

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN

by Donald Leslie Johnson.

If this book had been written before James Birrell's Walter Burley Griffin (Q. U. P. 1964) there would be no question at all about its importance. When Birrell's manuscript was first presented to the Q. U. P. in 1963 I was asked to give a confidential opinion on it, as I am now on Johnson's book (although in that case my opinion, which was highly critical in parts, was conveyed to the author, which of course will not happen this time). I wrote, in effect, that the Griffin story was a fascinating one, packed with architectural and human interest.

Griffin was an American expatriate hardly known at that time in the U. S. A. and a good book about him would be certain to attract interest in the U. S. A. as well as here. I was sorry however that the first book was not better in order to make a stronger initial impact, but I supposed that an inadequate book on Griffin was better than none at all, and that a definitive book would follow eventually. In the meantime, Birrell should be asked at least to tighten up his English and defoliate some of his prose. That was duly done and thanks greatly to the upholstery of good typography and publishing technique a respectable book emerged.

It is painful for me to have to take, now, much the same attitude to this second book on Griffin. I find it impossible to consider Mr. Johnson's book without judging it as a second run over the same ground. That would not be so inevitable if the Johnson book treated the subject in a different way, which would certainly be possible, for Griffin was a remarkable man. A book on him could be a human story, a genuine biography; or a penetrating analysis of his architecture as an art (as a Franz Phillip might have done it); or perhaps a study of Australian attitudes to the arts and to the "Overseas Expert", drawing the obvious parallel to the ease of Joern Utzon thirty years later. But Johnson tackles it in precisely the same way as Birrell did,

as a conventional, even old-fashioned, architectural biography. It is not really biographically or historically entrancing enough to electrify the "general reader", nor penetrating enough as a critical work to attract the art or architecture scholar. It takes the same general form as Birrell's book: a chronological story of Griffin's practices in the U.S.A., here, and India; a look at Canberra, his houses, public buildings, pupils; then a glance at other contemporary Australian architects; and a summing-up. Many of the illustrations in the two books are, inevitably, the same. One of the chapter headings is the same (Postscript). Both books are uncomplicated by humour.

Johnson of course is fully aware of the Birrell book and makes due references to it, and sometimes - without saying so - contradicts it. Yet his book is neither complementary to Birrell's nor a direct challenge to it. And it is not so superbly done as to throw Birrell's into a dark shadow. It is really just a second opinion.

For instance, the important story of the foundation of the Reverberatory Incinerator and Engineering Company, whose building operations kept Griffin occupied after all other work dried up early in the Depression, is told rather differently in Birrell's book. Birrell says that Leonard Kanewski "financed Griffin's incinerator venture" AND SPONSORED Griffin's trip to the USA in 1931 to study the reverberatory process to be used in the incinerators. In 1932, Birrell says, the company was formed. Johnson says that it was Kanewsky (sic.) who initiated the company in 1929, basing it on "an Australian patent". He also mentions Griffin's 1931 trip to the USA but believes that it was not made only to inspect incinerators (page 149). He says that other architects were involved earlier. He implies that Griffin was acting in the ordinary external professional capacity as an architect to Kanewsky, while Birrell suggests that Griffin was the brains behind the whole venture and Kanewski merely was financing him.

Yet strangely enough both books include an identical long quotation from Griffin about the incinerators, starting; "The final test..." (p. 148 in Johnson, p. 176 in Birrell). Johnson attributes this quotation to Magic of America by Mrs Griffin while Birrell attributes it to the Pioneer newspaper, Lucknow,

Both could be right. Mrs. Griffin may have been quoting from the Pioneer. My point is simply that Mr. Johnson should constantly be more aware of the Birrell book and be more forthright with the reader. If he can prove that Birrell was wrong about Griffin's initiatory role in the foundation of the incinerator company, I think he should say so, if only in a footnote. This would make the book more valuable to the serious student. Then, why quote precisely the same paragraph ("The final test...") that Birrell did?

I certainly do not want to suggest that Mr. Johnson's book is no advance on Birrell's. In at least two important respects it is a great advance: first, the scholarly research is most impressive. It extends from USA, to Australia, to India. The Australian section no doubt can be taken as an index to the others, and it is much more thorough than any previous work. Because of the depth of Johnson's research and his obviously thorough methods one must accept his story rather than Birrell's whenever they conflict — which they do only in comparatively minor matters. And Johnson is much more convincing, of course, on the American side. Second, Johnson's collection of illustrations is equally impressive. It is much more complete than the collection in Birrell's book and is quite fascinating. Drawings of Griffin designs that must be unknown even to most Griffin fans among Australian architects are numerous. There should be no thought of publishing the book without a proper display of all the pictures in the manuscript.

