

What was the Darwin rebellion?

By Georgia Hitch

Updated Tue 12 Dec 2017, 9:08am

All Australian students learn about the famous Eureka Stockade in Ballarat, where miners rebelled against the British colonial authorities in 1854. But what about the Darwin rebellion?

It began with a dispute over whether two bartenders could attend a party celebrating the end of World War I, and ended with two-thirds of the city's population chasing the administrator of the Northern Territory away while his effigy burned, but many have never heard of it. So we decided to take a closer look.

This story is part of Curious Darwin, our new series where you ask us the questions, you vote for your favourite, and we investigate. You can submit your question or vote on our next topic [here](#).

In the 1970s, Brian Watson was asked to research an event known as the Darwin rebellion for ABC TV, but mother nature unexpectedly put his plans on hold.

Brian was working in administration at Darwin Hospital at the time, but said his brother-in-law, ABC veteran journalist Trevor Watson, had asked him if he would look into the rebellion.

"I began to make progress on that and then Cyclone Tracy hit and we lost all of the work we'd done on it," he said.

"ABC Darwin was downgraded for a while and it really got forgotten, but I always thought it was a fascinating subject."

Now, more than four decades later, he hopes Curious Darwin can finally help him find more information.

A rebellion years in the making



PHOTO: A group of a few hundred men gathered at Government House demanding Dr Gilruth's resignation.

After rummaging through the Northern Territory Archives, listening to firsthand accounts of the incident and reading renowned Territorian Frank Alcorn OAM's take on the rebellion, I started to get a better idea of what fuelled the commotion on December 17, 1918.

There seemed to be three key issues that made Territorians' blood boil:

1. The NT being handed back to the Commonwealth in 1911, leaving Territorians unrepresented at the highest level
2. The nationalisation of Darwin hotels in 1915 which, by 1918, led to a jump in the price of beer by 30 per cent (which didn't sit well with a town known for its love of drinking)
3. Ongoing industrial disputes after the implementation of the White Australia Policy in 1911. It mandated that white workers had to be preferenced over Chinese migrants, who were paid less, which gave unions unprecedented bargaining powers

Ted Egan is a former NT administrator and recently wrote a book on Dr John Gilruth, who was the Territory's Administrator (the Commonwealth's representative in the north, like a state governor) at the time of the rebellion.

He told me that while all three of these decisions were made by the Federal Government, Top End workers directed their ire towards Scottish-born veterinary scientist Dr Gilruth.

"At all times Gilruth was blamed ... he was just carrying out the will of the Federal Government," Mr Egan said.



PHOTO: Harold Nelson negotiated a number of pay rises for workers by threatening, or taking, strike action. (Supplied: National Library of Australia)

From the beginning his plans went awry, wrote historian Alan Powell.

"Territorians and the Federal Government alike held unrealistically high hopes for economic development, yet half expected failure because such was seen to have been the result of all earlier efforts by South Australia in the Territory, thus every setback was doubly condemned," he wrote in a biography of Dr Gilruth.

The NT was annexed by South Australia in 1863, and it wasn't transferred to Commonwealth control until 1911.

"Gilruth did his best to promote agriculture, mining and, after initial doubts, the development of meatworks in Darwin by the giant English firm, Vestey's. All proved disappointing," Mr Powell said.

"With the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, an already wavering Commonwealth Government lost interest in Territory development."

Dr Gilruth was seen as arrogant and insensitive by the local community, Mr Powell wrote.

"He went to Darwin predisposed to treat the Chinese with reserve, the Aboriginals with heavy-handed paternalism and the white trade unionists with suspicion," he said.

In particular, he said Dr Gilruth was "constantly confronted" by Harold Nelson, the man Mr Alcorn describes as "the undisputed boss of the labour movement of the Territory".

Arguably the biggest confrontation was the industrial dispute with Vestey's Meatworks in 1918 where, after a series of failed pay negotiations, it partially closed down, putting hundreds of people out of work.

"The weight of public frustration fell upon Gilruth, quite unjustly, yet his own character helped to bring about that result," Mr Powell said.

