

Weathering the winds of change

Diana Giese

Journal of Northern Territory History 22, March 2011

From **Selected articles, chapters, Web material and radio** on www.dianagieseeditorial.com.au

In the published version, the following precedes the article:

Introduction¹

Professor David Carment

Diana Giese's article about the Darwin house in which she and her brother Richard grew up is one that as a highly regarded author with a longstanding interest in Northern Territory history she is especially well suited to write.

The building that she describes is familiar to many Darwin residents and visitors. Preserved as part of the National Trust's Myilly Point Heritage precinct of houses erected for senior government officials during the late 1930s, it is periodically open to the public. Its design provides maximum ventilation without the use of air conditioning and considerable living space. It also has a luxuriant tropical garden.

As Diana explains, for many years the building was the home of her parents and, at the time of writing, her mother still lives there. Harry Giese (1913-2000) and his wife Nan (1922-) were two of the Northern Territory's most influential and prominent figures. Both were awarded Australian and British imperial honours.

As Director of Welfare in the Northern Territory Administration from 1954 to 1970, Harry supervised administration of the Commonwealth's Aboriginal policy. Although sometimes controversial, he won widespread respect for the conscientious and effective manner in which he undertook his duties. He went on to become the Territory's first Ombudsman and a key founder of the Menzies School of Health Research.

Nan Giese is equally distinguished. Among her various community roles, she was President of the Arts Council of Australia's Northern Territory Division and for ten years Chancellor of the Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University).

The account that follows is a significant primary historical source.

¹ Sources for the introduction include: David Carment, *Looking at Darwin's Past*, North Australia Research Unit, The Australian National University, 1996; Peter d'Abbs, 'Giese, Harry Christian', in David Carment, Christine Edward, Barbara James, Robyn Maynard, Alan Powell and Helen J. Wilson (eds), *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, Revised Edition, Charles Darwin University Press, Darwin, 2008; *Who's Who in Australia 2010*, Crown Content, Melbourne, 2009.

Weathering the winds of change

Above the wide curve of Mindil Beach stands a house that, in spite of the odds against it, has survived. It has weathered the bombings of World II, the gales of Cyclone Tracy, the wreckers' bulldozers and years of neglect. Set high above the sandstone cliffs in a rainforest garden, it has been the home of the Giese family for more than half a century.

The place where it stands was once both wild and peaceful. Across the thin gravelly topsoil grew open woodlands of woollybutt and stringybark, milkwood, nutmeg and banyan. Vines clung to the cliffs. Around the corner Myilly Point overlooks a great arc of flat blue water across the beach to Bullocky Point.

In the early twentieth century this country of the Larrakia people began to be developed by Europeans. Near the house in 1912 the Kahlin Compound opened. Then five homes were built for government officials. Such settlement has always been fragile and temporary. After the cyclone of 1937, barely a tree was left standing. Nevertheless, in the 1940s Town Planner R.A. McInnes thought the whole area worth retaining as a national park.

Builders stubbornly return. Now the house is overlooked by a concrete tower containing the apartments of the Sultan of Brunei and an ex-Chief Minister. The road curves down to the densely crowded Cullen Bay marina, a developer's view of paradise.

The garden of the house is fertile, thrusting, exuberant. It began with water drawn from a well to tend tiny shrubs set in 44-gallon drums cut in half. Now it has burgeoned to a green oasis. Climb the wooden front steps into the house's entrance hall, turn right and gaze through a wall that is barely there. Open windows are centred between floor-to-ceiling louvres the height of two men. You find yourself up among the treetops. Within

reach is a canopy of spreading poinciana and mango trees, varieties of palm, acacias, raintrees, tamarinds. Frangipanis loaded with fragrant white blossom scent the evenings, amid a riot of magenta bougainvillea. Palms drape towards yellow allamanda and scarlet ixora, dense layers of vine, fruit, flowers.

Descend the stairs and plunge back in. You'll find that the garden opens up through paths and avenues into secret places, cool and peaceful havens of shade and breezes. In a storm the character changes. Water pours from the house's gutters in hard streams. Trees toss and bend. Out across the cliffs, Mindil Beach becomes invisible, lost behind grey sheets of rain in a long view of misty white, merging with the sky.

