



THE ERIC NICHOLLS COLLECTION

Christopher Vernon describes the Library's acquisition last year of the papers and associated ephemera of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin

The Commonwealth of Australia appointed architect Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937) as 'Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction' in 1913. Turning their world 'upside down', as his wife and professional partner Marion Mahony Griffin (1871–1961) put it, the couple moved to Australia the next year. Despite their shift across hemispheres however, the Griffins remained committed to their American careers, and anticipated only a three-year absence. Indeed, on the eve of their Chicago departure, they entered into partnership with a local colleague so as to continue their burgeoning American practice. Reality, however, deviated radically from the Griffins' plans: the couple chose

to remain in Australia, closing their Chicago office in 1917 and remaining here even after the demoralising end of Walter's official association with Canberra in 1921. By the mid-1930s, the Griffins had developed an extensive Australian practice which included built works in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria (with unrealised projects in Western Australia). Enlarging this achievement, Walter travelled to India in 1935 to take up new projects there; Marion soon followed to assist. Walter's accidental death there in 1937, however, abruptly ended this new episode in the couple's career. Working across three geographically disparate locales, the Griffins ultimately designed more than 400 projects.

In June 2006, the National Library of Australia acquired the records of the Griffins' remarkable practice. Named after the couple's office partner, Eric Milton Nicholls (1902–1965), the collection was purchased from his children, the late Glynn Nicholls and his sister Marie.

above left:
Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937)
Perspective, Cross Section and Detailed Landscape Plan for 154 The Rampart, Castlecrag between 1921 and 1930
b&w photographic reproduction of architectural drawing
20.9 x 12.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3603884-s988

above right:
Jorma Pohjanpalo
Portrait of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, Castlecrag, Sydney, 27 July 1930
b&w negative; 11.2 x 6.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3113700



above:
Walter Burley Griffin
(1876–1937)
*View of Harry Gunn House,
Chicago, from the Garden*
c.1906
b&w photograph
12.5 x 17.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3603884-s246

right:
Marion Mahony Griffin
(1871–1961)
Botanical Catalogues c.1916
Manuscripts Collection
MS9957

The Nicholls Collection is astonishing in size, scope and complexity. Assembled from across some 40 years, it comprises over 2500 items. As one might expect of architecturally-related collections, it includes a considerable range of original drawings, maps, blueprints and other reproductions, and photographs and lantern slides of the Griffins' public and private works, as well as views of structures under construction. Some of the drawings evince the hand of others working in the Griffins' studio, including, along with Nicholls, for instance, Roy A. Lippincott.

Finished drawings, however, are not the only document type preserved. The collection also includes preliminary sketches (including some made by Walter while a university student), scrawled annotations to maps and drawings, typescript lecture and essay drafts, correspondence, newspaper cuttings, travel expense receipts and all manner of paperwork which one would encounter in a working architectural office. Seemingly 'ordinary' ephemera such as this puts a human face on the legendary designers and offers insights into the workings of their creative process. Indeed, it is this rich ephemeral material that distinguishes the Nicholls Collection from its counterparts elsewhere in Australia and the United States.

Although the Griffins' Australian oeuvre (1913–1935) is most comprehensively

represented, the Nicholls Collection additionally documents their American work (c.1899–1917) and their swansong Indian projects (1935–1937). The collection also registers their lesser-known professional pursuits in landscape architecture, reflecting the Griffins' holistic approach: their interest in the comprehensive design of buildings, gardens, parks, suburban communities and even entire cities. The fact that the couple's landscape designs remain little known to some degree reflects 'the necessarily ephemeral nature of the living art of garden making', or to use the words of one of their colleagues: 'Just as an individual flower, so the garden blooms, fades, and if not renewed, becomes a memory.' Such has been the fate of nearly all the Griffins' landscape compositions. Spectacularly, the Nicholls Collection's photographs and lantern slides of the couple's built works reveal the original splendour of their now long-vanished garden and landscape surrounds.

The Nicholls Collection includes other landscape-related artefacts which, until now, were known to scholars only through textual sources. Writing in 1916, for instance, Marion reported that it was not possible to get much information for landscape design and planting work from the Australian botanical texts then available. In remedy, she assembled her own list of native plants for use in private work and in the federal capital, indexing it according to 'different growth requirements, [such] as soil, moisture; heights and shapes of growths; colour of flowers, foliage, berries and barks'. Marion's botanical catalogues survive amongst the Nicholls Collection treasures.



Each bearing a title such as 'Yellow[:] Light Yellow / Red Yellow / Red', the hand-bound volumes feature Japanese craft-inspired cut and stencilled coloured paper covers. These texts underpinned Walter's vision to 'paint' Canberra's hills with vegetal colour, an initiative from which hundreds of red bottlebrush shrubs (*Callistemons*) endure today on the slopes of Red Hill. Ultimately, Marion's flora texts are significant both as works of graphic art as well as for the horticultural knowledge they encapsulate.

Similarly evocative of the Griffins' enthusiasms for the natural world, the Nicholls Collection includes an array of photographs made on their extensive bush-walking expeditions throughout eastern Australia. As many of the landscapes which the couple captured on film—like their designed counterparts—have since been altered, these images will undoubtedly have significance for environmental historians and ecologists as well.

