

12. Patriot: Harry Gullett

First of the passengers to arrive at Essendon aerodrome, a man whose chronicles of battle made him second only to Charles Bean as a historian of the war that Street, Fairbairn, Brudenell White, and Thornthwaite had fought, was Sir Henry Gullett. At 62, silver-haired, bespectacled, stooped a little below his measured five feet eleven, with years of stress, chain-smoking, and illness etched on his face, Gullett was in the twilight of a chequered political career. He had risen rapidly in the conservative ranks in the 1920s after making his name as a war historian and journalist. He was the son of Rose Somer and Charles Gullett, a farmer, his paternal grandfather having emigrated from Devon to Melbourne in 1853.

Born in Harston in central Victoria in 1878 Harry, as he was known to his friends, started his working life on the family farm, leaving school at 12 to help his widowed mother. He was a keen reader and began to be attracted to a career in journalism. With the right connections it was not hard to get a foot in the door. (His sister Isabel would follow the same path.) He wrote articles on agricultural themes for the *Geelong Advertiser* until eventually in 1900 the call came to join his uncle Henry and brother-in-law, T. W. Heney, in Sydney. Henry Gullett had edited the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, and now at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he invited his nephew to join him. Young Harry learned quickly, and was well established by the time his uncle was given a comfortable retirement berth in the NSW Legislative Council in 1908.

Although his namesake and patron had been succeeded at the helm of the *Herald* by his brother-in-law, Gullett decided it was time to move on. For the next six years he made his base in London, working as a freelance journalist, sending articles back to the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* and *The Sun*. With a growing interest in emigration and development, he lectured and wrote pamphlets in association with Australia House. He travelled to the Continent and to the western hemisphere where he investigated innovations in irrigation. In 1914 he published *The Opportunity in Australia*, a 150-page tract extolling his native land as a destination for British emigrants. A year earlier, at 35, he had married Penelope Frater in a London registry office.¹ The autobiographical opening chapter of *The Opportunity* would help Harry's bride — 'small, dark and full of enchantment' as her grand-daughter would describe her — to understand the elemental forces that had helped shape her husband.² He was not the match

1 A. J. Hill, 'Gullett, Sir Henry Somer (Harry) (1878–1940)', Nairn and Serle (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, MUP, 1983, pp.137–9; Ken Stewart, 'Heney, Thomas William (1862–1928)', Nairn and Serle (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, pp.258–9.

2 Penne Hackforth-Jones, *Barbara Baynton: Between Two Worlds*, MUP, 1995 (1st ed. 1989), p.105.

Penelope's socially ambitious mother, the widowed writer of *Bush Studies*, Barbara Baynton, had hoped for her daughter. He had grown up in a world far removed from the society pages and the Parisian ballet school to which a 20-year-old Penelope had been despatched. Barbara Baynton had drawn a fictional veil over her own youthful rural poverty. Not so Harry. As a child, he said, he had thought his life on the half-cleared 320-acre selection in Victoria's Goulburn Valley quite rough and hard: 'Only in after years, when I had taken to the soft life of the cities, did I realise what it was not to have worked with the pioneers.' Now he urged the virtues of Australia's paternal state, the land on offer, the possibilities for the man without capital: 'Australia is the happiest of hunting grounds for the poor man.'³

War chronicler

Within months of the outbreak of war, Harry Gullett was accredited to the British and French armies as an Australian Official Correspondent. For the next two years he covered the conflict on the Western Front. He was seeing war at close quarters but was not happy to be a mere observer. A spell as an ambulance driver left him frustrated. Spurning an offered commission in the Grenadier Guards, he returned to Australia with Penelope and their infant son Joe (the 'e' would later be dropped) to enlist in the AIF. On 29 July 1916, aged 38 years and two months, he went to the Royal Agricultural Showgrounds at Moore Park in Sydney and attested. Already known as a propagandist, he was before long engaged by Billy Hughes as a speaker in the Prime Minister's conscription campaign. Then, drafted into the artillery, he was sent to England, accompanied by his family, on the troopship *Osterley*.⁴ Afflicted with pleurisy, and plainly not well enough to endure life at the front, his past caught up with him. His friend Charlie Bean sought him out to assist with the expanding task of collecting war records and preparing for the future creation of a war museum. As a Warrant Officer class 1 and Temporary Lieutenant, he was posted to the Audit Section, AIF HQ, in August 1917. There, with Bean, and occasionally in company with Will Dyson, Hubert Wilkins, Frank Hurley, and Keith Murdoch, he saw at first hand the Flanders terrain that was so familiar to the Australian infantry: Hill 60, Zonnebeek, Sanctuary Wood, Polygon Wood, the Menin Road, and Broodseinde.⁵

3 H. S. Gullett, *The Opportunity in Australia*, The Field & Queen (Horace Cox), 1914, pp.1–2, 37.

4 Hackforth-Jones, *Barbara Baynton*, pp.125–7.

5 Manning, 'Air Disaster at Canberra,' *Stand-To*, Jan.–Feb. 1962, p.8.

with diary

13

Desert Mounted Corps,
HQrs.
Dec, 7/17.

Dear Charlie,

Have been up here about a fortnight. So far am restricted by lack of transport. Horse etc. applied for but not yet to hand

However I have spent 10 days with 1st Brigade and have been up to the line with the 2nd. Intensely interesting but after France, a pleasant gentle silent campaign (although it is not tactful to say so here)

Personally I don't like the look of it. Alright if the old Hun keeps away but a hell of a spill there's going to be if he has a few divisions and a hundred planes to spare. However that is only an ignorant impression

Am very happy in the job and the prospect. Everywhere a very cordial/welcome. But much disappointed that I am not to act as correspondent. I may ask you one day soon to see if you can arrange it. Chauvel tried a year ago but ventured Hogue and it was bumped and although he is keen for it he is reluctant to risk another refusal. But he would welcome it and certainly it is a shame to leave them so neglected more especially as there is a strong disposition to boost the Y ---y and to overlook the dinkums

Should I propose it I shall understand of course that it probably means the end of my S. I. F. association. The terms will be for the Government and your suggestion. Anything will do. I only wish to meet their desire here.

For the moment however without transport of my own and with so much back work to do I am as well without the correspondence.

Kindest regards,
Yours sincerely,
(Sgd) Harry Gullett

Nothing to report to Treloar except that all will be O.K. I'll write him immediately.

Harry Gullett expresses his frustration to Charlie Bean, December 1917

(Bean MSS, AWM38 3DRL606/97/1)

Seven weeks later, Gullett was detached and sent to AIF War Records Section in London. At Bean's behest, in November 1917 he was attached 'for administrative purposes' to Australian HQ in Cairo. Belatedly, Bean had realised the need for an Australian war correspondent in Palestine. But there was a thicket of protocol to negotiate. The historian Alec Hill explained:

Brudenell White, the Chief of Staff, refused to put the idea up to Birdwood, insisting that such a proposal must come from the Australian Government through the High Commissioner in London. It was agreed that it should be left for Gullett himself to decide after he had tested the feelings of the A.I.F. in Palestine. If he favoured it, Bean was to arrange the appointment through the High Commission who would ask the Australian Government to seek the approval of the War Office in London.⁶

Successive attachments saw him at the Desert Mounted Corps HQ in December 1917 and early January 1918 — 'after France, a pleasant gentle silent campaign (although it is not tactful to say so here)' — then 10 days with the 67th Squadron Australian Flying Corps, and another 10 days each with the 3rd and 4th Light Horse Brigades. He then had a month detached to ICC Brigade, followed by two months at the 2nd Light Horse Brigade HQ before being appointed OIC, sub-section Australian War Records, in May 1918.

His peripatetic existence in the new role Bean had envisaged was to continue for what turned out to be the last four months of the war. Relinquishing his war records post and the temporary rank of Lieutenant, Gullett was attached initially to the Desert Mounted Corps, and finally designated Assistant Official Correspondent, AIF in Egypt. His appointment was terminated late in September 1919.⁷

While based in Cairo, taking notes and drafting historical chapters, Harry kept up a stream of informative letters to Penelope. His pen pictures, written in great haste, were vivid and warm in their appreciation of Australian endeavours. He had told of his admiration of Brudenell White in France in September 1917. In Palestine in November 1917 he wrote of a morning meeting with Major General Sir Harry Chauvel:

He gave me an hour & was most cordial & frank. A slight almost elegant man of scarcely average height: dried & wrinkled; a typical little horseman from Queensland, with a quiet confident manner; speech slow & diffident & occasionally a flashing smile of extraordinary charm. He is not as direct & humorous as White perhaps but there is capacity all over him & a gentleman of the rare kind. Queensland has been strangely rich in leadership. Nine of our generals come from there & this man & White are big fellows.⁸

6 A. J. Hill, 'Introduction', *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine, 1914–1918: Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, vol. VII, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1984 [1st ed. 1923].