It was the vision of architect B.C.G. Burnett to plan and construct houses such as this to complement their site and the region in which they were built. The soaring high-pitched roof and airy slanted ceilings recall the long-houses of Papua New Guinea. The open walls of louvres can be opened to prevailing breezes that drift over interior walls stopping well short of the ceilings. There are reminders of the houses of Southeast Asia, set high up on pillars for extra coolness. In this house the piers are of reinforced concrete and the louvres are fibro, not bamboo screens. In Burnett's designs, and those of his followers, like Edwin Henderson, the Commonwealth Architect in Canberra who in 1937 designed this house, vast spaces like the 'verandah lounge' are responsive to the changing needs of residents. On the plans, rooms are labelled 'sleeping space' or 'dressing room' or 'mosquito proof room', not mere bedrooms. 'Moveable screens' are suggested to vary the spaces and enhance privacy.

What the architects of the 1930s called 'the service wing' incorporated 'kitchen, bathroom, WC, linen cupboard', and you enter it through a door panelled in green glass. Its wall is a barrier reaching right up to the roof, dividing these domestic work spaces from the rest of the house. In the kitchen a recess under a mantelpiece is meant for a wood-burning stove; walk in to a pantry near the door. Under the back steps are two deep

double laundry tubs. Three 1000-gallon water tanks once stood on raised stands not far away, but were toppled, perhaps by the cyclone of 1937. By the early 1950s when the Gieses began to live in the house, one of the tanks had been upended and a door sliced out of it. We were told that an Aboriginal couple who helped with the chores had camped there. We had no servants, Aboriginal or otherwise. We children played in the tank.

I saw the house for the first time as a seven-year-old child. My mother, two-year-old brother and I were just off the daily plane from the south. We stepped out on to the gangway into the great wall of heat of the tropical night. Our car moved along a narrow road bordered by grass grown tall as a man, of a strange synthetic green. All around was deep darkness. We saw no people nor buildings. To town children, this Darwin seemed strange and eerily empty.

Then the house. When we mounted the stairs and entered the verandah lounge, we saw that in the middle of this ballroom-sized expanse of honey-coloured cypress pine, my father had polished a mat-sized sample. He had been camping in the house on his own, batching for months, but had found half an hour 'to show you how good it can look'. I remember how my mother's eyes widened.

Now when you wake from a night's sleep in the house, it's to the white glitter of a north Australian morning. Its distinctive sounds are birds calling: rosellas, hooded shrikes protecting their nests, splendid black-and-scarlet Major Mitchells, white pigeons down for the Wet from Thursday Island. There is a hum of passing cars and the rustle of lizards, the souging of overhead fans and sprinklers hissing over nearby lawns. When you open your eyes everything leaps into focus: orange, red, purple under the high white-blue sky, sharp and clear. In the Wet, after a storm the night before, the fragrance of moist earth rises. Drops of rain hang in the canopy of leaves, suspended from spiderwebs. If you stay still and quiet, you may see a long goanna stroll in stately fashion or fat black scrub-fowls digging for food with wide sweeps of their dangerous claws,

calling raucously to one another. Ibis rootle with long beaks and a frill-neck lizard stands alert. You may spy the languid, lustrous curve of a passing snake.

In the high cavity of the roof, possums frolic by night, fighting and cavorting and making a racket. Thin trickles of yellow urine startle the geckos scuttling up the walls. Relations between the wildlife and the house can turn nasty. Once a mammoth struggle between a roof possum and a python who had invaded the possums' space resulted in the death, in a snarling, drawn-out battle, of the snake. These fights were so regular that it took a terrible stench drifting down to the rooms to draw the corpse to our attention. When the tradesman engaged to remove it opened the manhole, he was so overpowered by the stink that he toppled off his ladder. The swollen carcass was removed in chunks. In one of them was discovered a swallowed possum.

