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**Arthur Purnell's
'Forgotten' Architecture**
Canton and Cars

Derham Groves

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Derham Groves
The University of Melbourne
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In memory of Frank Bren (1943–2018).

PREFACE

CANTON

In 1903, Arthur William Purnell (1878–1964), an architect from Geelong, Victoria, Australia (Fig. 1), joined Charles Souders Paget (1874–1933), an engineer from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA, to establish Purnell & Paget, a successful and prolific firm of architects and engineers in Canton, Kwangtung a.k.a Kwan Tung, China.¹ Canton was exotic and mysterious, especially to someone like Purnell, whose hometown was nicknamed ‘Sleepy Hollow.’ Nevertheless, he took to living and working over there like a duck to water. Indeed, few people could have loved it more. Purnell designed many important and impressive buildings in Canton, including one of the earliest reinforced concrete buildings in Southern China, the Arnhold, Karberg & Co. building (1907), and a pair of buildings (1907) that would become Dr. Sun Yast-sen’s first presidential palace, although nobody would have guessed that at the time. There was only one problem with living in Canton as far as Purnell was concerned ... (and you will have to read on to discover what that was!). After returning to Australia in 1910, he started an architectural practice from scratch in Melbourne, the capital of Victoria. Unsurprisingly, a number of his buildings were influenced by his years in China, including three of his own houses—‘Shameen’ #1 (1913), ‘Shameen’ #2 (1916) and ‘Shan Teng’ (1924–1925).



Fig. 1 Arthur Purnell (1878–1964) (Groves)

CARS

In Melbourne, Purnell soon became hooked on speed—the m.p.h. kind. As motor cars had just started to take over from horses in a big way in Australia and around the world, Purnell wanted to get involved in the next big thing in architecture—‘Carhitecture’ (i.e. the design of car factories, car showrooms, car service centres, etc.). The infant local car industry was full of colourful larger-than-life characters, such as the pioneering car-manufacturer, Col. Harley Tarrant (1860–1949), who had built his first

car in 1897, and Australia's first petrol-fuelled car in 1901, and also the trailblazing—albeit rather shady—Melbourne car retailer, Alec Barlow Sr. (1880–1937). Both men were clients of Purnell. Barlow also became one of his closest friends.

WRITING ABOUT ARTHUR PURNELL

Purnell designed hundreds of domestic, commercial, industrial, and recreational buildings during his long career, which spanned from about 1896 to about 1956. However, *Arthur Purnell's 'Forgotten' Architecture: Canton and Cars* will focus on his eight-year partnership with Paget, representing 'Canton,' and about his first twenty years in practise in Melbourne, representing 'Cars,' which were two early and interesting phases of his career—and as architectural careers go, his was a wild ride. In fact, it could easily be turned into an opera.

While Purnell was an accomplished architect, he was by no means a saint. He was too often a bully and a curmudgeon, and too seldom a caring husband and father, although, sadly, that seems to have gone with the territory to a large extent in those days. In my view, describing someone as complex and contrary as Purnell required a multi-layered approach. Therefore, I've tried to paint his portrait from several different points of view—his buildings, his clients, his employees, his family, etc. As a result, this monograph about Purnell is part-biography, part-detective story, part-history, and part-travelogue.

The Honeywood File: An Adventure in Building (1929) by the British architect and author, Harry Bulkeley a.k.a. H. B. Creswell (1869–1960), is about a dispute between an architect, James Spinlove, and his client, Sir Leslie Brash, as told through their letters. But as Creswell explains at the beginning of his textbook-cum-novel, it is about more than merely that: 'Although *The Honeywood File* is designed to engage aspirants to architectural practice with lively presentment of the adventures that await them, a picture in which men and women rather than architects and builders occupy the canvas, and which is more concerned with the fabric of life than with the fabric of houses, will perhaps amuse those who have fallen under the spell of bricks and mortar or who are curious of the unexplored.'² Likewise, I'd like to think that *Arthur Purnell's 'Forgotten' Architecture: Canton and Cars* also reaches beyond architecture.

As it turns out, Arthur Purnell and I have a few things in common:

He was born in Geelong. I was born in Geelong too.

He studied architecture at the Gordon. I studied architecture at the Gordon too.

He was fascinated by China. I am fascinated by China too.

He lived in Melbourne. I live in Melbourne too.

He was a talented designer. Four out of five aren't bad!

Brunswick West, Australia
December 2019

Derham Groves

NOTES

1. Nowadays, Canton is known as Guangzhou, and Kwangtung or Kwan Tung is known as Guangdong, however, I will use their old names wherever I can, because that's what Purnell called them.
2. H. B. Creswell (1869–1960) (1929), *The Honeywood File: An Adventure in Building*, London: Faber and Faber, 1972, p. 5.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Derham Groves has written this illuminating story of an exceptional but hitherto unsung Australian architect whose distinctive designs in China as well as his homeland may still be seen and enjoyed.

The author invited me to write this blurb because long ago, as a young teenager still in secondary school, I was recruited by Arthur Purnell to work as a cadet draftsman in his office in Melbourne's marvellous Equitable Building. I spent six years there learning about architecture as practised by Purnell and his partner Phillip Pearce. The firm had just designed and completed the first massive enlargements to the grandstands of the Melbourne Cricket Ground and their projects also included hotels, office buildings and warehouses, as well as residences.

I became Purnell's articled student—perhaps the last twentieth-century youngster to be tasked in this old-fashioned master-and-pupil system of teaching. At a very large drawing board I learned architectural drafting and some of the basics of building construction. And as well as answering the telephone and being the office messenger, I did typing and became office secretary. I even did site and building inspections.

Throughout these years I found out almost nothing about Purnell's life and character or his striking early work. He never talked about his own training or his past partnerships, nor did I learn anything about his remarkable Chinese practice. The Arthur Purnell that I knew remained a very private, withdrawn person.

But now, in this book Derham Groves has for the first time revealed some characteristic strands of Arthur Purnell's talents, whereby his subject's remarkable creativity is now clear for us to enjoy.

Robert Irving OAM

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PART I

Canton



CHAPTER 1

Educating Arthur

Abstract This chapter summarises Arthur Purnell’s education in Geelong, Australia, from primary school to architecture school. It talks about his first architectural job with his family’s firm, Purnell & Sons and one of the first buildings that he designed while working there, a house named ‘Tarina.’ It describes his around-the-world architecture tour in 1899 and his sea voyage to China in 1900, where he lived and worked for about a decade. Finally, it speculates on who might have influenced him to go to China in the first place—Frank Lloyd Wright, George R. King or George Ernest Morrison.

Keywords Architecture · China · Education · Geelong · Travel · Work

GROWING UP IN GEELONG

William Arthur Purnell was born on 5 January 1878 to Emily née Keown (1856–1939) and William Purnell Jr. (1854–1932) in Geelong, Victoria, Australia. So as not to be confused with either his father or his grandfather, who was also named William (1831–1904), the newest member of the Purnell family was called ‘Arthur’ instead. He later switched the order of his given names to reflect this.

Purnell grew up in Geelong. He attended the McManus Preparatory School, now defunct; Flinders School (where my mother (1920–2013)