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The Rare Retreat of Alexander North

Peter MacFie

High on a hill overlooking Koonya, the Derwent and Mt. Wellington in the distance is *Ravensbourne*, a small rubble and concrete house with narrow windows giving a definite medieval appearance. It was built during the late 1880s by Alexander North and was originally known as *Homelea*.

North was one of a small group of professionals who moved onto the Peninsula after the closing of the prison at Port Arthur and who used their houses as retreats. Near-neighbours at Koonya were William Charpentier in his ornate timber farm-house (a master-craftsman who later became founder of the Hobart School of Arts, later the Hobart Technical College) and J.R. McClymont, naturalist (see Chronicle 2). North and Charpentier shared similar interests, including an enthusiasm for native Tasmanian timbers, while North later became chairman of the Launceston Technical College in 1907 (the year of Charpentier's death). Their lifestyles must have contrasted with that of the struggling pioneering families who were their neighbours.

An experience architect, North was born in Yorkshire, studying at the Kendal and Lambert Schools of Art, taking particular interest in churches of Europe including the small timber structures. Migrating to Hobart in 1883, he worked until 1886 with the Department of Lands, His first church in Tasmania was St Michael's, Bothwell, designing the nave and fittings, and using Tasmanian animals and plants in their design.

Moving to Launceston around 1890, North became one of the island's leading architects, Energetic and with varied interests, he wrote on "The Truthful Treatment of Brickwork", (1892) and "Rural Churches", (1905), as well as on aspects of forestry and woodcraft.

"He was an expert on the treatment and use of Tasmanian timbers in building, and sent specimens of native woods to England as early as 1887 for promotional purposes, His considerable knowledge of botany is reflected in his designs for decorative work based on plant motifs, especially the column capitals of St John's, Launceston, and his habit of identifying both timbers and plants in his designs by their botanical names. Through his architecture and his patronage of craftsmen, North became a major force in the Arts and Crafts movement in Tasmania..."¹

Buildings in which North was either designer or co-architect include in Launceston:- St John's and Holy Trinity; The Colonial Mutual Life Assoc. (1887) since demolished and Ritchie's Mill (1912) both pioneering structures in reinforced concrete; the A.M.P Society

¹ C. Miley. "Beautiful and Useful", Queen Victoria Museum, 1987

(1891); the City Park's gardener's lodge and ornate Coronation Gates (1903); plus Thyne's Mill, coffee palaces and private homes in a distinct Federation style. These include *Omagh* (Lyttleton St) and *Glen Dhu*.

Other Northern Tasmanian Churches include St Mary's Star-of-the-Sea, Burnie (1890), the Church of our Lady, Mangana (1910); All Saints, Exeter (1916); plus others at, Illawarra, Beaconsfield, Glengarry and Lilydale.² The extensive use of timber in these grew from the strong impression made when visiting Norway many years earlier.

North's partnership in Launceston resulted in churches there and one in Fiji.

In 1912 North built and experimental house for himself at Rowella on the East Tamar. Of re-inforced concrete, *Homelea* was in the North family for many years. However, this and his other buildings using concrete are predated by the small cottage at Koonya, also originally known as *Homelea*.

Apart from the rural retreat at Koonya, Alexander North had a lasting impact on the nation's history by recommending to the 1913 Tasmanian Government that the Gothic-styled church at Port Arthur be conserved (he was less sympathetic to the large Penitentiary). As a consulting architect, he reported to the Minister for Lands on the state of both ruins, describing the effect of the 1874 bushfire which burnt out the church, noting that the walls were remarkably sound, and recommending methods of stabilising the structure.

Alexander North wrote:

"The question naturally arises, 'Is the ruin worth preserving?' I have no qualms in answering that question in the affirmative. The ruined Church is unique, so far as Australia is concerned, and future generations will not fail to thank those who have had the foresight to preserve this picturesque and interesting relic.

The thousands of tourist who visit Port Arthur annually bear testimony to the fact that the Church is the central feature of their visit, and none fail to be enchanted with its solemn dignity, and genuine beauty. Without the Church, Port Arthur would undoubtedly lose its attractiveness, and the State would be deprived of an asset which yearly increases in value... The ruined buildings (of England) are not of necessity restored but actions are taken to arrest disintegration.... I do not desire to see the Church made like a new building..."³

An obsession with the "romantic ruin" prevented North (and many since) from seeing the Church at Port Arthur as a place where the State attempted to control the minds of prisoners, many in chains, and all under the guard of armed British soldiers.

While North's love of churches showed in his comments, his opinion of the Penitentiary were – to our eyes – insensitive. The case for preservation was argued by Peninsula

² J. Maidment: "John Alexander North and His Work in Tasmania, National Trust Newsletter, December 1982, p.1-2

³ Public Works Dep't., 51/40/Tasman, 1/7/1913, Brand Papers, Port Arthur Historic Site

Councillors. “Figuratively speaking”, he wrote, with unconscious accuracy, “the building resembles a large neglected factory,” (We now know that the structure was first erected in 1844 as a flour mill and granary). The ruin, “possesses no artistic value” he believed:

“It cannot be argued that its retention beautifies the landscape, although to some people it may be of interest in illustrating the methods of prison discipline in convict times. Some of the Councillors appear to be most anxious for its retention and preservation, but whether or not they will exert themselves in this direction is another question.

It is no duty of mine to make recommendations for its disposal, but in a suggestion I propose that the building be offered to the Council, provided that they will give an undertaking to preserve and strengthen the building to the satisfaction of Your Department, and remove such portions as are a menace to society.

One of the Councillors told me that the number of persons visiting Port Arthur amounted to 5000. I asked him if he thought the visitors would pay sixpence each for inspecting the Penitentiary under the escort of a guide and he replied in the affirmative. If such is the case the entrance money would ... leave the Council an annual revenue (after paying the Caretaker) sufficient to keep the building in repair.”⁴

North’s recommended use of concrete and steel bars in the sandstone church caused further damage over the years, and was only repaired during the recent Port Arthur Conservation Project. His preference for removing the ivy covering the Church was rejected, and the repairs were completed by June 1914. Because of its appeal to tourists, the Penitentiary was retained rather than demolished. Whether Alexander North returned to the Peninsula again is unclear, although telegrams from Koonya to him are in the hands of a grandson, suggesting that he at least kept in touch. The small concrete house above Koonya is an architectural first, strangely out of place amongst the trees, as the early settlers put different roofs over different heads, each reflecting their hopes and means.

Alexander North died at *Homelea* on the East Tamar in 1945, aged 86.

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⁴ Public Works Dep’t., 51/40/Tasman, 1/7/1913, Brand Papers, Port Arthur Historic Site

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