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George Hyde Pownall: painter of cityscapes



Press photo of a dapper George Hyde Pownall, *The Star* (St Kilda), Feb-March, 1921, p. 29

IN SURVEYS OF ARTISTS who painted streetscapes and city life, one particular artist, George Hyde Pownall (1866-1939), has been generally overlooked. Pownall painted many street scenes during the first third of the twentieth century in London and Melbourne and is represented in the Cowen Gallery of the State Library of Victoria by two major works – Bourke Street and Collins Street (both c.1914). Little is known about his life and oeuvre apart from these works and the scant biographical notes on his life are inaccurate. He never seems to have exhibited in Australia and is not represented in standard art reference works such as McCulloch's *Encyclopaedia of Australian Art*. It therefore seems fitting that an appraisal of his life and work be undertaken to broaden our understanding of the portrayal of the Melbourne scene in the early years of the twentieth century.

English born, Pownall successfully combined his interest in painting with his professional role as a musician, especially as a singer, conductor and composer. Although heavily involved in theatrical pursuits, he was a prolific artist who painted many scenes in oil and watercolour, usually on a small scale in London and then in Melbourne after his arrival here via Sydney around 1914.¹ As a painter in London he painted many brightly illuminated nocturnal scenes of the West End with an emphasis on the theatre district. He also painted scenes reflecting imperial imagery and daily city life.

On immigrating to Australia, Pownall painted many cityscapes, emphasising the city's fine public buildings and churches. He also painted quieter suburban streetscapes in St Kilda where he lived from 1924. He captured much of the essence of modernity and change at a time when Melbourne was experiencing great prosperity. He also contributed considerably to the tradition of the cityscape which began soon after the Gold Rushes of the 1850s.

II

Pownall was born in Radcliffe-on-Trent in Nottinghamshire in 1866. He was the son of Nathan Hyde Pownall, a gardener, born in Disley, Cheshire in 1832 and Elizabeth Powell, a journalist born in Shrewsbury, Shropshire in 1828.²

The couple were married in Shrewsbury in December 1860³ and moved to

Cotgrave, Nottinghamshire, where their first child, Elizabeth was born in 1861.⁴ Two boys followed, John (born in 1864) and George in 1866, with both born in Radcliffe-on-Trent.⁵

By 1881 the family had settled in Lenton in Nottinghamshire. They lived at the gardener's cottage of Lowton Hall, an estate of one hundred acres that was then owned by Frederick and Ada Joyce Wright. Frederick Wright, born in Quarndon, Derbyshire, was a banker and farmer and employed three men, including Nathan, now aged forty-nine, as a gardener, and a young boy. Nathan and Elizabeth's two sons were still living with them. John, aged sixteen, was a stonemason apprentice and George, aged fourteen was apprenticed to a fine art dealer⁶ probably involved with framing, deliveries and related activities. By 1891 George had moved to London. Now twenty-four years of age he was still single and living at 37 Torrington Square, St Giles as a boarder and, according to the 1891 Census, he was now employed as a picture dealer's apprentice.⁷

In 1894 George married Mary Blanche Bray in St Giles' Church, Middlesex.⁸ His wife was only twenty⁹ and was born in Old Buckenham, Norfolk. The couple had two daughters, Vera Blanche Pownall, born in 1898 and Gertrude Olga Pownall, born in 1901.¹⁰ They outlived their father, but two sons and one other daughter pre-deceased him. One son, Francis George Hyde Pownall later enlisted in the Australian Army and was tragically killed at Pozieres in France during World War I at the age of 19, having reached the rank of Lance Corporal.¹¹

By 1901, George was working in London as an art packer's clerk.¹² Despite the modest wage this position would have paid, the family had a servant, Ada L Bray,¹³ probably a younger sister of Mary. It was often customary for couples of modest means to have servants at this time, especially if there were numerous children to care for. While working in the capacity of a picture dealer's assistant, George developed his skills as a painter, although no record of formal training has been found. He became reasonably well-known in London as a painter of landscapes and cityscapes and 'over a period of six years he exhibited his works in Liverpool, Leeds and Nottingham',¹⁴ in the latter 'at Shepherd Brothers in Angel Row in 1899'.¹⁵

