



Surgeon John Besley Gillen (RAN)



Played with Adelaide University



Football Club – B Grade (1914)

Degree – MB BS (1917)

Background

Coinciding with the Centenary of Anzacs our incentive behind the series of biographical publications is the Adelaide University Football and Cricket Club's desire to honour our players who served in the Great War (1914 - 1918). These brave men put on hold their academic, professional and sporting careers for King and Country in the name of peace and freedom. The AUFC/AUCC WW1 Memorial Committee is endeavouring to identify every one of our players who served and prepare life stories on all. This is to ensure their sacrifices and further contributions to society will be recognised by future generations.

On Anzac Day 2015, the Centenary of the Gallipoli landing, a memorial plaque was unveiled on the Adelaide University Oval Pavilion and this was followed by the erection of a picket fence between the pavilion and the scoreboard with each picket bearing a plaque with the name of an AUFC/AUCC player who served.

The following documentation relates to the life of John Besley Gillen. It is compilation of information and photographs collected from a variety of historical sources.

Service Record

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=5225002>

GILLEN, John Besley M.B., Ch. B. (Surgeon)		Date of Birth: 31 Jan 1895	
FILE NO.	SUBJECT	DATE OF APPOINTMENT	SENIORITY IN RANK
20/11/17	Surgeon (Temporary) P.M.F. 1895	20.11.17	20.11.17
19/1/24	Appt terminated at own request. 12.5.20		
22/1/24	Transferred to Emergency List Gaz. No. 22 of 1/3/24 Page 436 Ex. Min. 47		
	Dtd April, 1938		

RECORD OF SERVICE (OFFICERS)					
Name: Gillen John Besley M.B. Ch.B.					
Date of Birth: 31st January 1895		Place of Birth: Alice Springs Northern Territory			
Next of Kin (Relationship and Address):					
Date of joining R.A.N. or Permanent Naval Forces	Rank	Dates of Promotions	Gazette	Period and Date sent from R.N.	Rank and Seniority in R.N.
20.11.17	Surgeon		22/1/17		
Emergency List	Surgeon	20.11.17			
<div style="text-align: center;"> PAID 6170 Other Notations: approved to be paid Equivalency Allowance 1/1/20-30/6/21 </div>					
SPECIAL ALLOWANCES					
Authority	To date from	Nature of Allowance			
	20.11.17	Leaving Allowance 3/9 1/2 (1/1/20-30/6/21)			
	1-9-18	Boarding " " 1/1/20-30/6/21			
1/1/20-30/6/21 Final Share of Naval Prison Fund £20 1/- £13 6 18 Prize Money Paid 1/1/20-30/6/21 53/- 18 Sept 1919					

Biography

Blood Sweat and Fears: Medical Practitioners and Medical Students of South Australian who Served in World War 1,
C Verco, A Summers, T Swain & M Jelly. July 1914

GILLEN John Besley

MB BS DPM

1895 - 1937



John Besley Gillen was born in Alice Springs on the 31st January 1895, the second son of Mr. F. J. Gillen, who was well known for his work with the Aborigines in Central Australia, and Amelia, nee Besley, daughter of a school teacher from Mount Gambier. Members of the Besley family were serving on the overland telegraph line. Gillen's father eventually became the Post Master of the Alice Springs Telegraph station and he was a Special Magistrate and Sub Protector of aborigines in the area. The family moved from Alice Springs to Moonta and eventually Port Pirie. Gillen had an early education at Moonta and Port Pirie and later boarded privately in Adelaide, and gained a Government bursary whilst a student with Hugh Cairns at the Adelaide High School. Gillen and Cairns were co dux of Adelaide High School in their final year. He studied medicine at the University of Adelaide and was the recipient of both the Elder Prize and the much-coveted Dr. Davies Thomas scholarship. He graduated in MB BS in 1917.

