

7. Open letters and private correspondence

'For God's sake, don't feel that [this] demands any answer. It is enough to have got it off my chest.'

L. F. Giblin to E. M. Forster

Giblin, Brigden and Copland were not scholars immured in library stacks. Nor were they government officials, hidden in invisible annexes to the corridors of power. They were public figures. And they were never more public than in the 1930s, when they took to podium, platform and pen. They were the public intellectuals of the decade.

These public appearances were not a matter of striking an attitude, of being merely a lamenting chorus to the drama of the protagonists. They entered the amphitheatre to put to field a force that would win an important battle – the struggle between thought and prejudice. They believed, in the manner of the Enlightenment *philosophe*, that an important social dynamic lay in the conflict between a calm and supple reason on the one hand, and a hot and hard unreason on the other.

The urgency of this struggle had become more urgent with the advent of democracy, and the transfer of power from an educated elite to the uneducated mass. This transfer encouraged in late-Victorians doubts about the worth of democracy – doubts that both progressives (such as Giblin's hero, George Bernard Shaw), and reactionaries shared alike. Giblin sometimes entertained a Shavian displeasure with democracy. What actual value Giblin placed on democracy – in the sense of majoritarianism – is unclear. But as the 1930s progressed, and as anti-democratic forces drew vigour from unreason, the causes of Democracy and Reason coalesced.

Giblin, Brigden and Copland were not entirely pessimistic about democracy successfully drawing on the rationality that anti-democratic forces despised. The three had some confidence in their capacity to soften 'dense' unreason of the public with their emollient wisdom. But diplomacy, tact, discretion would be at a premium. Polemic they completely avoided; the darts of Keynes', *The economic consequences of the peace*, were very deliberately not imitated.¹

¹ The thirty volumes of *The collected writings of John Maynard Keynes* contain at least four volumes of 'popular' communication. A greater resemblance, and perhaps a model, lay in the popular economics of Stuart Chase (1888–1985).

They were assisted by the apparently easy access they had to newspapers and radio.² They were also assisted by the fact that their adversaries professed *economic* theories; the Douglasites and the Marxists, all considered themselves distinguished by their special economic insight. The simple dismissal of the economic criterion that was to confront a later generation of economists was not their difficulty.

At the same time their task was also made both harder and more necessary by circumstances. In Australia the teachings of political economy had never been received with a reverent hush. Political economy's precepts on trade had long been violated by colonial tariffs, and Federation merely violated them in a larger context. For several years an appointment of the first professor of economics at Sydney University had been delayed on account of an apprehension that a free trader might be chosen. (One Chancellor of that University described his resistance to economics teaching as his regular 'scotching the snake' (Groenewegen and McFarlane 1990, p. 43)). At about the same time the appointment of a professor of economics at Melbourne was thwarted by the requirement that the appointee must be Australian. And Australia had until the inter-war period never raised a single 'economist' who had become a prestigious public figure. 'Economists are heretics', Brigden noted (*Economic News* 9 June 1932 p. 108). There were few resources deployed in the dissemination of 'economic intelligence'. Textbooks with an Australian reference were non-existent. As Brigden wrote: 'For the student of Economics in Australia there is, as yet, no satisfactory text book dealing with Australian conditions' (Brigden 1922). And the financial press was undeveloped. The *Australian Financial Review* only came into being in 1951. Even the *Statistical Bulletin* of the Commonwealth Bank did not exist before 1937. It was partly in the light of this paucity that the *Economic Record* was originally conceived, not so much as an academic journal, but as a 'record' of otherwise deficient information.³

To this backdrop, the Great Depression arrived. In the view of the four, popular economic illusions exacerbated the Depression. The crux of the crisis did not lie in society's economic machine: 'Capitalism is ourselves', said Brigden (1932a, p. 13). The economic machine was not broken, it had been halted. And it had been halted (to pursue the metaphor) by political obstacles laying in its path. '[The financial system] does not mix well with 'politics' – that is, politics which ignore

² The press was not always available. Brigden had become *persona non grata* in the pages of the Hobart *Mercury*. The Editor of the *Mercury* told Copland that Brigden had a 'narrow and warped' view of the press. 'Brigden' he said, 'took up the extraordinary view that it was probably a good thing that the press was suppressed during the General Strike'.

³ Brigden anticipated that the *Record* 'would afford members information on the world's economic happenings during the year' (*Mercury* 8 April 1925).

economics, try to evade economics, and fail' (1932a, p. 26). These 'politics' reduce to public opinion. This opinion, inevitably, became more obdurate in times of stress. And in addition to the older, local devotions (such as the 'living wage'), there arrived in the 1930s new mystery religions (for example, Douglas Credit), and frenzies (for example, the notion of the Depression as a conspiracy).

