



Marion Mahony Griffin Lecture 2010

Marion, Miles, and the Magic of America

A talk by Emeritus Professor Jill Roe held on Wednesday 21 April 2010
at the National Library of Australia Theatre, Canberra

Jill Roe, AO, is Emeritus Professor of History at Macquarie University, Sydney. She is the author of the recent award-winning biography of Miles Franklin. Her talk focuses on the association of Marion Mahony Griffin and Miles Franklin in Chicago and Australia, with particular reference to Progressivism, Anthroposophy and a glimpse of the Limestone Plains.

Thank you. It is a great honour to be invited to present this lecture. Also, as it turns out, something of a challenge. What a pair I have chosen to talk about!

Marion and Miles

It is hardly surprising that Marion Griffin and Miles Franklin became friends. They were much of age, though Marion was a little older and lived considerably longer. She was born in Chicago in 1871 and died there in 1961, aged 90. Miles was born eight years later, in 1879, at Talbingo, and died in Sydney in 1954, shortly before her 75th birthday. They had a good deal in common also, in terms of temperament and values, but as I will go on to suggest, there were limits. According to Miles, Marion and her husband Walter were simply 'the very best people', among those she so quaintly and characteristically called 'my congenials'; and the residents of Castlecrag, the Griffins' ideal suburb in Sydney, always knew that Miles Franklin mattered.

Changing assessments

Even so, the documentation of congeniality is rather thin. There are graphics galore, but far fewer words on the page. Not that it matters. As Marion once told Miles, it is only people of 'no congeniality' who grow out of one another. Moreover both of them have been part of my life for so long now, I feel much the same about them. Somehow, although I have never considered them in tandem before, they have always gone together for me. It began way back when I was in Chicago looking for Franklin correspondence and saw the originals of Marion's marvelous Canberra drawings for the first time at the Art Institute of Chicago. PIC. How her renderings could have made so much of the Limestone Plains as they were in 1911 is still a minor mystery.

That was several decades ago, in the 1980s. Since then great strides have been made in both Griffin and Franklin studies. Back then, interest in Miles Franklin was just beginning to re-emerge, largely due to the international screen success of the film of *My Brilliant Career*.

These days we have much more to go on, with editions of her letters, her topical writings, her diaries, and more of her writings in print (one of which I will make something of later in this lecture), as listed in my recent biography. The changing status of non-fiction, and the passage of time, have together made a big difference to an appreciation of her life and work. Besides, her Papers are one of the great treasures of the State Library of NSW, and she made sure they kept her name before the public by endowing the Franklin Award. And, I should add, she is still often fun.

Over the same period, understandings of the significance of the life and work of Marion Mahony Griffin have changed even more dramatically. Back in the 1960s she was regarded as something of an embarrassment and a nuisance, without whom Walter Burley Griffin would probably have been better off. Now we know how simplistic that is – though Walter still remains somewhat opaque, to me at least – and more importantly, it is widely understood that what is so special about Marion is the breathtaking beauty of her own work, most recently exemplified by the publication of an edition of her 1918-1919 Tasmanian Forest drawings, and that sprawling memoir cum documentation of the Griffin achievements entitled *The Magic of America*, all 1400 pages of it, written after her return to Chicago in 1938, and published, at last, on the net in 2007. Without recourse to this '[c]haotic, polemical, unreliable, and fascinatingly brilliant work', Alasdair McGregor writes in the opening chapter of his recently published *Grand Obsessions: The life and work of Walter and Marion Griffin* (2009), his task would probably have been impossible. Good heavens.

Marion vindicated at last! But I must again confess to a personal response, that Marion is exceptional and impressive but underneath all the colour and style, terribly austere - and ultimately somewhat alarming. Moreover, it seems the insights of modern feminism, first noticed by Paula Lake in – who recalls this! – *Refractory Girl* in the 1970s have yet to be exhausted. There is probably more to be said to about the social milieu of Chicago too.

In his biography Alasdair McGregor rightly remarks on the surprising lack of major alternative documentation of the Griffin lives. As already intimated, this is certainly true of the relationship between Marion and Miles. Only a handful of letters between the two women survive, and if it were not for Miles Franklin's pocket diaries with their daily entries, often one liners, and her occasional contributions to the Australian press, we would not know much at all.

First meeting?