My parents Nan and Harry Giese's devotion to this garden, to establishing and nurturing it, shows their essential sanity in the face of human encroachment on the country of the Top End. The garden they planted and tended has become part of an environment more ancient, more enduring, than any material, social or political construction. They encouraged us as children to see it as they did. They helped me plant a poinciana seedling, small and delicate. Now it is tall as a building, its spreading branches bursting each year into flaming flower. But it could just as well have fallen with other trees in the garden during Cyclone Tracy. Afterwards, many were wrestled back into the thick layer of soil, humus and leaves so laboriously built up, spadeful by spadeful. Many of them struck root and still stand today. The lesson is: work with nature, don't try to resist her.

Move again into the house. The Gieses have lined the verandah lounge with bookshelves. Here is a leather-bound, gold-tooled *Complete Shakespeare*; observe the family Bible. Both are legacies of my Grandmother Daisy Wilson, prizes won as a bright schoolgirl a hundred

years ago. Now they are pitted and mildewed, remnants of the meals of tiny voracious insects. Over the years, more vulnerable volumes simply crumbled away in our hands. A whole library, including the first orange-covered Penguins collected by my father, with the paper-sleeved LPs played on the gramophone of His Master's Voice, were reduced by Cyclone Tracy to a sodden gruel. And not only the books. Pandanus mats, intricately woven by indigenous women on Elcho Island, mildewed, softened and simply fell apart.

At its best, on a clear sunny day in the Dry, sea breezes wafting gently through the open louvres with their glimpses of lush green, the high polish of the floors reflecting light back at the high airy ceilings, the house is the perfect tropical dwelling place. At its worst it is a vast inconvenient barn, a nightmare to maintain. We arrived home one day in the Wet in the midst of a torrential downpour, rain beating down like an artillery attack. Over the back door poured a mini-waterfall. Inside, a stream gushed down the walls, forming pools on the ancient lino of the kitchen floor. From the light in the centre of the ceiling, there was a steady trickle on to the kitchen table. Outside, deep grooves had worn into the original asbestos roof. It had become so fragile that no roofer dared climb on it. In those years, rows of plastic ice-cream buckets were positioned to catch the water that poured down from it into the rooms.

Anyone who suffered through Cyclone Tracy sees its echoes in such storms. Every time the winds rise and the rains batter against the walls, there is a sense that at any moment, everything could be swept away. The sky darkens and lightning splits the sky, illuminating the world like a film-set. Thunder deafeningly cracks and rain is hurled down to earth that is instantly transformed to mud, running strong and swift as a river. Trees crack and fall. Sheds and garden furniture crumble like cardboard.

My parents and my brother Richard, at the time a medical student, survived the first long hours of Christmas Eve 1974 as Tracy's winds blew up into a Force 10 gale. They sheltered under a table, having opened the

louvres on one side of the house so that the wind and water swept in but the structure held. In the terrifying silence of the eye of the storm, they opened the louvres on the other side. When the winds returned from the opposite direction, the house again withstood the assault, although by this time trees were falling all around and the roof had ripped open.

By dawn the winds had dropped again. When the three of them ventured downstairs, they were greeted by Tiger Brennan, in pith-helmet, boots and big white flapping underpants. 'This is a bad do, Harry', he trumpeted, before driving imperturbably away, across upended trees and fallen electricity wires. He had slept through the whole wild night. Darwin after storms is calm and peaceful. But after Tracy, no birds sang. As with all the north's wild storms, it wasn't long before, among the ruins, nature re-emerged. New shoots sprang up, intensely green. Insects and lizards reappeared. Within days the growth was palpable; within months it was monstrous in those echoing deserted streets. Palms aimed for the sky, multicoloured crotons flourished, creepers leapt and grabbed. Ground ivies reached across the spaces, choking weaker growth.

That morning after Tracy, within hours my brother had connected the house to a generator at the hospital, a block away, restoring electricity. He would volunteer in the wards in the following confusing days, among the blood-spattered wounded.

The news broke in Europe while I was crossing the Channel from Paris. I went straight to Australia House in London's Strand. They had posted lists of dead, wounded and missing, hand-written in haste. Back at my flat, something prompted me to pick up the phone. I got straight through to the house in Darwin.