These illusions, said Wilson in 1931, indicted Australia's 'education system' for failing to acquaint her citizens with 'the hard facts of our economic environment'. Consequently, Brigden believed 'his principal duty to be the dissemination of elementary economic knowledge and principles to an Australian public in which, at that time, both labour and business opinion were indifferent or hostile' (Wilson 1951).⁴ In the same vein, Giblin believed the Depression to be a 'great opportunity to bring home economic thought to the Australian people' (Giblin 1947, p. 2).

This chapter, then, begins by telling of the homilies the four issued in the early 1930s to shepherd the flock away from cliffs towards which it was blindly cantering. The 'texts' of these sermons were, above all else, the system of award wages and the monetary system, and to a lesser extent, sugar and railways.

The chapter goes on to show that the secular homily was used not only for weaning the public off economic vice. Politics, censorship and art became matters of 'open letters', especially from Giblin.

But it tells more. For Giblin the 'letter' form was not a literary exercise. Giblin was an addicted, almost obsessive, letter-writer. It was his most preferred form of expression, for private relations as well as his public ones. The chapter closes with some of his personal correspondence. We move, therefore, from the glare of publicity to the recesses of privacy.

John Smith

When Giblin was a young 'socialist', the pre-eminent literary success of socialist agitation consisted of a series of 'letters' by Robert Blatchford to one 'John Smith of Oldham, a Hard-Headed Workman, Fond of Facts'. John Smith was also a Liberal voter, and these addresses were intended to explode the Manchester School in John's eyes, and convert him to the socialist cause. First published in a newspaper in 1893, they were later collected in book form (*Merrie England*), priced at one penny, selling 850 000 copies by 1895, and ultimately two million, with translations in Dutch, German, Swedish, Italian, Danish, Hebrew, Norwegian, Spanish, and Welsh.

⁴ Downing, the former pupil and assistant of Copland (and Giblin): 'He was essentially a publicist and believed fervently in leading his community into wiser ways of economic thinking and policy' (Downing 1971, p. 466).

Giblin had used Baltchford's letters to Smith for his discussion circle in pre-war Hobart. In the Great Depression Giblin decided to write his own addresses to 'John Smith', with the intention, it might be said with pardonable exaggeration, of restoring the Manchester School in the eyes of the 'hard headed workmen'. Between 8 July 1930 and 18 July 1930, ten 'Letters to John Smith' appeared daily in the *Melbourne Herald* above Giblin's signature. They were republished as a collection by the *Herald* with the sub-title: 'telling in simple language the facts of the economic situation that has arisen in Australia, and showing how our problems can be solved'.⁵

Giblin's fundamental purpose was to persuade his readers of the wisdom of wage rate reductions. The word 'wages' appears in eight of the ten titles. 'The basis of wages' (letter 1); 'Wages can be too high' (letter 3); 'Why wages must fall' (letters 4 and 7); 'More about profits and wages' (letter 6); 'How to get higher wages' (letter 8); 'Making terms about wages' (letter 9); and the 'Limit to wages' (letter 10).⁶

Wage rates, says Giblin, are based on productivity. And the basis of profits? To explain profit, Giblin expounds the simple classical theory that interest and profit is the reward for abstinence.

Naturally we have to pay people to save – to refrain from spending – and we call the payments 'interest' ... The rate of interest is fixed by the need we have for someone's savings; it must be high enough to induce people to save enough to keep industry going. (Letter 5).

His explanation of wages and profits is the preface to his ultimate purpose of eliciting assent to wage cuts. But then suddenly he notes:

I have said, 'Wages must fall', and I have not given you any precise reason for the necessity.

This was correct. No reason had been given. But Giblin was cautious. He did not say: 'I give you one'. Instead he backed away with:

... are we quite sure of the necessity? Everybody says it – but a considerable number of people always have said it, all through recorded history. Probably Adam in his later centuries was very apt to say of his descendants of the nth degree, 'These boys eat too many figs, and they don't work the way poor Abel used to. I shall have to cut down their rations' ... (Giblin 1930d, p. 17).

⁵ A few weeks earlier there appeared *The Economic Outlook*, a reprint of three articles by Copland, which appeared in the *Melbourne Argus* on 19–21 June 1930.

⁶ And one of the two in which 'wages' is absent from the title (letter No. 2) is, nevertheless, about wages.

Anything approaching a 'precise reason' for believing that unemployment would go down if wages went down is hard to find. Would not John have detected an evasion?

Would not John have felt that he was being patronised? Opinions on this last are various. (see J.M Garland in Copland 1960). An aspiration to 'enlighten' must assume some sort of position of superiority to those being 'enlightened'. But it is fair to judge that Giblin's assumed superiority lay in knowledge, not intelligence, rationality, or responsibility.