Also, the author's overall approach to the subject is more scholarly than Birrell's, lacking for instance the latter's emotional and largely untenable denigration of Frank Lloyd Wright's credentials.

Johnson is always an outsider looking in to Australia, and cannot help being a little condescending at times. This quality would probably make the book considerably more acceptable than Birrell's in the USA. On the other hand it might limit the book's acceptance in Australia.

Mr. Johnson's understanding of Australian architecture is admirable, but he is apt to make little slips; e. g. "At no time in the history of Australian architecture

has Asia been of the slightest influence and seldom even considered" (p. 170). In fact, Japan has often exerted influence and there was Hardy Wilson's Chinese period, both of which Johnson does acknowledge a few pages later. He puts a good deal of importance on his contention that the modern movement in architecture in Australia "began when Walter Burley Griffin hung a shingle announcing his architectural practice in Melbourne in 1914". Most Australian writers on the subject, including Birrell, are not so easily prepared to admit that it took an American to civilize us, single-handed. Johnson mildly takes me to task for contending that the modern movement began in 1934.

Such disagreement is only a matter of semantics. In fact Griffin was (like Wright) opposed to "modern architecture", yet he certainly was also anti-traditional. He was a progressive romantic individualist, and I don't think that Johnson is right in saying that it was he who started here the movement which the general public now recognizes as "modern" (clean, undecorated, simple geometrical). However, Johnson's interpretation of him as a missionary would no doubt seem most convincing to American readers.

As to the literary style, I can only, sadly, feel much the same as I felt on reading Birrell's first manuscript. It is certainly not beyond possibility of redemption but it needs a lot of work from somebody in polishing. To relieve your editors I recommend that Mr. Johnson be asked to rewrite the first two or three chapters again in the light of the experience he had gained by the time he had written the last one. The book starts with a naive forecast by the proposed sub-title: A Yankee in the Kangaroo's Court. On almost every page there are several troublesome phrases. For example, in the first two or three pages:

"the young nation down-under full with exciting potentialities."

"He did not impose himself... or stir events with resultants pointing to or emanating from Griffin. Rather... he did his very best when they were presented and responded to the results of his efforts if it were appropriate" (sic, honestly.)

"Other than Canberra and Lucknow, there are a number of events which were important to and others which distinguish Griffin's career."

"...a small but significant group of clientele..."

"...a venture where his contribution was to design..."

"... little is known of these works if indeed there were any."

On page 20, John Sulman is described as "Australia's most well known advocate of town planning..."

One could continue quoting awkward passages or minor grammatical lapses by opening the book almost anywhere. Split infinitives, changes of tense, and other informalities abound, and sometimes the metaphores are mixed to an extent which almost rivals the style of our most prolific architectural writer:

"Bits and pieces of many ideas of form and geometry wrestled within his creative hands and revealed themselves too often at inappropriate moments." (p. 155)

Or: "...Orchestrations of Georgiana swelled in mighty tremulo under his flowering baton." (p. 183)

However, this is evidently a first book, and about two-thirds along the way the author begins to get into his stride and moves along in fine form. If he could rewrite the somewhat tongue-tied opening in the style with which he closes, the whole would be infinitely more readable.

Mr. Johnson's chapter on Griffin's last year, in India, is much more thorough and interesting than Birrell's, Johnson seeing this period as the feverish climax of Griffin's career. Their two stories differ again in many details: from the reason for Griffin's going to Lucknow in the first place to the nature of the accident that brought about his death. In the case of the United Provinces Exposition which Griffin designed and saw built the descriptions are quite different, but the illustration which Johnson produces certainly seems to confirm his version.

Thus Johnson throughout follows closely behind Birrell, not making major corrections but convincingly revising the details.

The many appendices are valuable.

Summing up, I recommend that the book is worthwhile and should be published, provided that the illustrations are unskimped in size, number and quality of reproduction, and that the writing, especially at the beginning, is revised. It might also be of some advantage to change the proposed name of the book, in order to avoid confusion between it and Birrell's.

No doubt it is important to you to have an estimate of the sales potential in order to judge how lavish you can afford to make the pictorial presentation. I can only guess that in Australia the demand would not be spectacular, because Birrell took off the cream; but the book would almost certainly be more successful than Birrell's in the USA, simply because it is written through American eyes and there is none of Birrell's antagonism to Wright. No doubt you have already sounded out your agents in the USA on the likely reception there. The Chicago area would be the most potential. The editor of the Prairie School Review, Park Forest, Illinois ( a little journal for Chicago School devotees) might be prepared to be helpful by assessing the level of latent interest in Griffin at this time.

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