After graduating at the University of Adelaide, Gillen joined the Royal Australian Navy on the 20th November 1917 as a temporary surgeon lieutenant in the Permanent Naval Forces serving in HMAS *Cerberus* until March 1918 then the cruiser HMAS *Brisbane* and later in the Submarine Depot Ship HMAS *Platypus* from 1918 to 1920. HMAS *Brisbane's* complement was 31 officers and 454 sailors. The *Brisbane* was tasked to search for a German raider that was laying mines near the sea trade routes around Australia and New Zealand. The ship is known as the *Wolf* which in August 1917 captured the *Matunga* returning to Rabaul and retained Colonel Cecil Lucius Strangman and John Wellesley Flood as POW's. HMAS *Brisbane* returned to British waters until 17th April 1919, when she departed from Portsmouth for home. During the return trip, she caught up with the submarine depot ship HMAS *Platypus* and the six J class submarines transferred from the Royal Navy to the RAN after the war. J5 was experiencing problems,

and HMAS *Brisbane* took the boat under tow; the two vessels reached Sydney on the 27th June 1919. All were sold before 1929. The cruiser was decommissioned on the 4th August 1922, and Gillen transferred to the Emergency List. He was issued with the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

Gillen married Ellen McCann in 1920. After general practice in Morgan he joined Dr Tobin at Gawler, from whom he subsequently took over the practice. Gillen stayed in practice in Gawler until 1935. He became involved with the High School council at Gawler in 1929 and was a familiar figure on the local links and a keen tennis player. He had extensive involvement with the Gawler Jockey Club. He began a practice at Tusmore, a suburb of Adelaide, on leaving Gawler in 1935. Gillen was interested in psychiatry and went to England for further study. He gained his DPM in England and was to return to South Australia in November 1937. His success led to his wife, sister of the State Agent-General in London, making the trip overseas to join her husband expecting to share some time with him before coming home. John Besley Gillen died suddenly in London on September 6th 1937, as a result of a heart attack. Their children, Robert and Pamella, were attending school in Adelaide at the time. A letter on Sept 12th 1937 from Sir Hugh Cairns at Oxford to his widow said:—*Jack and I were class mates all through AHS and I know well what a sturdy and loyal man he was, it was a great pleasure to meet him here this year in London and learn of his great hopes and prospects for the future. It was characteristic of him to break away into new fields.*

Sources:

Wikipedia, Navy Lists WW1,
MJA October 2nd 1937 p 563;
Photos AWM: HMAS *Brisbane*, P01886 001.jpg
Photo and personal interviews with Dr R Gillen (son).
NAA: A6769, barcode 5225002

Early Life

John Besley Gillen was born on the 31st January 1895 in the district of Palmerston in the Northern Territory to Francis James Gillen and Amelia Maude Besley (SA Birth Registration 562/344). After early life in Alice Springs the family moved to Moonta, South Australia and in May 1907 John wrote a letter to the Children's Pages of the Southern Cross newspaper.

Moonta.
As I failed to win a prize in the last Christmas competitions, I am determined to make another attempt, like Bruce and the spider. The old proverb

says, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again," and that is what I mean to do. I wonder what a boy, or girl, should do if they did not indulge in outdoor sports. Outdoor sports not only strengthen the body, but they brighten the mind. Take, for example, the boy who does not partake of them. He is dull, sleepish, and quarrelsome. On the other hand, take the boy who does partake of them. Why, you will find he is the smartest boy you can get hold of. The most popular of outdoor sports I think is football. Football which the boys of Australia play differs very much to what the boys of the motherland play. Football, which is an old sport, causes much excitement. Another favourite sport is hockey, which also is very exciting. Hockey is played very much the same as football, the only difference being that in hockey each player has a stick, whilst in football each player has not a stick. There are many other different outdoor sports for boys; but it would take a long while to explain, viz., cricket, croquet, golf, tennis, &c., &c. I must now conclude with love to you and the little orphans.—I remain, your loving nephew, JOHN B. GILLEN.

Schooling

John's early schooling was at Moonta where he passed his Primary Examinations at the Moonta Continuation School in October 1908. In December 1909 John won a scholarship to attend the Port Pirie School of Mines for a year.

