

John Harry Grainger

Architect and civil engineer

Brian Allison

John Harry Grainger, the Australian architect and engineer, is now almost forgotten by history. He receives a brief mention in the much examined life story of his genius son, the Australian composer and concert pianist, Percy Aldridge Grainger. In the various biographical and autobiographical narratives of Percy's life, Grainger senior appears as an estranged husband and a proud but ineffectual father. At worst he is presented as a syphilitic drunkard, horse-whipped by his wife. Brief mention is made of his prolific output as an architect. The notoriously close relationship between Percy and his mother Rose, combined with the likelihood that John infected Rose with syphilis, distanced father from son and meant that the father's story was not woven into that of his famous offspring.

J.H. Grainger was a gifted and creative man. By the age of 25 he had amassed the skills and experience to design the much celebrated Princes Bridge in Melbourne. This complex project would have been demanding for a seasoned practitioner twice his age. He allegedly lied about his age to inspire confidence in the Public Works Department officials to whom he submitted the original design.¹

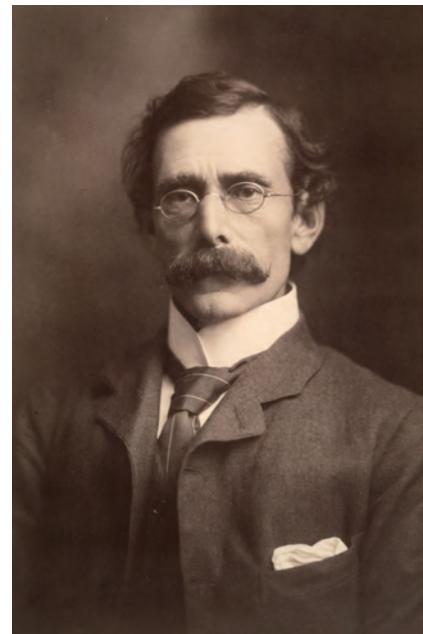
Where he gained his initial training is still unclear, as is the story

of much of his life prior to travelling to Australia in 1877. A clipping from the *Argus* newspaper of 4 August 1879 states:

Granger [*sic*] of Jenkins and Granger [*sic*] has been in the colony about 3 years. He came from London where he worked with Mr Wilson, the well-known engineer of the Metro. District Railways, and with him made special study of iron bridge making.

Marshall's biographical dictionary of railway engineers lists a William Wilson (1822–1898) who acted for contractors on the Metropolitan and District Railway. Grainger may have been apprenticed to Wilson or may have been a junior in Wilson's company; either way he received a solid grounding in civil engineering practices. Where he received his architectural training is more obscure.

Percy Grainger believed his father was born into 'a Northumbrian family of builders, architects and engineers', and that one of the family members was responsible for the development of Newcastle-on-Tyne.² The city was developed in the 1830s by a Richard Grainger (1797–1861) who effectively transformed a medieval town into a modern city. As



convenient as this explanation of J.H. Grainger's origins would be, unfortunately no direct connections have been discovered between him and his influential namesake. Grainger's recently retrieved birth certificate lists his date and place of birth as being 30 November 1854, at 1 New Street, Westminster. His parents are recorded as being a John Grainger, Master Tailor, and a Mary Ann Grainger, née Parsons.

Winifred Falconer, J.H. Grainger's companion in the latter part of his life,³ wrote in an unpublished

Opposite: Bartletto Studio, John Grainger aged 46, photographed in Perth, Western Australia, c.1890, silver gelatin print, 20.5 x 14.0 cm. Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne.

Below: H.W. De Mole, Princes Bridge over the Yarra River, c.1888, heliotype, 33.0 x 42.5 cm. Grainger Museum Collection, University of Melbourne.

manuscript in the 1930s that Grainger had lived with an uncle who was an important influence on him during his childhood. The gentleman was a personal friend of the great theologian Cardinal Newman and the young Grainger 'derived great pleasure as well as knowledge from listening to their discussions of the world's affairs'.⁴ His uncle was also interested in music and took Grainger to his personal box at the opera. Reference to the uncle also appears in the unpublished recollections of Grainger by another close friend,

South Australian musician Herman Schrader. He states that the uncle took Grainger to the Monday Pops Concerts at the Queens Hall.⁵

It is not known why Grainger was brought up in his uncle's home. His parents were not deceased—they are listed as still living in Westminster in the 1881 census. Percy believed that his father received much of his education at a monastery school in France at Yvetot (between Le Havre and Paris). This detail is confirmed by Winifred Falconer.⁶ John Bird, Percy Grainger's biographer, states that

J.H. Grainger claimed to have been in Paris during the siege near the end of the Franco-Prussian War (in 1870–1871).⁷ This begs the question: what was the son of a Westminster tailor doing at school in France? One possible explanation is that Grainger's uncle—his guardian—may have had business interests on the continent.

