

The Flying Caseys

Carl Bridge, Menzies Centre, King's College London

The name sounds like that of a high-wire double act, and in a sense, that is exactly what it was. The show was not in the big top but on the United States and Australian political and public stages. It was 1940 and 'the Flying Caseys' were Richard and Maie Casey, Australia's first full diplomat in Washington and his consort.²⁹ Their task was to raise awareness of Australia in isolationist America, promote mutual goodwill, and help woo the Americans into the war. How the Caseys created 'Brand Australia' in 1940 and 1941 for the Americans is a little known story and some of what has been written is misleading.

Mostly as a result of differing biographical perspectives, Casey has been portrayed as a willing ventriloquist's doll, operated by Ian Clunies Ross, of the International Wool Secretariat, Sir Keith Murdoch, Australia's Director-General of Information, his representative on Casey's staff, Melbourne *Herald* journalist Pat Jarrett, and by shadowy figure of American public relations expert, Earl Newsom.³⁰ All of these played their roles, but Richard and Maie were no dummies, they spoke and acted for themselves. 'The Flying Caseys' and Brand Casey had already been created in Australia before it was exported to the United States.

The clues are to be found in the extensive press clippings scrap-books and Richard Casey's private diaries held in the Casey collection in the National Library of Australia.

Richard and Maie Casey were both aged 49 in March 1940. They were each products of upper-crust Melbourne. He was scion of a wealthy grazing and mine-owning family. Educated at Melbourne Grammar and as an engineer at Melbourne and Cambridge universities, he was a staff officer in the 1st AIF in Gallipoli and France, an Australian diplomat in London in the 1920s (where he was his patron Prime Minister S. M. Bruce's 'eyes and ears'), and a UAP politician and federal treasurer in the 1930s. She was daughter of the prominent Melbourne surgeon, Sir Charles Ryan, and related by marriage to Princess Alice, the Duke of Buccleuch, and the Victorian colonial gentry families of Chirnsides, Clarkes and Snodgrasses. After governesses and schooling in England at St George's, Ascot, she attended finishing school in Paris, and acted as companion to her brother, Rupert Ryan, while he was with the British occupation forces in Cologne and Coblenz.

Maie and Richard married in the fashionable West End church of St James's, Piccadilly, in 1926. They had two children, Jane (11 in 1939) and Donn (9). Maie fancied herself as something of a bohemian. She had attended art school in Melbourne and was an accomplished amateur artist and a patron of modern art, particularly Australian art. The Caseys purchased and brought the first Picasso to Australia in 1937.

Though Richard's seat was Corio, centred on the city of Geelong, he and Maie decided to live in Canberra, in one of the five officers' houses at the then closed-down military college at Duntroon. There Maie painted and rode her horse, Brochette, and lived the life of grazier's wife. In 1930s Canberra's very small official community, they were particularly close to fellow political couples, Charles and Hilda Abbott and Sir Henry and Penny Gullett, and to the British Resident in Australia Ernest Crutchley and his family. Characteristically, Maie furnished the house with totally up-to-the-minute modernity, with contemporary art, with what she said were the first Thonet tubular chairs imported into Australia and with simple wooden furniture designed and made by Frederick Ward of Melbourne.

When Richard was at the Treasury the Caseys were instrumental in commissioning a new set of designs for Australia's currency, introducing the distinctive leaping kangaroo penny, the ear of wheat threepence and the merino

shilling, all designed by Douglas Annand of Sydney. In 1937 the Caseys attended the Coronation of George VI and Richard the accompanying Imperial Conference, where the British press dubbed him 'Australia's Anthony Eden', for his trim good-looks, military background, immaculate Bond Street double-breasted tailoring, and political prospects as heir apparent to the Prime Minister. (Maie always protested privately that she could not see the likeness, but the comparison stuck, to Richard's great advantage.) It was while in London that the Caseys purchased, from the Paul Rosenberg and Helft gallery, their Picasso. 'Le Repos', painted in 1932, is a typically stylised, massive head leaning on feathery hands.

Finding the train trip to the capital tiresome, Richard, ever the mechanical engineer by training and inclination, decided with Maie's encouragement to learn to fly and he took out his pilot's licence in early 1938. He could then fly direct from Canberra to Corio, or to Berwick, outside Melbourne, where Maie had co-inherited with her brother a property, 'Edrington'. Richard and Maie bought a Percival Vega Gull two-seater and, no doubt with electoral publicity in mind, they christened it the 'Corio Gull'.