PORT PIRIE, December 20.—The following are the successful students at the entrance scholarship examinations, entitling the winners to free tuition in any number of subjects for one year at the Port Pirie School of Mines:—Leslie James Clark, John Besley Gillen, James Penistan Patterson, Arthur William Wurm.

John passed Preparatory Chemistry (1st class) in the 1910 School of Mines Examinations and was awarded a further scholarship.

**PORT PIRIE SCHOOL OF MINES
ENTRANCE SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS, 1910.**
Nicholas Charles Ernest Currie.
Evan Jenkins.
John Besley Gillen.
Gertie Maud McEwen.
Maude Persse.
Ann Kennedy Bard.

John completed his schooling at Adelaide High School in 1912 where he was 14th in the general honours list for the Higher Public Examinations.

University

John commenced studying medicine at Adelaide University in 1913. In November 1914 he passed 2nd Year with 1st Class honours and was recommended for the Elder Scholarship. In third year he again passed 1st Class and was awarded the Dr Davies Thomas scholarship. In his final year John again passed 1st Class and was awarded his MB BS in July 1917.

In the examination for the degree of Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery, John Besley Gillen capped previous similar successes by obtaining a first-class in his third year. He was also recommended for the Dr. Davies Thomas' scholarship. He is a son of the late Mr. F. J. Gillen, S.M., the well-known ethnologist.

Mr. John Besley Gillen, son of the late Mr. F. J. Gillen, the well-known ethnologist, and nephew of Mrs. J. V. O'Loughlin, has passed his fifth year in medicine (first class) at the June examination for the degree of Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery. He was bracketed equal with H. W. Bell Cairns, the Rhodes Scholar, who is recommended for the Everard scholarship.

University Sport

Football

John was involved in the formation of the Adelaide Students Football Association in April 1914 and represented the University on the Match Committee.

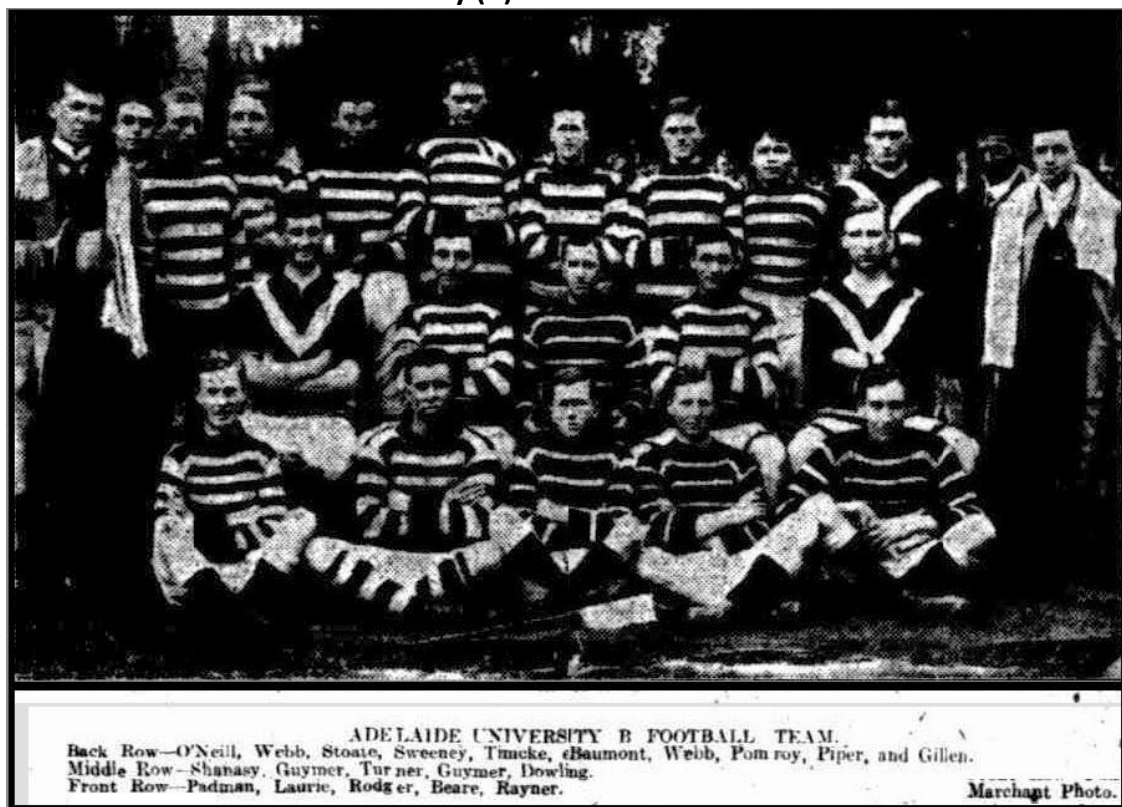
FOOTBALL.