Even now scholars are unsure when exactly Miles Franklin first met Marion and Walter Griffin. It has been suggested, for example, that they first met at Hull-House, the internationally renowned social settlement house run by Jane Addams in the heart of the Chicago Stockyards, the hub of American progressivism. This is plausible. When Miles Franklin first arrived in Chicago in 1906, she went straight to Hull-House; and over the next nine years working for the National Women's Trade Union League of America, she went there many times to meetings and for social gatherings. Not much happened in social reform circles in Chicago but that there was a meeting at Hull-House. At Hull-House the attempt by privileged people of social conscience to uplift the underprivileged and mitigate social conflict was diverse and unremitting.

When Jane Addams died in 1935, Miles wrote a lengthy memoir for *The Catholic Women's Review* in Sydney, in which she described some of her visits to Hull-House. Unfortunately they mostly pertain to the later years, and she didn't mention Marion Mahony Griffin among the great and the good she met there, nor Walter. Perhaps the Henry George League to which

he belonged was one reform organisation that did not meet there. More likely, or so I intuit, the architectural world of Chicago was sufficient unto itself. In short, to date no-one has seen any evidence that Marion and Miles first met at Hull-House, though they well might have, and the culture of Hull-House was one of the things they had in common. The nearest anyone has come so far to an early date for an encounter in Chicago is 1911.

But since Miles arrived in Chicago in late 1906, 1911 is not really very early, and again there is no real evidence. At one stage it seemed Miles and Marion may have met at a Single Tax conference dinner one Friday evening in late 1911. They were certainly all there. Miles mentions attending in her pocket diary. But that's all. All it does is underline that Stella Miles Franklin and Marion Mahony Griffin shared a common culture, which we already knew; and might have guessed anyway, since Miles' father John Maurice Franklin was a progressive too, and probably a single tax man as well, in 1890s Goulburn.

Which brings me to the only well-documented date, 4 June 1912. Shortly after news of Walter Burley Griffin's win in the Canberra competition was announced in the Chicago press, Miles and her compatriot-colleague at the League Alice Henry 'naturally went around to congratulate him', and Miles later wrote up the encounter for the Sydney Daily Telegraph (only recently found there by Canberra researcher Christine Fernon). From the article, entitled 'Walter Burley Griffin. Winner of the Federal capital prize', it is obvious the two Australians were pleased with and proud of the outcome, feeling that Australia was leading the world in this new art to city planning, and delighted by the modest Mr Griffin and his vibrant wife.

They did not fail to note that Mrs Griffin was also an architect in a partnership, where the partners' ideals were 'happily interwoven', and they reported that she was a woman of charming personality and nimble wit. More ominously, some may now feel, the Griffins were said to be 'characteristically American in appearance and to have the American outlook'.

Disappointing as it may be to both Franklin and Griffin scholars alike, that 1912 interview does seem to clinch it, that Miles had not previously met the Griffins. Thus the Canberra win in 1912 was the beginning of the association between Marion and Miles. Thereafter, there were a number of social exchanges in Chicago prior to the Griffins' departure for Australia mid-1914. What does give me pause though is mention of one of Miles' suitors at the time, the rather hapless real estate agent Fred Pischel, a German-American and brother of Emma Pischel, one of her closest and earliest women friends in Chicago, taking her to see the Griffins in 1913. The Pischel family had lived in Chicago from the turn of the century and Fred started out in architecture, so he probably knew the Griffins before he took Miles along to see them, and the possibility remains that she had indeed known, or at least known of, the Griffins before 1912.

I suppose I sound like a terrible pedant struggling over names and dates and beginnings like this. But beginnings matter, in friendships as in all else, and it seems obvious that in this case the Chicago experience was a crucial underpinning. Marion never understood she was not always admired by so many Australians outside the radical and bohemian circles which were the Griffins' natural milieu in Australia as in Chicago. Not only was she so obviously what we can now recognise as a liberated woman, but in governing and other elite circles there was a good deal of anti-Americanism. Naturally Miles knew both sides of the question, and was in a position to be helpful in various ways, for example writing letters introducing Walter to friends in Sydney, and encouraging Marion to contact her mother at Carlton when she arrived.

A long association

The association of Miles and Marion extended over almost three decades. As indicated earlier, the Griffins arrived to settle in Australia in May 1914 and, apart from a couple of brief returns to Chicago in 1924-5 and again in the early 1930s, they remained here until 1938, when, following Walter's untimely death in India, Marion left for Chicago, never to return. Miles

on the other hand was overseas for most of that time, staying on in Chicago in increasingly unhappy circumstances until late 1915, when she went to England, writing and working there until mid-1927, when she returned to Sydney, more or less for good, having made a happy trip home in the summer of 1923-24, and with an escape sojourn in London 1931-2 to come.