The experience of French culture in his formative years left Grainger with a lifetime love of French architecture. At some juncture, early in his career, he made a very detailed study of French revival styles—



particularly Renaissance revival architecture—a style in which he proved to be very proficient as a designer. If, as he claimed, he was in Paris at age 16, conceivably he may have had an association with an architectural atelier where he could have received some training.

At age 22 John Harry Grainger successfully applied for a position in the South Australian Government as an assistant architect and engineer. It is unclear why he chose to emigrate. In his 1954 memoir 'My father in my childhood', Percy refers to his father leaving a girl in England who was pregnant to him.⁸ Falconer says that his decision to move abroad followed a quarrel with his uncle. Whatever his motivation, his career decision proved to be well made. In addition to his government position he developed a thriving private practice in Adelaide. Less than 18 months later in 1878 he resigned his government position to pursue private commissions.

Grainger developed a strong social network in South Australia. He became very active within the musical fraternity and organised the first string quartet in Adelaide. The ensemble rehearsed in his private rooms. Though not an instrumentalist Grainger was musically literate and collected a library of musical scores now held in the Grainger Museum.

He is also said to have had a strong tenor singing voice.⁹ Herman Schrader wrote of him that his 'love for music was very great and absolutely cosmopolitan, embracing all styles, opera, oratorium [*sic*], orchestral, chamber and solo music enjoying all according to their different merits'.¹⁰

Grainger's social circle included a Mr George Aldridge who owned the Prince Alfred Hotel next door to the government offices where Grainger worked. He became a frequent visitor to the Aldridge family home and in 1880 married 22-year-old Rosa (Rose) Aldridge.

In the year of their marriage Grainger won the competition to design Princes Bridge over the Yarra River in association with surveyor and architect, J.S. Jenkins, with whom he had entered into a partnership (though the design is considered to be Grainger's). Grainger and his wife moved to Melbourne where he completed the finished drawings and hoped to oversee the construction of the bridge. Actual building work did not start until 1885 and the bridge took another three years to be formally opened.

In the same year that Grainger won the Princes Bridge competition he designed a swinging bridge over the La Trobe River at Sale in

Gippsland. The late architectural historian Margaret Pitt Morison described it as an 'elegant trussed structure in wrought iron with a balanced wing span of 45 metres supported centrally by eight pivot cylinders resting on bedrock'.¹¹ It is believed that Grainger's bridge was the first to use this technology in Australia.

Grainger maintained a strong connection with South Australia and in 1881 was contracted to design two mansions for the wealthy Barr Smith family—Auchendarroch at Mount Barker and Torrens Park at Mitcham. In the same year he designed a Church of England church in gothic style at Walkerville on the outskirts of Adelaide.

On 8 July 1882, Rose gave birth to a son, George Percy Grainger. The family was living in a brick house in North Brighton, where they employed staff. John Grainger's business was on a firm footing and their future would have seemed very positive, yet during their residence in Brighton, Grainger contracted syphilis.¹² And, as so often happened, he passed the then almost incurable disease on to his wife.

In 1882, Grainger entered into a partnership with architect and civil engineer Charles D'Ebbo, and established an office in Collins Street



in central Melbourne. In the same year they successfully submitted a design in a competition for a town hall in Fremantle. Later that year they won first prize for the Masonic Hall Company's building in Lonsdale Street in Melbourne.

In 1884 the partnership won first prize in a competition to design Auckland's public library and municipal offices (now the art gallery). This substantial building was

designed in the French Renaissance revival style. In the same year the partnership won a commission to design Brisbane Town Hall, though the design was never implemented and a government architect's design chosen instead.

In 1885 the Graingers moved from Brighton to the New England Hotel in Heidelberg. In a letter to his father, Grainger states that he overspeculated in mining shares and lost

money.¹³ This may explain the Graingers' sudden change in living circumstances. His business partnership was also dissolved at this stage. His professional status, however, does not seem to have been affected by either event—in 1886 he was responsible for the design of the Georges Building in Collins Street and the New Masonic Hall, also on Collins Street.

Grainger's professional life was

steady but it is conceivable that his family life had soured. He drank heavily at this stage and John Bird writes of Rose's use of a horse-whip to keep his behaviour in check.¹⁴ Rose over-bonded with her son Percy almost from birth—their relationship has been depicted in Percy's own memoirs as being abnormally close. Conversely, Grainger's relationship with his son may have been curtailed by his increasingly estranged wife.