A NEW ASSOCIATION FORMED.

The formation of the new Adelaide Students' Football Association was decided upon at a meeting of delegates of the colleges concerned. At present the association includes University B, School of Mines, Adelaide High School, and Christian Brothers' College teams, and additions may be made before the season commences. The main objects of the association are to promote good fellowship among students and public interest in the sport of students. A shield will be competed for: the shield to be inscribed and retained by the premiers each year. The officers are:—Professor Darnley Naylor, patron; Mr. Aley (Education Department), president; Messrs. C. E. Pellieu (University), P. E. Thiel (School of Mines), Allen (Adelaide High School), Bro. McCarthy (Christian Brothers), vice-presidents; general secretary and treasurer, Mr. E. A. Guymer (University); general committee, Messrs. C. T. Turner and A. H. Guymer (University), F. Welch and R. Berriman (School of Mines), R. Davey and R. Smith (High School), J. Power and R. Cummins (Christian Brothers); match committee, Messrs. T. Madigan (High School), D. Moriarty (Christian Brothers), J. B. Gillen (University), and R. Berriman (School of Mines).

In the first year of the Students' Football Association John was a member of the Adelaide University B Team in 1914 which defeated Adelaide High School for the Premiership.

Adelaide University (B) Football Team - Premiers 1914



Athletics

John competed in the 1914 Adelaide University Sports and he came third in the 880 yards flat race.

Rowing

In April 1915 John represented the Adelaide University Boat Club in the Light Weight Fours in the Autumn Regatta.

World War I

On the 9th July 1917 John was appointed an Honorary Captain in the AAMC. He then joined the Royal Australian Navy in November 1917. His war experience is well documented in the Blood, Sweat and Tears biography above.