However, it was as a musician that the public chiefly knew of Pownall. In the field of music his interests were certainly diverse, ranging from choral work to vaudeville. He studied music under Professor Dan Price of the Royal College of Music and became a well-known tenor in London during the early 1890s. He was appointed to the music staff of St Andrew's, Well Street and at Westminster Abbey. He was the soloist at St Mary's Roman Catholic Church for ten years and one of the original members of the famous choir of Westminster Cathedral. He was also an instrumentalist, becoming the pianist of the vaudeville orchestra at St George's Hall, Marylebone. And he was conductor of the Maskelyne and Devant orchestra, with which he was associated for two years. He later toured the British Isles as pianist for Sir Herbert Tree¹⁶ (1853-1917), the Shakespearian actor and manager of the Haymarket theatre in London.

It was through his association with the entrepreneur Edward Branscombe that

Pownall was encouraged to come to Australia in 1911. According to a 1920 article in the *Footlight Star*:

The two men had been associated as childhood friends and in the choir at St Andrews and Westminster Abbey. Pownall was the permanent deputy and second tenor of the Westminster Glee Singers and for many years was associated with the Jesters and Dandies' Companies, being second in charge to Mr Branscombe. He was also responsible for many of the lyrics and topical numbers until the group finally dissolved.¹⁷

Pownall arrived in Australia in late 1911, probably disembarking in Sydney.¹⁸ His wife and children appear not to have accompanied him. They may have come in 1913 or even as late as 1916.¹⁹ Pownall spent 'almost three years in Sydney before moving to Melbourne'.²⁰ In the electoral roll for 1914 his occupation is given as 'artist' and he, unusually, is listed as having two addresses. The first was 45 Claremont Street, South Yarra, where he presumably lived and the second was 1 Spring Street, Melbourne, where like many artists, he probably leased a studio. It is not known when his wife and children joined him in Melbourne. Mary Pownall does not appear in the Victorian electoral rolls until 1924,²¹ suggesting the couple lived apart for several years.

In 1916 Pownall resumed his musical career. According to the *Footlight Star*,

[he] accepted a proposal from John N. McCallum to travel with the Courtiers Company, first to Brisbane for a season and then touring to Rockhampton and Tasmania, finishing in St Kilda. Subsequently he was offered the position of conductor of the Vogues and Vanities Company, formed the year before by Cedric Johnson. The company played throughout Tasmanian and Victorian country towns, concluding with a season at the Lyric Theatre, St Kilda. The company specialised in orchestral work and arrangements of such airs as 'Mandy' and 'K-K-Katy', extending to the waltz from 'La Boheme'.²²

It was light entertainment designed to uplift the spirits of the public during the tumultuous times of the First World War.

Because of his theatrical commitments in St Kilda, George moved there so that he could be closer to the Lyric Theatre situated on the Esplanade.²³ It may have been at around this time that the family was reunited. Between 1924 and 1936 the Pownalls were residing in a terrace house at 27 Acland Street, St Kilda West. In 1931 the couple's daughter, Gertrude was still living with her parents and worked as a typist.²⁴ Their other daughter, Vera, had married, becoming Vera Bedeaux. While living in St Kilda 'George, in collaboration with two other composers, Francis Goddard and Nigel Brock composed a musical work entitled 'Austral March',²⁵ no doubt reflecting Pownall's imperial and patriotic fervour. He also continued with his painting during his spare time and also worked as a stage painter at the Bijou and Tivoli Theatres²⁶ in Bourke Street. In his role as conductor at the Lyric Theatre, there is the only known photograph of him. Dated around 1920, it depicts a debonair, benign, balding man wearing a bow tie.²⁷

Pownall died on 24 January 1939 at 7 Enfield Street, St Kilda. He was seventy-two years of age and the cause of his death was stomach cancer and heart failure. Survived by his wife and two daughters, he was cremated at the Springvale necropolis. At the time of

his death he had lived in Australia for twenty-eight years. The occupation given on his death certificate was 'musician',²⁸ but it is his pursuits in the realm of painting that will be the focus of this article.