The Nicholls Collection's provenance demonstrates how remarkable its survival is. From the outset, it must be underscored that, for designers, drawings and related documents are often considered but the means to an end; it is the final, built outcome or artefact that is valued, not its documentation. Indeed, architects are notorious for destroying the records of their practice, usually upon their retirement. (Images of Howard Roark, the frustrated architect hero of Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead*, incinerating his drawings of unrealised visions come readily to mind.) Moreover, until only recently, many public institutions were loath to collect such bulky and cumbersome documents.

Because the Griffins initially believed their Australian stay would only be temporary, they left their American practice records in Chicago with their then partner Francis Barry Byrne (1883–1967). At some point between that partnership's end in 1917 (also effectively the end of their American practice) and the couple's decision, around 1921, to remain in Australia, the Griffins apparently organised for their American records to be shipped overseas to them. Their first visit home in 1924–25 would also have provided opportunity for them to personally collect documents. By 1937, Eric Nicholls was a partner in the Griffins' new firm in Australia and a trusted employee

of more than 15 years' standing. In the aftermath of Walter's death, Nicholls sought and received Marion's permission to continue the practice under the name 'Griffin and Nicholls, Architects'. After returning to Australia from India for a few months following her husband's death, Marion departed for Chicago in 1938. As the collection was then considered to record the working practice, she left it with Nicholls in Sydney. Nicholls would serve as its custodian for nearly 30 years.

In addition to its tragic catalyst, Marion's return to Chicago had further disappointment. She discovered that Walter had largely been forgotten in professional circles there. His reputation had been eclipsed by the couple's former employer—and by now Marion's nemesis—Frank Lloyd Wright. In reaction, Marion launched a campaign to establish, if not recover, Walter's position within the canons of American architectural history. To this end, she began writing her memoirs, 'The Magic of America', eventually producing a manuscript in excess of 1000 pages. The voluminous length, together with her late husband's obscurity, however, conspired against her efforts to secure the manuscript's publication. Consequently, in 1949, she donated two slightly varying typescripts to the Art Institute of Chicago and the New-York Historical Society (the National Library has a microfilm copy). In parallel, Marion enlisted Eric Nicholls' assistance to restore Walter's professional visibility. Nicholls facilitated her donation of drawings—including a cache of her exquisite presentation renderings—to Northwestern University, Columbia University, and the Art Institute of Chicago (the National Library of Australia has a microfilm copy of portions of the Chicago acquisition). Retrospectively, these donations 'skimmed' the collection of its 'aesthetic cream'. For researchers, however, the remaining collateral material is



Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937)
The Blue Mountains c.1930
b&w photograph; 18.0 x 13.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3603884-s728

of far greater significance in gaining a fuller appreciation of the couple's lives and works. Marion's donations register her passionate belief that the couple's records should be publicly accessible.

Marion Mahony Griffin died in 1961. Happily, she had already been interviewed by a number of scholars seeking to record the Griffins' legacy. Upon Eric Nicholls' death in 1965, the collection came into his widow's possession, and ultimately passed to her children Glynn and Marie—architects themselves. Sadly, Glynn did not witness the Library's acquisition of the collection, passing away in January 2006.

Today, interest in the Griffins' ideals and their formative impact upon Canberra is widespread, exceeding anything the couple knew in their lifetimes. Along with this, the national capital's fast-approaching centenary makes the National Library's acquisition timely. The enormous popularity of Canberra's original authors, however, is a recent phenomenon; and one fraught with apocrypha. The Nicholls Collection sheds new light on the Griffins' Canberra enterprise, enabling clearer distinction of fact from fiction. Conventional wisdom, for instance, holds that the Griffins 'left'

the national capital in 1920. In reality, neither Walter nor Marion ever lived in Canberra. The couple evolved Canberra's design by working from Melbourne (then the temporary national capital), and only made visits to the site. Similarly and most prominently, the city's architectural authorship has been the subject of long-standing debate: was Walter the city's sole designer? Or was the plan conceived collaboratively with Marion? Even though, according to a 1913 newspaper article, Walter believed the 'ideas of his plan' were 'much more than half due to his wife' and that 'she ought to have much more than half the credit for winning the competition', some maintain that Marion was only 'the hand that held the pencil'. Undermining this position's credibility, the Nicholls Collection includes a photographic reproduction of a revised plan of 'Canberra[:] City and Environs', rubber-stamped and hand-annotated on its reverse: 'Federal Capital Office Melbourne[:] Plan Received from Mrs Griffin[,] 13/9/1916'. This is an important instance of a document's backside being as important as its front!

In its spectacular richness, the Eric Nicholls Collection complements and enhances the National Library's other considerable Griffin-related holdings, which include for example the papers of Griffin scholars Donald Leslie Johnson (MS 7817) and the late Peter Harrison (MS 8347). By acquiring the Nicholls Collection, the Library has made a vital contribution to more fully realising Marion's aim that materials documenting the story of the Griffins' lives and works be made available to the public at large. Furthering this, the National Library will stage a major exhibition showcasing this remarkable collection in 2009.

CHRISTOPHER VERNON is a leading scholar on the Griffins, and Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at the University of Western Australia. Beginning in 2000, he compiled the initial inventories of the Nicholls Collection and facilitated the Library's acquisition negotiations. Vernon will be one of the curators for the 2009 Griffin exhibition. He thanks Christine Fernon for sharing a copy of the 1913 newspaper interview with Griffin quoted herein

below:

Walter Burley Griffin
(1876–1937)
*Canberra Plan of City and
Environs, 103A* 1916
coloured linen-mounted map
67.7 x 66.7 cm
Maps Collection
nla.map-nic11

inset:

[detail of reverse]