Richard's private flying lessons were given, somewhat irregularly, by Group Captain Frederick Scherger in an RAAF Avro Cadet at the Laverton air force base. The lessons were executed in the full glare of publicity and when Richard first flew solo he was, according to Maie, 'horrified' (I expect actually gratified) to 'find an aircraft carrying a press photographer floating off his wing-tip'. Maie's lessons, given at Essendon in a De Havilland Moth by P. G. 'Bill' Taylor, Kingsford Smith's famous co-pilot, were also self-consciously newsworthy. She was pictured in the newspapers romantically with full flying kit of leather helmet, jacket and goggles. It was Taylor who found them the Gull. Maie's interest in flying had been longstanding, stimulated in part by C. B. (Lord) Thomson, a friend and perhaps suitor, who was British Labour Minister for Air when he died in the R101 airship disaster in 1930.

To sum up: this thoroughly modern couple flew their own plane, owned a Picasso, dressed like film stars, and had royal connections. The Caseys had clearly shaped the Flying Casey Brand well before late 1939 when they were put into the hands of Keith Murdoch, Ian Clunies Ross, Pat Jarrett and Earl Newsom. They did not need Clunies-Ross's or Murdoch's prompting to make sure that the first leg of their journey to the US was a flight from Melbourne to Sydney. And they were yet to employ Jarrett and Newsom.³¹

When Richard was appointed to Washington at the beginning of 1940 he told the Australian press that as soon as he arrived in the United States he would buy a plane and destroy the illusion that ‘Britons are stuffed shirts’.³² He also arranged to have a sprig of wattle blossom on his desk on arrival, and every day thereafter. Maie, who arrived six weeks later, sailed on the *Mariposa* with a dress length of white-and-silver Australian woven wool for an evening gown so that she could be ‘a walking advertisement for Australia’.³³ She also shipped with her twenty of their own Australian paintings and fifteen on loan from other collections. Maie announced as she left that the furnishings in the new Residence would be ‘distinctively Australian’.³⁴

The Residence and Legation were housed in the same building, ‘White Oaks’, an American colonial style red-brick, two-storey pile, with a white-pillared portico, built on leafy Cleveland Avenue by a speculator in 1928. Maie had her Melbourne friend print-maker Frances Burke design wood-block curtain and place mat patterns suggesting ‘muted green’ eucalypts. In the sitting room she hung a Rupert Bunny of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens; in the dining room Russell Drysdale’s ‘The Rabbits’ and Peter Purves Smith’s ‘The Kangaroo Hunt’; and in the wood-panelled library the Picasso and another Drysdale. She also commissioned New York resident Australian artist Mary Cecil Allen to paint a large screen with six indigo and one big red kangaroo against a pale background. Clipped Australian sheepskin rugs were placed on the floors.³⁵

On his arrival in Los Angeles on the *Monterey* on 19 February 1940 Richard was hailed in the local press on cue as ‘The Anthony Eden of Australia’.³⁶ When he met Maie and the children there a month later and the family crossed the continent by plane, the *Christian Science Monitor* welcomed ‘Australia’s Flying Envoy’.³⁷ True to Richard’s word, the Caseys purchased for the then mighty sum of US\$26000 a Fairchild 24 aircraft, had it painted yellow and green for Australia and had Maie smash a bottle of Australian beer on its nose and christen it ‘Boomerang’. Inevitably the picture published in the *Washington Post* of Richard and Maie in the cockpit was captioned ‘The Flying Caseys’.³⁸ It was recycled many times thereafter.³⁹

The flying theme became a constant refrain over the next two years. In May 1940 Maie was reported piloting an amphibian aircraft over New York and practising landings near the Statue of Liberty. In July Richard helped inaugurate the first PanAm Clipper service to New Zealand (and on to Australia by a different carrier). ‘Boomerang’ was reported as sharing a hangar with the machines of enemy air attaches at Bolling Field. In August Maie was noted as one of the few women

pilots in Washington. In September she was avoiding the heat of Washington by going up to shiver at 4000 feet. In October the Caseys were taking photographs of Washington friends' mansion from the air. In January and February 1941 they flew themselves to Florida for some winter sun. And in July 1941 Casey was pictured climbing into a Catalina flying boat at a factory in San Diego, California.⁴⁰

