Henry Burn exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1830 and with the Birmingham Society of Arts in 1832 and 1850. Between 1840-1852, he painted as far north as Yorkshire and south to Dorset. His lithographs depict Nottingham, Derby, Leeds, Halifax, Shrewsbury, Northampton, Winchester and other locations. Perhaps Burn chose to seek a new life when he embarked at Liverpool, aboard the *Baltimore*, arriving in Melbourne 30 January 1853. In 1860, giving his age as 47, he married Susan Cane whom he had met on the *Baltimore*. There were no children from the marriage.2

He showed two works at the 1857 Victorian Society of Fine Arts exhibition including a portrait of the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly. At this exhibition, he joined important colonial artists William Strutt, Nicholas Chevalier, Conrad Martens, Eugene von Guérard, John Gilfillan, Thomas Clark, Georgiana McCrae, William Dexter and Ludwig Becker.3 He travelled to Sydney in 1858, but it is unsure if he exhibited.4 Although later, he showed a watercolour of the city, *Government House, Sydney*, at the Victorian Exhibition of Fine Arts in 1860.5

At the Exhibition of Fine Arts in 1861, he hung again with von Guérard, Clark and Gillflian and also Henry Easom Davies, Edward Greig, William Pitt, Andrew MacCormac, Frederick William Woodhouse, John Irvine, Henry Short, Henricus van den Houten, John Thomas Richardson, Thomas J J Wyatt and Frederick Schoenfeld. A critic wrote: ‘Mr H Burn is a further instance of how very effective an artist may be…’.6 He continued to exhibit at Fine Arts exhibitions 1862-1864. Burn described his painting as: ‘…a faithful portraiture of … place…’ when he sought permission to dedicate a lithograph, *General view of the City of Melbourne*, to a later Governor, Sir John Manners-Sutton, in 1867.7

Burn showed at a major exhibition held by the Melbourne Public Library (now State Library of Victoria) in 1869. This may relate to the collection’s Untitled (*Melbourne from the south side of the Yarra*). In that year a wealthy medical practitioner, politician and collector, Dr LL Smith, loaned the exhibition six watercolours by Henry Burn. Two of these works are similar – *Scene on the Yarra* and *View of the Yarra*.8 The original timber backing from the University of Melbourne’s painting bears an inscription: “Melbourne 1869, by H Burn, Dr L L Smith”.9 It would appear that this work is one of the paintings Smith loaned the Public Library for their exhibition.

In 1869 it is interesting to note, again, the calibre of Burn’s fellow exhibitors, painters who would all gain recognition during that period. Artists such as Henry Gritten, Oswald Brierly, John Glover, Louis Buvelot, Chester Earles, JH Carse and, again, von Guérard, van den Houten and Chevalier. In 1870 Dr. Smith sponsored Burn’s application to the Trustees to paint in the National Gallery.10 Henry Burn joined many of the aforementioned artists at the Victorian Academy of Arts exhibitions in 1870, 1872 and 1876-77.

*in detail*

Henry Burn *Untitled (Melbourne from the south side of the Yarra)*

‘...this panoramic sketch will convey a vivid idea of Melbourne…’

This is how Birmingham born topographical artist and lithographer Henry Burn described his work for sale in 1856. He had led an itinerant artist’s life, travelling around England, before reaching Australia. But once in Victoria, Burn sought entry to Melbourne’s elite art circles, to sell his work to prominent collectors and acquire Vice-Regal patronage. Although Burn mostly achieved these goals, he died a pauper.
The University of Melbourne’s Untitled (Melbourne from the south side of the Yarra) is an important colonial work in the collection, depicting early landmarks and industry. A well-dressed party enjoys the view across the Yarra. Several structures are visible including spires of the Wesleyan and Independent chapels on Collins Street, the original St. Paul’s Church, Flinders Street railway station and Princes Bridge. Adding to these monuments to Melbourne’s prosperity, two steam trains represent industry hauling carriages of passengers and goods to their destinations. Burn has used a device popular with topographical artists of the period. As in one of the National Gallery of Victoria’s most popular pictures, Swanston Street from the Bridge (1861), he has dramatised the picture with the presence of cloud casting a shadow over the fore-ground: ‘It gives depth and mystery to the view…It’s in and out of the light’. 11

The opening quote refers to a related lithograph in the collection, Panoramic view of the city of Melbourne, taken from the south bank of the Yarra (1856), which is also a gift through the Grimwade Bequest. Three similar works by Burn can be seen in the State Library’s La Trobe Collection, Melbourne from Old Sandridge Road (c. 1867), Yarra Yarra and part of Studley Park (1868) and Melbourne from the Domain (1871). The State Library of NSW holds related watercolours, The River Yarra at Dight’s Falls, Studley Park (1863) and Fisherman’s Bend, Sandridge, (1868, now Port Melbourne), along with an oil, Melbourne from the south side of the Yarra near Jolimont (1874).

Later years display evidence of Henry Burn’s demise as an artist. From all reports, he and his wife lived in humble circumstances in the Collingwood-Fitzroy-Richmond area until 1877, walking distance from the scenes he painted. In that year, upon application on his behalf by a Collingwood publican, PJ Petherick, he was admitted to the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum. His wife returned to live with her father, Samuel Cane, in whose will provided for her ‘…from whom God has seen fit to withhold many of the comforts of life’. 12 Burn was dismissed from the Asylum in December 1877, possibly for alcohol abuse. 13

He was readmitted upon the recommendation of another licensee, Robert Showers of the West of England Hotel, Fitzroy, in August 1878. Ironically, Burn’s patron, Dr LL Smith, was a Life Governor of the Asylum. 14 Henry Burn died penniless on 26 October 1884 and was buried in a public grave at the Melbourne General Cemetery.

Selected works by Henry Burn from the University of Melbourne Art Collection:
– Melbourne, 1855, lithograph
– Melbourne from the south, near St Kilda Road, 1855, lithograph
– Panoramic view of the city of Melbourne, taken from the south bank of the Yarra, 1856, lithograph

Additional information available at www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Stephen Mead The Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2003

1 'Panoramic view of Melbourne', The Argus, 19 May 1856, p. 5.
4 ‘Persons Advertised For’, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 October 1858, p. 1.
5 Kerr, Joan (ed), The Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870, Melbourne, 1992, p. 117.
7 Correspondence, Henry Burn to Sir John Manners-Sutton, 30 April 1867, Cited Reynolds, p. 52.
8 Catalogue of the works of art, ornamental and decorative art exhibited by the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library and Museum; Mason, Firth & Co., 1869, no. 192 & 194.
9 Item contained in Archive File, held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art.
10 Correspondence, Dr LL Smith & G.O. Twentyman to the Trustees of the Public Library, 2 March 1870. Cited Reynolds, p. 52.
11 Lane, Terence, in Gurvich, Victoria, ‘Swanston Street from the Bridge (1861)’, The Age, 18 April 2003, Review, p. 7.
12 Will of Samuel Cane, 3 September 1880. Cited Reynolds, p. 54.
13 Reynolds, pp. 54 & 59.
14 Reynolds, op cit.