After Tracy the Gieses were not among those queuing to be evacuated in the great air exodus. They stayed on to help rebuild the devastated city. My father led one of the reconstruction organisations that sprang up from

within the community, drawing on the knowledge and experience of people who knew the Top End from the ground up.

It wasn't long before the life of Darwin reasserted itself. The house is built for lavish entertaining, for large parties, big dinners, balls. The social rituals of our childhood drew on those of the dying British Empire: formal receptions at Larrakeyah Barracks, dinner on visiting Naval vessels with white-uniformed and braided officers; annual cocktail parties for missionaries in from Arnhem Land and the Islands, at which everyone ate dainty canapés freshly made from the crabs and lobsters they had brought with them. They had been dropped, live and bound, into the boiling water of the washday copper.

Morning teas were the preserve of the wives. A sumptuous spread would be wheeled in on polished tray-mobiles. Set on starched and embroidered cloths were huge plates of tiny sandwiches, rum-balls, cheese darlings, Kentish cake and high, light sponges. The ladies, in stockings and high heels, hats and gloves, had deposited their handbags in the bedroom on arrival. The hard gleam of the polished floor of the verandah room reflected the bark paintings, the tall vases, the family silver, the photographs.

The Administrator and the Departmental heads were fixtures at social functions. The house has been home to a parade of Administration officials: in 1938-39, S. O'Brien, the Commonwealth Auditor; from 1946, L.H.A. Giles, Government Secretary; from 1947-49, and 1950-53, F. Moy, then R. McCaffery, Acting Director and Director of Native Affairs. In the new-broom regime of Minister for Territories Paul Hasluck, my father H.C. Giese became in 1954 the first Director of Welfare in the era of post-War reconstruction.

During World War II the Myilly Point houses were used by the Army and Navy as rest-and-recreation accommodation. Nurses and others came from Adelaide River and camps down the Track, the new north-south

highway, to enjoy ready access to the beach. This was made even easier by concrete steps constructed down the cliff. You can still use them, moving down through pungent muddy undergrowth, a porridge of fallen leaves and burgeoning ground-cover, twigs and fallen branches, to emerge to the long sweep of sand and the wide expanse of water.

The other houses in what is now the National Trust's Heritage Precinct were occupied by other Directors: Lands, Works, Health, the Chief Veterinary Officer, the Police Commissioner and the Auditor-General. During Cyclone Tracy, the Director of Health's house collapsed on to the car parked underneath. It was never rebuilt. In the 1960s, the Magistrate's House on the corner of the precinct was extended with a fibro annexe, and turned into a boys' home.

There were parallel worlds housing others in Darwin which I, as a child, only briefly glimpsed. Along the beaches and in open fields camps were cobbled together of hessian, under tarpaulins. Winnellie, on the outskirts of town, was an old Army base. Its cavernous Sidney Williams' huts were used as venues for the Arts and Agricultural Halls of the annual Darwin Show. But around them clustered all sorts of makeshift dwellings in which people squatted and made lives. One morning at school assembly, out under the trees near the tennis court on Cavenagh Street, our headmaster stood high on the verandah and told us that our schoolmate would not be returning. I remember our stunned silence as we dropped our eyes, as instructed, to the pebbly red dirt for a minute's silence. Later the whispers passed swiftly around: *beaten to death by her own father*.

In the days of my childhood in the 1950s and 60s, the dominant narratives were those of Empire, of loyalty to kith and kin in the mother country, Great Britain. The battles and sacrifices of World War II were still fresh in everyone's minds. In the Northern Territory from the 1950s on, Harry and Nan Giese became public figures, part of the great roaring theatre of public life. They inherited from the recent past a sense of obligation to community beyond the family, that sense that communities

thrive when people contribute to social improvement without thought of personal enrichment. Harry Giese's ideal of public service was a unified community making steady progress towards a better future for everyone.