Before leaving Australia Casey had been instructed by Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Clunies Ross and Murdoch to contact the New York public relations expert, Earl Newsom, whose company had the contract for marketing Australian, New Zealand and South African wool in the US. Clunies Ross had written that Australia might be marketed in the US just as any commodity was, such as wool or toothpaste. In contrast to Britain, Australia was to be promoted as a new country, a young democracy with an egalitarian ethos and get-up-and-go people, in short as a smaller British version of the United States. Newsom was very useful in supplying Casey with introductions and in identifying the important journalists, broadcasters, editors and proprietors. Casey exploited these contacts energetically and to the full, as we shall see.

To reiterate, however: the Flying Casey Brand itself was already well-formed before the Caseys left Australia and Maie and Richard themselves had been its architects. What is more, they found that the same stories and angles that kept them in the news in Australia worked with the press and radio in the US as well. Moreover, stories that originated in their American activities were still good press in Australia and kept the Caseys at the forefront of the public imagination at home, too. Thus Richard Casey's very public American sojourn fuelled his (and Maie's) Australian political future.

The Caseys' nose for publicity was almost unerring and their efforts indefatigable. Besides flying and their Australianness, the Caseys played on various other aspects of their personas. On their first official visit to New York in May 1940, engineer Richard was reported for criticising the giant twelve foot in diameter copper globe suspended over the hall at La Guardia airport. He said it was 'too far north' and had 'bulges in all the wrong places'.⁴¹ On the same visit, 'Daredevil Dick' and Maie accompanied a NYPD radio car on its midnight rounds and gained more press attention.⁴² In December 1940, sartorial Richard attended Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration in the full dress navy blue and gold-braid diplomat's uniform and plumed hat, while other more sensible envoys rugged up in homburg hats and overcoats. Richard not only caught the photo pages but he also caught pneumonia.⁴³

Probably at Pat Jarrett's prompting, the two Casey children were mobilised for their publicity value from time to time. In November 1940 Jane was the 'beauty' patting 'two beasts' at the Potomac Boxer Club's dog show; and she and Donn were depicted a year later exhibiting their own dog 'Dinah' at another show.⁴⁴ Donn was photographed learning to swim at the British Embassy pool and also, with Jane at his shoulder, at his typewriter composing their Christmas radio messages to be broadcast on the BBC.⁴⁵ And when Richard was offered a piece of barbecued squirrel at an event at Muskogee, Oklahoma, he found a diplomatic solution to avoiding eating it by pleading that his children were too fond of squirrels for him to be reported as having had one for dinner!⁴⁶

Apart from her flying, entertaining and some Red Cross activities, Maie's major contribution to the cause came in the form of promoting Australian art in the United States. She did this not only by hanging Australian works on her own walls, but by her involvement in a major exhibition, the Australian Exhibition of Art, which toured the eastern US in late 1941. It opened at the Mellon Gallery in Washington, moved to Yale, and then ended up at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where 1000 people attended the opening by Richard. Sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, it contained 300 paintings, some of which were from the Casey's own collection. Its centrepiece was Tom Roberts's evocative bushranger painting 'Bailed up!'. Unusual for the time, there were some Aboriginal bark paintings which were remarked upon. Two of the Caseys' own collection, Drysdale's 'Monday Morning' and Purves Smith's 'Kangaroo Hunt' appeared in it and these works were later donated respectively to the Metropolitan and the Museum of Modern Art.⁴⁷

Other Casey stunts were the sending of Australian stamps and coins to the collection columns of the big newspapers and the donation of an echidna and platypus to the New York Zoo. There was a rare failure when Richard Casey endeavoured to talk Walt Disney into introducing a kangaroo and a koala into his cast of cartoon animals.⁴⁸ Richard also crowned the Peanut Queen at the National Peanut Exposition in Suffolk, Virginia, in October 1941.⁴⁹ And he supplied Vice-President Henry Wallace with some boomerangs.⁵⁰

