



William Arthur Nelson (1875-1958)

(The Architect [WA], Vol.3, No.3, September 1959, p.13)

Nelson, William Arthur, was born 19 March 1875 at Potts Point, Sydney. Educated at Royston College and the Sydney High School, in March 1891 Nelson commenced serving articles with prolific NSW architect Thomas Rowe, and whilst employed as a draughtsman at Pitt Street, also studied at Sydney Technical College for four years. Nelson had lessons from John Smedley (1841-1903), reputedly the first Australian born architect, W. Wright Campbell, and J.L. Bruce. In 1894 he was awarded a bronze medal for architectural design from the Technical College. Rowe's large practice suffered badly in the depression of 1893, and it is likely that along with many other young architects at the time, Nelson found work difficult to procure. He began practice in Sydney, but in 1896 joined the exodus to the gold boom in Western Australia. Residing at Perth, he entered the service of the Admiralty Survey Department and became chief draughtsman. After nearly two years employment, with closure of the department Nelson commenced architectural practice on his own behalf. Over the next twenty-odd years, Nelson designed many well-known works in Western Australia, including Melba Corner in Perth, Padbury Memorial (now St James') Church at Moora, Johnston Buildings, Torrens Building, buildings at Albany, several hotels, many residences and other structures in town and country, also claiming to have designed the first reinforced concrete building in WA. He was architect for the Bank of New South Wales and several corporations. Some of Nelson's early Twentieth Century designs include Wesley Maley's homestead at Moojebing, near Katanning, and the Coffee Palace at Stirling Highway Cottesloe for Francis Sproule in 1904. Nelson married Kathleen Olive Maley in April 1905 at Wesley Church, Perth. A long-serving secretary of the Western Australian

Institute of Architects (WAIA), he was elected a Fellow of WAIA in October 1908. Nelson took a great interest in the welfare of the profession, was instrumental in early moves toward the registration of architects, and acted as chief incentive officer of the Institute for a long period. In 1908-09 the leading men of WAIA, Hobbs, Cavanagh, Poole and Harrison worked together with treasurer Jefferis, secretary Nelson, and members of the WAIA council toward the registration issue, not to be resolved for another dozen years. Other important business included modifying the Scale of Professional Charges, and petitioning RIBA to constitute WAIA as an allied society. Although a dedicated study of Nelson's designs in WA has not been made, it is known that a fair number of buildings with which he was associated remain, including St James' Anglican Church, Moora; Bank of New South Wales (fmr), Northam; Bank of New South Wales (fmr), 349-355 Murray Street Perth; Bank of New South Wales (fmr), Wagin; Moora Town Hall; Commercial Hotel (fmr) Moora; Moora District Hospital & Myles Memorial Arch; and the Seamen's [Sailors'] Rest, 28 Marine Terrace, Fremantle.

For recreational pursuits, Nelson had a farming interest at Balingup, where he owned a property. In April 1914 he left on the 'mailboat' with his wife for an extended trip to England and America, whilst his practice was carried on by Herbert Parry. Nelson reported impressions gained on his 'grand tour' to fellow Australian architects. In November 1915, *The Salon* published 'Impressions of America', Nelson's report on architecture in the USA. Following an exploratory visit that included the cities of New York, Washington, and San Francisco, Nelson decried the lack of development of American Romanesque style, 'which looked so well on paper and suggested illimitable possibilities of development'. Although praising the work of 'brilliant and gentle' Charles McKim, Nelson felt the Americans had turned away from Richardsonian types, and could not discover any important work which was being developed on lines which had hitherto been regarded as peculiarly American.

A member of council of the Town Planning Association of WA, in July 1917 Nelson was the originator of the idea of a conference to consider 'post war problems and industrial phases of repatriation'. Married but childless, Nelson must have felt the pressure of service to his country during the First World War. Enlisting in early 1918, he embarked at Albany on HMAT *Marathon* in July, serving briefly as a sapper with AIF engineers in England. Following the end of war, in early 1919 Nelson found the exciting opportunity to work with renowned architect Sir Mervyn MacCartney on

national housing schemes at Wallingford, west of London, and on both St Paul's and Durham cathedrals. It was decided that Kathleen would join her husband in Great Britain, and she departed their home 'Calvert Lodge' at 20 Walker Avenue, West Perth. Tragically, Kathleen died on the *Miltiades* near Tenerife (Canary Islands) in April 1919, aged just 37 years.