But by 1957, for Britain as for other colonial powers, the winds of change were already blowing strongly. The first of the African colonies, the Gold Coast, gained its Independence as Ghana, under its charismatic leader Kwame Nkrumah. Great new prospects of progress opened out, temptingly. Big Dams for water. Big Power to electrify the villages. Universal primary education and health care for all. The heroes of Empire, plucky little explorers striking out into the 'unknown', the Oxbridge administrators who had presided over the building of roads, bridges, railways and towns gave way to ambitious new global initiatives. The power alliances of the world were changing-- and fast. Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, came to town. Rupert Murdoch made a flying visit at the start of his career, to acquire the local paper.

The ride into the future was as bumpy as a light plane, the Dragon Rapides or Fokker Friendships of the time. My parents laboured amidst great storms of controversy which rivalled cyclones in their intensity. Building a new Territory out of the ruins of War required strength of purpose. *Why did Aboriginal people need the schools, medical centres, houses, jobs the Welfare Branch was pioneering?* thundered the pastoralists, the old-school pith-helmeted bushmen. *A northern university? An arts centre? Ridiculous!* the Philistines scoffed at my mother's initiatives. The ritual sparring, the impassioned rhetoric, this great commotion of democracy, used up people's best energies. I became hugely wary of public life. I saw how it seized people, knocked them around, then tossed them aside, the detritus of a storm.

Post-War Darwin was a leveller society. With my family's German, Slavic and Scottish ancestry to add to our shabby genteel English forebears, we were never a natural part of the 'born to rule' colonial elite. *You lived in that big house, but you never thought you were better than anyone else,* an old schoolfriend told me, years later.

Over the seventy years the house has stood the world has turned upside down. We have watched the rise of feisty indigenous leaders, fêted and honoured, to whom the community defers. Many are products of this period of transition and change, but few now acknowledge this. Indigenous industries, institutes and centres, forums and conferences have grown into vast complex bureaucracies, employing thousands who manipulate the agendas of policy and debate, for power, preferment, profit and their own views of social change. The Australian community that once seemed homogeneous has fragmented into competing fiefdoms: factional generals with their mini-armies lording it over the ruins of the old political parties, ethnic warlords with their violent gangs. Chefs and popstars, not doctors or bishops, have become the role models in a culture of instant celebrity. Agendas of building social capital, dreams of the greater good, are lost amid teenage idols' deafening cries of *What's in it for me? Me. Me!*

Urban Australians, safely removed from the slums of the outstations, parade their consciences, condemn the actions of our settler ancestors, and agonise, from a great distance, over present problems in the north: infant mortality, child abuse, drug and alcohol addiction and premature death.

We who are the products of the free public education of the 1950s, have adapted in our different ways. We were taught to argue, be sceptical, to question everything. We learned there was always more than one view of history, of change, of how things happened. It was our generation who pioneered the 'history from below' that is now the staple of every museum exhibition, every thesis. We sallied forth with heavy reel-to-reel tape recorders to ask questions of our fathers, mothers and grandparents, the workers in the dying industries and on the degraded land. We recorded the now-vanished voices of those who built the towns, stations, missions and mines. We heard about World War II from those who fought it. We listened to passed-down memories of the traumas of World War I. This multiplicity of views, clamouring for history's attention, will in future

years provide something close to the real story of the years the house has stood.

Many stories make up what Australia has become. There are those today who choose to tell and hear just one: theirs. Totalitarian power-brokers seek to impose their views on everyone else: denigrating past achievements, defaming historical actors now dead, spreading malicious gossip, silencing dissent—or just plain telling lies about the past. Heroes and villains, black and white, us and them: there is a rising agitprop poster view of who we are and where we have come from.