A similar diplomacy is found in Brigden's complementary public lectures, *Escape to prosperity*, later published by Macmillan and sold at the 'lowest possible price'. Brigden drew here on a radically new and apparently powerful way of communicating: the radio. The newly found and briefly lived predecessor of the ABC – the Australian Broadcasting Company – had already, by 1930, 'considerably developed' the radio talk. By 1929 there were 300 000 licensed listeners.⁷

But Brigden's 'strategy for escape' included little economics. Brigden avoided it due to a concern not to lose his listeners. 'I decline to say that Compulsory Arbitration should be abolished forthwith partly because I want this book to be read by people who are arguing about it' (Brigden 1930a, p. 184). Instead he warns his listeners against the tendency of Australians to refer to, and depend upon, the state in economic matters; and then exhorts his countrymen to show in the economic emergency that hardy resourcefulness that was to be found in the 'old pioneer spirit' and 'Mont St Quentin'. His exhortation is good-humoured, homely, and nudging. It is also frequently trite in sentiment and tired in phrasemaking: ('It is time ...'; 'Let us ...'). *Escape to prosperity* may have made passable listening, but it was a lost opportunity to convey some economic logic.⁸

It is not surprising that Brigden's *Escape* was ignored, while Giblin's letters – dense in simple economic principle – provoked John Curtin into writing his own 'letters' in reply. Curtin begins with a thoughtless conflation of the positions of Gibson and Giblin. 'It is the policy of Sir Robert Gibson and of Professor Giblin that has to answer to the community; for it is their programme which has been, and is, in function' (*Westralian Worker* 12 December 1930). He then turns

⁷ Brigden gave six talks over October–November 1933 for 4QG, including 'Competition: old theories and new facts', and 'The utopia of economic stability'. They were all 'live'.

⁸ *Economic News* was a more decided attempt of Brigden to enlighten the public in economic matters. A monthly production of the Queensland Bureau of Economics and Statistics from June 1932, it furnished economic journalism of a standard not previously seen in Australia. 'Many things done for this book have not been done before' (*Economic News* 6 June 1932, p. 3). The first number describes itself as a 'book' and did constitute by itself an introductory text. Brigden feared *News* may suffer from unpopularity. In fact the *News* was protected from this by its lack of position.

upon Giblin's thesis that it was the deterioration of the terms of trade which is responsible for Australia's troubles. It is not relative prices, says Curtin, but a decline in all money prices that is the source of the difficulty. 'It is not the relation of tea to flour ... that has radically altered, but all of them to money that has given us world-wide depression ... Why then does the Professor leave the money question sacrosanct?' Curtin invokes Keynes as an ally, no doubt thinking of the recently published and much discussed *Treatise on money*.

Giblin drafted a reply. He addresses Curtin as 'my friend'. He suggests that Curtin is mistaken in supposing a significant difference separated the two of them. He, like Curtin, favours going off gold. '[Curtin] would even make me responsible for the present economic structure of society and challenges me to defend it. I probably agree with Mr Curtin in most of the criticism he would make'.⁹

But Giblin defends his identification of the reduction in the terms of trade as the source of Australia's ills. Flour may not have changed relative to tea. But tea made up little of Australia's imports. The average prices of exports had fallen by 50 per cent, says Giblin, while the average price of imports by only six per cent: 'much the greater part of our loss from exports is a real loss, which cannot be made up from monetary policy'. And Giblin contradicts Curtin's notion that private interests are blocking a socially improving monetary policy. 'I am not convinced that "private interests" have hitherto had very serious effects. The question of technical competence is more important'.

Giblin's dismissal of the powerful vested interest seems a precondition of the usefulness of any attempt to shape public opinion. If 'public opinion' is just 'public propaganda' – just an attempt of the man in the street to blind others rather than see himself – any attempt to 'enlighten' opinion would seem totally misguided. As the three always had some confidence that they could enlighten, they must dispute the role of interest.¹⁰ But could vested interests be so confidently dismissed?

Roland Wilson noted tartly in a column in the *Statist* (September 29 1932) that that the UAP Government had announced that pensions were to be cut from 17/5 to 15/–, while simultaneously confirming farmers were exempt from sales tax.¹¹ With relief he records: 'the movement towards a reduction in costs has at last extended towards the sugar industry'. Sugar was the object lesson of vested interest, commented on by Giblin and Brigden as well as Wilson. For, at

⁹ JCPML 00653/151/9.

¹⁰ 'This book may leave the Bureau with no friends at all who are accurate and influential'.

¹¹ In 1932 Wilson wrote four articles (at the request of Shann) on Australian economic conditions for the *Statist: a Journal of Practical Finance and Trade*, founded in 1878, presumably as a competitor to the *Economist*.

a time when Australia at large was in deep economic distress, the Queensland sugar industry was in a state of unnatural prosperity, on account of its protection from the Great Depression by subsidies from Australian consumers.