7 Gullett to Bean, 7 Dec. 1917, Bean MSS, AWM: 38, 3DRL606/97/1; Notes compiled 1933, AWM: 43 A327.

8 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 27 Nov. 1917, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/31.



WCdr Dicky Williams: still a 'fearsome disciplinarian' ca 1925

(Courtesy of the RAAF Museum)

It was not only the senior officers who caught Gullett's eye. He wrote from Jerusalem in July 1918 of a twilight visit to No. 1 Squadron AFC, where he pulled up outside the flight commander's big tent:

You would have been gratified at the affectionate greeting. Of the three 'flyers' one grabbed my baggage, another left for the mess for a large bottle of Bass & the third laid out his bath & filled it with water. Such charming boys. Ross Smith the star among them got two Huns in very brilliant fashion yesterday. They dived as he attacked & flew very low among some wadies [sic]. He downed them when they were within 50 feet of the ground by sheer pugnacious pursuit within a few yards of the ground. Then he photographed them...He is the South Australian I once

said had the manners of a prince: he would stand very close to top in our gallery of young Australians...He is an inspiration to every man in the squadron both as a great airman & a personality.

Gullett's status as historian in uniform enabled him to move freely among all ranks. It helped that his friend Major A. B. 'Banjo' Patterson, commanding the Australian Remount Squadron, entrusted him with good horses. Shortly after the memorable interlude with the former Light Horseman Ross Smith and his companions, he had tea with 'Colonel Williams', now commanding the wing, whom he described as: 'Just a well grown goody goody schoolboy...A fearsome disciplinarian. He has made a great Australian squadron of this...Williams is capable of almost anything.'⁹ Richard 'Dicky' Williams didn't drink, smoke, or swear but was 'not only popular, but he was also deeply respected throughout his squadron'.¹⁰ He was to be a towering presence in Australian military aviation for another 25 years.

A week later, Gullett completed two articles on 'the flying people'.¹¹ When he came to write the official history of the Australians in Sinai and Palestine four years later, Gullett was to refer in passing to No. 1 Squadron and its commanding officer, 'a young Australian of marked capacity' and the reputation of Williams' unit 'recognised as a great battle-squadron, and...at the same time conspicuous as a model of efficiency in all mechanical work and administration'.¹²

By mid-1918 there were hopes that a way might be found to escape to London to join Penelope and their three-year-old son for a break from duty. He had been awarded a C. B.: not the decorations and mentions of his cousin Sid, nor the distinction in battle of Sid's younger brother who was killed in action; but it was welcome recognition of the earnest and sometimes dangerous duties to which he had been summoned. He was already beginning to look forward to a post-war world. As he told his friend Jack Latham, who was 'fully and usefully employed' in naval intelligence in Melbourne, whatever they had done in the past few years would 'be nothing to the employment that will lie before everybody at the conclusion of the War'. Looking back he lamented: 'the pity of the business is that so much splendid work in 1915 was interrupted by irresponsible criticism, which can only be described as crazy. I have never yet been able to understand why Australian people swallowed such stuff, however that cannot be helped.'¹³

9 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 21–24 July 1918, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/190.

10 L. W. Sutherland in collaboration with Norman Ellison, *Aces and Kings*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935, p.57.

11 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 31 July 1918, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/364.

12 H. S. Gullett, *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine 1914–1918*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1923, p.658.

13 Gullett to Latham, 17 June 1918, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/20/651A.

The opportunity to better inform the Australian people about their 'forgotten army' in Palestine had been thrust upon Gullett in the closing stages of the war. As he explained to Penelope about the thwarting of their plans for a reunion in London: 'There was nothing to stop it until they sprang the job as correspondent...The position is this. The whole force has resented having no publicity & there has been the strongest desire that I should do it.' Badly as he felt, 'it would be very questionable to go off for three months...there are some 15 000 to 20 000 men here & most of them have been away for years. They & their people at home will be greatly pleased to see the Light Horse written about.'¹⁴

A cataract of articles came from his typewriter over the next few months. Yet there was always time for a long bulletin of news for Penelope. At the end of August he once again visited the fighter squadron:

Young McGinness who already had two certain and one probable German to his credit this week yesterday got two more in a very brilliant fight over our lines. A more unlikely looking coot you never saw: very fair with wild straight fair hair hanging nearly to his eyes: hatchet faced round shouldered with upper teeth always showing. But such a nice modest boy. I congratulated him & he said 'O I only steered the old bus while Fysh shot them.' Fysh was the observer, a long innocuous pleasant-faced Tasmanian not yet done growing. McGinty as the squadron call him gave me the compass from one of the Hun machines, or what was left of it after a fall of 12 000 feet. I said I would hand it in to Trophies. 'In that case,' he said, 'I'll keep it. I want you to have it yourself.' So I have it for Joe.¹⁵

The correspondent's life was replete with surprises and excitements. None revealed more of his character than the aftermath of the Surafend incident, when some 200 men of the Anzac Mounted Division 'cleaned up' a village in which a New Zealand sergeant had been killed by an Arab caught in the act of stealing a rifle. The Anzacs had waited in vain for some action from GHQ before angrily taking the matter into their own hands. A rum-fuelled rampage left scores of dead Bedouin and a village in embers. The Commander-in-Chief, Sir Edmund Allenby, had the troops assembled and rebuked them as cowards and murderers. No culprits were identified or charged. But the entire division was sent to Rafa, a desolate semi-desert post, with all leave cancelled and those on leave recalled. As a further mark of displeasure, the forthcoming honours list contained no names from the offending division. When the Australian and New

¹⁴ Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 26–28 July 1918, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/205.

¹⁵ Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 1–4 Sept. 1918, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/259. Hudson Fysh and 'Young McGinnis' would become two of the founders of Qantas.

Zealand troops were about to return home in June 1919, Gullett took it upon himself to warn Allenby of the unwisdom of allowing their deep resentment to fester. The general attempted to order Gullett to withdraw. But, no longer a mere lieutenant, and now in civilian clothes and holding an appointment from the Australian government, he stood his ground. Allenby at last saw the point. This was no time to hazard Imperial ill-will. The Anzacs had after all been instrumental in bringing him some considerable victories. A hastily concocted order of the day was printed and distributed throughout the departing division and to every Australian and New Zealander in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. It was typical of Gullett that when he wrote of this incident in his official history of the war he did not identify himself as the man who had confronted the Commander-in-Chief.¹⁶

Politics or nothing

When the war was almost over it was time for a fundamental decision. Before returning to England, Gullett had sent a long letter from Cairo to his 'darling Penelope' setting out his thoughts:

Have some writing to do. Hard to work: now the long strain is over I am panting to get back to work — this time constructive work I pray that you will be interested in.

The Labour people at home will be hard to swallow. And they must be swallowed whole: if I start there I must burn my boats & curb my restlessness & temper & go in for better or worse. It is that or no politics or ambition at all. I have flirted with the idea of the Other Side but it's no use: I can't see myself as the champion of Fat. Had I myself attained to Fatness it might have been different. But that I should spend the rest of my life working to make Fat still fatter is unthinkable. Even with riches I have I think been politically for Labour. Without riches the decision is easier. It will be hard to take sides against many good friends in the AIF who are uncompromising. But all in all we have few we care about as far as that. We are so independent & complete in our happiness.

16 Lieut.-Col. G. F. Langley DSO, 'Sir Henry Gullett, A Tribute', *Reveille*, Dec. 1940, p.8. Langley dined with Gullett immediately after the meeting with Allenby. The story is repeated in George F. and Edmée M. Langley, *Sand, Sweat and Camels*, Seal Books Sydney, 1980 (1st ed. Rigby 1976), pp.174–5; Gullett, *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*, pp.790–1. Paul Daley, *Beersheba: A journey through Australia's forgotten war*, MUP, 2009, pp.251–304, Terry Kinloch, *Devils on Horses: in the words of the Anzacs in the Middle East 1916–19*, Exisle Publishers, Auckland, 2007, pp.329–34, and Peter Rees, *Desert Boys: Australians at war from Beersheba to Tobruk and El Alamein*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011, pp.285–90 examine the Surafend 'massacre'.