A divisive administrator

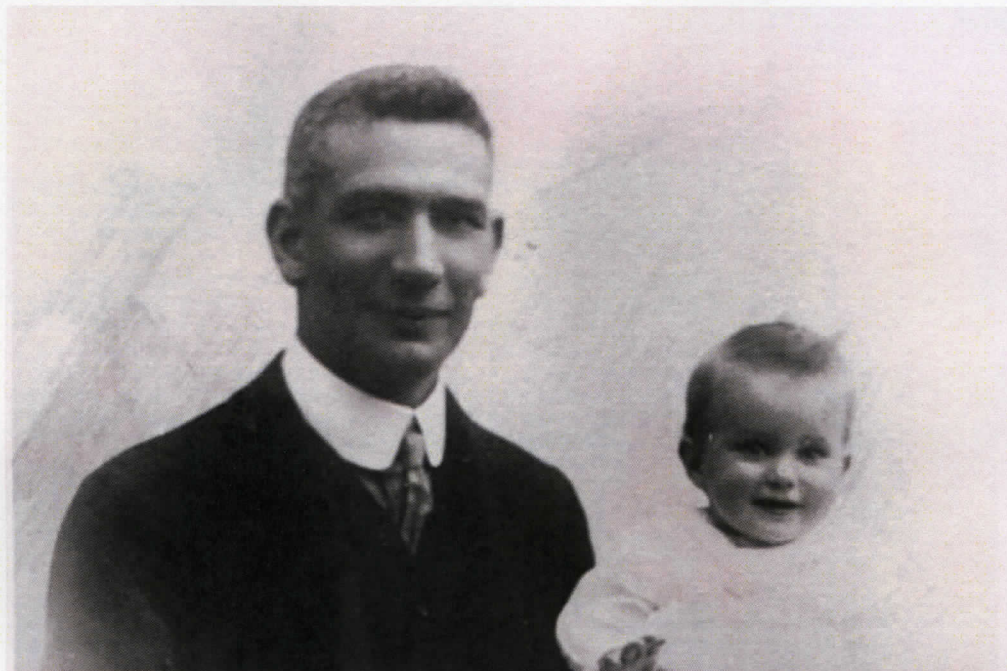


PHOTO: Dr Gilruth was the Territory's first and arguably most controversial administrator. (Supplied: Northern Territory Library)

Despite being warmly welcomed when he first arrived in the Territory, Dr Gilruth quickly began to rub people the wrong way.

"It was not long until his tyrannical disposition made him the most unpopular man in the Territory," wrote Harold Jensen, the former NT director of mines.

Dr Jensen despised the "oppressive" Dr Gilruth so much, he unsuccessfully tried to have a royal commission investigation into his poor governance.

It didn't help public opinion that the only local newspaper, the NT Times, also took a strong stand against Dr Gilruth, describing his administration as a "curse".

But not everyone thought Dr Gilruth's manner was so rough.

While at the archives I listened to an interview from 1971 with a woman called Mary Perez who lived in Darwin at the time of the rebellion and knew the Gilruth family.

"[Dr Gilruth] was a big type of fellow, broad shoulders, but he didn't have a face that would startle anyone," she said.

"I think the [union] took too much into their own hands because Dr Gilruth I don't think was an unjust man.

"He tried to please everyone, but it's like today, nobody would take no for an answer."

To Mr Egan, Dr Gilruth was a tough man to deal with, but he thinks his attitude may have been more of a product of circumstance.

Northern Territory Times

DARWIN. SATURDAY, NOV 28 1918

OUR DAY—WHEN IT COMES.

With the peoples of Belgium, France, Serbia and Roumania singing the joy songs of deliverance from the heel of the invader, and Germany and Russia quite within hail of an era of freedom and democracy hitherto unknown, the people of the Northern Territory of Australia must wait until six months after the war for the first essential to their well-being—the utter elimination of the Gilruth regime. It is more than likely, how-

PHOTO: The Northern Territory Times was staunchly opposed to the Gilruth administration. (Supplied: National Library of Australia)

"But to me, he was always a great spotter of talented people and if people think he wasn't fit to rule a democratic society they were perhaps right because it wasn't a very democratic society."

Even Mr Egan acknowledged, though, that Dr Gilruth was ultimately the master of his own demise.

A rebellion as serious as the Eureka Stockade



PHOTO: The march snaked through the city to Government House. (Supplied: Northern Territory Archives Service)

The tipping point for Darwin workers stemmed from an incident involving Dr Gilruth not allowing two bartenders from the Victoria Hotel a Saturday evening off to attend a local party celebrating the end of World War I.

Mr Alcorta said the decision was "of such painful triviality that it is extraordinary a man of his intelligence made it", with Mr Egan describing it as a "very, very stupid mistake".

"I wouldn't have made that mistake when I was the administrator, I'd have said, 'where's the party, girls?'" Mr Egan said.

A little over a month later, Mr Nelson organised a meeting with local police where he asked, and was granted, permission to stage a peaceful protest through the city.