III

After Pownall moved to London in the late nineteenth century he recorded many urban scenes, while still pursuing his theatrical and musical interests. At this time London was prospering as a great industrial city and Britain was at the height of its imperial power. London was the heart of the Empire and it was this theme that attracted Pownall and other artists, such as Arthur Streeton who titled his evocative 1902 painting of Trafalgar Square, 'The Centre of Empire'.²⁹ Pownall painted many scenes commemorating ceremonial occasions and displaying pageantry, but also scenes of city life, often at night, with public buildings in the background. He painted quickly, usually on a small scale for commercial gain, signing his works in various ways, 'either Geo Hyde, GH Pownall, Geo Pownall or GHP'.³⁰

Pownall's scenes of London³¹ are very evocative of life in the city during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A c.1910 view of 'St Paul's from the river' evokes a busy industrial city in the late afternoon. The cathedral, which dominates the work, is shrouded in fog and smoke being belched by passing riverboats. Yet the greyness of the scene is uplifted by the glorious yellowish cloud formation framing the dome of St Paul's. In the foreground, on the Thames, empty barges await their next cargo.

Another painting of St Paul's, viewed from Fleet Street, depicts the bustle of street life. The foreground is crowded with shadowy figures, while an open-roofed bus proceeds towards the grey dome of St Paul's, again a misty apparition caused by smoke emanating from a steam train on the viaduct. The narrow street, framed by buildings, enhances the sense of activity in the area. This same vista also attracted the interest of the Australian artist, Sydney Long, who painted the scene while based in London between 1910 and 1925.

Pownall painted many other London street scenes. These included 'Rotten Row, Hyde Park Corner', which depicts a broad avenue with horses and carriages conveying people at leisure. He also painted 'Early afternoon, Whitehall', another sparsely populated streetscape. In addition, he painted many views of Westminster Abbey and Piccadilly Circus, often in the early evening.

However, it is Pownall's night scenes that are the most alluring, especially those of the theatre district in the West End. Pownall painted many of these scenes, with streets glistening after rain and the buildings illuminated by street lamps against a slate-grey or purple sky. Typical of these scenes are his two paintings of 'The Haymarket'. On the left in the one reproduced on page 26, probably painted in 1911,³² is the colonnaded façade of the Haymarket Theatre, lit by the staggered street lights which progress down the street. Cabs also proceed down the street and shadowy figures walk along the pavement. Opposite the Haymarket Theatre the illuminated façade of Her Majesty's Theatre balances the composition. In another scene entitled 'Theatreland', a scene of surging



Two views of London by George Hyde Pownall.

Top: The Haymarket, London, c. 1911.

Bottom: St. Paul's from the River, c. 1910.

Both reproduced courtesy of the Bridgeman Art Library, London (BON 203168 and BON 703168)



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George Hyde Pownall, [Bourke Street East], c. 1912.
Oil on millboard, 67 x 112 cm



George Hyde Pownall, [Collins Street], c. 1912.
Oil on millboard, 68.8 x 111.5 cm

crowds in the theatre district is illuminated by a solitary gas street-light. In yet another scene, this time of Drury Lane, the foreground displays a wet street with cars and a hansom cab, while in the background the buildings are literally ablaze with yellowish-white light reflected from the street lamps.

In his painting of Piccadilly Circus, the same technique is employed. At this major intersection the streets glisten after rain, while figures meander in the foreground. To the right stands the darkened statue of Eros, while the buildings in the background are illuminated by streetlights against a mauve tinted sky. In these works, Pownall owes much to Whistler, who in such paintings as 'The Grand Canal Amsterdam' (1884), presents a flecking pattern of lighted windows in the buildings along the canal.

Pownall's nocturnal views of the Thames are also exercises in the use of reflected light. A clear influence again is Whistler who, in his 'Nocturne, Blue and Gold-Old Battersea Bridge' (1872-1875), created a harmonious moonlit scene of the bridge and river in shades of blue, bespeckled with the light of fireworks and ships in the background. 'Cleopatra's Needle at Night', Pownall's view of the Thames is more murky and less subtle. Here he depicts the curve of the Embankment from Hungerford Bridge, looking down the river. Light from street lamps is reflected in the river and the scene is punctuated by 'the obelisk brought back from Egypt in 1878 and known as Cleopatra's Needle'.³³ Smoke from a factory in the background adds a touch of white light to the dark sky, but indicates that London was still an industrial city at the time.