Boats burned and heading towards politics

(Courtesy of Peter and Kate Gullett)

The way ahead, as Harry saw it, was if possible to join a new Labor newspaper, *The World*, in Sydney which would serve as a 'good platform for my political apprenticeship'. Convinced in his bones that he could make a unique contribution to Labor, he knew that he needed to work on his public speaking. It might take three years before he could get into federal Parliament but, once in, he was sure his progress would not be slow. The only alternative was London:

I have no ambitions in journalism in Australia: it is politics or nothing for me & also I think for you. London would be a surrender — pleasant

but a surrender. Our lives would go gaily enough & we should live in a House Beautiful & rejoice in Joe. But feeling as I do today more confident & full of fight than I have ever been, London is not satisfying.¹⁷

While still in London he told Penelope: 'I should give a fortune to be out on the Labour ticket next elections in Australia. With a good propagandist on their side they will sweep H & Co into the sea. The present administration is a hopeless thing & is not improving.'¹⁸ As Press Liaison Officer to the Prime Minister at the Paris Peace Conference, he had seen enough of Hughes to form a definite judgement. But needing to work and earn an income, and with a second child on the way, he did not vex his chief with unnecessary dissent. He was aware that if he were to start expressing political views on the platform or in the press his government work must cease. It had to be all government work or none. And the choice could not be long delayed.

Not yet swept into the sea, and oblivious to Gullett's true sentiments, Billy Hughes invited Gullett to become director of the proposed Australian War Museum, relieving the over-burdened Bean. It was a creative job enlivened by good company, as his son remembered:

My father used to rise very early and work a couple of hours on his history. Then he set off to the Exhibition Building on the old cable tram. On Sunday mornings artists and soldiers would come to our house with notes, sketches, maps and battle pictures. General Chauvel and General White rode up on horses, while Generals Gellibrand and Glasgow came by taxi, because there were no trams on Sunday morning. Albert Jacka, the most famous of all Australian fighting soldiers with his VC, MC and Bar, rode a bicycle. Bill Dyson and George Lambert walked the mile or so from the railway station. Only our cousin Sid Gullett drove his own car.¹⁹

Enjoyable as his post at the War Museum was, Gullett still had a career in public life in mind. In 1920, he accepted an offer from Hughes to become director of the Australian Immigration Bureau, a role he seems to have devised for himself. Soon falling out with the Prime Minister over immigration policy ('a wretched quarrel' as he told his lawyer friend Jack Latham), he 'left the work — officially — with very deep regret, not impulsively but only after long consideration & when I was convinced that things must get worse before they could improve'.²⁰ A day after his resignation, a cable from Lord Northcliffe in London offered

17 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 3 Nov. 1918, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/301.

18 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, [n.d. ?1919], Gullett Family MSS.

19 Gullett, *Good Company*, pp.2–3.

20 Gullett to Latham, 5 March 1922, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/995.

him a senior post on *The Times*. It was the kind of appointment few journalists would have resisted. His Army friend George Langley was with him when the message arrived:

...he quickly made up his mind to decline the offer — giving two reasons for so doing — he thought it would look like funking it if he left Australia then. He preferred to stay and resolved at once to try politics, entering the lists as a critic of the P.M. His second reason was that he wanted his son Joe...to 'grow up an Australian'.²¹

There was a third reason. After prolonged editorial battles, his Official History volume was close to publication. His narrative of the Australian Light Horsemen at war in the Middle East was imbued with respect and admiration for 'the very flower of their race'. In a book of almost 800 pages, he told a story of courage and achievement by 'a remarkable band of brothers in arms...drawn from a wide and fragrant countryside, animated by a noble cause, thrilled and expectant with the sense of a grand adventure in foreign lands, and knit together by the common interest of their peace-time callings and the still closer ties of personal friendship and affection'. The lyrical portrait of the 'Light Horseman and his Horse', preceded a lengthy exposition of tactical insight, generous character assessment, and vivid action.

Some British experts in particular would find fault with what they thought 'fierce and unfair criticism'. But the book was an impressive effort, nearly 300 000 words long, comparable in scope, if not quite in authority, with the works of Bean on the more popular themes of the Western Front and Gallipoli. Unlike Bean, however, Gullett did not invest his Desert Mounted Corps heroes with too grand a moral mission. Downplaying the indiscipline of the troops in the Holy Places that so troubled their superiors, he told Bean, 'their campaign was to a remarkable extent one with a casual sporting purpose to which they bent all their high intelligence and endeavour'. His aim was to provide a 'clear honest narrative' that would serve both as a military textbook and a book for the general reader. Intentionally or not, it was to have the effect of making reputations for the commanders whose praises he sang. Much as he admired Sir Harry Chauvel, however, he resisted some of Chauvel's strongly pressed suggestions. As Gullett himself noted, the usually un-self-congratulatory Chauvel saw the potential for 'a good deal of self-advertisement' in the book.²²

21 Langley, 'Sir Henry Gullett...', p.8.

22 Daley, *Beersheba*, p.298; *The Times*, 14 Aug. 1940; Christopher Lee, "'War is not a Christian Mission': Racial Invasion and Religious Crusade' in H. S. Gullett's *Official History of the Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*", *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 7, 2007, pp.85–96; Hill, 'Introduction', *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine, 1914–1918*.

In ill-health, and incensed at the criticism of his text from Angus and Robertson's editors, Gullett had threatened to withdraw the manuscript, pay back his fee to the Defence Department, and publish the book himself. Dissuaded by Bean from extreme measures, he would soon enjoy public acclaim and qualified professional commendation. In what was generally regarded as an engaging if 'over coloured' journalistic account, clichés and banalities were noted by discerning reviewers, though there was little reaction to the assumption of racial inferiority implicit in passages about the peoples of Palestine and the Sinai. It would be many years before shifting cultural values and a new generation of military historians brought significant revision of a work that the author himself was glad to put behind him.²³



On the hustings, with trade-mark bow tie

(Courtesy of Peter and Kate Gullett)

²³ Suzanne Brugger, *Australians and Egypt 1914–1919*, MUP, 1980, pp.72–5; Graham Wilson, *Bully Beef & Balderdash: Some Myths of the AIF Examined and Debunked*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport NSW, 2012, pp.211–3 for Gullett's failure to correct false stories of the fate of the horses of the Light Horse.

Political intent

As his historical task was coming to an end, both Gullett and his friend Jack Latham stood for the House of Representatives. Latham succeeded as an anti-Hughes candidate in 1922. It took Gullett, who had been working as news editor of the Melbourne *Herald*, a second attempt before he was elected in 1925 as an Independent Nationalist for Henty, centred on the Melbourne bayside suburb of Brighton. Independent of Hughes, independent of Labor, Gullett cast himself into the fray as a Nationalist who would accept no party whip. George Langley, formerly of the Camel Corps and the 5th Light Horse Regiment and now back teaching in country Victoria, was at his side during the electioneering.²⁴ In the meantime, Gullett had foreshadowed something of his own future political spirit and instincts in letters to Latham. Commending Latham on an independent vote, he wrote, 'The rigid party line is an accursed thing.'²⁵ While working at the *Herald* he confessed: 'I find it extremely difficult to abstain from rebellion against the prolonged idleness of the men of big personality and ability... And I cannot escape the conviction that the Country Party fellows are playing a very selfish game.' Gullett had seen a good deal of Stanley Bruce, 'in a personal way', and formed the opinion that the Prime Minister would have:

...broken the show up but for his difficulty in forming an all-Nationalist team which would have been in the least impressive. He has had an exceedingly trying time and is very anxious lest the continuation of the Composite Government should weaken Nationalists now holding rural seats.²⁶

Almost from the beginning of his parliamentary career, Gullett found much about the life disagreeable. 'God knows I am no saint,' he told his wife in February 1928, 'but I feel at least a little too decent to remain long in this dirty game.' He felt as though he was 'in the gun' and would never get to the front bench in the absence of drastic change. Riding for a while with a small group of independent Nationalist backbenchers, he certainly did not advance his cause by characterising the Country Party leader Earle Page in November 1927 as 'the most tragic Treasurer' Australia had ever had.²⁷ The defeat of Bruce and the loss of half a dozen of his supporters might, he thought, produce a different story after the next election.²⁸ He had made up his mind to go his own way, 'careless

24 George F. and Edmée M. Langley, *Sand, Sweat and Camels*, pp. xv, 144.

25 Gullett to Latham, 16 Aug. 1923, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/1112.

26 Gullett to Latham, 11 Aug. 1924, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/1270.

27 C. J. Lloyd, 'The Formation and Development of the United Australia Party', Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1984, p.24, courtesy of the late Professor Clem Lloyd.

28 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, 22 Feb. 1928, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/595-7.

of consequences', in the next House. But it was not long before Bruce took him aside for the kind of heart to heart conversation that party leaders bestow on promising but recalcitrant backbenchers:

He had me marked for early inclusion in Ministry. He dwelt on my many qualities; pressed the point that outside the Ministry I could do nothing along the lines I believed in, while inside I could use my influence. He was a reasonable man, always prepared to listen &c &c.