The next day on December 17, a group of men marched from Vesteys Meatworks in Parap, past Mindil Beach and down Smith Street, ending at Government House, gaining hundreds of protesters on the way.

"It was a confrontation of a thousand people to take over Government House and demand the removal of His Excellency The Administrator," Mr Egan told me.

"We've got to keep in mind that this was a rebellion, a confrontation, as serious as Eureka in Ballarat.

"The only essential and good difference is that no lives were lost in Darwin."

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that Darwin's population in 1921 was 1,399 people, which means that about two-thirds of Darwinites — a huge proportion — were involved in the protest.



GIF: The group burned an effigy of Dr Gilruth during the protest

Initially, Dr Gilruth refused to address the crowd, but after persuasion by the group's leaders he changed his mind.

A few minutes after he began to speak someone from the group — most seem to think it was Mr Nelson — shouted "over the fence!", so the men swarmed the administrator and the grounds.

"There was remarkably little violence. Gilruth was pushed and shoved a couple of times as he attempted to flee into the house," Mr Alcorta said.

"But within a few minutes order was restored by Nelson."

According to Mr Alcorta, Mr Nelson told the mob they had done enough to show they meant business and asked them to go home.

"They delayed for long enough to burn Gilruth's effigy outside the front gate," he said.

'An inglorious departure'

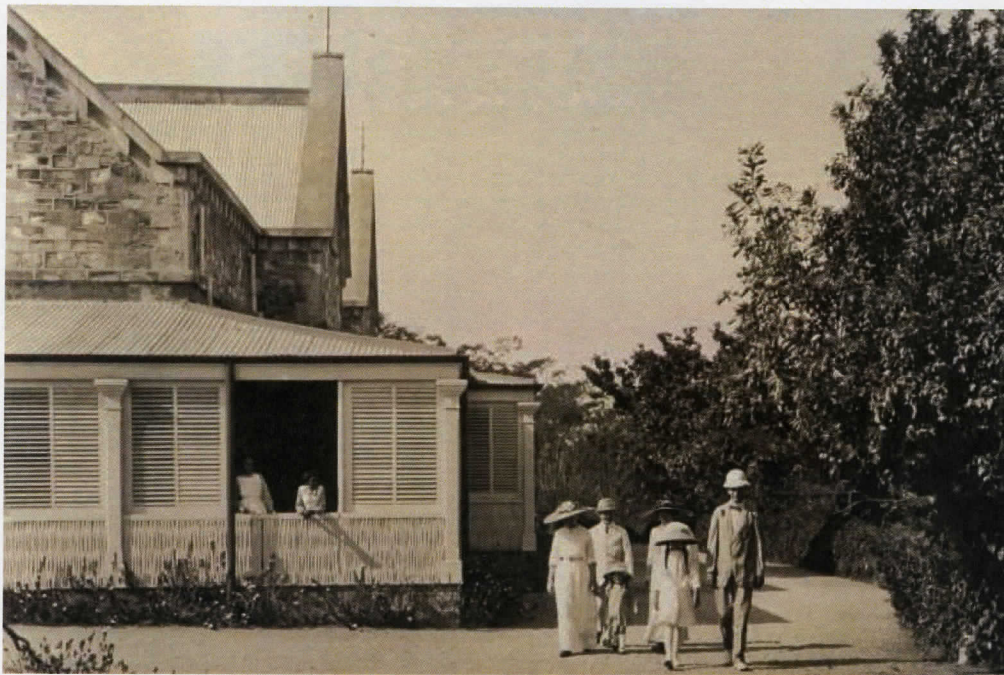


PHOTO: Dr Gilruth and his family did not leave Government House for two months after the rebellion. (Supplied: Northern Territory Library)

After the "disturbance", as the NT Times termed it, the Royal Navy was called in to protect Dr Gilruth and his family, while they spent the next two months essentially living as prisoners in Government House, too afraid to leave the property.

It wasn't until late February that they were shepherded out of the city in the middle of the night, which Mr Alcorta described as "an inglorious departure".

"The Gilruth family quietly boarded HMAS Encounter on the morning of 20 February 1919 and sailed away from Darwin, never to return," Mr Egan wrote in his book.

Conditions didn't improve for workers after the rebellion; strikes continued and many left to pursue employment elsewhere.

As well as driving the administrator out, the union claimed the rebellion as a key driver behind the federal government's decision to create a non-voting position for the NT in the House of Representatives.

In 1922, Mr Nelson became the first representative for the Territory.

Decades later, his son, Jock Nelson, also held the position, and in 1973 went on to become the 15th administrator of the NT — I couldn't help but wonder what his dad would've thought of that.