

Burley Griffin

JAMES BIRRELL: *Walter Burley Griffin*. University of Queensland Press. 105s.

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.

As Robin Boyd writes in a Foreword to Mr Birrell's book, Griffin was "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 many more monographs and books on Griffin, his personal life, his thought and

his individual projects. He 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 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 Mr Birrell's, the culmination of years of painstaking scholarship, sustained by a fiercely partisan feeling for his man.

Mr 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, and 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 judgments 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 a wealth of personal reminiscence among young 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.

Unlike Robin Boyd, I do not feel that the "fascinating core" of the book is the tension between Griffin, his wife and Frank Lloyd Wright. This will make better copy for overseas reviews, but the real core of Griffin (if shines through in this book) was his entire dedication to comprehensive environmental design

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Five Senses, by Judith Wright; *Walter Burley Griffin*, by James Birrell; *Indonesian Communism*, by Arnold C. Brackman.

Contributions are invited and should be addressed to NATION, Box 112, G.P.O., Sydney. Correspondence to the same address.

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Hard to Swallow

BREATHLESS, we wait for the curtain to fall on Australia's first live Cookie Comedy. Already we know which boy will get the reluctant bride: it's the Local Lad, Mr Geoffrey Arnott, who has already stretched his firm protective arm half-way around the little Swallow. A fine fellow is he, outwitting the Yankee villain, who has been holding on to the hem of her skirt. But where's the tableau? Isn't the Local Lad going to step forward to receive the plaudits of all patriots?

There is bustling behind the footlights. The engaged couple are moving away from their marriage broker and the hero goes into a huddle with some dark-suited men carrying briefcases. Love and liberality yield to the law. Was all this foreseen and written into the script? Somewhere, there was a mention of sixty-two shillings and sixpence for relinquishing all claims to the chirpy Swallow. What do the men with the briefcases have to say? Is a man's word his word, or is it only a conditional offer? Will the defeated suitor have to be paid off?

The legal problem that has exercised the Arnott conscience for part of this week is a very pretty one. Early last week Arnott had offered to buy any Swallow shares at 62s. 6d. each, conditionally upon fifty-one per cent of shareholders accepting. The Americans promptly offered 70s. Arnott's response was a silent raid on the share market, giving it fifty-two per cent of the shares at prices up to 81s. This means that other shareholders cannot provide fifty-one per cent. Question: Does Arnott have to buy at 62s. 6d.?

IN the background, out of the brightly lit ring where the match has been made, are those simple souls who stuck with Swallow through bad days and good. In this latest drama, they were like the Cocky on the biscuit tin—not in it. But such is the way of the stock exchanges that nobody can speak up for them. The marriage brokers, the professional actors, the riders on the band-waggon have all had their turn, with premiums going above two hundred per cent—walk on, walk off. Does someone still remember they are in existence, and have sat quiet because of the handsome sums that have been talked about? Perhaps a few crumbs will yet be thrown to them.

On one note or another, the curtain must come down. It's very fine to be patriotic about keeping our natural resources. But should we throw our sympathies behind the Local Lad who spends money merely to reduce our choice? An enterprise that has grown efficient through generations of battling for our custom and for good relations with its retailers is now pumping out floods of money to stop someone else from keeping it in trim condition. As you chew it over, the chocolate-coated cookie leaves a cheesy after-taste.

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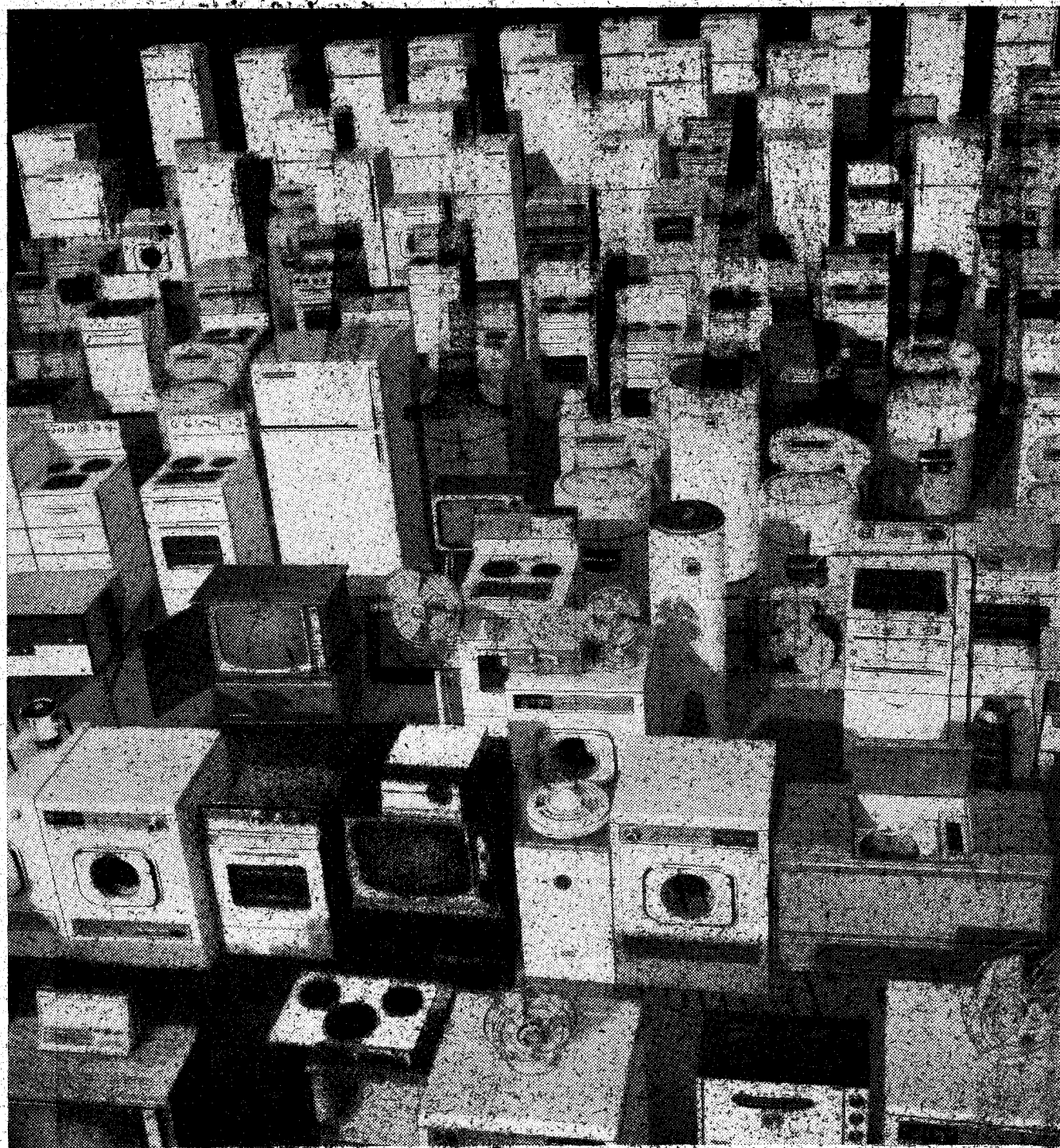
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He was far ahead of Wright, Corbusier and Gropius on this score: he was not at all obsessed with individual architectural tours de force, but instead, with the quality of personal and social life in town and country. In his pursuit of this vision of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