The preservation in the post-war period of abnormally high wartime sugar prices, by means of import prohibitions and bounties, had underpinned the 165 per cent increase in sugar production between 1921 and 1931. Although Australia was an importer before the 1920s, Queensland's production had long outrun the capacity of the Australian market to absorb expensive Queensland sugar. The inevitable resort was to pay the foreigner to buy Australian sugar. In 1931 Brigden estimated that 49.8 per cent of all production would be exported. The very simplest calculation of the cost of the policy was £8.7m.¹² This compares with £600 000 of public funds spent on capital works in schools in 1930–31, and £150 000 of public funds spent on housing (Butlin 1985, pp. 34–5). £8.7m amounted to 1.5 per cent of GDP. It was equivalent to £1100 per farm (when average earnings in Australia came to £220 pounds per year).¹³ It was Wilson's belief that this hefty transfer from South to North was in considerable measure responsible for the unusually low rate of unemployment in Queensland compared with the rest of Australia (Wilson 1932).¹⁴

Brigden's *The story of sugar* (1932b) seeks to reconcile Australian opinion to this expensive policy, and Queensland opinion to its mild reform. Yes, the Australian consumer pays Queensland producers a premium over the world price. Yet during the First World War a prohibition of the export of sugar to a sugar-starved world had kept Australian prices below international ones. 'This is a fact that Southerners should remember – and Queenslanders forget' (p. iii).

Brigden could certainly not go further – this was a publication of the Queensland Bureau of Economics and Statistics. It is surprising that he ventured as far as he did. Yet the fact remains he did not venture further. The fact remains that *The story of sugar* is an apology for the 'virile industry in the North'. An industry that was not so virile, however, as to be unrequiring of the generous support of the effeminate South. Brigden closes by rebuking the 'indignant' propaganda' (p. 9) of the South against the sugar subsidy. It was impossible for Brigden to join the South's rebukes. But it was possible to avoid this slight of a well-founded resentment.

Railway economics (1931c) was another attempt by Brigden to gently persuade. It traces the roots of financial troubles of the Queensland railway system's

¹² £8.7m = £2.7m in export bounties plus £6m in subsidy for home production. This sum measures the cost to the consumer. But it does not include the loss caused by the misallocation of resources.

¹³ This is pointed out to 'John Smith' by Giblin.

¹⁴ Wilson reported that rate of unemployment in February 1932 as 18.2 per cent in Queensland, 31.8 per cent in New South Wales, and 28.3 per cent in Australia as a whole.

over-investment in track. 'For its sparsely populated area Queensland is lavishly equipped with railways.' But all this capital was not effectively exploited owing to regional squabbling. He traces the beginnings of wrangling over the railway system to the unification of the Southern Division of the railways (Brisbane to Charleville) with the Central Division (Rockhampton to Longreach). This enabled wool to be sent direct to Brisbane by rail, and so bypass Rockhampton. Consequently, penalties were imposed to stop wool using the railway route to Brisbane. But these penalties did not restore Rockhampton's financial viability. Brigden held hopes for *Railway economics* to obtain a wider interest. But, he says, it 'did not contain any political sticks, and it fell flat' (*Economic News*, 9 June 1932, p. 2).

One other attempt of Brigden at public persuasion is *Credit* (1932a), a tract designed to dispose of Douglas Credit theories. C. H. Douglas had gained considerable publicity on his tours in the 1930s, and Social Credit leagues, movements and associations proliferated in Australia prior to the formation of Social Credit Party. Moreover, it had proved popular with sympathisers of Georgists (more through psychological than logical considerations), and with many in the ALP. In Tasmania in May 1931, the Reverend George Carruthers, a penniless Anglican clergyman, won the sixth seat of Denison on the Social Credit platform, purportedly the first Social Credit MP anywhere. Social credit, it seemed, was on the march.

In *Credit*, Brigden launches his own rebuttal of social credit. He makes heavy work of the trivial fallacies of social credit (such as fixed costs affecting pricing in the short run), or its perplexing dicta ('Money used several times in production must necessarily record a cost greater than itself'). Life is added by giving space to two Queensland Douglasites to reply to Brigden.¹⁵ Brigden's intention was much better secured by a public lecture Copland gave to the Commerce Students Society in August 1932, entitled *Facts and fallacies of Douglas Credit with a note on Australian credit policy*. Copland's bony prose spears Douglas' pretensions and evasions.

¹⁵ *P.P.* (Brigden 1931a), issued at about the time of the Lang Plan, was another attempt of Brigden to vanquish unsound notions of money. But it does not succeed as advocacy: it lacks an adversary; it is all as if from teacher to pupil. And as a textbook, it is no more successful. It is lacking in theses. Its great vistas of commonplace definition are not compensated by his enthusiastic use of italics, or his easy, conversational sentences.

The practical communist

For all the attempts of Giblin, Brigden and even Copland to practise diplomacy with respect to wages, they received the obloquy of the Left.¹⁶ (See for example, Lloyd Ross.) The irony is that, throughout the 1930s, Giblin displayed an attraction to extreme left ideals.