In today's Darwin the descendants of the founding families stubbornly live on. Chinese children are offered snapshots and verbal maps of a town long gone, in their own museum at the Chung Wah Hall tracing their families back to the goldfields. The rubbish dumps and rough camps that littered the shores of a Harbour as extensive as Sydney's have been replaced by high-rise hotels. The plain fibro houses and sober empty yards of the old Chinese houses are now apartments and the red rust of the roofs of Sidney Williams' huts now part of plush high-rise marinas and chic estates like Bayview or Brinkin. Our childhood picnic spot at Dripstone Caves is now a coastal national park. Tourists travelling the country to find out who they are park their camper-vans in the carpark of the booming Casino. Wartime gun turrets have become a museum. The chants of indigenous singers have been replaced by the thump of rock bands from the Gardens Amphitheatre, beating across wide swaths of barbered lawn. After the great indigenous art boom, it is now clear that the Territory is of growing interest to those from outside: exotic, primary-coloured, full of characters, a place of unmined beauty and spirituality. It now attracts writers and artists, dealers and entrepreneurs from round the world.

The house above Mindil Beach joins other buildings from earlier times as markers of the history of Darwin. Browns Mart, the oldest commercial building, dates from 1883 in Smith Street, the main thoroughfare of the

embryo town. Its first destruction came in the cyclone of 1897. It was restored then destroyed once more by Tracy. The Stonehouses, a substantial terrace of five shops built in 1887 and registered by herbalist Kwong Sue Duk in the business name of Sun Mow Loong, are today are all that remain of Darwin's vanished Chinatown. Like the Administrator's Office and Lord McAlpine's restored Esplanade offices, low buildings of local sandstone set in lush tropical gardens, such structures suggest other ways of life, earlier rituals.

In the mid-1980s a whole silvertail street, a way of life, vanished overnight, when the houses on Myilly Point were bulldozed. When Cullen Bay was built, the earth-movers sliced into the cliff itself, gashing the sandstone for an access road and bringing in truckloads of rocks for a sea-wall. Now at the end of the Point only the Harry Seidler house commissioned by Vivienne Paspaley, wife of the pearling king, and another belonging to her daughter, remain.

The Gieses saved their house by living in it, never leaving, outfacing Tracy and the knockdowns, changing fashions and new tsars. Now it stands in the Heritage Precinct with three others. In 1982 the Northern Territory government presented them all to the National Trust of Australia. Nan Giese, Harry's widow, has life-time tenancy. Several times every year the house and garden are opened to those who wish to see the heritage that has been preserved for everyone.

The house, still solid, still here, is today very much as it was when building started seventy years ago. It is a symbol of the stubborn resilience necessary to live well in the Top End. Our family has also endured, adapting to the winds of change. Now the house belongs to all Territorians. Part of Old Darwin, it suggests to new generations how they, too, might adapt and survive.

The Giese Residence (1937) is at 2 Burnett Place, Larrakeyah, Darwin. The National Trust of Australia, with its Darwin headquarters at the neighbouring 2 Kahlin Avenue, has provided interpretive sign-boards in its garden.

Sources

1. Plans of the house ('Amended Type "B" Residence, Darwin, NT') were hand-drawn and signed by the Commonwealth Architect ('E. Henderson, 10.6.37, 7554.B').
2. Giese Residence (Audit House), *The Heritage of Australia: The Illustrated Register of the National Estate*, The Macmillan Company of Australia in association with the Australian Heritage Commission, 1981
3. 'Northern Heights', *Australian House and Garden*, Yearbook 1988, 'Our Salute to Australia's Past', pages 58-59. Under the heading *Northern Heights*, it says: 'This large timber-framed residence was constructed in 1934 [sic]. Carefully designed for the tropical climate, it has an open floor plan and timber shutters [sic]. Set in a large, well-established tropical garden, this house is a now rare example of a large-scale housing form used in Darwin 1920-40.'

Diana Giese's latest book is *A better place to live* (Freshwater Bay Press), about the post-War pioneers who built community and culture in the Top End from the 1950s until self-government.

Nancy Giese AO OBE was re-elected Chancellor of the Northern Territory University every year from 1993-2004, when she received an honorary doctorate from the institution she had been instrumental in setting up, 'in recognition of outstanding service to the Northern Territory community, particularly in education and the arts...a true pioneer'.

Harry Giese AM MBE, 1913-2000, was the Director of Welfare in the Northern Territory Administration of post-War reconstruction, the Territory's first Ombudsman and a founder of the Menzies School of Health Research.

Dr Richard Giese runs his own Darwin medical practice.