From this outline it will be apparent that until Miles came home in the late 1920s, she and Marion were seldom in the same place. But the cultural bonds remained strong. It was not until invited to give this lecture that I realized the ongoing significance of the 'new art' of town planning was in Miles' life. In 1913, she began a novel entitled *On Dearborn Street* (a main street of Chicago), which remained in typescript until 1981, when it was published by the University of Queensland Press. Elsewhere I have argued that *On Dearborn Street* was Miles's boldest throw as a writer in America. Its relevance here is that the male narrator Roswell Cavarley is a Chicago architect, now into real estate, who lives in an inner city male-only residential called 'The Caboodle', and becomes entranced by the ingénue stenographer Sybyl Penolo. Cavarley finally secures Sybyl's affection, having realised he must be pure and that Sybyl will not consent to live in a suburb. Miles' writings are usually some meld of reality, and the idea that there are elements of Walter Griffin's response to Marion in the mild mannered feminist-reared Cavarley seems irresistible. As for Marion herself as a literary model, there's not a whiff. But on one occasion Miles did mention and use graphics of Marion's own work in her topical writings ('Elisabeth Martini. A pioneer in an old profession', *Life & Labor*, 2, 1914).

Another continuity with 'the new art' now seems so obvious I can't imagine why I didn't see it before. From 1918 to 1926 Miles worked for the National Housing & Town Planning Council in London, another semi-philanthropic body dating from the turn of the century. It was always housing that popped out of the sources at me – probably because of being so amused by Miles' confession to Sydney friend Eva O'Sullivan that she was finding it all a bit dull because after all 'housing is something anyone can believe in', but more seriously because housing was at the top of the British political agenda after the Great War as in the slogan 'Homes for Fit Heroes', and she was there as a sop to the woman's voice. Again fresh evidence has called me up short. One of the councillors was called Lanchester. I never quite pinned him down. But there in *The Magic of America* he turns up as an architect in India before Walter Burley Griffin!

In Australia, 1924

After the Council's secretary ran off to France with the money in 1925 leaving the office staff exhausted, there was nothing for it but to leave. The 'new art' had turned into another miserable postwar mess; and Miles was keen to get on with her writing. What she saw when she came home on a six month visit 1923-24 cheered her along. It was then, in Melbourne, where the Griffins had been living since 1916, that she caught up with Marion Griffin again (and Walter too).

Ten years had passed since last they met. When Marion Griffin learned that Miles and her mother were coming to Melbourne, she was delighted: 'Be prepared to have your head talked off', she wrote; adding that Mrs Franklin 'will be tickled to pieces with our one room house.'

Miles' response does not survive, so I can't say if she was, but the one-room house at Eaglemont, near Heidelberg, was indeed a treat. Terribly controversial at the time, 'Pholiota' (as it was called after the golden-brown fungus which builds around ring-barked trees), was a now familiar matter of pillars and curtains round large-ish living area (I believe it is still there though much altered).

Typically, in her letter Marion also urged Miles to see the Griffins' new project at Middle Harbour in Sydney i.e. the model suburb Castlecrag, 'both for what is visible now and what

is in the air for the future, if we can fight it through ... It is enough to make one's hair stand on end how determined the authorities are that nothing beautiful shall be left in Sydney, or anywhere else in this beautiful country', she concluded. (MMG/SMF, 7/1/1924, Franklin Papers, vol. 15)

Marion loved the one-roomed house. The years spent there were among the happiest of her life, she later wrote. Regrettably when Miles and her mother did get out to Heidelberg to see it, Miles did not record a reaction. Instead it seems she had her head talked of. And not about times past. Apparently Mrs Griffin 'enlarged her theories'.

What this probably means is that by early 1924 Marion Mahony Griffin was already a devotee of the latest alternative religious teaching, the teaching of ex-theosophist Austrian-born Rudolf Steiner PIC known as anthroposophy (say it slowly after me Anthro=poss=o=phy.) The Anthroposophical Society was established in Australia shortly after World War I, and has never been large. But it has survived and the teaching is now best known now for Steiner schools and work with the intellectually disabled.