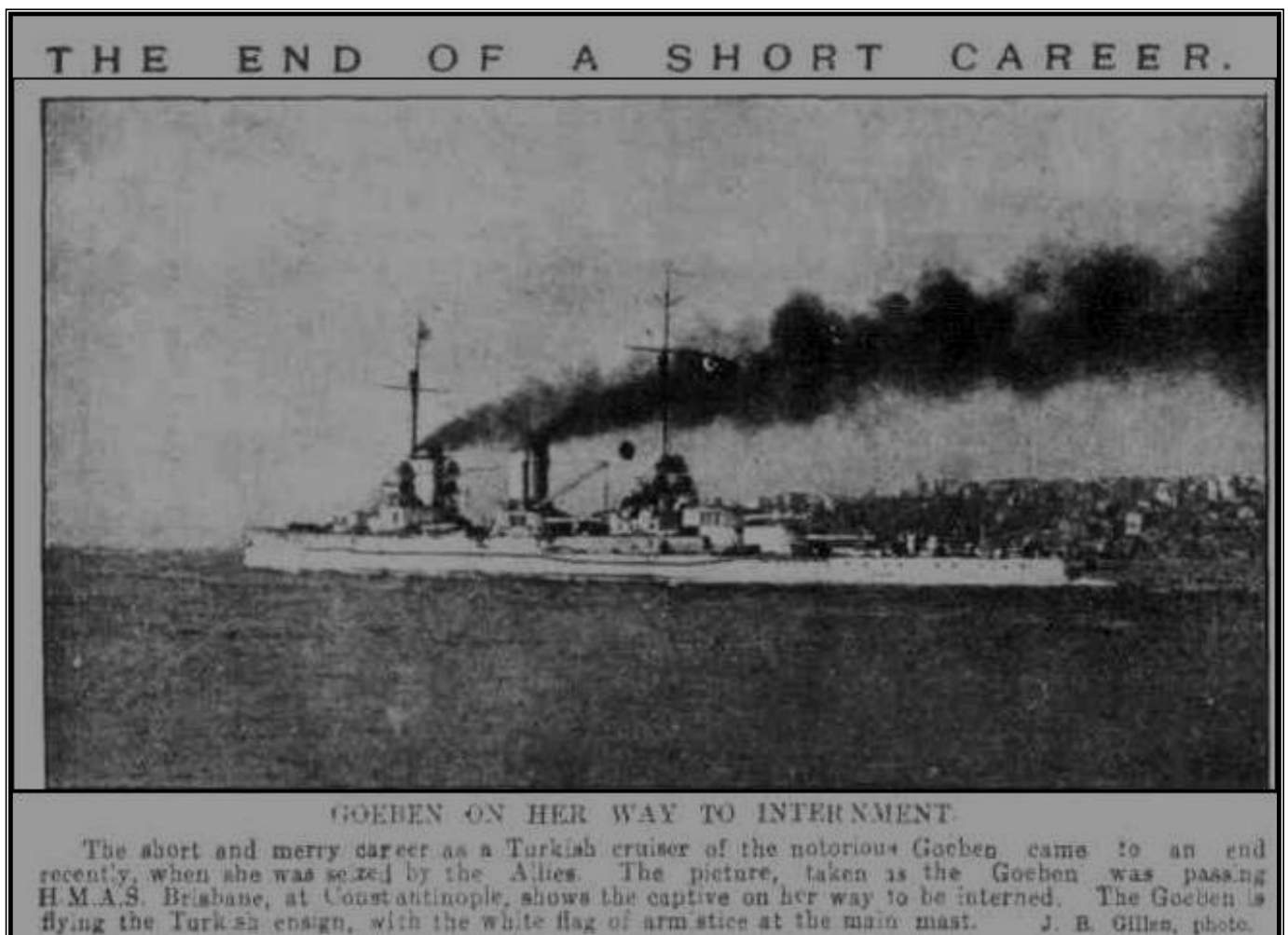


While on active service John wrote the following letter back to the students of the Adelaide High School.

Extract of letter from Surgeon J. B. Gillen, R.A.N., H.M.A.S. "Brisbane" :-

"Just a line to let you know although far away one has not altogether forgotten the old School. Fancy! Middle of winter, and I am writing this clad in white trousers and singlet, with my electric fan going at full belt to keep me cool. I heard from Syd. O'Neill several weeks ago. He is having a good trip, and is a much travelled chap now. We have five 'varsity men on board - two New South Wales, one Melbourne, one New Zealand, and myself. Our 'varsity degrees seem to mean a good deal in the other States, and what I have seen I think our chaps can hold their own readily. The discipline in this service is splendid, and one gets into a very good routine. Everything seems to work like clockwork. We run a very good moving picture show on board when at anchor, and we have some very good films. These shows buck up the men tremendously, and keep their attention diverted from wrong channels. The world is very small. Several days ago I met a man whose wife worked at the same dissecting table at the 'varsity with me five years ago. Since then she has married him, of course. I was introduced to this chap, and he said, 'O, you are a crow-eater, too!' I looked surprised, and asked him how he knew, and he told me he had heard of me from his wife. One is always running up against people like this, and it is most interesting to meet them. I suppose all the Higher Public classes are plugging away hard, and the budding medicos still hunting for frogs and crayfish."

In February 1919 a photograph, taken by John, of the captured Turkish cruiser 'Goeben' was published in the Chronicle newspaper in South Australia.



John returned to South Australia in August 1919.

