

THE CITY AMONG THE HILLS

They came in crowded, open motor cars, rattling over dusty yellow roads. They came by the family load, in jinkers. Some of the two thousand people of the Federal Territory came on foot. The Third Light Horse Brigade, a thousand strong, came mounted, and formed up on three sides of a hollow square. Lord Denman came on horseback, in the Governor-General's full dress uniform, white feathers blowing in the breeze of a glorious early Autumn day.

Mounted bands played the National Anthem; guns boomed a salute. His Excellency laid the first stone of a memorial Commonwealth column. The Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, laid a second stone. The Minister of State for Home Affairs, King O'Malley, laid a third stone. The band played 'All People That on Earth do Dwell', and then the climactic moment arrived.

Lady Denman rose to announce the name of the capital city of Australia. It had been a well kept secret. As she said the word 'Canberra', cheers burst forth. Guns boomed. The mounted bands played 'Advance Australia Fair'. This was the 12th of March, 1913.

Three weeks earlier King O'Malley had driven the first peg to mark the start of the laying-out of the city on the ground, and only three months before that he had officially adopted a city design prepared by Government planners. This departmental design was not the design to which Canberra was subsequently built, and neither this plan nor the later one bore very close resemblance to the design for which Walter Burley Griffin won first prize in an international competition held, with high ideals but a low budget, in 1910.

The design of Australia's capital has undergone many political and artistic vicissitudes. Griffin, the greatly talented American architect, contributed most to its ultimate shape, as is officially recognized in the naming of the lake which fills the central basin. But no single man shaped it; not Griffin, nor O'Malley, nor Sir William Holford, who came from England in 1957 to advise, nor John Overall, who is the present National Capital Development Commissioner and under whom the city has prospered. All have helped, but in the end Australia's capital has taken an anonymous Australian shape. This shining city has a great deal of the goodness, as well as a representative touch of some shortcomings, that are characteristic of modern Australia, and all in the comprehensible space of a few square miles.

It all began in July, 1900, with the federation of the Australian colonies. To resolve the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne, section 125 of

carry important monumental buildings. In the centre, near where the land axis and the water axis cross by the edge of the lake, permanent Parliament House someday will rise magnificently: the crowning gem, it is hoped, in Australia's most splendid setting.

Beyond the triangle the road plan gathers into vortexes, circular or hexagonal, at key points like the Civic Centre, and sends shoots out to suburbs which lie beyond the inner ring of hills like distant star clusters.

Canberra has some fine buildings, some of them modern, some with a semi-classical formality, and many of a highly romantic persuasion. There is in fact a quite remarkable variety considering that most have been built since 1955. However, many of them are protected from an outright clash with their neighbours by a flattering and separating veil made by the best landscaping in Australia.

Canberra's success remains largely independent of its buildings, which are almost irrelevant details. Trees, space and perspective are the most important things. Long vistas, sweeps of geometrically curved roads, ponds, fountains, bridges, lawns, copses, avenues of blossom trees, avenues of evergreens, avenues of blossom trees and evergreens alternating: these characterize Canberra. Moreover, a degree of loving care hardly ever experienced in the rest of Australia marks the details of kerbs, signs, lights, litter-bins. Then, two negative elements are just as important: the blue skies are clear of wires and the streets are free of advertising, both by day and by night.

At the centre of this great garden tidiness is the middle segment of the lake, with lawns to the brink of its artificial banks. It is a crisp crescent of shallow water a mile long, bound at each end by the thousand foot bridges which are probably the boldest structural elements of the city. Each twin bridge is a gently arched bow supported by four widely spaced pylons standing in the water. The long spans of prestressed concrete are impressive by day, and at night when the strip lights which are concealed in the handrails flood the pavements they are impeccable engineering ornaments in a world of disciplined nature.

Canberra is all Australian and yet atypical of Australia. Its basic values are Australia's. The surrounding suburbs could belong in no other country. Yet these suburbs and the public spaces and landscaping are done so much better and so much more consistently than in any Australian State capital. Of course the Federal Capital works under a different system. In sharpest contrast to nearly all other communities

in Australia, Canberra is rigidly controlled. Private enterprise fills in the details, but the framework and the overall form is benevolently dictated by the Commission, which answers to the Federal Government. There are few accidental effects. The Government is a good house-keeper, and manages to influence private citizens to be equally good, with no more vexation than is usual under normal municipal control. This gleaming, cheerful city, then, is a lesson to all others.

The artistic inspiration of Canberra springs from the Garden City concept which Sir Ebenezer Howard advocated just before the end of last century. Canberra has preserved the best of Howard's ideas. In its hands the Garden City ideal nowhere deteriorates into the familiar suburban sprawl, with many pretty but private things and little or no beauty to be found in the public street.

Canberra is extraordinarily even in quality, and although it is still really only half formed, has a rare unity and wholeness. Canberra is one great garden in a big, but not intimidatingly big, valley surrounded by distant, but not aloof, mountains. The valley enjoys a climate with few excesses and most days are, as on that brilliant launching day, flooded with a sunlight that is probably sharper and clearer than can be found in any other capital city in the world. White stone and metal trims of new buildings reflect dazzling highlights for miles along the axial lines, from focal point to focal point. Shadows are black against white cement walls and pebbled paving. Then when spring explodes in Canberra the blossom of fruit trees or wattle shrieks from between the dark evergreens and spills bright trails of primary-coloured reflections on to the placid pale-blue surface of the lake.