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Charles Darwin University

**'Unruly days: Territory life, 1911–1921', Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 30 June 2018–17 May 2020**

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*Published in:*  
Australian Historical Studies

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/1031461X.2019.1592283](https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2019.1592283)

Published: 01/06/2019

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Farram, S. (2019). 'Unruly days: Territory life, 1911–1921', Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 30 June 2018–17 May 2020. *Australian Historical Studies*, 50(2), 264-266.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2019.1592283>

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**‘Unruly Days: Territory Life, 1911-1921’. Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), Darwin, 30 June 2018 – 17 May 2020**

Displayed in one of MAGNT’s major galleries this stand-alone exhibition concerns the Northern Territory (NT) during its first decade under Commonwealth rule. The title presumably refers to dislocations caused by the Great War and the union-led protests against the new administration that culminated in a mass demonstration on 17 December 1918 (later named the Darwin Rebellion) that led to the withdrawal of Administrator John Gilruth. Moving clockwise through the exhibition a series of themes is discernible: the coming of the Commonwealth; daily life in the Territory; the Great War; industry; and the Rebellion. Displays in the centre of the room, accessible at several points, deal with transport and communications.

The exhibition space is reached via a corridor lined with large, back-lit photographic portraits from 1911-1921. These images portray the unique Territory demography when Aborigines were the majority, followed by the Chinese and then Europeans. The photographs highlight diverse Territorian lifestyles by including a traditionally-dressed Aboriginal man with a spear; three uniformed, rifle-bearing Aboriginal trackers; a well-dressed Aboriginal family with a respectable-looking European couple; a barefoot (but happy-looking) European man with his Aboriginal wife; an elderly Chinese labourer; and a prosperous Chinese merchant with his large family. Such powerful images feature throughout the exhibition alongside artefacts from the collections of MAGNT, other institutions and individuals that enhance the viewer’s experience and understanding of the exhibition’s themes.

The first section of the exhibition explains how it was believed that the transfer from South Australia to the Commonwealth would help the NT achieve its unrealised potential. However, the outbreak of the Great War meant money earmarked for Territory development was diverted elsewhere and economic progress proved elusive. Territorians also accused Gilruth and his administration of mismanagement. Other developments can be viewed today only with regret. For example, dog registration tags from the South Australian period are displayed alongside identification discs used from 1912 in an (unsuccessful) attempt to control the movements of Aborigines in Darwin. The accompanying text declares that the issuing of these discs placed it beyond doubt for Aborigines that Europeans viewed them as ‘all same dog’. Photographs of the miserable ‘half-caste’ homes established in Darwin and Central Australia underline the point.

Further along we learn how various sports flourished and of the popularity of hotels for European men. One of the more striking photographs is that of a customer leaning on the rustic-looking bar of the Stuart Arms Hotel. Meanwhile, the Chinese were demonised for providing gambling, prostitutes, sly-grog and opium, despite many patrons being European. Nevertheless, photographs show that the Chinese were a highly visible part of the community through more reputable commercial operations and activities such as parades. Other Asians also lived in the NT and in a section entitled ‘Pearling: A Dangerous Occupation’ it is explained how the Commonwealth waived the immigration laws for European pearling-masters wishing to employ Malays and Japanese. Many died and never returned home. It is also noted in the pearling display that the industry collapsed in 1921, but there is no mention of its later resurgence. Although the stated aim of the exhibition is to cover the decade 1911-1921, I felt that with this and a few other displays some further information would have given the visitor a fuller picture of the situation.

Moving on to displays about the Great War we learn that over 400 Territorians (including Aborigines and men of Asian descent) served during the conflict. Other issues covered are the conscription referenda, Red Cross fundraising and the post-war Darwin cenotaph. Military insignia, medals and weapons are displayed alongside the buffalo-bell rung in Darwin to signal the armistice. The following sections concern local industries: buffalo hunting, pastoralism, mining and agriculture. South Australia's attempt to emulate other tropical agricultural economies failed and Commonwealth efforts were equally unsuccessful. Buffalo hunting provided a livelihood for a few adventurers, and mining waxed and waned. The cattle industry was the most enduring and Territory-wide endeavour, but one entirely dependent on cheap Aboriginal labour. Some of the larger artefacts are displayed here, including a Comet steam engine (c. 1915) originally used at the Koolpinyah Ice Works, but still operating in Darwin as late as 1968.

The visitor may choose at this point to explore the central displays focussing on transport and communications, which include photographs and artefacts relating to the Great Air Race that saw Ross and Keith Smith land the first aircraft to have travelled from England to Australia in Darwin on 10 December 1919. Other photographs show donkeys, horses and camels, but also motorcars, motorcycles, bicycles and a steam tractor. I was pleased to see attention paid to the shipping so vital for Darwin in those years; a matter overlooked in many accounts. There is also an outstanding model of Vestey's Meatworks (operational 1917-1919 and briefly in 1925), once the single largest employer in the NT and the main location of union activity. Furthermore, as explained in the accompanying text, MAGNT is built on the old meatworks site, so it is fitting that it be represented.

Although the exhibition covers the period to 1921, the displays do not appear in strict chronological order and it makes sense that the last section (next to the exit) should be about the Darwin Rebellion and its aftermath in 1919, as those events most clearly align with the exhibition's title 'Unruly Days'. This section focusses on the role played by H.G. Nelson, the union leader most vocal and active in his opposition to Gilruth and a major instigator of the Rebellion. Gilruth apologists claim he was unfairly blamed for the failure of economic development and unpopular Commonwealth policies, such as the nationalisation of hotels and the price of beer, but the main criticism of his aloof, autocratic style remains uncontested. Either way, the Commonwealth saw fit to recall Gilruth to Melbourne a few months after the December 1918 events.

In a way, the decade 1911-1921 shaped future NT-Commonwealth relations and the exhibition allows visitors to learn something about those formative years when hopes for advancement gave way to mistrust, misunderstanding and frustration. Although much has been achieved since, the relationship still bears the marks of its early beginnings. 'Unruly Days' is an attractive and informative exhibition. It is well worth a visit.

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