Dr. J. B. Gillen, R.A.N., has recently returned from overseas, and has been spending a week or two with his mother at Blackwood. Dr. Gillen had a distinguished university career, passing first class each year of his course, and gaining several bursaries and scholarships. He joined the Australian Navy as surgeon lieutenant on H.M.A.S. Brisbane, and after cruising in the Mediterranean and Black Sea arrived in England, where he was transferred to the Platypus, the submarine convoy ship. Dr. Gillen is the son of the late Frank Gillen, S.M., whose work on the Australian aboriginals in conjunction with Professor Baldwin Spencer is so well known.

Career and Family Life

John was living at Gawler in September 1920 when he purchased a Douglas 6 JAP Motorcycle. He then moved to Morgan where he consulted and was appointed the district health officer. On the 31st March 1921 John married Eileen Margaret McCann, the youngest daughter of John McCann at St Lawrence's Church, North Adelaide.

GILLEN-McCANN.—On the 31st March, at St. Lawrence's Church, North Adelaide, by the Very Rev. Prior Hogan, O.P., Eileen Margaret, youngest daughter of John McCann, Esq., to John Besley Gillen, M.B., B.S., elder son of the late Mr. F. J. and Mrs. Gillen, of Blackwood, South Australia.

While at Morgan, John was Honorary Surgeon to the Morgan Racing Club and the Management Board of the Morgan Hospital. On the 14th March 1922 John and Eileen's daughter (Mary Pamela) was born at the North Adelaide Private Hospital. John moved from Morgan to Gawler in April 1922 and he purchased a Sunbeam 18.2 Overland car. John and Eileen's son (Robert Spencer) was born at Gawler on the 10th March 1925. While at Gawler John and Eileen organised Euchre parties and John played golf and was a member of the Gawler Floral Society and the School Council.

John's mother passed away in 1927 and John gifted his father's note books to Adelaide University.

MRS. GILLEN.
Mrs. Gillen, whose death occurred at her residence, John's-road, Prospect, yesterday, was the widow of Mr. F. J. Gillen, S.M., a well-known authority on Central Australian aboriginal tribes and customs, his book, "The Native Tribes of Central Australia," written in conjunction with Professor Spencer, of Melbourne University, being a recognised authority on the subject. Mrs. Gillen, who was the daughter of Mr. John Besley, was born at Mount Gambier. She lived there for some time, and spent several years at Alice Springs with her husband. Since his death she had lived in the city with her daughters. She leaves two surviving sons, Dr. J. B. Gillen, of Gawler, and Mr. S. Gillen; and three daughters, Misses E. Gillen, K. Gillen, and C. Gillen.

VALUABLE RECORD OF ARUNTA HISTORY

Late F. J. Gillen's Notebooks For Adelaide University

The Council of the University has received through the Board of Anthropological Studies from Dr. J. B. Gillen, of Gawler, the original notebooks compiled by his father the late F. J. Gillen, dealing with the native tribes of Central Australia.

Mr. F. J. Gillen was a conjoint author with the late Sir Baldwin Spencer of the now classic volume on the life and customs of the central aboriginal tribes.

The notebooks consist of five volumes of clearly written manuscript information on the ceremonies and customs of the Arunta and adjacent tribes, and include comparative vocabularies.

Much of the text in the Spencer and Gillen volumes is a transcription from these notebooks, and it is proposed to make a thorough investigation of them for hitherto unpublished data.