No doubt saddened by memories of time with Kathleen in WA, Nelson eventually returned to Sydney, registering with the NSW Architects Board in December 1923, and commenced practice as Mitchell & Nelson at Pitt Street, Sydney. From 1932 to 1952 Nelson's listed address with the Board was *Radcliffe*, 65 Tryon Road, Lindfield, which he had designed back in 1924. Works north of Sydney in the Ku-ring-gai area include both 65 & 67 Tryon Road, Lindfield (1924); two houses in Roseville (1933); Killara Court, Werona Avenue (1933); additions to the Killara Bowling Club (1935); and business premises at No.96a Pacific Highway, Roseville.

Greengate Court, the block of shops at 672-678 Pacific Highway, Killara, was designed by Nelson and built in 1936. Nelson owned the property with his second wife Annot Louise Nelson. Nelson married for a third time in October 1947, at St Philip's Church Sydney, to Emily Margaret Ellis, also of Lindfield.

Amongst other works from Nelson's second period in NSW were a number of churches including St Barnabas', Roseville and St John's, Moss Vale. He was also responsible for many business premises, blocks of flats and service stations in Sydney and its suburbs, including the West End Garage at 80 Broadway, in 1939. In time, Nelson was honored as a Fellow of both the Institute of Architects of NSW, and Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

Nelson died in a motor accident on 12 August 1958. He left bequests to both the RAIWA (NSW) and RAIWA (WA). In WA £1,000 in bonds was set aside for educational purposes in the form of prizes for students, although the prize lapsed in 2010.

References:

'On The Terrace', *West Australian Mining, Building, and Engineering Journal*, 17 September 1904, p.20, (Coffee Palace at Cottesloe for F. Sproule; large country residence at Katanning for W. Maley).

'W.A. Institute of Architects – Annual Meeting', *WAMBEJ*, 14 March 1908, p.20 (registration etc).

'Perth Improvements', *Western Mail*, 27 May 1911, p.14 (J.R. Johnston Buildings, 849 Hay Street, Perth, later Metters Ltd Showrooms and numbered 847 - 851 Hay Street, c.1926-1958).

Battye, J.S., 'William Arthur Nelson FWAIA', *Cyclopedia of Western Australia*, Vol.1, 1912, p.631-2.

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'A Farewell Gathering', *The West Australian*, 18 April 1914, p.12 (with Perth Town Clerk W.E. Bold).

'Personal', *The West Australian*, 22 April 1914, p.8 (departure for England and America).
 NELSON, William A., 'Impressions of Panama Exposition', *The Salon*, vol.3, no.2 (Sep 1914), pp.72-4; vol.4, no.5 (Jun 1915), pp.186-7; 'Glimpses of Cairo', *The Salon*, vol.3, no.2 (Sep 1914), pp.72-4; 'Impressions of America', *The Salon*, vol.5, no.4, November 1915, pp.98-100.
 'Repatriation - Conference of Public Bodies', *The West Australian*, 6 July 1917, p.9 (Nelson's address).
 National Archives of Australia, control symbol NELSON WILLIAM ARTHUR, series no. B2455, barcode 7992845 (war service 1918-19, education, death of wife, employment with MacCartney).
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 'William Arthur Nelson FRAIA', *The Architect (WA)*, Vol.3, No.3, September 1959, p.13.
 'Greengate Court, Pacific Highway, Killara', *Ku-ring-gai Historical Society News* June 2008, p.7.

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Sailors' Rest, 28 Marine Terrace, Fremantle; Melba Corner, S-E corner Hay and Milligan Sts, Perth (SLWA 009215PD, SLWA 102288PD)



Wesley Maley's homestead 'Hounsome' at Moojebing [near Katanning] (Battye Vol 2, p.765)



Sproule's Coffee Palace
 561 Stirling Highway, Cottesloe

Johnston Buildings (Mettters Showrooms c.1926-1958)
 849 Hay Street, Perth

(John Taylor 2011)