Assisted by Sir Keith Murdoch, Richard organised an officially-sponsored tour of Australia by ten prominent American journalists in August 1940, all of whom wrote extensively while there and afterwards. He was also so much taken by a highly successful 'Canada at War' episode of the very popular 'March of Time' newsreel that he organised for a *Time-Life* film journalist, Victor Jergin, to visit

Australia and even supplied a draft script. An 'Australia at War' newsreel, with Jergin's own different script, was duly screened in January 1941.⁵¹

This is not the place to analyse Richard Casey's highly effective speech-making and broadcasting in the US. Suffice it to say that he made some seventy major speeches in two years, including sixteen broadcasts, three of them coast-to-coast. He undertook six speaking tours to the mid-West – the heart of isolationist sentiment – two each to Florida and California, one to North Carolina, and many in the Washington-New York-New England triangle. Unbeknown to him, the British Foreign Office held him up privately as the ideal pro-war speaker.⁵²

Discordant notes were few. In June 1941 the Washington radio political commentary show 'Merry-Go-Round' reported erroneously that Richard Casey was considering changing his name as he was sick of being mistaken for a 'Mick', that is an Irishman. The Irish of course were neutral in the war and the American Irish McCormack press were the leading Isolationists. Richard was quick to hose down the story. Then, a couple of months later, an Indiana isolationist paper accused him of 'fifth column work ... propagandizing ... to get us into the war'. This time he chose simply to ignore the criticism.⁵³

The Caseys were a great social success and proved ideal Washington networkers. They held regular luncheon and dinner parties and 'at homes' and were assiduous attenders of those of others. Two of the great Washington political hostesses, Mrs Truxton Beale and Mrs Robert Low Bacon, were particularly supportive, as were in New York the Ogden Reids, proprietors of the *New York Herald-Tribune*.⁵⁴

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor rendered their public affairs diplomacy largely redundant, and the coming to power of the Curtin Labor government made the Caseys somewhat uncertain in their position, the Caseys soon accepted an offer from Winston Churchill to continue their war work from Cairo where Richard became British Minister Resident in the Middle East. This, in itself, was a rare compliment.⁵⁵ But others came from all quarters in Washington and elsewhere. Novelist, British expatriate and Washington socialite Anne Bridge contrasted the Caseys favourably with the dour British Ambassador, Lord Halifax. She praised the Caseys' 'at homes' with their 'warm and welcoming atmosphere, ... good strong drinks, ... cheerful gaiety, and no hint of fatigue'. She concluded that the Allied 'cause in the United States owed more to that gallant and devoted couple than has usually been recognised'.⁵⁶ The *New York Times* commented that Casey had 'brought his country closer to us than it ever has been before';⁵⁷ the *Herald-Tribune* editorial thought his departure 'a loss to this country ... Rarely has a

minister from another country made as many friends in so short a time ... Americans felt he was one of them.’⁵⁸ The *Washington Post* pronounced him ‘one of the ablest diplomatists in Washington’.⁵⁹ And it wrote of Maie that she endeared herself to the ‘petticoat press’ by being ‘good copy’, flying her own plane, being interested in art, and ‘entertaining often, and well’ as well as getting involved in war work.

But the last words should be left to two Australians who were as close professionally to Richard Casey as anybody. Choosing his words carefully, Casey’s old mentor, S. M. Bruce, now Australia’s High Commissioner in London, was moved to write that:

...you have put up a completely star turn performance ... you have made for yourself the position of the outstanding representative of the British Empire in the U.S.A., not excluding the United Kingdom ambassador ... Yours has been a remarkable performance ... which has stirred even me to a point of effusive praise were such a thing in me.⁶⁰

And Alan Watt, Casey’s First Secretary in Washington, wrote in his memoirs many years later:

It has always been my view that Casey’s work in Washington and the United States generally has been underestimated in his own country. It was not easy, in advance of Pearl Harbour, to develop a favourable climate of opinion towards Australia. This the Australian Minister undoubtedly did.⁶¹

Australia has good reason to be grateful that the two Caseys worked their magic on the Americans. Whoever it was who was actually responsible for influencing Menzies to choose them for the task in 1939 knew what they were doing. Indeed, it appears that the key influence, as so often in the Caseys’ careers, was probably Maie herself.⁶² The Caseys were very much architects of their own destinies and the Washington years, which called upon all of their diplomatic, social and publicity skills, were arguably their finest hour.

