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## **Tintara** **20 Lyndon Street (Corner Fuller Road & Victoria Avenue)** **Ripponlea**

Edward Fielder Billson (1892-1986) was the first to receive a Diploma in Architecture from Melbourne University, in 1915. It had been available since 1905, but never awarded, and even Billson had to patiently wait two years, after completing the course, while the wheels of academic bureaucracy ground on.

He became the first employee in Australia of the extraordinary Chicago architect, Walter Burley Griffin (3), and his only articulated employee, when in 1916, after winning the international competition for the design of Canberra, Griffin and his wife, Marion Mahoney, established an office in Melbourne.

In 1918, whilst in Griffin's office, Billson designed a house for his own father, George F. Billson, who was a St Kilda city councillor. In Toorak, it was a chunky composition, reminiscent of Griffin's Chicago work and influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright. In the next year, Billson designed a house for Margaret Armstrong, in Caulfield.

In 1920, Billson joined with fellow Griffin employee, Roy Alstan Lippincott, to enter the competition for the design of Auckland University Arts Building. Born in Pennsylvania, Lippincott studied architecture at Cornell University (1903-09). From 1909, he worked with Griffin. Frank Lloyd Wright had absconded to Europe with a female client, leaving his wife, family and office in Oak Park, Chicago. Griffin, Marion Mahoney and W.W. Holst completed Wright's work.

Mahoney had worked for Wright for eleven years. On graduation, Lippincott joined the office and was delegated to supervise construction of the Robie House, one of Wright's most famous and influential designs. It is extraordinary that this famous building was erected under the supervision of such a young architect in Wright's absence. In 1911, Griffin and Mahoney were married, and three years later, Lippincott married Griffin's sister. Both couples moved to Australia together.

Most unusually, Griffin encouraged employees to work on their own, independent commissions in his office. They were only required to sign Griffin's 'Reciprocal Co-operative Agreement': any profit was to be shared with other associates in the firm. In 1920, Billson signed, and so became an associate. Soon after, he designed a house for Marguerita and James Cragg, at 18 Findon Street, Kew. Meanwhile, he worked on the

Auckland University competition design, with Lippincott, who had been an associate since 1915.

The Griffins even offered to complete the interior design of the Cragg house, whilst Billson worked to the deadline for the Auckland job. Sadly, the Cragg house was demolished in 1979. No drawings survive.

When Billson and Lippincott won the competition, Lippincott left for Auckland to supervise construction of their design. He remained in Auckland for eighteen years. Lippincott's other major Auckland building is the Smith and Caughey department store, corner of Elliot and Wellesley Streets (1927), which has early precast concrete facade panels.

The public furore over the award of the prize to Lippincott and Billson 'has seldom been equalled' in New Zealand's architectural history. *Building* magazine described it 'as freak architecture':

The laws of architectural balance and proportion are entirely ignored ... the hideous tower, springing out of a medley of ridiculous buttresses, brand the design as a work of a child rather than a mature architect...

The design is influenced by Griffin's design for Newman College, at the University of Melbourne (1915), where Lippincott had been responsible for the design development phase. Its form is derived from Sir Christopher Wren's Gothic Tom Tower at Christ Church College, Oxford (1681-82)

Billson didn't go to Auckland, sensibly leaving Lippincott to face the Kiwi abuse, although he did make regular trans-Tasman trips. He resigned from the Griffins' office in 1922.

Billson's last drawing for the Griffins, was of a project for a house for Walter Reginald Hume, director of the Hume Pipe Company, probably on the site of their works, overlooking the Maribyrnong River, now the site of Melbourne's Living Museum of the West. The beautiful architectural drawing survives.

In that year, Lippincott and Billson Architects received an honourable mention in the famous architectural competition for the *Chicago Tribune* Tower. There were 264 entries. It was won by New York architects John Mead Howells and Raymond M. Hood. Their design inspired that of Marcus Barlow for the Manchester Unity Building in Melbourne, seven years later.

But the designs of several other entrants in the competition have become famous: Eliel Saarinen, who came second (he also came second after Griffin for the design of Canberra), Walter Gropius, Adolf Loos, and Walter Burley Griffin. Billson and Lippincott were awarded an honourable mention. They were amongst excellent company.

Also in 1922, on leaving the Griffins' office, Billson designed a house at 45 Balaclava Road, Caulfield. Then in 1923, Billson (still of Lippincott and Billson), designed Tintara, for John Keane, a commercial traveller. It is smaller than the Caulfield house, but similar, and it is still very well cared-for. For its time it has many design innovations: deep eaves and bargeboards, sloping facias concealing roof gutters, chevron-patterned leadlight glazing-bars, a semi-sunken bath, built-in sideboard, unusually designed skirting, powerful piers, and a chunky brick fireplace. There is only one main bedroom, so it would not suit everyone. But in 1923, it was the most advanced house-design in St Kilda.

In 1936, when Mrs Keane alone owned the property, a self-contained flat was added to the north-west corner. She did not trouble Billson, but the same builders did the work (J. Bain in 1923; Bain and Farrell in 1936).

In 1924, Billson entered and was placed fourth in the competition for the new Shrine of Remembrance in the Domain, Melbourne. The next year, he designed a house for George Silcock at Glenroy Road, Hawthorn, a new clubhouse at Woodlands Golf Club, White Street, Mordiallic and was awarded second place in a competition for a design for spires for St Paul's Cathedral.

It was also in 1925, that Griffin probably received the commission to redesign the landscape and street furniture of the St Kilda foreshore (3). This job came not from Herman and Leon Phillips, entrepreneurs of the Palais and other foreshore entertainment businesses and Griffin's clients for the Capitol, Swanston Street (1921-24), but from St Kilda Councillor, George F. Billson, a member of the St Kilda Foreshore Committee, the father of Edward.

In 1928, Billson was designing some flats in Grange Road Toorak, and another sports club: the Lawn Tennis Association of Victoria Clubrooms, Glenferrie Road, Kooyong. This has recently been re-modelled by Six Degrees Architects, respectful of Billson's work.

Billson turned to an entirely different architectural style, for his masterpieces, the Modernism of the remarkable Sanitarium Health Foods Co. factory (closed 1997 and now vacant) and the nearby printing office of Signs Publishing. Built in 1936-39, they are beautifully sited in the Yarra Valley at Warburton. These works develop the design approach of Willem Marinus Dudok, as expressed in one building, the Raadhuis (town hall) at Hilversum, Netherlands (1928-34). How this work by the municipal architect of a smallish Dutch town acquired such pervasive international influence, is remarkable. It has a strongly massed, interlocking, asymmetrical composition, in pale brick, with steel windows and applied vertical elements: very different to the design of Tintara.

In St Kilda this approach is nearest to that of Seabrook and Fildes at Park Court flats, 473 St Kilda Street (1938) and Woy Woy by Geoffrey Mewton of Mewton and Grounds (42). Later, in 1939-40, Billson practised with the young Geoffrey Mewton, after his partnership with Roy Grounds (1932-38).

Inexplicably, Billson's entry in the influential 1934 Centenary Homes Exhibition was an Old English design. In 1940, (Griffin had died in 1937), Edward Billson was commissioned to design the Coral Room, an addition to Griffin's Palais de Danse interior. These were lost to fire in 1968.

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