The Saturday morning readers of the conservative *Argus* on 2 November 1935 would have seen this listed amongst the public notices:

TWO-DAY CONFERENCE OF FRIENDSHIP WITH THE SOVIET UNION

At Central Hall

Speakers: Miss D. Alexander, Miss M. Heagney, Prof J. N. Greenwood, Mr W. A. Smith, Ex-Senator R. D. Elliot, Mr J. D. Blake

Chairman: Rev S. Evans, Mr Max Meldrum, Prof L. F. Giblin¹⁷

At Unity Hall

Talk on Art, Chekov, Russian Music

Giblin's participation in this Communist Party front could not have been unpremeditated. In October 1933 Giblin had addressed the Melbourne University Labor Club, another Communist Party front, on 'socialism'. To the student society Boobooks he spoke on the 'The Practical Communist'. In a radio talk (on 3AR) innocuously entitled, 'Shaping the future of Australia', he registers his sympathetic gaze towards 'one country, Russia' that 'was in the process of giving some answers' to questions of planning.

Russia has adopted conscious direction in the most extreme form for some years. The experience of Russia, carefully interpreted should help greatly. It is too early to draw certain conclusions. We know that

¹⁶ The ever-caustic Roland Wilson was an exception to this diplomacy: he did not give quarter to economically illiterate interests. Thus of the Basic Wage Inquiry he wrote:

Some amusement has been caused to those whom the depression has not robbed of their sense of humour by ... the claim that a wireless receiving set forms one of the essential elements in the cost of living. The pompous seriousness with which such arguments are advanced and rebutted constitutes a major indictment not only of our educational system but of the methods by which we endeavour to reconcile our social inspiration with the hard facts of our economic environment. (*Statist* 15 August 1933).

¹⁷ Max Meldrum was an anti-modernist art teacher who won the Archibald several times, a pacifist during the First World War, and a civil libertarian. J. D. Blake was at that time an ardent Stalinist who attended and defended the Moscow show trials of the 1930s. D. Alexander was married to Ralph Gibson of the Communist Party, and was active in the Kisch case. John Greenwood was Professor of Metallurgy and Applied Science at the University of Melbourne.

production has greatly increased, that unemployment has been abolished, and that the standard of living is now rising. We also know that this has been done at very heavy cost, and that the standard of living is still very low in comparison with western Europe.

At about the same time he penned another letter to John Smith, entitled 'The lesson from Russia'.

Ten years ago Russia appeared to be down and out as a result of the war and the revolution ... Since then progress has been in leaps and bounds. In about three years it looks as if Russian production would have grown to three times pre-war production. It has been possible because Russian leaders recognised the facts. It was Lenin who set the pace. It is useful to remember that Lenin was a statistician. (NLA LFG).

Has the rhetoric of 'facts' ever made such a fool of itself?

How can one explain such a lapse of judgement? In the mid-1930s a trustful indulgence of the Soviet Union was commonplace among surviving members of the Edwardian Liberal-Left. H. G. Wells was one example. So were the Webbs, (also highly enamoured of facts: see Webb 1889). And so was John Maynard Keynes (see Coleman 1992).¹⁸

For Giblin, the attraction of the Soviet Union may be more particularly traced. The attraction lay in its rigour, its severity. The Soviet Union was delivering to its population in severe terms the necessary austerity that soft-minded Australians were hiding from. While 'Russia the land of dreams getting down to hard facts. Australia, the land of realities, still dreaming about a sacred standard of living' ('The lesson of Russia').

Giblin was never an enthusiast - Russia's standard of living, remained 'miserably low ... the lowest in Europe'. He was an eccentric.

More certain conclusions will probably emerge during the next few years, and will probably penetrate to Australia in spite of censorship. Meanwhile we must keep an open mind, think carefully and experiment boldly.¹⁹

¹⁸ On June 1 1936 Keynes declared on the BBC that the results of the 'new system' in Russia were 'impressive'. 'The largest scale empiricism and experimentalism which has ever been attempted by disinterested administrators is in operation' (quoted in Coleman 1992). This was his position in 1936: Keynes's views on the Soviet Union underwent several fluctuations, as did his views on many things.

¹⁹ Not all Giblin's platform company was left-wing. He was invited by the ABC to debate with R. G. Menzies on the topic, 'Twenty million people for Australia - is it a possibility?' The ABC, however, required that his talk be submitted in advance, examined, and revised in a manner deemed fit by the ABC. Giblin replied: 'I may say that I would be very interested in such a

'*In spite of censorship*': the modern reader will assume that this is a reference to Soviet censorship. However, it is more likely a reference to Australian censorship which, at this point of time, forbade the dissemination of works deemed to advocate 'the overthrow of civilised government'. These included Lenin. In the 1930s Australian censorship was at its peak of confidence and completeness.

The Lyons Government Minister for Customs, Sir Thomas White,²⁰ had proved a particularly assiduous censor. In response, a Book Censorship Abolition League was formed in 1934, and Giblin was one of its public speakers. 'Book Anti-Censorship are staging another big show at the Town Hall. Six speakers taking each a banned book and dealing with it – a good representative lot of speakers – Paton from the University taking one of Lenin's books and so on' (RBA LFG April 1935).²¹

The occasion of his memorable protest was the controversy over Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* that appeared in 1936. Harold Holt described it as 'brilliant'; Casey thought it 'dull'. But *Brave new world* had been banned, and White had sternly announced: 'Huxley should not escape the process of the law'. The prospect of banning *Eyeless in Gaza* was floated. This moved Giblin to protest; the protest is worth quoting at some length.