He said nothing as to future & I can only guess at what he was driving at...I gave no assurances, but admitted frankly that our repeated disagreements were a keen disappointment to me & that I regarded the future without much personal satisfaction.²⁹

Gullett would not have to wait for Bruce's misfortune before making the longed-for advance. In November 1928 he was appointed Minister for Trade and Customs. Among his first social engagements as a member of the Cabinet was a dinner he gave for Sir Hugo Hirst, chairman and managing director of the General Electric Company, who was visiting Australia with three other British industrialists and their wives. The delegation had come at the invitation of the Prime Minister to give advice on economic development. Hirst recorded his impressions of the new minister as 'a most cultured man' who 'seems to have been a journalist at one time'. Hirst was struck by the decorations in the Gullett house that 'show in good taste' records of his travels in Japan and the East, Canada, and Europe. Like almost everyone, he found Penny Gullett charming.³⁰

There was real work to do as a minister; but less than a year later Gullett was out of office when the Bruce–Page government was defeated at the polls. With a Labor government in power, and his former leader Bruce departed, Gullett felt 'without much direction politically'. Yet his career advanced. As Deputy Leader of the Opposition under Latham there was some relief to be felt that it was James Scullin and his Labor colleagues who were at the helm at a time of world economic crisis. It was Labor that would have to bear the opprobrium for some years of 'increasing expenditure & falling revenues — and more direct taxes'.³¹ As Jack Lang remembered, Gullett was 'the gad-fly who harassed the Scullin Government incessantly'.³² Gradually, from a vantage point in the inner circle, he was becoming more comfortable with the moneyed interests he had once disdained. The lack of direction was perhaps further mitigated by the news that the National Union, the Collins Street powerbrokers, had granted him up

29 Gullett to Penelope Gullett, [n.d. 1928], Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/600.

30 Sir Hugo Hirst's diary, 25 Nov. 1928, 6 Jan. 1929, MS Marconi 3174, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

31 Gullett to Latham, 3 Feb. 1930, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/1956.

32 J. T. Lang, *The Great Bust: The Depression of the Thirties*, McNamara's Books, Katoomba, 1980 (1st ed. Angus & Robertson 1962), p.311.

to £400 a year to pay for a secretary.³³ Direction was certainly found when the departure of Joe Lyons from the Labor ranks and the formation of the United Australia Party soon brought an end to Labor rule. Gullett, working closely with Menzies, had been privy to the manoeuvrings with Lyons, his friend and fellow Athenaeum Club man Keith Murdoch, and others that led to the new party. He was present when Menzies vetoed Earle Page as 'No. 2', thereby determining that the conservative forces were to go ahead without the Country Party.³⁴ In the new configuration Latham, having deferred to Lyons as leader, assumed Gullett's role of Deputy Leader of the Opposition. After the UAP's landslide victory in the general election of December 1931, Gullett entered the Lyons Cabinet, once again as Minister for Trade and Customs.³⁵

The political ferment of the next few months, with 'secret' and not so secret armies competing in alarms and excursions, left few political leaders completely untouched. Unfounded fears of communist revolution and well-founded concern about the intentions of the New South Wales government under Jack Lang, brought many prominent businessmen, pastoralists, and retired military officers into anxious conclave. Among the first to congratulate Gullett on his new appointment was Captain L. W. Sutherland, secretary of the militant and highly visible anti-communist group, the New Guard. Leslie 'Woodie' Sutherland was a former Australian Flying Corps observer whose service in Palestine had brought him a DCM and an MC as well as several mentions in Fred Cutlack's official history of the AFC at war.³⁶ Cutlack, now a leader writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, remained an ally in advancing patriotic causes.³⁷ In the late 1920s, having been invalided out of the RAAF after an accident, Sutherland was aviation representative for the Vacuum Oil Company; in that capacity he was closely involved with Charles Kingsford-Smith, Charles Ulm, and Keith Anderson. He had testified to the 'Coffee Royal' Inquiry that Anderson had not followed regulation procedure in 'swinging' of the *Kookaburra's* compass at Richmond before the fatal flight with Bobby Hitchcock. 'Highly intelligent and of adventurous disposition', as a secret naval intelligence division report described him, Sutherland now wrote to 'Harry' Gullett introducing 'a close personal friend of mine Capt De Groot'.

33 E. H. Willis to Latham, 25 Feb. 1930, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/1961.

34 Anne Henderson, *Enid Lyons: Leading Lady to a Nation*, Pluto Press Australia, North Melbourne, 2008, p.161; Anne Henderson, *Joseph Lyons: The People's Prime Minister*, Newsouth, Sydney, 2011, p.290.

35 'The Rise and Fall of the United Australia Party', is authoritatively distilled by Clem Lloyd in J. R. Nethercote (ed.), *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2001, pp.134–62; for 'The Politics of the Depression' Allan W. Martin's essay in Robert Manne (ed.), *The Australian Century*, Text Publishing Melbourne, 1999, pp.80–118, remains unsurpassed.

36 Sutherland to Gullett, 28 Jan. 1932, NAA A367/1, C94121; F. M. Cutlack, *The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War 1914–1918*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935 (1st ed. 1923). Sutherland's own war stories, written in collaboration with Norman Ellison, are in *Aces and Kings*, published in 1935.

37 Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, pp.123, 131.

According to Sutherland, Attorney-General Jack Latham had been anxious to contact Eric Campbell, the New Guard leader, 're some departmental matter'. Campbell was a decorated artillery officer, and now a well-connected solicitor with command experience in the Militia. He had been retained for some time by Vacuum Oil where he came into close contact with the former post-war Director of Artillery, Brigadier-General Herbert Lloyd, who punctuated his military and business career with spells as a Nationalist, and later UAP MP in the NSW Parliament. Campbell had achieved considerable publicity in 1929 representing Kingsford-Smith and Ulm as they defended themselves against allegations that their disappearance in the Kimberley was a stunt arranged with Keith Anderson. He had been intimately connected with the shadowy groups of businessmen, graziers, and ex-officers gathered together in 1930 amid fears of revolutionary anarchy. By 1932, having broken away in February 1931 from what came to be known as the Old Guard, he had recruited his own New Guard with as many as 36 000 adherents. Herbert Lloyd initially occupied the deputy leadership role. Kingsford-Smith was, it seems, designated by Campbell as the head of an air wing if the New Guard were ever to be mobilised to keep order. Both Campbell and Gullett's parliamentary colleague Frederick Stewart were directors of Kingsford-Smith's company, Australian National Airways.

Meanwhile, Captain Frank De Groot had been detailed to see the Attorney-General. It was 28 January 1932 and the NSW Premier J. T. Lang's populist economic policies were causing increasing alarm in conservative financial and political circles. Evidently Gullett acted promptly on the request that he assist De Groot to contact Latham. If Gullett did not know Campbell, he certainly would have known of him. Campbell had been associated in a para-military venture with Major Jack Scott, at the instigation of former Prime Minister Stanley Bruce in 1925. Scott was now chief of staff of the Old Guard, with whom the New South Wales police had a quiet understanding. Sutherland's letter bears a handwritten note from Latham to the Director of the Intelligence Bureau: 'Brought to me by Capt de Groot to whom I explained that I had not sought contact with Col. Campbell but that, as A. G., I wd be glad to receive any authentic information which might prove of value.'³⁸

Latham, long enmeshed with the intelligence community and forces arrayed against communism, appears to have been economical with the truth about his contact with Campbell.³⁹ On the same day, from his office in the *Sydney Morning*

38 NAA: A367/1, C94121. The connection between De Groot, Campbell, and Latham is acknowledged in Andrew Moore, 'De Groot, Francis Edward (Frank) (1888–1969)', Christopher Cunneen *et al* (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Supplementary Volume, MUP, 2005, pp.97–9, and explored more fully in Moore's *Francis De Groot: Irish Fascist Australian Legend*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2005, and 'Loyal lieutenant or spy? Frank De Groot and the intelligence services', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 96, Pt 2, Dec. 2010, pp.201–20, the latter of which came to hand after these paragraphs were written.

39 For Latham as legal officer for Monash's special constables during the 1923 Victorian police strike, and the support of the anti-Bolshevik Australian Legion for his early parliamentary candidacies, see Andrew Moore, *The Right Road: A History of Right-wing Politics in Australia*, OUP, Melbourne, 1995, p.28.

Herald building, Campbell wrote direct to Latham introducing De Groot who was, he said, 'known to Mr Gullett'. It appears that Gullett's old colleague and 'very close friend' Fred Cutlack had acted as an intermediary, and Campbell acknowledged that it might be embarrassing for Latham to see him personally.⁴⁰ Campbell did not need to add that De Groot was well-known as a former reproduction furniture manufacturer, shop-fitter, and antique dealer, as well as a prominent supporter of the Red Cross Limbless Soldiers' Association. Latham met De Groot but was careful to put on record for the director of the Investigation Bureau that he had given no undertaking, agreement, or understanding about future government action. He would, however, 'be glad to receive at any time useful information — rather than hearsay accounts — from any source'.

