

# AN ARCHITECTURAL PIONEER DESCRIBED AS A "DRAFTSMAN"

Frank Lloyd Wright's patronising description of his associate, Walter Burley Griffin—"a draftsman who went to Australia"—becomes the title of a chapter in the splendid biography of Griffin written by a young Melbourne architect. ? *Jim lived & practised in Brisbane!*

**"WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN,"** by James Birrell (University of Queensland Press; price, £5/5/).

Reviewed by  
**NEIL CLEREHAN, FRAIA.**

**JAMES BIRRELL'S "WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN"** is the first serious and readable study of the life and works of an architect to appear in this country. The book is beautifully produced by the University of Queensland Press.

In many other countries definitive biographies appear from time to time, of architects whose reputations are established. This comes about by the combination of enthusiasm and money. Of enthusiasm there is no lack in this country.

James Birrell had already written a thesis on Griffin in 1961. He was fortunate enough to win the Sisal-kraft scholarship. He was thus able to travel to, and study in, America.

There he talked to clients, employees, relatives and friends of Burley Griffin. He travelled around the middle western States in which Griffin worked prior to his coming to Australia in 1913. The author was thus able to fill in the gaps so tantalisingly obvious in a cursory study of Griffin's life.

In filling in these gaps—a casual way of describing an important job of research—Mr. Birrell has not only given us a richly detailed and, incidentally, a very partisan biography of a great man, but he has added to the 60-year-old controversy regarding the relative importance of Griffin and Wright in the early days of modern architecture.

Many laymen, most architects, and an entirely new generation of students, know the dramatic story of Canberra's beginnings.

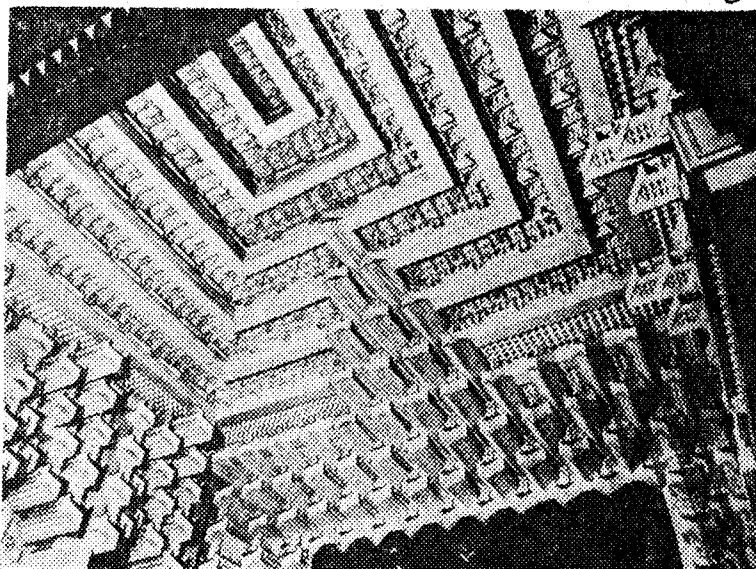
During the recent 50th anniversary celebrations of our national capital, the Federal Government, doubtless repentant of its servants' misdeeds, and secure in the knowledge that the trouble makers of 1913 were dead, resurrected the story of Canberra's beginnings. A commemorative stamp was issued as a belated tribute to its designer.

In 1912, Walter Burley Griffin, a successful architect in Chicago, and an erstwhile associate of Frank Lloyd Wright, won the international competition held to select a town plan for Canberra.

His plan was enthusiastically accepted but the detailed drawing-up was left to public servants who had their own ideas of town planning.

When their version was seen by local architects an uproar ensued and the profession in all States banded together and demanded that the Government revert to Griffin's masterful plan.

Griffin was then invited to come to Australia to supervise the implementation of the plan. But war had broken out and little money could be allocated to Canberra's development. Griffin, a guileless man and a foreigner, was hamstrung at every turn by the bureaucrats.



The ceiling of the Capitol Theatre (1924), seemingly complex, was built up by repetition of a few simple plaster shapes. It is lit by 7000 bulbs and its color and intensity may be varied from a keyboard to match musical and screen action. The Capitol, Melbourne, was closed down three weeks ago.

His advanced ideas and the story of their sporadic success is excitingly told in this book.

He launched a competition for the design of new Houses of Parliament and selected internationally famous assessors. The war put a stop to the competition (one of the assessors was a German citizen), and even today the competition for the new Parliament House has still not been organised.

So great was the bungling that Griffin had to appeal directly to the Prime Minister of the day, and a royal commission was set up to investigate the charges of inefficiency.

The evidence showed that little

had been done to help Griffin. Despite the patent hostility of various officials, in contrast to Griffin's undying enthusiasm, his appointment was not renewed.

He quit Canberra and left the development of a "city potentially more beautiful and exciting than any other in the world" in the hands of the men who had frustrated his work.

For more than 30 years the making of Canberra went ahead in an amateurish and ill-considered fashion. The drift was not corrected until a few years ago when the National Capital Development Commission was set up.

After leaving Canberra, Griffin

settled in Melbourne and built up a successful practice. By now many of his buildings have been wrecked or mutilated, but sufficient remain to enable us to measure his greatness.

Leonard House, in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, is generally regarded as one of the most logical solutions to a building on a narrow, confined city site.

The Capitol Theatre, Melbourne—at present its fate is undecided—is regarded as one of the few cinemas in the world of architectural excellence.

If its unused auditorium becomes a shopping arcade, the famous ceiling will be sealed off. This is surely the first occasion when Melbourne's cognoscenti have welcomed the prospect of a bowling alley in their city—bowling alleys need high ceilings.

Newman College (1916) is one of the greatest buildings even with the highly unsuitable additions, notably the chapel. Of the original building a former rector once said: "Unlike the other (University) colleges, it is ever new, right down the ages."

When Mr. Birrell tells the Canberra story, and indeed most other parts of Griffin's life, there is little doubt that in his view his subject could do no wrong.

This is an attitude still evinced by Griffin's clients. Some comment critically of his wife, Marion Mahony, but of Griffin nothing ill is said.

The Australian society in which Griffin worked can be studied in the background of this book. It seemed a more fluid society in those days. New ideas were more easily accepted. What really major building would be built in unfamiliar materials, to unfamiliar designs by a foreign architect in Melbourne today?

Griffin has been dead for just over 25 years. In 1933 he left Melbourne and practised in Sydney. In 1936 he emigrated to India as the result of being offered a commission to design the library at the University of Lucknow. He died in 1937 from peritonitis. He was 60. He left buildings on three, possibly four continents.

He had practised for 14 years in Chicago and built in a dozen States. He practised 16 years in Australia and a few months in India.

This book will appeal strongly to those who can remember Griffin, and this seems to include anybody with more than average perspicacity who ever went or was taken to the Capitol (vide Robin Boyd's witty foreword).

The careful documentation of Griffin's professional association with Wright will make Mr. Birrell's book eagerly read in the U.S. He throws new and extraordinary light on that relationship which was for ever being belittled by Wright.

When asked about Griffin once, Wright eschewed even the patronage of the heading quotation.

He couldn't remember much about the gentleman but he volunteered the information to this reviewer that