It would be difficult to imagine a more thoroughly depressing piece of news. The collapse of the wool-market would be a trifling mishap in comparison.

Mr Huxley has for some years been the most interesting of the younger English writers. Enormous promise, expressed often in tentative and experimental form, has left some dissatisfaction with the total performance, despite brilliance in parts. It has for some time been an anxious question whether he was going to get anywhere ... 'Eyeless in Gaza' goes far towards answering this question and dispelling this doubt. The superficial brilliances have in effect disappeared, merged in the high seriousness of the story. I have read no new book for years which comes so near to the Greek tragic idea of purging by pity and terror.

What would make the censorship news supremely farcical, if it was not so revolting, is that Mr Huxley shows himself here as fundamentally a

discussion, but I am not willing to broadcast at any time on any subject under the conditions referred to in your letter' (UMA LFG 19 October 1936).

²⁰ Thomas White (1888–1957), was a son-in-law of Alfred Deakin, winner of the Distinguished Flying Cross, author of *Guests of the unspeakable: the odyssey of an Australian airman, being a record of captivity and escape in Turkey*, and active in the Develop Australia League, the Protect Australia League, and the Royal Empire Society.

²¹ Sir George Paton, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne from 1951 to 1968.

moralist of the old dispensation ... 'Eyeless in Gaza' is a dramatic re-statement in terms of present day experience of the vision opened in the Sermon on the Mount – the most honest and convincing given to this generation. And Mr White is considering whether it should be banned!

It is of course possible to pick out from the six hundred pages a minor incident, a touch of colour, here and there, details necessary for a fair and full presentation of the whole story – and put them violently into apposition as a sample of the whole calculated to disturb the after dinner complacency of the unlettered pater-familias. The same could be done with most great writers.

If one could ascribe this attitude to the blind and dense unreason of a Minister's intelligence, it would not be so bad. Ministers come and go. It is much worse than that. Not only is the Government behind it, but in effect the whole Parliament of Australia. Censorship procedure of the kind we have suffered from would not be possible if there were in Parliament even a solid minority of people acutely conscious of the ridiculous futility of the Censor's antics. It is abundantly clear that there is not, – that with hardly an exception our representatives do not care ... It is this attitude towards the intelligence of the country which spells the breakdown of democracy and opens the road to the worst excesses of either Nazism or Bolshevism.

Eyeless in Gaza was not banned. The retreat on book censorship began the following year. *Brave New World* was unbanned.²²

Giblin did not only lift his pen to defend art, but also to advance it; not so much as defender, but as patron and benefactor.

The Jindyworobaks were a poetic movement of the late 1930s and 1940s, stirred by Rex Ingamells (1913-1955). The movement has been judged to amount to a resurgence of the literary nationalism of the 1890s, but distinguished by a 'novel attempt to mine aboriginal culture for inspiration' (Bennett 1988).²³ Giblin appears to have been the earliest of several patrons of Ingamells. It seems that he had brought Ingamells to the attention of John Masefield – the popular Poet Laureate, and generous patron of young talent (FUL p. 11) – when Masefield

²² *Love me sailor* left Giblin 'impressed by its qualities'. He told Eilean it is 'ridiculous' to consider it 'bawdy' (NLA LFG 29 March 1949).

²³ The chief organ of 1890s nationalism was *The Bulletin*. Giblin 'had a long standing devotion to the Sydney *Bulletin*' (Copland 1960, p. 12).

visited Melbourne in 1934 for the centenary of European settlement.²⁴ And he provided Ingamells with a contact for Bunny Garnett.

Giblin also provided the opening 'manifesto' for the Jindyworobaks, in a foreword to Ingamell's first collection of poetry, *Gumtops*. There Giblin makes a bare and brave call for Australian poetry to shun the English literary tradition, which distracts the native poet from the necessary 'direct reaction' to the Australian environment.

Some individuality of character and habit have developed in Australia in the last 150 years, and the face of nature has always had a unique distinction. But this individuality and distinction are not at all adequately on record in letters or any other art ... The contrast with older countries is very marked. In England, of nature and man, the record is so adequate as to raise the familiar doubt as to which came first. The English rustic is shaped in the tradition of Shakespeare and Hardy; rain-clouds on the southern hills have obviously read their Meredith; beeches and wych-elms know all there is to know of Gothic architecture; and the poplars round Cambridge raise their heads in conscious rivalry with King's College Chapel ... Our Australian poetry is in striking contrast, and enrichment must be slow and laborious. The problem of even naming the common birds and beasts, trees and flowers, needs the inspiration of a new Adam. Our fathers, in despair at their strange surroundings, and clutching at some pathetic shred of similarity to familiar things, peopled the bush with a dozen different oaks, ashes, myrtles, pears, cherries. A true story is impossible in these terms. (Giblin 1935).