graphical 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. As 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 book is in no way definitive. But Mr Birrell has courageously pioneered a trail of inquiry which now invites exploration in depth.

GEORGE CLARKE.

After Madiun

ARNOLD C. BRACKMAN: *Indonesian Communism*. Frederick A. Praeger, 69s. 6d.

WHEN so many Western observers tend to see all that happens in the new republics of Africa and Asia through a cold war prism, it is surprising that students of Indonesia should have given so little specific attention to the role of the Indonesian Communist Party. Arnold Brackman's book is therefore a useful contribution to the subject. It offers a survey of the party's role since its initial establishment as the Indies Social Democratic Association (converted to the Indonesian Communist Party—PKI—in 1920). It examines the movement as a party of nationalist resistance to the Dutch, as an element in the struggle for independence and as one of the political forces of the independent republic.

The story is told chronologically, and this has the disadvantage that analysis tends to be subordinated to the flow of events. At times one feels that Brackman's account may overplay the PKI's strength and initiative. It is interesting to compare, for example, his account of the kidnapping of Sukarno and Hatta which preceded the proclamation of Indonesian independence with that of Professor Kahin. And there are examples of over-simplified judgement, as when he attributes the Dutch agreement to negotiate with the Republic after the second police action to their desire to strengthen the non-communist world. But, minor details apart, it is of value to have a continuous account of organised communism in Indonesia which, by its very continuity, is able to throw interesting light on incidents which scholars have tended to view from other angles. Through the fluctuations of the party's fortunes there emerges a consistency of general purpose as it sought to adapt itself to the changing circumstances of its environment on the one hand and to the policies of the international movement on the other.

This is to be expected, and the main outlines of the story are fairly standard. Yet the overall result is in some ways an odd one. Whether he is dealing with the revolts of 1926 or the Madiun Affair

or the swift and silent recovery of communist strength in the years following Madiun, Brackman's treatment, by placing the PKI continuously in the foreground, leaves a certain mistiness obscuring the background. The story concerns the interaction of communists and others, but the “others” are never sufficiently defined, nor their purposes described. At one time the Dutch, at another the forces of the struggling republic, at another a shifting coalition of political parties or the increasingly cohesive army—these forces were an integral part of the scene at each stage, but they almost tend in Brackman's treatment to appear as “extras”, to derive their existence from the relationship they bear to the central character of the play—the PKI.

It may seem unfair for a reviewer to bemoan the absence of a biography and

then to complain because a biographer sticks to his subject. But this, not quite the substance of the complaint. The oddity of focus is possibly a natural consequence of the concentration of attention upon one political party, but it is a necessary consequence. The real criticism of Brackman's book might be stated more accurately in terms of his failure, while giving a narrative history, to evaluate the role and the present position of the party in relation to other elements of the Indonesian scene. The role of the PKI as a member of an international conspiracy is less interesting than the particular way it has operated in this particular environment—the extent to which it has set the pace or the degree to which it has been domesticated. For an evaluation—at least of the PKI under the Aidit leadership—one must still seek access to the unpublished thesis of Donald Hindle in the Australian National University library.

It is perhaps a part of this failure that Brackman ends his book with a nostalgic backward look at the days of liberal democracy and suggests that the alternatives facing modern Indonesia are a return to democracy on the one hand and a slide towards communism on the other. This is to exaggerate both the comforting aspects of the present situation and its dangers. It would be nice but naive to believe that an army-dominated regime which Brackman hopes might follow the fall of Sukarno could possibly secure a return to a Hatta and Sjahrir style of liberal democracy.

Brackman's treatment, in brief, is good enough to make one wish it were a little better.

J. D. LEGGE.

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