



Riot and Rebellion!





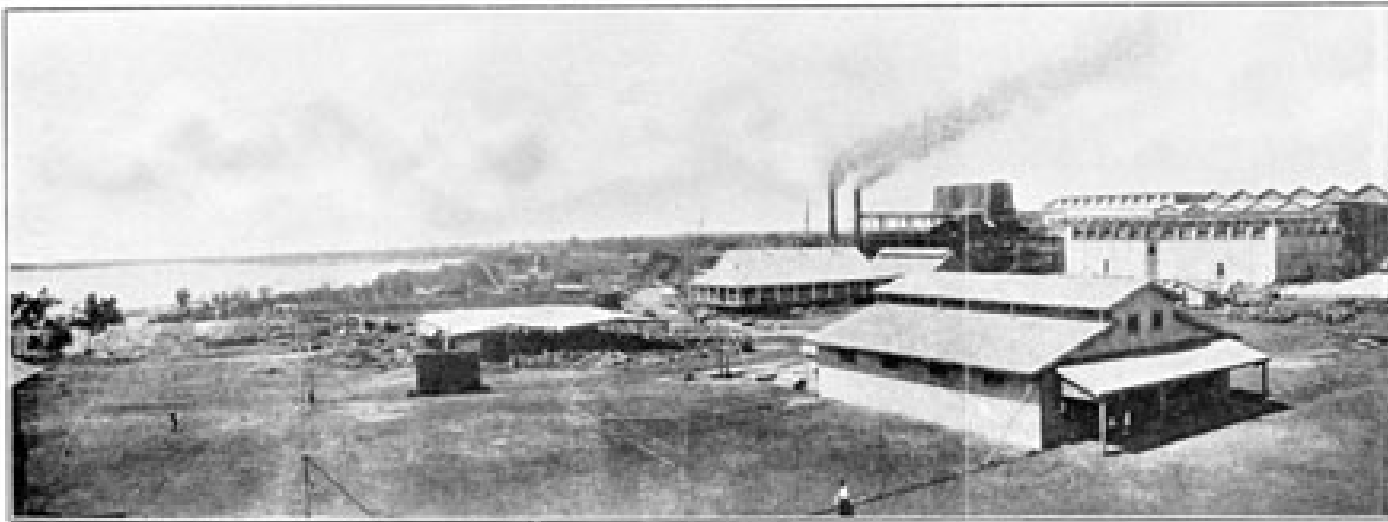
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1918: *The Darwin Rebellion*

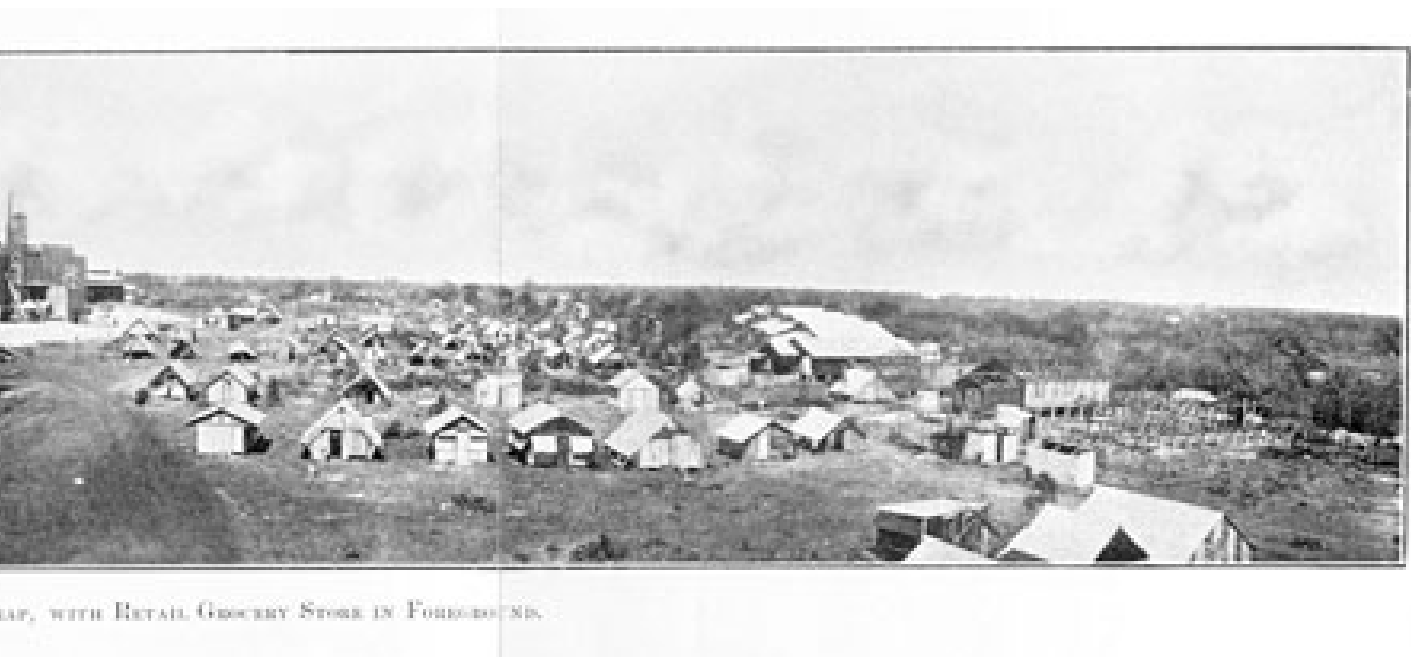
It was near the end of World War 1 and there were shortages of men in Darwin, less ships available to deliver goods, mining had declined and Vestey's meatworks had closed. The Administrator, Dr Gilruth, was accused of not running Darwin properly and had put restrictions on governing the colony and running local hotels. As people became more and more unhappy, the worker's union, run by Harold Nelson, was gaining more and more support.