Australian poets, wrote Giblin, 'must forget all they have learned of the poetry of other lands; shut their ears to all the familiar, captivating echoes, and try to give us their first-hand, direct reaction to nature and man as they find them in Australia'.²⁵

Gumtops, with Giblin's foreword, was sent to P. R. Stephensen, the doyen of Australian literary nationalism of the 1930s. He declined to publish. The spirit and thought of Giblin's foreword is undeniably similar to Stephensen's nationalist credo, *Foundations of Australian culture*, published in July 1935. The insistence on creation being a matter of first-hand direct reaction, and the implications of this for Australian literature, is common to both. Stephensen is commonly

²⁴ 'Between 1933 and 1935, Prof L. F. Giblin, Mr Edward Garnett, and Mr John Masefield encouraged me to write Australian nature poems'. Giblin told Ingamells: 'You are certainly overgenerous in speaking of my help' (FUL LFG 2 October 1948).

²⁵ Ingamells says Giblin's foreword articulates the key 'Jindy' concern: 'environmental values'. This expression has an arresting modernity about it. But it does not speak for a wish for man to not shape the environment. Rather, it speaks of a wish for the environment to shape man.

recorded as a 'profound influence' on the twenty-two-year-old Ingamells. The chronology would suggest that Giblin might be more deserving of that judgement.

Giblin recommended Ingamells for a Rhodes Scholarship. But his letter commented:

It is a queer quality, this power or incipient power, of making poetry. It does not correlate with other abilities. The Committee will find his responses on personal contact disappointing, a little crude. (UMA LFG 27 October 1936).

It appears that Giblin's 'disappointment' became more pungent over the years. He 'drifted into a defensive disinterest' about the 'Jindys'. Twelve years later Giblin wrote to Ingamells to explain 'on why I have kept aloof from your enterprise'.

2.10.48

Dear Rex

... the deciding factor was the adoption of the word 'jindyworobak'. It seemed to me to be a very perverse choice – academic in the worst sense. You seem to have exercised a perverse ingenuity in picking out a word with all the [undecipherable] that any word in any language could have ... that was my state of mind when I became a victim of the pruning knife. (FUL LFG 2 October 1948).

'I am bound to admit now that I was wrong in thinking you would get nowhere'. But there was little other show of concession in his letter. Giblin judges a recent Jindy collection to contain 'some very poor stuff ... General impression was of a poor ability to write English'. A week later he seems to have felt some regret at sending this cool, hard letter, and wrote again. 'I think the criticism of my last letter may suggest hostility to you' (FUL LFG 7 October 1948).

At bottom of his estrangement from the Jindyworobaks is a difference over truth as an artistic value. To Giblin truth was a central artistic value. He wanted 'a true story'. Art was a form of reporting. And when he read one of the Jindys infelicitously compare the cry of a certain bird with a 'chortle', he was 'roused to a fury of scornful protest'.²⁶

²⁶ Giblin found no appeal in the notion of Art as a distinct domain, or sanctuary, from Life. Francis Galton – the mentor of Giblin's own teacher Karl Pearson – had taken it for granted that art was to answer to science; thus Galton's scientific investigations of poetry. Giblin, in a similar way, was content to make quantitative investigations of poetry. Late in life he pursued an exhaustive quantitative investigation of poetry, called the Poetry Game, in which reactions to lines of poetry were measured. 'I was not a particularly imaginative child, or bright in the way of fancy'.

'Personal'

Several months after Giblin died, his sister Edith asked: 'Is Copland writing a life? I have almost everything Lynd wrote me while he was away – Klondyke-England –War' (NLA LFG:EMG 21 May 1951). What she could offer a biographer was massive. Giblin was addicted to letter-writing, of all sorts: letters to family, to friends, almost daily letters to his wife; letters to the editor;²⁷ follow-up letters; letters with codicils; carefully composed, but never sent letters.

To his elder sister, Edith, he wrote more, and more devotedly, than to any other person. His first letter is to her, on the occasion of a visit to the mainland.

Dear Edith

Did you like Sydney or Melbourne best? Are there many good buildings in Sydney. I thought a couple of days ago that you would not be able to go to Sydney, which would have been awful for you.

The Hutchins School are going to give an entertainment of gymnasium and exercises to parents and friends. Mr and Mrs Justice Giblin & family are invited. We are dreadfully disappointed, Miss E. Giblin, or at least I am, that you will not be there to witness my intended brilliant performance. (RBA LFG 13 June 1885).

In his young adulthood his animated, blithe, copious letters to Edith reveal a wish to share with her his world – and his enjoyment of it. And her own wish for him to share it. He provides minute descriptions on the cityscape of Cambridge. He describes his friendships about which she wishes to learn.