An earlier artist, Atkinson Grimshaw, who specialised in urban scenes bathed in moonlight, could have influenced Pownall in his painting of the Embankment. Grimshaw painted in 1880 a view of the Embankment looking in the other direction towards Westminster. His painting is sharper in focus, with figures in the foreground sharply delineated, but again the curve of the Embankment is emphasised and the light of the streetlamps is reflected in the river. 'The composition takes the eye right round in a majestic sweep from the contemplative young lady looking at the river to the Houses of Parliament along the embankment'.³⁴ Grimshaw's work is in the Leeds City Art Gallery and Pownall may have seen it while exhibiting or performing in Leeds, for the similarity in the sweeping views is pronounced.

An event which captivated Pownall's interest at this time was the coronation of King George V on 22 June 1911.³⁵ According to the King's own account the day was 'overcast and cloudy with some showers and a strongish cool breeze'.³⁶ But the overcast weather was compensated for by the spectacular nature of the procession. The King and Queen progressed in the elaborate gilt state coach, drawn by ten horses through the city to Westminster Abbey for the crowning. Whitehall was lined by rows of soldiers and sailors, standing in front of temporary grandstands to house the cheering crowds. At the Abbey the King and Queen alighted to enter an annexe that served as a robing room for those attending the ceremony, which included heads of state from all over the world and especially the Commonwealth. Pownall captured some of the excitement of the event in two paintings displaying decorations for the Coronation. One view was of Whitehall

with Big Ben and Westminster in the background, while the other is of St James' Street. The gloominess of the day suited Pownall's palette of sombre ochrish shades, but the scenes are uplifted by the garlands and bunting which festoon the upper reaches of the paintings. Down below crowds surge through the streets seeking a better view of the procession. It was this patriotic fervour that seemed to attract Pownall.

One is reminded here of Monet's work, 'La Rue Montorgueil'. This is a study of a street in Paris, bedecked with bunting to celebrate the opening of the International Exhibition, the Rue Montorgueil fete of 30 June 1878. It is a vertically structured work portraying a streetscape from a high aspect. Tri-colour flags of the Republic protrude from high buildings and flare out with an exuberance reflecting the celebration. In the street below, grey and white figures are depicted as mere streaks. While Monet's work is far brighter and freer in style than Pownall's, which are darker and more tonal, the similarities remain, with decorations dominating the occasion, almost taking on a life of their own.

Pownall's interest in imperialism and British tradition is reflected again in his painting entitled 'The Changing of the Guard' (c.1910). In this small study, typical of many he painted, reflecting life and traditions in Edwardian London, Pownall depicted guardsmen, strikingly dressed in red jackets and bearskin busbies marching in front of Buckingham Palace. The elaborate wrought-iron gates are open as the guards process outwards and down the avenue in front of the public. Typically, Pownall places two figures in the foreground – a mother wearing a large flowered hat with her daughter, who is pointing at the spectacle. The colourful scene is enhanced by the greyness of the east front of the palace, which dated from 1850. This was replaced in 1913 with a neo-classical façade in the much lighter Portland stone, designed by Sir Aston Webb.³⁷ The painting can therefore be dated as being before 1913, by which time Pownall was living in Australia.

IV

When Pownall settled in Melbourne in 1914, having spent three or so years in Sydney, he would have experienced a vital, fully developed city. It had largely recovered from the depredations of the depression of the early 1890s and was a centre for finance and communications, even though Sydney had overtaken her as the most populous city on the continent. Since 1901 Melbourne had enjoyed its status as the temporary capital of the new Commonwealth of Australia, with government emanating from Victoria's Parliament House. Most of the iconic buildings associated with Melbourne had been constructed, including the Treasury Building, the General Post Office, the Town Hall and the two cathedrals, St Patrick's and St Paul's (still minus the spires). Commercial buildings included elaborate banking chambers, coffee palaces, theatres and huge emporiums to serve the needs of shoppers. It was a well-planned city with fine boulevards served by train and tram lines to take people to their destinations. Despite the energy of the city it was still in transition, with horse-drawn vehicles slowly giving way to motorised transport.