PANORAMIC VIEW OF FREEZING WORKS AT PARAPARA

It was a trivial event that triggered the worker's union to act. The people of Darwin had been very patriotic and supportive of the war effort and had planned a celebration for the end of the war. The women employed in the hotels asked for a few hours off on Saturday, 14 November 1918, to join in the celebrations. However, Dr Gilruth refused to allow them leave but they took the time off anyway. When they returned to work the next day, the Administrator had them locked out.

On the 17th December 1918, 400 disgruntled men held a stopwork meeting at Parap, then marched into town, holding an effigy of Dr Gilruth. On the way, another 700 people joined them, including Aboriginal people from Kahlin Compound (then at the far end of Smith Street) and Chinese residents carrying dragons and banners.



They marched up to Government House and demanded that Dr Gilruth leave Darwin. A group of representatives, led by Hardie Gibson, insisted that Dr Gilruth meet with them but he refused. Instead he had called the police to guard the gates so they couldn't enter. The group then gave him an ultimatum - come out in one minute or else! Dr Gilruth did front the men.



Above: The march to Government House.

Hardie said, "We, the citizens of Darwin here assembled ask that the Administrator address us regarding his administration of the Territory of the last five years. Failing to comply, that he be asked if he is willing to leave Darwin by the steamer and remain away until a public commission is granted on his administration. This meeting will guarantee him safe conduct to the steamer...."

Dr Gilruth replied, "I will not leave unless recalled by the Minister."