The appearance of Eilean in 1917 created a new correspondent. When they were apart – which was often – he wrote frequently. His letters to her are briefings, extensive and interested. From the front in 1918 he wrote:

There are queer stories of insubordination among Tommy units going about. One is credibly reported by one of our fellows who was at Harvre at the time. Food very short, complaints, promises to make it better; that evening only a biscuit to eat, and the crowd gathered to protest – 2 Tommy battalions concerned. Second in command addressed men, and has his face cut open with a jam tin, and stuff flew about. A big N.C.O. got up to protect the officer, offered to take on anyone, and he was kicked to death, and cheers followed. There were over 30 killed altogether and finally Australians were turned out to clear up the row, which apparently they did.²⁸

²⁷ A sample. To the *Argus*, complaining about its over-crowded columns: 'The orator knows the eloquence of pauses, the musician of silent bars. The architect (except in Melbourne) recognizes the value of a plain space of wall. Even the advertiser in your paper knows that he gets greater effect (and profit) by leaving his paid-for inches blank. But on the 'literary side' the smallest space of virgin white seems to be an unpardonable sin' (UMA LFG 1 August 1933).

²⁸ Just a rumour? On the night of 9–10 December 1918 elements of British forces in Le Havre rioted.

Figure 7.1. Giblin with young friends



Source: Courtesy of Alf Hagger

His letters to Eilean avoid the bouts of reflection and the minuting of to-and-fro, written to Edith. They also lack the gaiety of those of his earlier life. Perhaps Eilean was not a good foil for blithe spirits. Or had his life lost some joy?

There was a third category of correspondent: youths and young men.

Giblin devoted considerable time to the 'pastoral care' of boys. He was a member of Legacy. He had frequent associations with boys' schools, especially Geelong Grammar²⁹ and Canberra Grammar School. On his 70th birthday he received a gift from one boy, 'Michael', stricken by rheumatic fever, and bed-ridden for over a year – a pipe.

This sort of association generated a correspondence on several occasions. The correspondents were often the sons of Giblin's academic peers and colleagues. One example is Paul Unwin, a son of Ernest Unwin who arrived in 1923 to be Headmaster of the Friends School at Hobart.

The first letter on file reveals Paul already full of trust and attachment to Giblin.

I have grown some this term, and am now 5 foot 5 inches high and I weigh 9 stone 9 to 10lbs; is this too much?

Some time later:

I am so glad that you have decided to visit us these holidays ... I will be thirteen when I see you next, so get some work for me to do at the Beach on the farm, or I shall become a newsense [sic].

At about this time Giblin sent Unwin a copy of the freshly published *Enquiry*.

31/7/29

Dear Mr Giblin

Thanks for the Tariff book you sent me. It will come in very well to put in my library, even if I never read it right through until I am old man with white locks.

Long before his adulthood, questions of later dilemmas loomed in Paul's mind.

10.30am 29/9/29

Dear Mr Giblin

I am sorry to trouble you but as you teach in Melbourne University could you let me know what [are] the conditions of compulsory military service there? Being a quaker I am entirely against, as all our denomination, Compulsory Military Training and for that I am practically debarred from Sydney University.

²⁹ Giblin notes after one visit to Canberra Grammar: 'Boys being encouraged to think for themselves, are doing so, and the results sometimes embarrassing' (RBA LFG 4 April 1935).

Perhaps a career in forestry might evade military training? Giblin gave him some preparation.

Paul did very well. Ran about lightly with a 25lb swag and was always ready for more. We had three good wettings – one with a very wearisome spell of 3 hours soaked through over long button grass.

Giblin wrote to the Tasmanian Forestry Commission to recommend Unwin as a trainee. 'I feel sure that you will find him a very satisfactory investment'. Giblin knew what he was talking about. Unwin was made a trainee, and in 1971 was appointed Chief Commissioner of Forests.

Having begun with open letters to the throng, we can conclude with one letter which was only ever seen by the author's eyes. On his return from Cambridge in 1938 Giblin wrote, but never sent, the following letter.

Dear Morgan Forster

This impertinence springs from your Henry Thornton article, which like all you write nestles in my mind as very little contemporary stuff does. It's a queer family in which you are for me a member – the saga, Hamlet and the sonnets, some of Miss Austen and a good deal of Meredith, the later Beethoven and the 4th Symphony of Sibelius.

You may just have heard my name. I spent most of last spring and summer at King's: they very amiably made me a supernumerary fellow. In visiting England and Cambridge, I had rather counted on meeting you, and Wedd was confident you would be sometime in Cambridge. In default, I even thought of invading your Surrey fastness, but a sense of decency was reinforced by lack of time at the last. Still, I would like to tell you baldly – and leave it at that – how pre-eminently you have been my refreshment these last 30 years ...

That's all and more than enough. It is in fact my first offence of this kind in 66 years. Call it dotage. It will harmonise with second childhood if I adopt the small boy's friendly ending – Love.

L. F. Giblin