Whatever authentic information Latham received directly from Campbell's camp, the government was well-informed about the New Guard, especially its wilder elements, and soon recognised, along with the New South Wales police, that it was better treated with caution, as more a threat to 'constituted authority' than an ally in the cause of social harmony. De Groot's spectacular intervention at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge caught the public imagination. But more-sinister plans were germinating. When Campbell cabled the Prime Minister in April 1932 offering to place the New Guard at the government's disposal in the event of an emergency, he was politely rebuffed. 'We deprecate the suggestion that an emergency is likely to arise that will require intervention by the Commonwealth and the use of organised force,' Lyons wrote.⁴¹

Gullett, as Minister for Customs, was too cautious to have allied himself with Campbell's quasi-fascist and fractious movement. He was neither attractive to, nor attracted by, secret armies. But some of his parliamentary colleagues were not bashful about their New Guard links. It was evident that there was considerable overlap between those in the community who looked to the New Guard as a guarantor of public safety and those who saw in the United Australia Party the answer to the nation's political troubles. The newly-elected UAP MP for Parramatta, Frederick Stewart, was most conspicuous. A director of Associated Newspapers, as well as chairman of Kingsford-Smith and Ulm's airline, ANA, Stewart openly assisted the Guard by making part of his Sydney bus fleet available to convey a bizarre fire-fighting expedition to Cobar.⁴² He was soon to become Minister for Commerce and to take over trade negotiations from an exhausted Gullett.

40 Re Cutlack as a very close friend: Gullett to A.R. Wiggins, 3 Jan. 1933, Gullett Family MSS.

41 Campbell to Attorney-General, 28 Jan. 1932; Maj. H. E. Jones to A/g Attorney-General, 1 March 1932, 'The New Guard and "The Association"', NAA: A367/1, C94121; Cables Campbell to Lyons and reply 6, 7 April 1932, Lyons MSS, NLA MS 4851 Box 1, folder 4; Moore, Francis De Groot, pp.48–51, 56–81; Richard Evans, 'A menace to this realm' The New Guard and the New South Wales police, 1931–32', *History Australia*, 5(3), Dec. 2008, DOI: 10.2104/ha080076.

42 Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, p.149; Mackersey, *Smithy*, pp.204–5, 253.

It was only 10 months later, after playing a key role in defending Australian trade interests at the Ottawa imperial economic conference — his 'fiery temper was useful' Stanley Bruce would recall — that Gullett's health broke down.⁴³ After four months of convalescence he felt compelled to resign his office. As Charles Bean was to summarise this phase of his life, he 'rounded off his work at the Ottawa Conference with one of the greatest speeches ever delivered in our Parliament, and with the permanent loss of his health'.⁴⁴ Consoled with a knighthood, 'like all the political ones, purely an accident but...a pleasant souvenir of the happy, if somewhat hazardous, Ottawa enterprise', he might have supposed that he would spend the rest of his political career on the UAP back benches.⁴⁵

'A fanatical Australian'

'The main purpose of the United Australia Party', a young Sydney scholar had pronounced in 1935, was to keep the ALP out of office. 'It is not bound together by any principle that it can claim as peculiarly its own.' If anything held together 'the chequered and speckled complicated piece of cabinet-making known as the United Australia Party', it was 'a determination to defend the rights of property'.⁴⁶ It was to be expected therefore that men like Geoff Street and Jim Fairbairn would be found among the UAP's most active figures. Nor was it strange that the announced policy of what was left of the New Guard in August 1934 was to give whole-hearted support to the UAP at the next federal general election. But Harry Gullett? During a decade and a half of political turmoil and re-alignment he had found a home outside the Labor Party to which he had at first been attracted. For all his instinctual revulsion from fat capitalists, his vision was of development and immigration, an Australia of prosperous farms and pasture but also of burgeoning towns providing work for builders, carpenters, plumbers. He saw too a future for secondary industry. As early as 1914 he had written: 'For nearly a century the squatters produced the bulk of Australia's wealth; but the second century is to belong not to the squatter but to the farmer and the industrialist.'⁴⁷ 'He was,' remembered Sir Larry Hartnett, 'a fanatical Australian, absolutely crazy to get a motor car manufactured.'⁴⁸

43 Cecil Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne: Man of Two Worlds*, Heinemann, London, 1965, p.211.

44 *Reveille*, Sept. 1940, p.8. Kosmas Tsokhas, 'Australia and the Ottawa Conference', Working Papers in Economic History, No. 122, Jan. 1989, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU.

45 Gullett to Sir Hugo Hirst Bt, 11 March 1933, Gullett MSS, NLA MS ANU 3078/3/468.

46 J. A. McCallum, 'The Economic Bases of Australian Politics', W. G. K. Duncan (ed.), *Trends in Australian Politics*, Angus & Robertson in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Political Science, Sydney, 1935, pp.62-4.

47 Gullett, *The Opportunity in Australia*, p.114.

48 Recollections of Sir Laurence Hartnett, 16 Sept. 1977: Joe Rich, *Hartnett: Portrait of a Technocratic Brigand*, Turton & Armstrong, Sydney, 1996, pp.102-7.

Gullett was a man of enthusiasms, with a deep belief in the potential of government to make the nation a better place. For such a man, thoughts of retirement were premature. Lyons brought him back after the 1934 general election as Minister without Portfolio with responsibility for trade treaties. When he returned to the government he had not foreseen the difficulties ahead, not least his own ill-health. Jim Fairbairn would tell Charles Hawker in February 1935 that their friend 'looked like death (or a candidate for the mad house)'. In London in October 1935, he was contemplating but rejecting the idea of resigning: 'There is nobody else for the job & it must be done.'⁴⁹ Reflecting on the experience when in due course he did resign, he told one of his old wartime heroes, the 'serene and unpretentious little man' Sir Harry Chauvel, 'I had rather an awful 2½ years because of the fact that after my illness I joined in a junior capacity, and yet was called upon to handle so much important work.'⁵⁰

The important work to which Gullett had to turn his hand was the government's policy of 'trade diversion'. In May 1936 he was to announce the new policy designed to increase export of primary produce, expand secondary industry, and generate rural and industrial employment. A key element of the plan entailed preference for 'great customers' like Britain and correspondingly higher tariffs on Japanese textiles. When the pastoral industry, particularly the NSW graziers, mounted a campaign against the government's policy, Gullett was staunch with Lyons and the Country Party leader, Earle Page, in standing firm against pressure from wool growers and brokers to accede to Japanese demands. Restrictions on Japanese rayon and cotton exports to Australia looked to some like a capitulation to British cotton manufacturers. Gullett explained the policy privately to the Governor-General: 'If we cannot keep within definite bounds the import and competition of goods produced by Eastern standards (not only in textiles but in all manufactures) there is no safe future for British Australia.'⁵¹

Unimpressed graziers, abetted initially by Gullett's erstwhile Cabinet colleague Charles Hawker, saw the minister with responsibility for trade treaties as the author of their prospective misfortunes. Bob Menzies, Deputy Leader of the UAP, was quietly letting it be known that he had misgivings about the way negotiations were being conducted.⁵² But there was an 'inwardness' about the policy. Hawker, understanding the political danger of a stalemate and public conflict between pastoral interests and the UAP, eventually came round to support a compromise government position. Gullett and Lyons were edging

49 Fairbairn to Hawker, 28 Feb. 1935, Hawker MSS, NLA MS 4848/1/1; Gullett to Lady Gullett, 17 Oct. 1935, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/5/626.

50 Gullett to Chauvel, 22 March 1937, copy, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/3/40; Gullett, *The Australian Imperial Force in Sinai and Palestine*, p.698.

51 Gullett to Lord Gowrie, 10 Jan. 1937, Gowrie MSS NLA MS 2852/5/9.

52 J. P. Moffat's diary, 11–12 Feb. 1937, microfilm copy, NLA G7251.

their way towards a balance between the wool industry and the interests of beef producers, dairy men, and other primary-goods exporters who needed access to the British market.⁵³

Less controversial treaties were negotiated with France, Czechoslovakia, and Belgium. On the North American dimension of trade diversion Australia was less successful. With the Americans unwilling to do anything to ease the large trade imbalance with Australia, it fell to Gullett to introduce measures to restrict imports of American goods. A licensing system and prohibitive duties were imposed in the hope of persuading the United States to lower barriers to Australian primary produce while simultaneously boosting Australian manufacturing, and increasing both rural and urban employment. A visionary element of the policy was the notion that it would smooth the way for an Australian automobile manufacturing industry.⁵⁴ When the Americans retaliated in November 1936, Gullett had the task of putting the Australian position to J. P. Moffat, the U.S. Consul-General. Moffat's diary records the Trade Treaties Minister's heartfelt argument:

We are not out of the woods; we are fighting for national solvency. We have had six good moist years in a row, thank God! But Australia is a country of ups and downs; you have never seen it withered and parched and thirty or forty million sheep dying in a year. But we have. And the vision haunts us. We cannot rest until we have reserves enough to ride us over such a period. That is our first consideration. If not, we might have to default, and non-payment might gradually weaken the bonds of Empire and then God help us. No, our financial solvency is not only a matter of honour but of self-preservation.