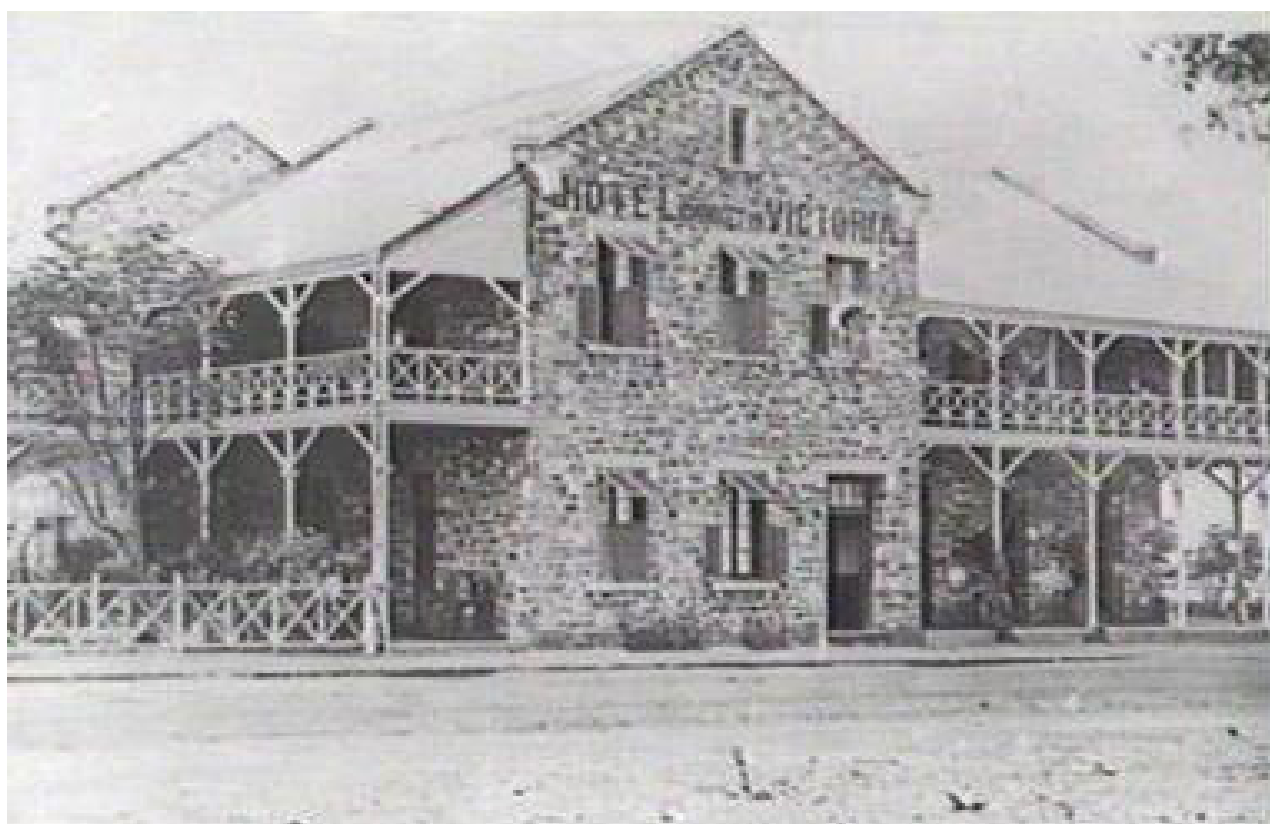


Above: Crowds outside Government House.

When the crowd heard that, they revolted. The white fence around Government House was surrounded with people who surged forward until it finally collapsed. Harold Nelson reportedly called out “Over the fence boys!” The crowd ran onto the lawns. Dr Gilruth was roughly handled and abused then made to retreat inside Government House. While Hardie kept Dr Gilruth in the house, others snatched the batons off the policemen. Stones crashed onto Government House. Windows were smashed and wire netting was ripped off the tennis court.



Above: Dr Gilruth and his family at Government House.
Right top: Harold Nelson, leader of Worker's Union.
Right bottom: Victoria Hotel, one the state run hotels.