One significant area in which Grainger senior influenced his son was the visual arts. Grainger was a very competent watercolour painter and had an extensive knowledge of western art history. In his recollections of his father Percy wrote:

Indeed he was on fire for beauty everywhere and all his life he collected photos of lovely buildings, pictures, statues, bridges and pasted them into albums, himself adding information about the origin and history of the works of art depicted. This was known as 'Graingerising'.¹⁵

From a very young age, Percy spent hours drawing and the Grainger Museum Collection includes hundreds of examples of sophisticated juvenilia. In 1890,

John Grainger wrote to his father:

At present he draws well, immensely well in fact, and it is a frightful thing to keep him from being always at it, and his mother is most anxious he should be an artist. I am afraid if he becomes one that he will be dangerous.¹⁶

Much of what is known about Grainger's movements over the next decade is sourced from correspondence between Grainger and a young woman, Miss Amy Black, the sister of one of Grainger's junior staff members originally articulated to the firm of Grainger and D'Ebro. Black lived with her family in Brighton near the Grainger household and became John Grainger's confidante.

In 1890, Grainger experienced some sort of breakdown. Percy believed he suffered from delirium tremens from alcoholism as well as nicotine poisoning. Writing to Amy Black, Grainger spoke of being disturbed in mind and body. Following his doctor's orders he ceased working and set out for England on the *S.S. Oruba*. This virtually put an end to an already moribund marriage and kept him permanently separated from his child.

Grainger visited family members

in England—possibly with intentions of reconciliation. He may not have achieved this outcome as he bought a return passage to Australia on the same vessel. Deck life appears to have agreed with him as his health returned to normal. Grainger returned to Melbourne but stayed briefly and travelled to Adelaide where he had maintained ties with his wife's family. Without a business partnership or close family to give him direction he lived a transient life in the first half of the 1890s.

Professionally it was also a lean period. In 1892 he is recorded as winning a prize for the design for the Hamley Buildings in Adelaide. But the following year he was working at Hill River Cattle Station near Clare in South Australia, remodelling woolsheds. By 1896 he was living in rough conditions in Kalgoorlie supervising the construction of processing plants for gold mining. He does not seem to have benefitted financially by the Western Australian gold rush as many did.

Finding mining town life hard to tolerate, Grainger left for Perth and applied for a position with the Western Australian Government. On 1 March 1897 he commenced working as Chief Architect in the Western Australian Public Works Department on a salary of £600 per



annum—a position that was to bring stability back into his life.

Grainger's role was to design public buildings or to sign off on the work of other architects in his department. The mining boom meant that substantial building activity was being undertaken—particularly in regional areas. Buildings possessing Grainger's imprimatur included the Warden's Court in Coolgardie, public buildings in Kalgoorlie, post offices at

Guildford, East Fremantle and Boulder, the Albany Quarantine Station and an asylum at Whitby.

Grainger had little time for private commissions in his new role, yet in 1898 he was persuaded to design a large commercial building for a Mr Davies in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Called the Australian Building, the design was a two-storey arcaded structure, housing ten shops at street level with office

space above, and was 'slightly Indian in feeling'.¹⁷

During his time with the Public Works Department he was engaged in two projects that gave him significant kudos and, he claimed, professional satisfaction. The first, started in 1897, was extensions to Western Australia's Government House which included the design of a new ballroom which featured rolling Romanesque arches. Percy Grainger

visited Perth in 1904 during a concert tour and wrote to his mother that he saw the ballroom and that it was of 'outrordinary [*sic*] beauty ... pure effect in great sheets of white and red brown. (jarrah)'.¹⁸

The second project, which also had a considerable impact on his son, was his designs for the Western Australian court at the Paris International Exhibition of 1900. Amply showcasing the riches of Western Australia's natural resources and designed to highlight native timbers, it led to Grainger becoming a member of the Société Centrale des Architectes Français. This is the only professional body of which Grainger was known to be a member during his working life.

Back in Perth at the end of 1901 Grainger was responsible for lavish street decorations to mark the visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York for Federation celebrations. During this period his health began to fluctuate. In 1903 he took three months' leave of absence to seek the curative powers of natural hot baths at Rotorua in New Zealand. He was experiencing symptoms he referred to as rheumatism.

In 1905 he wrote of being engaged in music again, helping to organise the Perth Orchestral Society in his spare time. In the same year he

resigned his post as Government Architect due to ill health. He suffered severe cramps in his fingers, making drawing and writing difficult. Grainger and Winifred Falconer set off for an extended journey to Europe where Falconer writes he made a detailed study of the architecture of Spain, Italy, France and Belgium and visited many important European public galleries. The couple also visited Harrogate in England where Grainger sought 'the cure' for his ailments in the town's sulphurous baths.