Miles' laconic record of the visit to Eaglemont gives little away. Later she would say more. In the meantime, it was presumably not worth fussing about. And after all, things were not going so badly for Marion just then. Something of her stance and style in 1920s Australia is nicely captured in a report of a farewell garden party in Melbourne, late 1924, which considering how often she criticized Australia's class-bound ways, I am unable to resist quoting at some length: *'Amid the beautiful surroundings of the Botanic Garden, the Quarterly Club met on Saturday to bid farewell to Mrs W.B. Griffin prior to her departure for America. The guest of honour was attractively gowned in a majestic colour knitted silk frock with a cape effect and a Tutankhamen turban and carried presentation bouquets of brilliant hued poppies. Tea was served in the pagoda, and Mrs Griffin, with her dynamic personality, gave a graphic outline of her future plans. After a three month's stay in America, she will return to Sydney to promote the interests of a "snowball" colony, and her well known architectural gifts will be availed of for the housing of the snowballers. Included among those present were ...[numerous names] and Miss Vida Goldstein.'*

[Source: Unidentified clipping from a Melbourne newspaper, c.November/December 1924, Hamilton Hamilton-Moore scrap book, copy courtesy of the late Eldred Hamilton-Moore.]

Sometimes I've wondered if Miles did not get along better with Walter than Marion Griffin. Many people did. She called on him at his Melbourne office at that time, and he took her to see his enduring architectural triumph there, Newman College at the University of Melbourne. Likewise when she returned a few weeks later to catch the boat back to London, he twice took her for meals, once to Adams Hotel.

At Castlecrag, 1928–9

Later, when they were all back in Sydney in the late 1920s, not long after Miles returned home for good, she visited the Griffins at Castlecrag. On that occasion, she delighted in their achievements there, especially the preservation of native flora, and Walter took her for long walk in the bush, largely to escape a pompous Shakespearian actor, but also to speak freely. It is a mark of his esteem for her. 'The poor man confessed to me his bitterness; is sorry he did not stay in the United States. ... The way he is persecuted and thwarted is shameful ', Miles wrote in a private note to Alice Henry. It is just as well she made it a private note, since he spoke of her compatriots as 'poor white trash'. But she agreed anyway: 'It will never be any better till they develop a brain and soul and they can't do that while they are fed on this pap from England. The papers are unbelievable...'. Marion said she was thankful for Miles helping out that time, and said she was going to visit Miles one night ' so I can talk to her'.

Probably Marion was too busy safeguarding the bush at Castlecrag to do so. But she still felt Miles was an asset, urging her to write an article suggesting that Australians make a ritual of

going out to see the Christmas bush in its prime and establish a festival for it's worship. 'A good religion that would be'. I love the Christmas bush myself and watch out for it, though it's hardly a religious festival. There's not enough left.

Some of the elements of my subject have now been sketched in. But I've been concentrating on Marion and Miles and congeniality, the two women, architect and the writer, who both knew and loved America and found Australia hard to adapt to by the 1920s. Shortly I must face the bigger one, Marion, Miles, and the Magic of America. This is the story of the 1930s, and the final phase of their association.

A hiatus

Before that could happen however, there was hiatus that might well have put an end to things. The hiatus had nothing to do with Miles or the affinity of Marion and Miles. Both women left the country for almost two years between 1930 -1932, Miles for London in hope of publishers, and Marion for Chicago to free Walter for a mysterious affair he was having, presumably with a Castlecragger. 'Now you are a free man', she said as she stepped on to the boat. For years no-one mentioned this marital breakdown, and even now despite the best efforts of curious local researchers, it is unclear who the woman was. Some even think there was child, referring to a eugenical fear that Walter's genius would be lost if he did not reproduce.

To all intents and purposes Marion was leaving for good in 1930. But it seems pretty obvious that Walter could not do without her. He went over to bring her back, and he joined the Anthroposophical Society, as she had done earlier. By 1933, Castlecrag was in full swing again, and another image of the association between Marion and Miles comes into focus.

Castlecrag in the 1930s

Wanda Spathopoulous, who was brought up there and later went to live in Greece, has written a memoir of the Castlecrag community in the interwar years to demonstrate how exuberant and outward-going it was. As a suburb Castlecrag was not making much progress by the 1930s, but as a cultural experiment led by Marion it boomed, and like many other like-minded Sydney-siders, Miles saw some of it. She was not much interested in the round of anthroposophical festivals that were held to heighten awareness of the four seasons, but she did see some of the plays that Marion directed in the open air theatre at Castlecrag, the New Haven Scenic Theatre. In 1935 she saw three plays there, Euripides' 'Iphigenia in Tauris', 'Kris Kringle' (German for Father Christmas, and apparently played in German), and a nativity play. Here we see Marion in full flight PIC. 'It was wonderful indeed the variety of effects one could get in that valley', she later wrote. Everyone had a job to do - Ida Leeson from the Mitchell Library held a spotlight – and no-one seemed to mind sitting on the rocks.

