

At the launching of Robin Boyd - a Life by Geoffrey Serle: 21 November 1995

In the now far-off days when I used to try to teach students New Testament or hellenistic Greek, rightly or wrongly I encouraged them to distinguish between two Greek words for time: chronos, from which we get chronometer, chronology, time as it can be measured horizontally, as it were, time which passes; and kairos, the appropriate time, the critical hour, the significance of which can only be measured vertically as it were - the hour that stands out, remains significant in human affairs. I have often wondered whether that distinction could be applied to men and women. Most of us live relatively insignificant lives, time passes; but there are a few who encapsulate in their existence something of greater significance. To read this book, Robin Boyd: a Life by Geoffrey Serle is to have these questions forced upon us again. To employ a simple phrase, much used in my native Ireland, Robin Boyd was a special man: what made, what makes him that? Oddly enough this special quality can only be brought out when the story is told chronologically; and that is what Geoffrey Serle does: he tells Robin's story, sequentially, the story of his family, the family into which he was born and the family which he and Patricia made; his own story from childhood through young manhood, the successes and disappointments of a professional career until we find recorded his relatively early death, so unexpected, so disturbing to all who knew him. At every stage the question arises: what makes the subject of this biography a special man?

One of the merits of this remarkable book is that that question never obtrudes to dominate the narrative so that its repetition becomes boring and in a way self-defeating. Nor however is it ever lost in the story of the times in which he lived, the coming of Modernism to

Australia, the story of his family life so like and so unlike that of other families, of his writings and his architecture, all of which is part of the story of our times or of our immediate past. Insistently, but delicately, as befits the subject, without stridency the question is asked: what made him a special man?

Of course family background counted for a lot, with its artistic interests and talents; but, as Geoffrey Serle puts it

'The Boyds' did not emerge as a public phenomenon until the 1950's when Martin, Robin, Arthur and his brothers and sisters had all won some fame. Before then, Robin and Arthur's grandparents and parents were known, respectfully, only in the art world. Pat (his brother) and Robin acquired their outlook on the primacy of art as a way of life directly from their mother.

Elsewhere he reflects:

How he (Robin Boyd) had become the complete Modern by the age of twenty, in Melbourne, is not easily explained.

Already he had 'broad interests and an advanced eye', was largely self-educated, discovered, read and responded to literature that introduced him to a world to which most of his contemporaries were blind.

The Modern movement (writes Serle) was chiefly transmitted through overseas journals and magazines, and Robin was shaped far more by these than by any

family influence. But he must be distinguished from most of the avant-garde internationalist Moderns by his strange concern with Australia - and much of his originality and distinction lies in his combination of International Modernism with intense local interest.

It is indeed now impossible to see Australia or to think of Australia apart from that wider world which he and others mediated for us, along with a passionate concern for the protection of flora and fauna and for what in a generalized way we call the environment. His writings, the houses and other buildings designed by him, have in the last 40-50 years helped to bring Australia into contact with some of the best things in the 20th century before the 21st breaks upon us, or perhaps before we slip back into philistinism. While bringing this to-gether, and apparently just telling the story, Geoffrey Serle subtly brings all this before us. Like some of the great Renaissance painters he fills his canvas with many characters. Without losing sight of the central figure we find depicted in this corner of the picture or that portraits of his mother, his brother, his close colleagues (Grounds and Romberg) and of some of his clients. It is engaging, and often entertaining, to learn of some of the exploits of Roy Simpson, Peter McIntyre and others still happily with us. It is a book about Robin Boyd, but it is also a book about our world, our failures and our aspirations to better taste. It calls for a greater respect for the profession of architect.

There are some things which we take for granted, but which in large measure we owe to Robin Boyd: a pioneer in writing the history of the Australian home as Robin emerges as an important social historian, and as one who gave us a vocabulary for architectural criticism. Sir Joseph Burke used to say that every time he went into the Australian

countryside he found himself distracted by Fred Williams: wherever he looked he saw Fred Williams' landscapes. We cannot look at the buildings around us, our houses and public buildings, and we certainly cannot speak about them one to another without being in Robin's debt. We deplore the ugliness of our streetscapes, the vulgarity of pretentious structures, and we respond to the graceful and the sensitive because he has shown us the way to think and talk about these things. Our shame and our pride have both been quickened. Some of us also learnt what it is to be a client, and this book brings that home to us. It was my good fortune to learn something of that role in their very different ways from both Frederick Romberg and from Robin Boyd. It would be dangerous if as a community - as individuals and public bodies, corporations - we were to lose that respect for the insight, judgement and integrity of the architect.

I began by saying that in Ireland we would speak about 'a special man'. They also sometimes say: 'Och! he's a lovely man.' That too many of us would say about Robin Boyd, and he has a lovely biographer. In content and in form it is a lovely book with its fine writing and generous illustrations, photographs and drawings so well chosen. Robin deserves such a book. In launching it we would all want to congratulate both author and publisher. That I most heartily do, and commend it to a safe voyage into your homes and hearts.

Dr. Daw's McCaughey's - Book launch
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