Again the experience of travel seemed to restore Grainger's health and energy. He moved with Falconer back to Melbourne where he entered into partnership with Phillip Kennedy and John Little. Grainger, Kennedy and Little practised as architects and civil engineers and had an office at 123 Queen Street in central Melbourne.¹⁹

This last period of his professional life began with a quite prestigious success. Shortly after his arrival in Melbourne he won first prize in a competition to design a northern wing to Melbourne's Town Hall. His firm was also responsible for the design of St Michael's Catholic Church in North Melbourne. By 1910 the firm was reduced to Grainger and Little but continued to

secure significant projects. Its commissions included the State Savings Bank and Collins House (both now demolished).

Grainger became increasingly troubled by rheumatic symptoms and his health deteriorated dramatically by the outbreak of World War 1. His last building design was for an extension to Coombe Cottage, Nellie Melba's house at Coldstream in country Victoria. Melba's father David Mitchell was the building contractor for a number of Grainger's Melbourne projects and the two men were lifelong friends.

By 1915 Grainger was an invalid and was suffering the last stages of tertiary syphilis, while his companion Winifred Falconer nursed him. Entirely crippled and barely able to hold cigarettes, to which he was highly addicted, he spent many hours pumping a player piano for entertainment. His son, Percy, wired him £30 a month from New York as neither he nor Falconer had any income. He died on 13 April 1917 at 71 Stevenson Street, Kew.

Grainger died a pauper and was buried in an unmarked grave at Melbourne's Box Hill Cemetery. It wasn't until the 1930s that Percy Grainger became interested in his father's story, coinciding with Percy's development of his autobiographical

museum at the University of Melbourne. He began to correspond with his father's surviving friends and colleagues, asking for recollections of John Grainger to be written down—the manuscripts upon which much of this essay is based. He also negotiated the donation to the Grainger Museum of the Amy Black correspondence.

Grainger's name lived on after his death in the name of his architectural practice. Grainger and Little became Grainger, Little and Barlow and finally Grainger, Little, Barlow and Hawkins—the latter existed until 1924. Posthumous use of his name is perhaps an indication of how this highly accomplished architect and engineer was viewed by his professional fraternity.

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Notes

- 1 Winifred Falconer, 'The life and works of John H. Grainger, architect and civil engineer', unpublished manuscript, c.1934, Grainger Museum Collection (GMC), p. 1.
- 2 Percy Grainger, 'John H. Grainger', Museum Legend, 15 March 1956, published in Malcolm Gillies, David Pear and Mark Carroll (eds), *Self-portrait of Percy Grainger*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 15.
- 3 Grainger met Winifred Falconer in Adelaide in 1895.
- 4 Falconer, 'The life and works of John H. Grainger', p. 1.
- 5 Herman Schrader, 'Reminiscences of J.H. Grainger and the Adelaide String Quartet', unpublished manuscript, n.d., GMC, p. 8.
- 6 Falconer, 'The life and works of John H. Grainger', p. 1.
- 7 John Bird, *Percy Grainger*, 3rd edition, Sydney: Currency Press, 1999, p. 4.
- 8 Percy Grainger, 'My father in my childhood', 12 May 1954, from 'Grainger's anecdotes', typescript and manuscript, 1949–1954, in Gillies, Pear and Carroll (eds), *Self-portrait of Percy Grainger*, p. 25.
- 9 Amy Chalk, 'John Grainger', unpublished manuscript, 1934, GMC, p. 1.
- 10 Schrader, 'Reminiscences of J.H. Grainger and the Adelaide String Quartet', p. 8.
- 11 Margaret Pitt Morison, 'John Harry Grainger, architect and civil engineer', unpublished manuscript, n.d., GMC, p. 1.
- 12 Grainger, 'My father in my childhood', p. 25.
- 13 John H. Grainger, letter to his father [John Grainger], 14 January 1890, GMC.
- 14 Bird, *Percy Grainger*, p. 8.
- 15 Percy Grainger, 'John H. Grainger', p. 15.
- 16 John H. Grainger, letter to his father, 14 January 1890.
- 17 John H. Grainger, letter to Mr Davies, 19 September 1998, GMC.
- 18 Percy Grainger, letter to Rose Grainger, 16 January 1904, in Kay Dreyfus (ed.), *The farthest north of humanness: Letters of Percy Grainger 1901–14*, South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1985, p. 34.
- 19 Pitt Morison, 'John Harry Grainger, architect and civil engineer', p. 9.