In a Christmas letter to her old Chicago mentors the Robinses, Miles reported that the Griffins were 'still with us and much prized by me personally as well as spiritually'. I don't place a lot of weight on 'spiritually' as far as Miles Franklin is concerned, but if she meant ideally, that would make sense. Many found the burning idealism of the Griffin experiment in town-planning, and the way Marion could cast community building in a nation building frame, uplifting. In *The Magic of America* she extolled the Greek plays at Castlecrag in the following terms: 'all this glory that was Greece will be reconstructed on the shores of the Pacific'. Here is another Marion quote, from 'Home Building as an Art. Making a model suburb for Sydney':

'It is a great work, but it is only a beginning. It points to a new Australian life, based upon a new Australian idea. That idea is that it is absurd for Australians to keep following in the gouty footsteps of old John Bull or to ape Uncle Sam. They must think out a new civilization and begin to draw up the ground plans for the new institutions. The idea may be summed up in a phrase: Life as a Fine Art.'

A divergence

It would take more time than we have this evening to extract all the underpinnings of such statements, a lot of which depends on Arnold Toynbee who famously saw history as the rise and fall of great civilisations. Nor could the vision readily be swallowed whole. And here comes a divergence for Marion and Miles. Although Miles prized the Griffins to the end - she was one of those who went to see Marion off in 1938 - and enjoyed the plays, her letter to the Robinses about the plays concludes on a slightly apologetic note: 'mention of these things seem trivial while the great problems are flouted'.

How Walter Burley Griffin might have reacted to the rise of fascism in Europe we cannot know, as he died in India in early 1937. In so far as Marion paid attention, it seems she held out no hope of resistance to undemocratic politics. Anything to do with class conflict was anathema. Along with an interfering bureaucracy, 'classism' was one of her greatest objections to Australia.

For both of the Griffins Democracy with a capital D was a religion, the fine flower of individualism, and in accordance with Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical teachings, the solution to world problems depended on achieving consensus. In case there is an anthroposophist present, I trust that very broad resume of a complex and essentially spiritualised approach to political change seems fair. Inevitably and unfortunately for the well meaning, the approach was also increasingly inappropriate in the 1930s. For Miles Franklin, it was a 'terrible blow' when Marion Griffin decided to leave permanently for Chicago in 1938, to (and I quote) 'follow out this Steiner teaching,' adding 'I do not find myself en rapport with that'. Of course not. She was a far more worldly and politically experienced person than Marion, and she always put Australia first. It was tempting to suppose that the best thing for Australia was to steer clear of European wars, but that was not a viable position, as another important American in Australia in the late 1930s, left commentator Hartley Grattan did not hesitate to tell her.

How far the views of Marion and Miles diverged is only now becoming clearer from *The Magic of America*, which Marion compiled in Chicago in the late 1940s. That there was such a thing as the (lower case) 'magic of America', they could both agree. But Miles found good things to say about all the places she lived. And, as she and Alice Henry had first observed in 1912, the Griffins remained staunchly American in outlook, true believers in what historians call American exceptionalism. Like many of their compatriots, they held to a linear view of history, that American democracy represented the pinnacle of achievement to date; and what they had hoped for in Australia, further westward, was a next step along the evolutionary path. This proved to not be their experience.

An affinity

Happily the great good they did in this country did not depend on the negative experiences. Nor did the values they undoubtedly encouraged among the middle classes in Melbourne and Sydney. I have formed the view that the reason they stayed here so long despite the frustrations is that they loved it, like Miles loved it, for the land itself. Miles wrote well about it in her most impressive pastoral novel, the prize-winning *All That Swagger* (1936); and at the same time the Griffins at Castlecrag fought tooth and nail for what they called environmental values. Marion even bandaged up ring-barked trees. That is to say, by way of conclusion, the bond between these two determinedly professional women dated back to the Progressive era in pre-World War I Chicago, and was sustained by a passion for the natural beauty of this country, despite darkening war clouds.

Thank you.