

early draft ^{March} 1964?
see Review as finally
WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN published

review for some
other publication?
or a
superseded draft of
actual review.
published in
"NATION"
16/5/1964

by James Birrell. University of Queensland Press,
St. Lucia, 1964. 203 pp. 112 illus. 105s.0d.

* I added the excoriating opening paras later.

This book is of great potential significance to all interested in cultural change in Australia. It is the first attempt at a comprehensive biography of one of the least known, most shadowed and yet seminal figures of recent Australian cultural history. This biography, however, is in no way definitive. Nevertheless, Birrell has courageously pioneered a trail of enquiry which now invites exploration in depth.

* After I read the reviews by Clerehan + Molnar?

It therefore seems important that this first book be taken seriously by social and political, as well as by art, historians; by playwrights and poets as well as by city planners and architects.

Walter Burley Griffin, as a man and as a creative phenomenon, spent himself in twenty three years of struggle and tension with Australians. Unlike D.H. Lawrence, Griffin had not a sufficient sense of self preservation to cut his losses in the early 'twenties and leave our tawdry province. He stayed and bore witness for his Whitmanesque romantic ideals and suffered the inevitable ignominy of a creative prophet in the suburban, colonial society of Sydney and Melbourne between the wars. But in so doing, he left a scattered number of small buildings, the vision and frame of a National Capital, and sufficient drawings and writings by which we now may measure both him and ourselves.

WBG was, as Robin Boyd writes in a Foreword to Birrell, "possibly" one of the greatest architects of this century. It seems that Australian obtuseness stopped him from realising his potential in a way that the U.S.A. did not thwart his former Chicago associate, Frank Lloyd Wright. Whether the difference lay in the men, or in the countries, is hard to tell. But Griffin's life is now the stuff of tragedy and legend, meriting not only precise post-mortems but also the skills of a Manning Clark and a Patrick White. Our own quest for self-knowledge demands a score more monographs and books on Griffin, his personal life, his thought and his individual projects. WBG is going to be with us for at least another generation. We are all living and developing our cities in the shadow of this mysterious figure in our national

past, with whom we need to come to terms.

Of the Australians who already sense this, some of whom take his name in vain, perhaps only half a dozen have so far enjoyed any real understanding, or even knowledge of the man and what he was getting at. Because of our neglect, his name overseas has been omitted from all but the most obscure footnotes. A reasonable attempt at a factual, professional biography is long overdue.

Griffin's direct influence on Australian architects and environmentalists has so far been negligible. Robin Boyd has urged Griffin's reputation as an architectural innovator in the details of domestic design and construction. Peter Harrison has worked to rediscover and interpret Griffin as an environmental planner and designer. But no one has had the time or tenacity to search out and set down a consecutive record of his life and work. This achievement has been Birrell's, the culmination of years of painstaking scholarship, sustained by a fiercely partisan feeling for his man.

Birrell's book is easy to criticise. He is a young professional architect and planner, not a writer. His prologue Chapter One is haphazard. He unnecessarily resents and snipes at Wright. He carries the game of "spot the influence" to absurd lengths. The concatenation of names, dates, places and other facts is not always smoothly integrated in an easily comprehensible text. His pages 120-124, on the development of Canberra since 1958, contain hasty judgements and wild prescriptions. Birrell does not attempt an intimate personal portrait of Griffin or of his remarkable wife, Marion. Illuminating details of their relationships with each other and with Frank Lloyd Wright are possibly now lost forever. But there must still be some wealth of personal reminiscence among living Australians, not only about the Griffins, but about their friends and enemies. Birrell has tried to redress the balance for Griffin against Wright, but has largely ignored what to us is more important - the personal confrontations and relationships between the Griffins and individual Australians - the Federal Ministers, officials, other architects, his clients and so on. These things now need to be explored in depth.

Birrell has not had space to deal in detail with many of Griffin's individual Australian projects - Newman College, Melbourne, Castlecrag, the planning and subsequent muddled development of Leeton and Griffith - these all need to be analysed in separate monographs.

Contrary to Boyd, I do not feel that the "fascinating core" of the book is the tension between WGB, Marion and FLW. This will make better copy for overseas reviews, but the real core of Griffin (it shines through in this book) was his entire dedication to comprehensive environmental design -- "nothing less than the harmonizing of man's habitat with his physical environment -- external nature". He stood for the integration of the methods and aspirations of town planning, landscape design, engineering and architecture, into "a total humanised and romantic environment".

He was far ahead of Wright, Corbusier and Gropius on this score: he was not at all obsessed with individual architectural tours de force, but instead, with the quality of personal and social life in town and country. In his pursuit of this vision of the good life, as at Castlecrag and in Canberra, buildings play an incidental role in great topographical and landscape compositions at extra-human scale.

Birrell understands and manages to communicate this essence of the man, sufficiently to make one want to know more about him. Twenty-seven years after his death, we are just beginning to appreciate his genius and his sanity!

GEORGE CLARKE