J.B. Gillen
In Gardens at Gawler, South Australia, Cir 1933

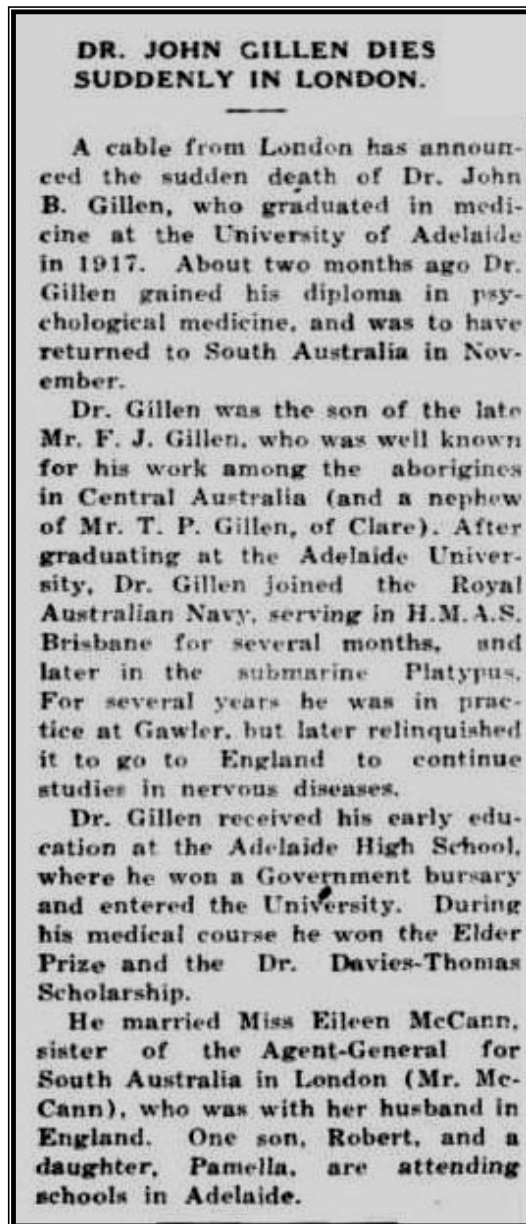
John was a member of the AHS Old Scholars Association and on the committee of the Gawler Sub-Branch of the RSL. He competed in the AIF Cup (Golf) from 1931-35 and provided a trophy (Dr J.B. Gillen Trophy) to the Gawler Golf Club. In June 1934 John took on a partner (Dr. John Covernton) and in May 1935 he resigned the role of health officer for the District Council of Munno Para East. John left Gawler in 1936 and practised at Tusmore before departing to England to undertake further studies. Eileen and the children remained in Adelaide, living at 'Cathcart', Palmer Place in North Adelaide. In May 1937, Eileen left Adelaide on the 'Mongolia' with plans to join John and tour Great Britain before returning to Australia. Eileen arrived in London in mid July 1937 where she was met by John and by her brother and sister-in-law.



Eileen Gillen

Death

Tragically while John and Eileen were in the UK, John had a heart attack and died in London on the 6th September 1937 (aged 42).



Family Legacy

Eileen continued living in North Adelaide until at least 1954. In 1956 she travelled to the UK intending to stay for six months.

In 1941 Pamela married Colin Thomson (RAAF), the only son of Mr & Mrs R.S. Thomson of North Adelaide.

Robert Spencer Gillen followed his father to Adelaide High School and Adelaide University. He gained his MB BS in 1953. Robert edited his grandfather's first diary (F.J. Gillen's first diary 1875 : Adelaide to Alice Springs, March to June / edited by Robert S. Gillen, SA Ready Ref Books (919.429 G476)).

Eileen passed away on the 17 March 1995, aged 97 and is buried at Enfield Cemetery, Adelaide.

Sources and Acknowledgements:

The AIF Project <https://www.aif.adfa.edu.au/>
RSL Virtual War Memorial <https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/>
The National Archives of Australia <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/>
Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/>
The Adelaide University <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/records/archives/>
The National Library of Australia <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>
(Trove Newspaper articles tagged – John Besley Gillen)
SA Genealogy <https://www.genealogysa.org.au/resources/online-databases.html>
Blood Sweat and Fears: Medical Practitioners and Medical Students of South Australian who Served in World War 1,
C Verco, A Summers, T Swain & M Jelly. July 1914
Adelaide High School – extracts from AHS Magazine “World War 1 from the AHS Magazines.pdf”
Ancestry.com.au – photograph 2533525e-1175-4ccf-8523-fb45093350fb.jpg
Kym Beilby & Rob O'Shannassy AUFC/AUCC Researchers