And now you come along, oblivious of the fact that buying from North America is Australia; it is not only you but Canada. That is our next problem.

Five months later, the 'next problem' was to bring about Gullett's downfall. As Moffat summarised it on 10 March 1937, Gullett had resigned after encountering almost total opposition when seeking Cabinet agreement to impose further limits on Canadian imports and encourage trade with nations outside the Empire:

53 Kosmas Tsokhas, 'Business, Empire and the United Australia Party', *Politics*, 24 (2), Nov. 1989, pp.39–52; Kosmas Tsokhas, *Markets, Money and Empire: The Political Economy of the Australian Wool Industry*, MUP, 1990, pp.105–18; D. C. S. Sissons, 'Private Diplomacy in the 1936 Trade Dispute with Japan', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 27 (2), Aug. 1981, pp.143–59; D. C. S. Sissons, 'Pitfalls on the Road to N.A.R.A. — Sir Henry Gullett's Treaty Negotiations with Japan 1935–36', paper presented at 46th ANZAAS Congress, Canberra, 23 Jan. 1975.

54 Ross, *Armed & Ready*, pp.85, 96–7.

The rest of the Cabinet apparently pointed out that his trade diversion policy was getting nowhere, that this would cut across inter-Empire trade, etc. Finding himself virtually alone, with only the Prime Minister supporting him, and with his colleagues almost a unit in censuring him, he walked out of Cabinet meeting, resigned then and there and is leaving Canberra today.⁵⁵

What Moffat knew, as a result of the disloyal indiscretion of J. F. Murphy, Secretary of the Department of Commerce, was that not even Gullett's department supported the trade diversion policy. Murphy explained at a private lunch that, had it not been for the absence overseas of Page and Menzies when the policy was being formulated, the measures decided upon would not have given 'such immense offence'.⁵⁶ Gullett pointed the finger firmly at Earle Page: 'He and his tribe deliberately worked behind my back in direct consultation with the Canadians.'⁵⁷ Gullett resigned for 'personal reasons' but insiders knew better. He had made it clear that he had not left because of his health. To a journalist invited to his hotel on the evening of his dramatic departure he went on the record: 'I have not felt so fit for many years.'

There were the usual commiserations from former colleagues. But, of all the valedictions, that from Attorney-General Menzies to 'My dear Harry' showed the most effort:

Although I was, unfortunately, not able to agree with you on the particular point we were discussing before your resignation, I feel I must write to tell you how distressed I feel about the whole matter. In a way, I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, any Cabinet must be the poorer when it loses a man of patriotism, ability and courage. On the other hand I have felt for a long time that you were over-exhausting yourself, both nervously and physically, and that only your indomitable spirit kept you to a task which most men would have long since abandoned. On the whole, I suspect that you will be a happier man from now on, and I certainly know that there will be many occasions during the next twelve months when I will envy you mightily.

Thank you for all your friendliness and companionship of the last few years...⁵⁸

Menzies' distress was no doubt tempered by the fact that he had himself been given responsibility for trade treaties, co-ordinating the work of the Ministers

55 Moffat diary, 10 March 1937, Nancy Harvison Hooker (ed.), *The Moffat Papers: Selections from the Diplomatic Journals of Jay Pierrepont Moffat 1919-1943*, Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass, 1956, p.144.

56 Moffat diary, 26 Jan. 1937, microfilm copy, NLA G7251.

57 Gullett to Latham, 24 March 1937, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/5117.

58 Menzies to Gullett, 12 March 1937, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/3/37.

for Customs and Commerce and their departments. If Gullett felt any resentment he did not show it. He would later confide to a former parliamentary colleague: 'I was rather the "pigeon" of the piece, as trade diversion really had its origin in the Treasury.'⁵⁹ He would stay in the House of Representatives as a private member, he had said, a role that offered 'a great field of usefulness'.



The Gulletts' Orchard Cottage, photograph by Nash-Boothby Studios, 1924

(Courtesy of Malvern Historical Society and Stonnington History Centre)

With a homestead and 2500 acres six miles from the capital, the Gulletts had assumed a leading role in Canberra social life. They were welcome visitors at Yarralumla, where the Governor-General found discussions with Harry on 'various subjects, local, Imperial, world wide...most helpful and instructive'.⁶⁰ Charles Hawker would spend weekends and go out riding; the Fairbairns and others would drive out to dine or for a picnic. But, for a backbencher without the obligations of the political inner circle, the Hill Station property, remote from the nation's metropolises, become more a burden than an asset. In Melbourne, at Orchard Cottage in Moonga Road, Toorak, the Gulletts were closer to the heart of society. Extended as a result of a generous settlement from Penny Gullett's mother, Lady Headley (an astute businesswoman, principal shareholder of the profitable Law Book Company, but still more widely known

⁵⁹ Gullett to Sir Donald Cameron, 11 May 1939, copy, Gullett Family MSS.

⁶⁰ Lord Gowrie to Lady Gullett, 16 Aug. 1940, copy, Gowrie MSS NLA MS 2852/5/12.

as the writer Barbara Baynton), the house and a tennis court sat on an acre and a half. It was big enough to accommodate a cook, a housemaid, and a parlour maid, with a governess for the children when they were young, and a gardener and part-time laundress. A chauffeur was shared with Lady Headley, who built and occupied a house next door until her death in 1929. There was one large room for entertaining.

Penny Gullett was a popular hostess, ‘devastatingly funny’ as Elisabeth Murdoch remembered, celebrated for amusing stories about her friends, whose voices she effortlessly mimicked. She had befriended Enid Lyons and cleverly brought together personalities from politics, the press, especially the Murdochs, and wider society. She had been ‘a loving friend and encourager’ of Elisabeth Murdoch since taking the 19-year-old under her wing when she was being courted by the 42-year-old bachelor editor of *The Herald*.⁶¹ Bob Menzies too had often enjoyed the Gulletts’ hospitality and befriended their son Jo. During his first visit to the United Kingdom in May 1935, the Attorney-General went up to Oxford to take Jo, Bill Baillieu, and some other young Australian friends to dinner at the Mitre Tavern.⁶² It was the kind of gesture that counted with a colleague who was a proud father. Gullett and Menzies were not confidantes. They disagreed publicly on modern art. But they had mutual respect and their easy communication survived breaches over policy as well as their differences over Matisse, Picasso, and Van Gogh.⁶³ Whatever their quarrels, Gullett would tell his son, he admired Menzies as ‘the least greedy man you can imagine’ — giving up a most lucrative legal practice for a life of public service with all its political savagery and personal slurs.⁶⁴

After the election of 1937, discontent simmered in the Cabinet. For some, the issue was what seemed like a dilatory approach to defence preparations. Writing 35 years later, Enid Lyons described the malcontents as men who thought her husband lacked vigour and drive. Gullett, she said, was one of them. ‘He resigned his portfolio and openly opposed Joe’s leadership.’⁶⁵ In fact, the Prime Minister’s wife had been informed privately that Gullett was secretly contributing critical articles to the Murdoch press.⁶⁶ Briefed by the restless retired Major General Sir John Gellibrand, a former parliamentary colleague, Gullett was openly calling for the creation of an effective infantry and infantry mobilisation plan, a national register of men from 18 to 50, and ‘sounder training’. By the end of 1938, as the Cabinet itself was increasingly divided on the best way to respond

61 Gullett, *Good Company*, *passim*; John Monks, *Elisabeth Murdoch: two lives*, Sun, Sydney, 1995 (1st ed. Pan Macmillan 1994), p.139.

62 Menzies’ draft typescript diary, 17 May 1935, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/579/7. Gullett recalled a breakfast with other friends in his rooms at Oriel College (Gullett, *Good Company*, pp.96–7).

63 June Helmer, *George Bell: The Art of Influence*, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, 1985, p.86.

64 H. B. ‘Jo’ Gullett, interview, 7 Aug 1978.

65 Lyons, *Among the Carrion Crows*, p.61.

66 Henderson, *Enid Lyons*, p.242.

to growing international tensions, Gullett had nailed his colours to the mast of a stronger commitment to defence and compulsory military training. He was understood to be colloquing with Menzies and Sir Keith Murdoch (who had taken on Gullett's son as a reporter), all of them impatient for a change at the top of the government. In a speech laced with inflammatory language, he spoke on a Labor confidence motion on 3 November 1938 of the 'farcical training' of the citizen force which, if it were to encounter any 'real invading trouble', would be 'a mere suicide club'.