George Hyde Pownall, Building of spires on St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne, April 1931.
Watercolour, 32 x 24 cm. Private Collection

Pownall illustrated the developing city in his work, 'Melbourne from Victoria Gardens' (cover image), soon after his arrival. These gardens³⁸ were created by the Melbourne City Council in 1909 at the intersection of Alexandra Avenue and St Kilda Road. They differed from earlier gardens whose paths were tree-lined. These new gardens instead presented a carpet-like open effect, with sinuous paths lined with flower-beds, converging towards the city in the distance. The vista portrayed was a popular one, having been painted previously some fifty years earlier but from a higher perspective in the Botanic Gardens by Thomas Clark and Henry Gritten. In Pownall's painting, the city appears in a bluish haze in the distance. Apart from the landmark spires, seen also in the

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Two Melbourne cityscapes by George Hyde Pownall
Top: Winter Sunshine, Flinders Street, Melbourne, c. 1920.
Watercolour, 16.5 x 21.5 cm. Private Collection
Bottom: [Fitzroy Street, St Kilda], c. 1925.
76.5 x 26 cm. Private Collection



earlier paintings by Clark and Gritten, the horizontally of the cityscape is emphasised by the newly constructed Flinders Street Railway Station, with its distinctive dome and tower extending along Flinders Street.

Before resuming his theatrical career Pownall was stimulated to record some of the city street scenes for posterity. A guidebook of the period states that:

Visitors cannot fail to be struck with the splendid architecture displayed in the erection of public buildings, business premises and ecclesiastical edifices in the main streets, and many of the principle theatres are imposing and handsome structures.³⁹

Around 1914 Pownall painted two large oil paintings immortalising two of Melbourne's major streets. Now hanging in the Cowen Gallery at the State Library of Victoria, they depict Bourke Street and Collins Street and are almost equal in size. Possibly commissioned works, they were purchased by the Library in 1970. Depicting some of Melbourne's major public buildings they convey a sense of solidity and prosperity in Melbourne during the early years of the twentieth century.

The scene of Collins Street is depicted looking west from Russell Street. It features a cable tram as it passes the Town Hall on the right, with its lofty tower cut off above the clock, which reveals the time of day – 12.25pm. Apart from the tram, other vehicles include a car and a hansom cab in an otherwise empty street. The scene is enlivened by shoppers parading under a Victorian verandah, with the shopfronts lit by the afternoon sun. This area was just down from the Paris end of Collins Street, so named because of its fashionable shops. The scene is painted in pale shades of yellow and ochre and there is a haziness in the distance.

The second scene, of Bourke Street, looks east from a point midway between Elizabeth and Queen Streets, up towards Parliament House. Again Pownall uses a grand public building, this time the Post Office, as a feature and framing device. Bathed in late afternoon sunshine it is made more prominent in comparison with the Cromwell building opposite (now demolished). On the right hand side is the Metropole Hotel and arcade (also demolished and replaced by the Head Office of the State Bank), on the corner of Bourke and Elizabeth Streets.⁴⁰

In his Bourke Street painting, Pownall's work has been compared⁴¹ with Tom Roberts' work, 'Allegro Con Brio', (Bourke Street looking west), painted in 1885. The title of the work, 'meaning fast with spirit' defines the way in which Roberts painted the scene – full of bustling activity.⁴² The scene, painted from a high viewpoint and in a high colour, captures the shimmering heat of a summer's day and focuses on the bottom right hand corner where a group of people and carriages are clustered around the Post Office.

In contrast to Roberts' view of Bourke Street, Pownall's work is far more subdued. Instead of the word 'allegro', the term 'moderato' has been used to describe it. Rather than the shimmering heat of midday, Pownall presents a softer, more distant vision of the city retreating into the shadows of an autumn afternoon.⁴³ The pace is less frenetic and the scene lacks the immediacy of Roberts' work. In Pownall's painting, the buildings

are more monumental, especially the Post Office tower, which seems to be extended in height. They are bathed in a soft light as the city gloried in its role as the temporary capital of the Commonwealth. The people are less defined as they merge into the daily life of the city. Melbourne seems to have outgrown its colonial past, the hansom cabs having gradually been replaced by cable trams since 1885, with their tracks providing the artist with a device to lead the viewer into the scene.

