

GIBLIN'S PLATOON

THE TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS OF THE ECONOMIST
IN AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC LIFE

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IN AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC LIFE

WILLIAM COLEMAN SELWYN CORNISH ALF HAGGER



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

E P R E S S



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L. F. Giblin 1872–1951



J. B. Brigden 1887–1950



D. B. Copland 1894–1970



Roland Wilson 1904–1996

'The civilisation of a country may be judged from its statistics.'
L. F. Giblin

'Australian history is, of course, largely economic history.'
D. B. Copland

'Economists are heretics.'
J. B. Brigden

'A man of stature and personality can hardly be said to die.'
Roland Wilson

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Preface

This book tells the story of four men – L. F. Giblin, J. B. Brigden, D. B. Copland and Roland Wilson – who, in 1920s Tasmania, formed a personal and intellectual bond that was to prove a pivot of economic thought, policy-making and institution-building in mid-century Australia.

The book seeks to supply in words the group photograph that, sadly, seems not to exist. In our book, as in the hypothetical wished-for photograph, L. F. Giblin stands firmly at the centre, glaring at the observer, the focus of our attention, implicitly commanding the following of the others. Copland stands loyally, close by his right hand; Brigden is at his left, a bit further away, as if seeking a little space; and Wilson stands between Brigden and Giblin, directly contemplating the onlooker with a cool, sceptical expression.

Our photograph does not seek to glamorise or sentimentalise: it allows a stark light to fall on any unattractive surface. But it does allow the subjects to arrange themselves, so that they reveal what they chose, even if they did not realise they were revealing it.

The photograph has an arresting background; one that explains why it has been taken at all. For the story told here is larger than that of the four lives. It is the story of the advent of the economist in Australian public life. A more extensive telling of this tale would involve others, including E. O. G. Shann, L. G. Melville and H. C. Coombs. But these persons either leave early, or join late. It is our four who lead the advance, endure reversals, and finally consolidate the position.

This arrival of the economist was a pregnant development in Australian history. It has been deplored, celebrated and mythified. But less often understood. It stands outside the three foci of Australian history-writing: material history (exploration, technology, and business), political history and social history (overwhelmingly, labour history) and cultural history. Our story cuts across all of these – labour history especially – but has at its core a report of intellectual achievements, which were strong enough to anticipate and stimulate the leading currents in economic thinking across the world.

We are, then, providing a piece of Australian intellectual history that has not been properly valued. In doing this we are paying a tribute to one of the central themes of Giblin and his platoon: that Australia was more than it seemed, to its inhabitants and foreigners alike. And, if this truth were realised, could be still more than it was.

William Coleman
Selwyn Cornish
Alf Hagger

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- The Reserve Bank of Australia
- The College of Business and Economics of the Australian National University
- The School of Economics of the Australian National University
- The University of Tasmania

We would also like to express our debt to several persons.

Professor Michael Roe was actively consulted throughout the research of the book, and attentively read the entire manuscript. Ian Castles gave us the benefit of his marvellous knowledge of detail and documentary sources, and, as guardian of the Roland Wilson Archives, kindly put these at our disposal.

We also thank Marjorie Harper for participation in a workshop on part of the manuscript, and for granting us access to some documents of which she is custodian; and Peter Karmel and Cristina Marcuzza for presenting to and participating in other workshops on the manuscript.

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We give our special thanks to Lady Joyce Wilson for providing us, and giving us permission to use, the several photographs of Sir Roland Wilson.

And we thank John Ancher for his assistance with the archives of The Hutchins School, and Rosalind Moad for her assistance with the archives of Wycombe Abbey School.

We also thank the staff of:

- the Australian National University Archives
- the Bank of England Archives
- the King's College Library Archives
- the London School of Economics Archives
- the National Library of Australia Manuscript Collection
- the Reserve Bank of Australia Archives
- the Archives of Tasmania
- the University of Melbourne Archives
- the University of Tasmania Archives

List of abbreviations

Individuals

LFG Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin

DBC Douglas Berry Copland

JBB James Bristock Brigden

RW Roland Wilson

AWF Arthur William Fadden

EMG Edith M. Giblin

HCC Herbert Cole (Nugget) Coombs

HSN Harold Sprent Nicholas

JAL Joseph Aloysius Lyons

JMK John Maynard Keynes

JR John Reynolds

KHB Kenneth H. Bailey

LGM Leslie Galfreid Melville

PS Percy Spender

RGC Richard Gardiner Casey

RGM Robert Gordon Menzies

RK Raymond Kershaw

WKH William Keith Hancock

Newspapers, organisations, books

ABC Australian Broadcasting Corporation

CWJMK The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes

NZDB New Zealand Dictionary of Biography

SMH Sydney Morning Herald

Archives and records

ANUA Australian National University Archives

AWM Australian War Memorial

DAFTHP Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Historical Publications

FUL Ingamells Collection, Flinders University Library

JCPML John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library

KCLA Keynes Papers, King's College Library Archives

LSE Cannan Papers, London School of Economics Archives

NAA National Archives of Australia

NLA Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia

PRO Public Records Office

RBA Papers of Governors and Senior Personnel, records in the custody of the Reserve Bank of Australia Archives

RWA Roland Wilson Archives

UMA Faculty of Commerce and Economics Papers, University of Melbourne Archives

Note on archival sources

The archival abbreviations noted above are used in the text to refer to items drawn from these collections.

Any archival reference will begin with the abbreviation of the archives, followed by an abbreviation of the 'creator' of the collection of papers being referred to. So,

NLA JAL

indicates an item which is part of the Joseph Aloysius Lyons papers in the Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Australia. If the author of the item referred to is not the 'creator' of the collection in which it is held, then the initials of the author are appended. For example,

NLA JAL:LFG

denotes an item authored by Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin which is part of the Joseph Aloysius Lyons papers in the Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Australia.

Where only one collection in an archive is used, the abbreviation for the 'creator' of the collection is dropped. So, for example, as only the Keynes collection of the King's College Library Archives is used

KCLA LFG

denotes an item authored by Lyndhurst Falkiner Giblin which is part of the Keynes collection of the King's College Library Archives.