



Bill Robertson at the time of establishment of the Perth Technical College architectural course (*The West Australian*, 23 March 1946, p.12)

William (Bill) Haydyn Robertson (1905-1953) was born 26 July 1905 at *Haddon* 323 High Street Prahran, Victoria to renowned veterinary surgeon William Apperley Norton Robertson and his wife Agnes Maud (nee Ferne) Robertson. Bill's parents had married at Christ Church, St Kilda in June 1904. The family grew quickly, as twin daughters Maud Norton and Nina Vivienne were born in August 1906, and young Bill had sisters of a very close age.

Bill Robertson qualified as an architect in 1927 after completing his articles with A. & K. Henderson and gaining his Diploma in Architecture at Melbourne University. Once qualified he travelled to London where he worked in the office of Sir Aston Webb & Son, also attending lectures at the Bartlett School of Architecture within the University of London. Bill voyaged to Canada and Montreal, working with the firm of John S. Archibald where he spent two years working on buildings for the Canadian National Railways. He also attended classes at the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts at Montreal.

From New York, Robertson travelled on to Italy and France to further his architectural observations before returning to Australia in 1933, when he joined the Commonwealth Department of the Interior as an architect. He may have transferred to Perth as early as June 1934, as there was a Bill Robertson in attendance at the Embassy Ballroom for the 'T Square Ball' of that year.

Working through the Second World War (1939-1945), Bill held the post of architect-in-charge of the Commonwealth Department of Works drawing office. He resigned to take up the position as the first lecturer-in-charge of the newly created (1946) Department of Architecture at Perth Technical College (PTC) at

a reduced salary of just over £600. Almost certainly reflecting the value of his enthusiastic efforts in the position, by 1951 Robertson's remuneration had increased to over £1200. Whilst undertaking war-related activities at the Department of Works, Robertson had met Perth-trained architect Arnold Camerer (1915-1979), and together they were the foundation staff of the PTC architecture course opened in 1946, with Robertson and Camerer as full-time lecturers, later supplemented by other local architects including Allan Douglas and Margaret Pitt Morison.



Bill Robertson in the early 1950s (*Phi*, 1951, p.2)

A manifestation of the 1930s period of scientific rationalism was the MARS group, the Modern Architectural Research Society. It was founded in Sydney in 1938 as an off-shoot of a similarly named United Kingdom organization, and attempted to promote the introduction of science more directly into the development of modern architecture. Probably its most obvious influence on Western Australian architecture can have been through the association of Bill Robertson and his primary part in the direction of the School of Architecture at PTC. Prior to the Second World War, architectural students who did not receive academic training overseas, or in other States of Australia, had been obliged to train in WA under a system of indenture to individual practicing architects. The products of this system of architectural education were trained rather than educated and clearly bore the marks of the architect who trained them. During the war it could be foreseen that great demands would be placed on the building industry when peace eventuated, and in 1946 Robertson and Camerer provided the first steps in the development of architects to meet these needs.

Robertson's observance of MARS and the society's philosophies had a clear input to the nature of the course at Perth. The war had made housing a major consideration, and a practical objective of industrialization for the Modern Movement. Robertson was also strongly oriented to construction and practical aspects, and the curriculum he organized was accordingly a very practical one. Wider social issues were of concern to him, and he encouraged these interests and that of travel among his students. F. Senior Bolland, who replaced Robertson as head of the Department of Architecture after the latter's death in 1953, introduced into the school a greater emphasis on design and aesthetics.



Mrs. W. H. Robertson (left), wife of the lecturer in charge of the school of architecture at the Perth Technical College, and Miss I. Fairweather, secretary to the department of architecture, examining a model of a replanned country town at the school's exhibition yesterday. Graduating students were entertained with an exhibition of their work, and work by professional architects.

Hermione Robertson and Jeannette Fairweather examining a model at a PTC exhibition in 1952
(*The West Australian*, 4 December 1952, p.5)

During his time at PTC Robertson steered the course through its formative years and with completion of the first five-year cycle was instrumental in having the Associateship in Architecture accredited by the Architects Registration Board of WA, Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA), and Royal Institute of British Architects. He was also actively involved in the foundation of the WA branch of the Australian Planning Institute in 1951, and in 1952 he was made a Fellow of the RAIA. Reflecting 'Robbie's' concerns, the seven fifth-year students of the course in 1950 were given a town-planning exercise in their final term – to design a housing settlement for a 469 acre (190 ha) site nine miles (14.5 km) north from Perth on the Wanneroo Road.

The results of the exams for the associateship course at PTC were announced in *The West Australian* newspaper in mid-December 1950, and the very first graduates of the Robertson-directed architectural course were feted by their friends as the ‘magnificent seven’. Stuart Coll, Vin Davies, John Hallam, Gil Nicol, Alan Shepherd, Ray Strauss and Geoff Summerhayes had passed the final four units to complete their studies. Apparently all of the early cohorts of students at PTC regarded ‘Robbie’ with great respect.



Some of Bill Robertson’s first students at PTC shown in 1950: from left to right: John Hallam, Alan Shepherd (probably), Arthur Smith (probably), Stuart Coll, George John, Ray Strauss, Vin Davies, Gil Nicol, Geoff Summerhayes (courtesy Jane Adjuk)



Bill Robertson with PTC School of Architecture football team in 1952 (courtesy Lidbury family)
 Back: Peter Bruechle, Don Collins, Jack Finney, Bob Lyon, Ross Chisholm, Bill Weedon, Alex Doepel
 Middle: Arch Jones, Ron Facius, Gus Ferguson, Col Nicholas, Morris Fairbrother, Scott Thompson, Bill Angove

Front: Eddie McMillan, Bill Waters, **Bill Robertson**, John Lidbury, Bob Day, Ted Cartwright
 (Bill Weedon noted in 2021 that Bill Angove – a photographer – set up this image with a timer and then joined the group in the photo, taken at UWA’s James Oval).

Robertson's early death in March 1953, at the age of just 48 years, stunned the Department and the profession. In an obituary in *The Architect*, RAIA (WA) chapter president Ossie Chisholm conveyed condolences to Robertson's widow, Hermione and their young children, and suggested that Bill's memorial would be the buildings which the first students of architecture at PTC were then designing.



Bill Robertson photo accompanying obituary in 1953 (*The Architect* March 1953 p.10)

Bill Robertson and Hermione Lilian O'Connor were married in 1935, and they eventually lived in Constance Road at Darlington, with children Ann, Katherine, William and Ian - who initially attended Darlington Primary School, along with two of Arnold Camerer's daughters. The pioneer of formal architectural education in Western Australia, Robertson died at Royal Perth Hospital on the 9th March 1953. He was survived by Hermione (1914-2005) and the four children. In 2002, the elderly architect Fred McCardell (1906-2007) wrote that he had got to know 'Robbie' very well, and gave his recollections of Robertson's passing: *'Somewhere early in the 1950s he contracted tuberculosis which required intensive medical treatment. Apparently this treatment was not considered adequate, so he was subjected to a surgical operation, shortly after which he died on 9 March 1953. His physician, a client of mine, told me afterwards that the operation was completely unnecessary.'*

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