In addition to these two large streetscapes of Melbourne, Pownall painted many smaller views, including 'Swanston Street looking south'. Painted in the late afternoon the atmosphere is hazy and light filters through a dull sky. The Town Hall with its clock tower looms on the left in a glowing light. People with umbrellas are highlighted scurrying across a wet road as they alight from or catch the passing trams. A brightly lit tram approaches us from a distance.

In all these works, photography would have been an influence in Pownall's ability to achieve accuracy, especially in architectural forms. Since the 1860s, Melbourne's main streets and public buildings had been recorded meticulously by photographers and Pownall would surely have seen their works. One photograph⁴⁴ of Bourke Street taken just prior to World War 1 depicts the identical scene which Pownall portrayed, looking towards Parliament House with the General Post Office on the left. The time on the clock tower is 11.50am, almost midday, when Melbourne would be at its busiest. Hansom cabs and horse-drawn carts line the footpaths, while a cable tram approaches us. People scuttle across the road in the retail sector that would soon be dominated by the Myer Emporium, founded in 1911. This area is now the Bourke Street Mall. There is also a photograph⁴⁵ of Collins Street looking west, taken in 1890, similar to Pownall's painting of the scene. However, the Town Hall clock tower is in full view and the cable car depicted is travelling east towards Fitzroy, rather than west down Collins Street. The extent to which Pownall was influenced by these early photographs is uncertain, but it would not have been possible for him to paint these works from a location in the middle of the road without being run over.

One of Pownall's smaller works, 'Elizabeth Street looking north', was painted from a high vantage point, looking down on the street. The artist must have been viewing the street from a building at the intersection of Collins and Elizabeth Streets as Alston's Building is on the right, identified by its prominent tower. Opposite are a series of Victorian buildings, some with awnings, receding into the distance. The tones are ochre and the light subdued, but the scene is uplifted by the dashes of white paint highlighting the trams as they hurtle either north or southwards. 'Sunlight is filtered through the soupy atmosphere of a winter's afternoon'⁴⁶ and pedestrians are depicted as daubs as they scurry along the pavement.

The format of painting cityscapes from a high viewpoint had become widespread since the late nineteenth century. In England, Whistler had employed this technique when he depicted the streetscape, 'St James' Street looking down towards St James' Palace' (1878). Despite being an etching the street is filled with the activity created by

horses and carriages and people crossing from one side to the other. Five years earlier in Paris, Monet painted his 'Boulevard des Capucines' (1873) from an upper room, again portraying the bustle of city life. Camille Pissarro also painted many cityscapes from a high aspect with horses and carriages and pedestrians vying for a place on the streets of Paris. His 'Boulevard Montmartre' painted in 1897 and purchased by the Felton Bequest for the National Gallery of Victoria in 1905⁴⁷ would have been known to Pownall and could well have influenced his style. In the painting, Pissarro adopts a balanced composition with buildings on either side of the road extending into the distance. Also the focus is on urban life, with horse-drawn cabs and pedestrians actively involved in particular objectives.

One building which Pownall did favour as a focus for the portrayal of city life was the newly erected Flinders Street station at the intersection of Flinders and Swanston Streets. 'The station had been built between 1905 and 1910, following the construction of the viaduct linking Spencer Street with Finders Street'⁴⁸ and provided Melburnians with greater accessibility to their city. In his painting 'Flinders Street station, Wattle Day' (1914), Pownall depicted the north-eastern façade of the station from a diagonal position near St Paul's Cathedral. The station looms large as people emanate from the arch under a domed clock tower. A mixture of transport types indicates the transitional nature of Melbourne at this time. A horse and dray approaches, having passed a tram heading west, while a new car crosses the intersection at the left near the Princes Bridge Railway Station. People walk along the pavement to the right and cross the road at the intersection, but they are ill-defined and featureless. However, two of the pedestrians approaching us appear to be wearing buttons or sprigs of wattle in their lapels, celebrating Wattle Day, inaugurated 'in 1911 to foster patriotic sentiment and observed during the First World War to raise money for charity. The day was first celebrated on 5 September in Victoria,'⁴⁹ which enables one to determine the time of the year when the scene was depicted. Details in the work are often pin-pointed by the flick of the brush and architectural detailing is rendered in an impressionistic way. Again Pownall prefers not to paint clear light, choosing rather to paint in the late afternoon, with light filtered through a hazy atmosphere. The sun only momentarily comes out to highlight the intersection and the entrance to the station. The palette is also subdued with cream and ochre shades prevailing.