Two days later, Gullett raised concerns in the party room about leadership, suggesting that Lyons should make way for someone else. There was 'a little wordy by-play' between him and the Prime Minister. But he received little support and was openly derided by Tommy White, the Minister for Trade and Customs.⁶⁷ Within a few months Murdoch and the money men of the UAP had lost their confidence in Menzies. They were convinced that he was so unpopular with the electorate that Lyons, although exhausted and desperate to retire, was essential to the survival of the government. Lyons had reshuffled the ministry immediately after the November party room meeting, promoting Geoff Street to be Minister of Defence, and creating a 'policy committee', in effect an inner Cabinet, prompting an excluded and piqued Tommy White to resign. Recognising that matters of substance remained unresolved, Gullett did not waver. In the manoeuvrings that followed Menzies' resignation and the death of Lyons in April 1939, he was unequivocally in Menzies' camp.⁶⁸

Support for Menzies brought its reward. It did not hurt that he had publicly praised the increasingly influential Fred Shedden, Secretary of the Defence Department. Gullett had kept in touch with other key figures — hosting a dinner for Jim Fairbairn and General Squires on March 7 after which the latter recorded 'much talk...about Defence matters — I hope not indiscreet on my part'.⁶⁹ Squires may not have known how close Gullett was also to Sir Tom Blamey, appointed chairman of the Manpower Committee by a hesitant Joe Lyons, who had heard 'funny things' about the Victorian Police Commissioner.⁷⁰ Initially expressing reluctance to take up office again, Gullett had two meetings with the new Prime Minister. The disclosure by Menzies that he was offering the External Affairs portfolio brought him into the fold. Writing to Jack Latham, now Chief Justice of Australia, he commented on the new ministry:

A fair team. All depends on Bob. He has it in him, if it can be extracted & applied.

67 White diary, 5 Nov. 1938, in Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, p.154.

68 CPD, House of Representatives, 3, 8 Nov. 1938, pp.1231, 1323–6; White, *A Political Love Story*, pp.201, 206–16.

69 *The Herald*, 24 Feb. 1939; Lt Gen. E. K. Squires diary, 7 March 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.

70 Frank Legg, *The Gordon Bennett Story*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p.158.

Alas I am one of the few survivors — the only one of the old B-P team.

I was reluctant to begin again but Bob put it almost as a duty. And he has treated me handsomely. I think Coalition will come quickly, but only if Page is discarded. When it does I am out.⁷¹



A minister again, reluctant but persuaded

(Courtesy of Peter and Kate Gullett)

Writing more expansively to an Australian pastoralist living in London, Gullett explained a fortnight later:

The new Menzies team which is solely U. A. P. is of course at the mercy of the Country Party. The C. P. after Page's loathsome attack on Menzies has split, and I think now that five members do not attend its meetings. So long as Page remains the C. P. leader a coalition is impossible and

⁷¹ Gullett to Latham, 3 May 1939, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1/5312; Gullett to Sir Archdale Parkhill, 11 May 1939, copy, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/3/519.

with the general unhappiness of the party I think it likely that we will carry on through this year and possibly up to the eve of the elections. However this is all surmise, and the P. M. probably has his own views about it.

We have a sound team and Menzies is shaping phenomenally well. He is striking a deeper, wider note and certainly has a grand public throughout Australia after only three weeks of office. Page's attack on him did him the world of good and, strangely enough, particularly with the returned soldiers.⁷²

As External Affairs Minister, Gullett was a member of the Council of Defence. He took a variety of issues to Cabinet, but it was soon obvious that both foreign and defence policy were firmly in the Prime Minister's hands. Menzies left Gullett to handle the delicate diplomatic contacts with Japan. In dialogue with the Japanese Ambassador, the External Affairs Minister faithfully presented the Australian official position that 'there was not the least hostility in this country towards Japan, apart from some feeling over the Sino-Japanese war'. He oversaw negotiation of oil concessions in Timor, and endeavours to thwart Dutch ambitions to secure the commercial air route from Dilli [sic] to Darwin — both in pursuance of establishing Australian interests in Portuguese Timor and 'to forestall Japanese activities as part of their southward advance policy'. The Australian government had proposed to the Portuguese government a weekly air service as long ago as April 1939. The effort gained impetus following a survey visit to the colony in July 1939 by Jim Fairbairn, the Minister for Civil Aviation, in company with his principal public service advisor, Edgar Johnston. A draft agreement had been sent to Lisbon.⁷³

Like all of the Cabinet, by early July 1939, Gullett had to contemplate the imminent outbreak of war with the Axis Powers in Europe. With Menzies' concurrence he had earlier danced gingerly around the contentious question of the extent to which Australia was free to make its own decisions. The Prime Minister had said in a broadcast that 'the British countries of the world must stand or fall together'. But these words, Gullett said:

...were not to be interpreted to mean that in any and every set of circumstances the foreign policy of a United Kingdom Government, if it led to war, should or would, automatically, commit Australia to participation in that war. Nor did they mean that action taken by a

72 Gullett to D. Russell Ferguson, 18 May 1939, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/3/497.

73 Sir Henry Gullett, Minister for External Affairs, to R. G. Menzies, Prime Minister, Memorandum, 7 June 1939, Secret, NAA: A981, Japan 101, ii; H. S. Gullett, 'Portuguese Timor-Oil Concessions and Air Service', Cabinet submission, 13 March 1940, NAA: A981, Timor (Portuguese) 22, v; Hudson Fysh, *Qantas at War*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1968, p.112.

Government of the Commonwealth in any and every set of circumstances, and leading to war, should or would automatically commit the United Kingdom to participation in that war.

It is conceivable that upon either side a policy might be adopted which met with strong disapproval, or condemnation, by the other Government...But in the circumstances in which the Governments of the United Kingdom and of the Commonwealth find themselves today there is no sort of disagreement. On the contrary there is complete unanimity on the policy being followed, and on any action which may arise out of that policy.⁷⁴

As the record of a discussion of a defence policy review by the Chiefs of Staff makes clear, Gullett was profoundly pessimistic about the prospects in the next few months:

If in that period war should come, we would be in a very unsatisfactory position. Singapore was devoid of assistance from an effective Navy and would remain so until the position was cleared up in the North Sea by the British and French Navies. Within that period...anything might happen. Japan would, in his opinion, undoubtedly come south and have the capacity to entirely destroy the small Australian Navy, some portion of which, unfortunately, at the present time, was in the unhappy position of undergoing modernisation. Our Air Force had not a single frontline aircraft in Australia, although of course, it soon would have.

He said that the outline conveyed by the Chief of the General Staff as to the ineffectiveness of our coastal defences was most depressing and, in addition, many of our 6" guns appeared to be not fully effective. He particularly stressed the fact that he did not wish to reflect on anyone in authority for he stated that, when the present position was surveyed in the light of the situation three or four years ago, our position now was undoubtedly good, but nevertheless was not good enough. To his mind the Army was of first importance in view of the relative ineffectiveness of the Navy without the support of a squadron at Singapore and the deficiencies in the Air Force, but when he considered the Army strength it appeared that we had at present no military force outside of the Fixed Defences.⁷⁵

The Chiefs of Staff might have protested that this was an unduly gloomy assessment. But there was too much truth in it for anyone's comfort. After

⁷⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1939; Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–1941*, p.119.

⁷⁵ Summary of Proceedings of Council of Defence Meeting, 5 July 1939, NAA: AA 1971/216 in *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy*, vol. 2, 1939, No. 117.

a Council of Defence meeting, Gullett confided to his Army friend, John Gellibrand, his disillusion with the makers of defence policy. General Squires he thought was 'unscrupulous & a bad swine'. Generals Chauvel and Brudenell White, and the Defence Minister Geoff Street were 'nincompoops & Squires' Yes men'.⁷⁶ Being noticeably sensitive, Gullett could be impetuous in debate.