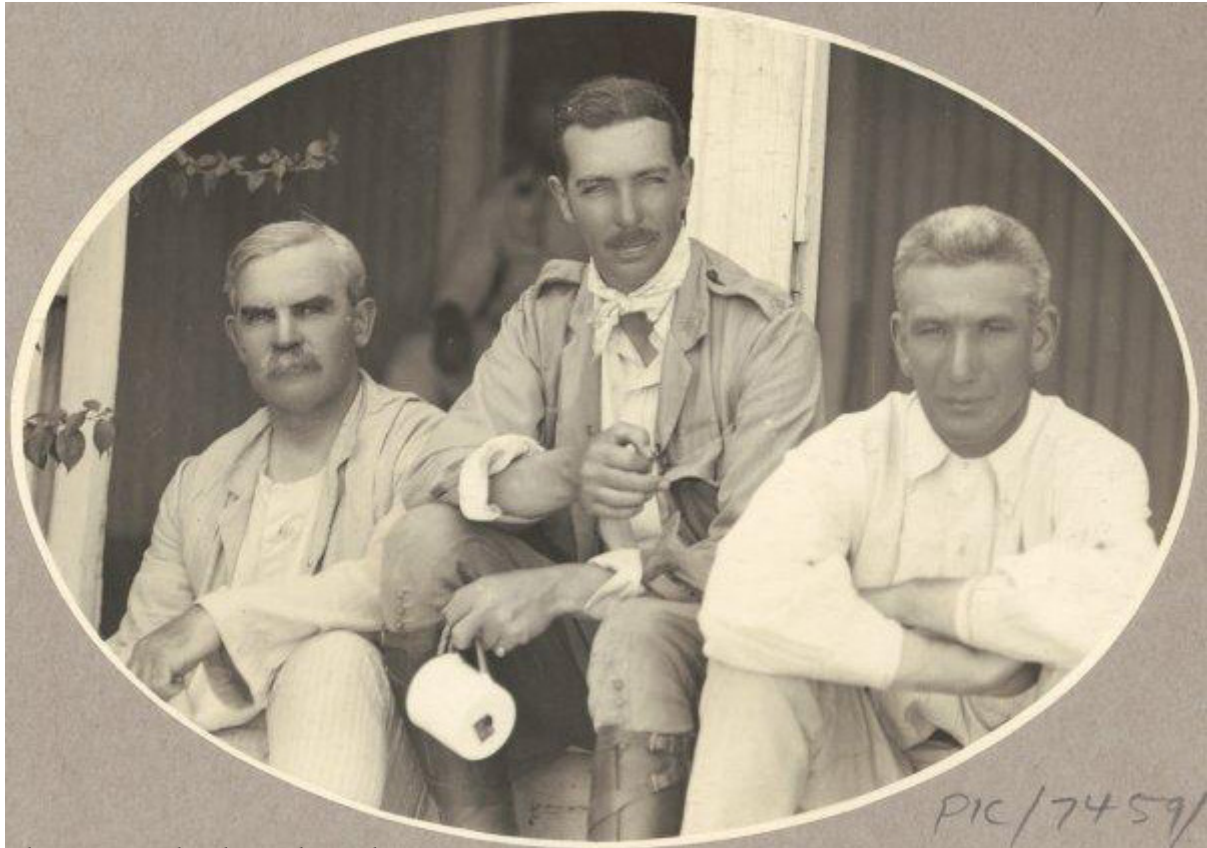




Above: The crowds at the Darwin Rebellion.

The crowd then gathered up the broken fence palings and started a large bonfire. Onto the burning heap, they threw Dr Gilruth – the effigy soaked in kerosene. The leaders finally dispersed the crowd but they were still angry and tensions continued to simmer.

Dr Gilruth sent a message south to the Commonwealth Government for reinforcements. Soon after, the gunboat 'HMAS Una' arrived in Darwin, followed by a warship, 'HMAS Encounter', which was equipped with larger guns. The threat of the ships didn't stop the protests and soon there was another encounter.



Above: Dr Gilruth on the right.

In January, 1919, a thousand people again marched past Government House, and stopped just down the road on the Esplanade. Another public meeting was held in January 1919, and a telegram sent from the meeting to the acting Prime Minister which read:

"We, the citizens of the Northern Territory, beseechingly implore you to recall the Administrator, Dr Gilruth, in the interests of life and property, as his autocratic administration is fast reaching a grave crisis."

This time there was no violence but Dr Gilruth was so unnerved that he and his family were virtually prisoners within Government House until, early in February, they disappeared in the middle of the night, never to return to Darwin again.

After Dr Gilruth left, there was no Administrator. By June, the position of Administrator was abolished and a director, Mr Henry Carey, was appointed instead, as an Acting Administrator, . He was able to listen and negotiate more effectively with the men. He calmed the situation, defended the North Australian Industrial Union, increased spending and created larger reserves for Aboriginal people.



Left: Monument to the Darwin Rebellion at Liberty Square, near Parliament House.

1930: The Administrator in Prison!

It was 1930 and the beginning of the Great Depression. The economy had crashed and the banks had collapsed, creating the biggest economic disaster known. People had lost all their money and unemployment was at its highest ever. Hundreds of thousands of Australians were living in dire poverty and many were on the streets. Any vacancy for a job had long queues of applicants, desperate for work. It was in this situation that Government House and the Resident, Mr Robert Weddell, again became the centre of conflict.