²⁹ The standard biographies, which touch on the theme of this paper but do not fully pursue it, are W. J. Hudson, *Casey*, Melbourne, OUP, 1986, and Diane Langmore, *Glittering Surfaces: A Life of Maie Casey*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1997. Richard Casey’s own account is in his *Personal Experience, 1939-46*, London: Collins, 1962 and Maie Casey’s in her *Tides and Eddies*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1966. These are the sources for what follows, unless otherwise indicated.

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- 30 See Carl Bridge, 'Casey and the Americans: Australian War Propaganda in the United States, 1940-41', Australian Studies Centre, London, Working Paper No. 30, 1988; Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'The Kangaroo is Coming into its Own': R. G. Casey, Earl Newsom and Public Relations in the 1940s', Australasian Journal of American Studies, vol. 23, no. 2, December 2004; and Audrey Tate, Fair Comment: The Life of Pat Jarrett 1911-1990, Melbourne, MUP, 1996.
- 31 Advertiser (Geelong), 10 Feb. 1940.
- 32 Sun (Sydney), 23 Feb. 1940.
- 33 Daily News (Sydney), 21 Feb. 1940.
- 34 Langmore, Glittering Surfaces, p. 67.
- 35 Maie Casey, Tides and Eddies, p. 69.
- 36 Daily News and Los Angeles Examiner, 20 Feb. 1940.
- 37 Christian Science Monitor, 22 March 1940.
- 38 Washington Post, 21 May 1940.
- 39 E.g. United States News, 21 March 1941.
- 40 Sun (Melbourne), 3 May 1940; Washington Post, 15 July 1940; Town and Country (Washington), 1 Aug. 1940; Editor and Publisher (New York), 24 Aug. 1940; Women's Weekly (Sydney), 12 Oct. 1940; Sydney Morning Herald, 22 Oct. 1940; Miami Daily News, 2 Jan. 1941; Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 19 July 1941. Maie Casey, Tides and Eddies, p. 84.
- 41 New York Herald-Tribune, 4 May 1940; New York Times, 5 May 1940; Fortune, August 1940.
- 42 New York Herald Tribune, 2 May 1940; Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 5 May 1940.
- 43 Casey Diaries, 20, 22 Jan. 1941, MS6150, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- 44 Washington Star, 4 Nov. 1940; Washington Times Herald, 25 Oct. 1941.
- 45 Sydney Morning Herald, 22 Oct. 1940; Washington Post, 15 Dec. 1940.
- 46 American (Fort Smith, Arkansas), 10 Sept. 1940 ('and 140 other papers').
- 47 Langmore, Glittering Surfaces, pp. 80-1; Maie Casey, Tides and Eddies, p. 91; Casey Diaries, 17 Nov. 1941.
- 48 Casey Diaries, 23 Feb. and 23 Sept. 1940, 17 and 19 Sept 1941.
- 49 Times Dispatch (Richmond, Virginia), 26 Oct. 1941.
- 50 Casey Diaries, 19 Feb. 1941.
- 51 Bridge, 'Casey and the Americans', p. 9.
- 52 Bridge, 'Casey and the Americans', pp. 7-8.
- 53 New York City Enquirer, 26 June 1941; Palladium and Sun Journal (Richmond, Indiana), 15 Aug. 1941.
- 54 Maie Casey, Tides and Eddies, p. 75 and p. 92.
- 55 Though one American diplomat thought Churchill was moving Casey as he had been 'too successful' an advocate for Australia in Washington, Ray Atherton, cited in the diary of the Australian diplomat Alfred Stirling, 18 Dec. 1946 (I owe this reference to Jeremy Hearder).
- 56 Anne Bridge, Facts and Fictions, London, Chatto & Windus, 1968, p. 127.
- 57 New York Times, 21 March 1942.
- 58 New York Herald-Tribune, 31 March 1942.
- 59 Washington Post, 28 Dec. 1943. Also see the passage cited in Langmore, Glittering Surfaces, p. 85.
- 60 S. M. Bruce to R. G. Casey, 17 Sept. 1941, cited in Hudson, Casey, p. 122.
- 61 Alan Watt, Australian Diplomat, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1972, p. 35.
- 62 Langmore, Glittering Surfaces, pp. 62-3.