An entertaining conversationalist, he could occasionally be a little too free with his opinions. Yet much was forgiven of a man of ideals and intellectual rigour, a fine host, and above all someone who did not spare himself in the pursuit of the government's goals.⁷⁷

Weary propagandist

The coming of war dissolved many old quarrels and brought new responsibilities. Jo Gullett, awaiting his medical examination before joining the AIF, would sense his father's frustration: 'Menzies puts a dam side [sic] too much work on him because the Cabinet is pretty full of dumbbells [sic]. Dad is working up for a frightful row with Street who lacks drive but he holds back with impatience.'⁷⁸

When a Department of Information was created in September 1939, the portfolio was assigned to Gullett.⁷⁹ As Secretary of the department he brought in his old friend and successor at the Australian War Memorial John Treloar. A punctilious and disinterested classical public servant, Treloar had served as a staff sergeant during the war on Gallipoli, as a lieutenant in No. 1 Squadron Australian Flying Corps in Egypt, as confidential clerk to General Brudenell White in France, and finally as officer in charge of war records in London. Treloar made it clear to his subordinates that they were on no account to be drawn into defending the government or the Minister. In October, Gullett explained to the Cabinet the tasks of the department. First was maintenance of domestic morale and distribution of information. Next was overseas propaganda (a logical link with the External Affairs department's role) mainly disseminated by means of a shortwave radio service. And third was censorship. In elaborating his mandate for Cabinet, he articulated a grand aspiration to 'constantly increase and sustain the faith of the Australian people in the cause for which we are engaged in war'. Specifically, they were 'to promote the interest and thought calculated

76 Edith Gellibrand diary, 8 July 1939, in Peter S. Sadler, *The Paladin: A Life of Major-General Sir John Gellibrand*, Oxford UP, Melbourne, 2000, p.247.

77 Watt, *Australian Diplomat*, p.21; Irvine Douglas, 'Australian Air Disaster: Careers of Three Ministers', *Sunday Times* (London), 18 Aug. 1940.

78 Jo Gullett to 'Weed', 25 Sept. [1939], Gullett Family MSS.

79 For much of what follows on the Department of Information I have drawn on Edward Louis Vickery, 'Telling Australia's story to the world: The Department of Information 1939-1950', PhD thesis, Australian National University, Aug. 2003, pp.15-79 and John Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors: Censorship and Propaganda in World War II*, UQP, St Lucia, 1984, pp.17-65.

to support the government in the necessary recruiting, the raising of money, the acceptance of the inevitable taxation and its activities generally'. Then, in case anything important had been omitted, they were 'to distribute sound facts upon all phases of the war direct and indirect through every kind of available channel'.

Gullett's mission might have been easier if there had been greater clarity about the 'cause' for which Australia was fighting. But the government was notably quiet about its war aims. He was astute enough to realise that whatever the volume of 'sound facts' despatched throughout the country, increasing and sustaining the 'faith' of the people was going to be an elusive goal. At least, without any regular attempt to gauge public opinion, no one could say with certainty that they were failing. What could be said, albeit with little foundation, was that the department was in effect a government-financed propaganda machine for the United Australia Party. A Labor Party standing aloof from government could make the charge but could not give it substance. And of course, in its international role, dissemination of propaganda was precisely what Gullett's team was meant to be doing.

If his statement to Parliament on 21 November 1939 was a reflection of his real feelings, Harry Gullett had little enthusiasm for the Information role. The ministry was not his creation, he said. 'It was passed over to me for administration. It is a very heavy task.' The weight of the task owed something to the jealousies and resistance of established departments. Relations with Defence and the Army especially had to be constantly finessed. He was happy in January 1940 to join the Service Chiefs in putting the representatives of the Sydney press right about what could and could not be said about the movements of the AIF, happily assisting as General Squires and Admiral Colvin 'refuted their arguments'.⁸⁰ But a few weeks later, after a bungle over the release of information about the landing of the 2nd AIF in Egypt, he had to get Cabinet backing to secure 'paramount authority' for himself and the Chief Publicity Censor. Service representatives were henceforth to be advisors only.⁸¹

By March 1940 Gullett was showing signs of weariness. He, along with the Prime Minister, had been rebuked in letters to newspaper editors for suggesting that Army recruiting figures showed that Australians were apathetic about the war. He was perhaps less in touch with popular sentiment than once he had been.⁸² He wrote to his old comrade Latham that he had 'not been in much physical shape'. With relations between the UAP and the Country Party once again proving difficult, he reflected:

80 Squires diary, 12 Jan. 1940, UNSW@ADFA, MS 184, folder 3.

81 Submissions, Cabinet decisions and minutes, 16 Oct. 1939, Jan.–Feb. 1940, NAA: A A2676, 36.

82 *The Argus*, 20 Jan. 1940; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Feb. 1940.

A lovely political kettle of fish. A counter attack is I think overdue & between ourselves I am advising Bob to object to Cameron, but to offer to deal generously with a C. P. led by McEwen. (The going between Cameron & McEwen is I think about equal, if it does not actually favour McEwen). Whatever the government's frailties it has had no chance with a press so hostile...

I find myself strangely disinterested. Perhaps I am too old to worry now. I do my job with what strength & brains I have — & leave the rest to fate. Meanwhile I dream of the day when I may be able to go for the rest of my days to 'Tawstock' — my farm.⁸³

Gullett got part of his retirement wish when coalition came shortly afterwards. He was dropped from the War Cabinet, making way for McEwen at External Affairs, when the ministry was reconstructed in March 1940. Within External Affairs he had been increasingly seen by his officials as 'a dilettante, rather indolent, very agreeable, very civilised, good company — but the sort of man who never bestirred himself very much'. He had the reputation, one recalled, of being 'an able but somewhat vain and pernickety man'.⁸⁴ Whatever the truth of that, Menzies was at pains to keep him in the government as Vice President of the Executive Council, minister in charge of industrial and scientific research, and minister assisting the Minister for Information, the second post he had himself just vacated.

The appointment of Sir Keith Murdoch as Director-General of Information in May might have been thought by some a recipe for friction. Menzies had not hidden from the War Cabinet his belief that the Information Department was 'poor'.⁸⁵ Murdoch was given unprecedented powers and reported directly to the Prime Minister, who had 'nominally appointed' himself Minister for Information. But Murdoch was an old friend and shooting companion, and Gullett was not minded to make difficulties. He turned his attention to censorship, leaving the rest of the domain to Murdoch. It was just as well. Menzies soon began to lose patience with the Director-General and the antagonism which the appointment of a business rival eventually provoked from the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Rupert Henderson. Rationing of newsprint aroused the wrath of press proprietors convinced that Murdoch had disclosed commercially sensitive information to the government. In July 1940 other media interests also found themselves in conflict with the Director-General over proposed national security regulations requiring newspapers, cinemas, and broadcasters to publish statements deemed essential to the prosecution of the war. Forced into embarrassing amendments

83 Gullett to Latham, [?] March 1940, Latham MSS, NLA MS 1009/1.

84 Sir Keith Waller, interview, 21 June 1977; Watt, *Australian Diplomat*, p.21.

85 War Cabinet Notes, 21 May 1940, Shedden Papers, NAA: A5954, 729/1.

by a storm of protest over the proposed 'dictatorial' powers and an openly disgruntled Postmaster-General, Vic Thorby, and other unconsulted Cabinet members, Menzies instructed his private secretary Peter Looker to keep Murdoch at arm's length.⁸⁶

As early as April 1940, with a general election looming, Gullett had admitted:

I am somewhat feeble on the physical side. My capacity for night engagements really is most limited. As a general rule I take to my bed immediately after dinner and there read papers. The social side of my life has been almost entirely abandoned which at my age is perhaps not unbecoming.⁸⁷

What was unbecoming was a needless row with John Curtin over arrangements to distribute the Leader of the Opposition's shortwave address to South Africa, which was in Gullett's view 'merely a rehash of a great many speeches he has made on Labor's defence policy'. 'Mr Menzies, it is believed,' the *Sun News Pictorial* reported on April 10, 'prevailed upon Sir Henry Gullett to modify his attitude.' Recurring bouts of ill-health, silently accentuated by decades of tobacco smoking, had taken their toll. He was still able to make a good speech, as he did at the University of Melbourne on July 20 commending newspaper scrutiny of the ministry: 'A government leading its people into war should have the worst known about it at the outset.' Yet, unless they were intent on changing the leadership or removing a government, newspapers should be careful in the national interest not to bring a ministry into 'disrepute with soldiers or citizens'.⁸⁸

A plea for co-operation between journalism and government might have been Gullett's political swan-song. Had his electorate seemed safe he would have preferred to stand down and not fight the next election. He had bought a block of grazing land about 50 miles north of Melbourne, fenced off five acres, and built a weekend cottage flanked by a stream and surrounded by ash, oak, and other English trees he planted himself. 'Tawstock', an evocation of the Somerset of his grandfather's youth, was an increasingly enticing retreat. However, there were signs that a fresh candidate might have difficulties in the Henty electorate; and he was already beginning to think that he might have to saddle up again. Perhaps he would be relieved of ministerial responsibilities. But for now, on another crisp August morning, with the quick smile that flickered for Prime Minister and chauffeur alike, Harry Gullett embarked dutifully on the familiar drive from Toorak to Essendon.

86 Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors*, pp.56–65; Sir Cecil (Peter) Looker, interview, 25 March 1976; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18, 19, 20 July 1940.

87 Gullett to A. Bishop, 4 April 1940, Gullett MSS, NLA MS 3078/3/66.

88 *The Argus*, 30 July 1940.

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