About fifty people arrived outside of Government House and a representative group insisted upon seeing Mr Weddell. They demanded employment but no solution could be found. The leader of the group banged his hands down on the table and shouted, "We've reached a deadlock!"



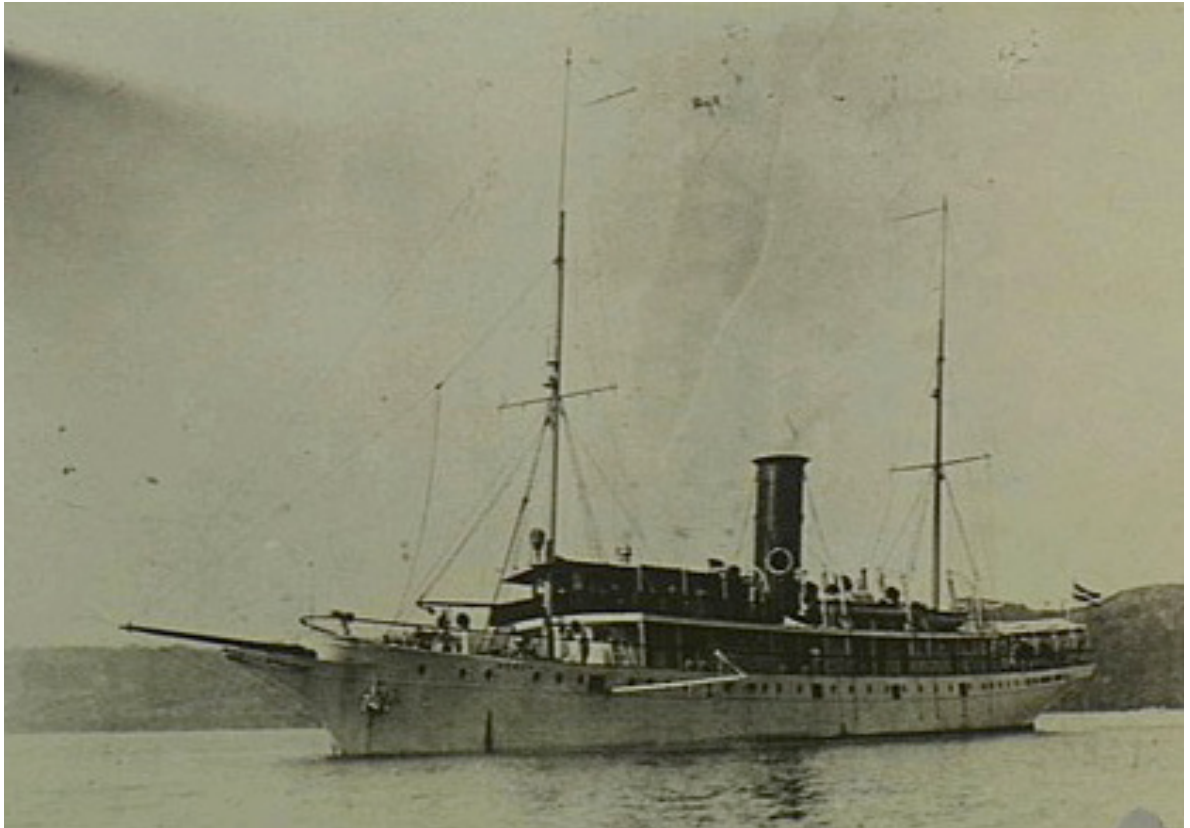


Above: The view of Government House today from Liberty Square.

When the group waiting outside heard this, seven men stormed into Government House and locked all four doors, imprisoning the Resident (as the Administrator was then called). The police were called and Inspector Stretton led a group of policemen through the crowd to release Mr Weddell. The unemployed men then staged a peaceful 'sit in' for the next four days. They camped on the lawn in swags and cooked in four gallon drums. They also played loud music day and night to harass the Resident.



When they put placards up on the verandah of Government House that said 'Work not food', police were again called. This time fourteen were arrested. The remaining men protested and fighting broke out, injuring both the men and police. Eventually the police bodily removed another thirty men. The group dispersed after four days. According to the newspapers, they had sore throats from singing too much and the reporter was not sympathetic toward their plight at all.



Above: HMAS Una

Below: HMAS Encounter



References

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