While Pownall's oil painting of Flinders Street station may seem a trifle dull and ponderous, his watercolour of the same scene is far brighter and more spontaneous. In 'Winter Sunshine' he depicts virtually the same view of the station, but from a point closer to the centre of the road, avoiding the depiction of Princes Bridge station on the left hand side and cutting off a small section of the domed structure. The light in the watercolour is far brighter suggesting that the work was painted earlier in the day. The figures crossing Flinders Street as they emerge from the station are also more fleeting, creating a greater sense of animation. A car emerges from the right hand side to cross Flinders Street and a tram approaches. The intersection is literally bathed in winter sunshine. However, if the work was painted at the same time as the oil painting it would

be early spring, not winter. Also, I would suggest that the work was painted some years later than the oil painting as a lady is depicted in the foreground wearing a cloche hat and short skirt, fashions more characteristic of the 1920s.

In his views of Melbourne and Flinders Street station in particular, Pownall could well have been influenced by postcards. 'Since the 1890s demand for postcards, on the back of which people could write messages to send to friends, led to a vast commercial production of coloured images',⁵⁰ especially of city views. Usually postcard publishers would buy images from a photographer. 'The photograph might be retouched and altered to include additional details of local significance. Then the photographic image had to be transferred to a plate for printing. Finally, the printed image had to be coloured or tinted.'⁵¹ In many cases the procedures were carried out in Germany where the most advanced techniques were practised and results of the highest quality achieved. The publishers of the postcards sent the photographic negatives or the amended positives to the printers in Germany for manufacturing.⁵²

A postcard produced by a German manufacturer in 1913 was an almost exact duplicate of Pownall's oil painting of Flinders Street station. It is probable that Pownall used elements from the postcard in both his oil and watercolour versions of the work. The view in the postcard is exactly replicated in the oil painting, including Princes Bridge station and the full outline of the south-west corner of Flinders Street station. However, there is more activity in the postcard – horse-drawn carts, people in military uniform and more pedestrians in the foreground, which is largely empty in the oil painting. The positioning of the car on the right side, however, is exactly the same as in the watercolour, but absent in the oil painting. One has to assume that Pownall used the postcard as a guide for his works, which he was able to imbue with far greater atmospheric effects.

Flinders Street station has been perhaps the most popular site in Melbourne for artists. Apart from Pownall, Frederick McCubbin, Robert Taylor-Ghee and Ernest Buckmaster all painted the station, often aggrandizing its form. Stretching along Flinders Street, with its tower and domed, angled façade, it has been described as 'an Edwardian Baroque masterpiece'.⁵³ It has been suggested that its unusual architecture could have attracted attention rather than its function as a railway station. It could even have been a department store, akin to Harrods in Knightsbridge,⁵⁴ in the way people entered it and exited under its main archway. Only the row of clocks above its main entrance, displaying train departure times, indicated that it served commuters. It had become the centre of Melbourne's communication network of trams, buses and trains at Melbourne's busiest intersection.

Within a few years Pownall had completed his major Melbourne streetscapes. He had recorded much of Melbourne's urban fabric and city-life in the painted form. City-life may have been more leisurely than it is today, with pedestrians and vehicles able to jostle for space without the need for pedestrian crossings. Pownall also depicted the grand Italianate sandstone edifices in the city, such as the Town Hall and GPO, albeit as framing devices for his paintings. Above all he was able to capture the essence of change and transition, especially in transport.

V

As previously mentioned, after resuming his theatrical career, Pownall eventually settled in St Kilda with his wife and daughters, first living in a Victorian terrace house in Acland Street, and from 1937 until his death in 1939, in a group of Spanish Mission villa units at 7 Enfield Street, behind Fitzroy Street.⁵⁵ St Kilda at this time was in sharp decline as a respectable upper middle class suburb. After the war many of the mansions, previously owned by wealthy professional and landed classes were converted into rooming houses for the poor. Toorak had replaced St Kilda as the most desirable suburb for the rich. However, St Kilda still had its bayside location, close to the city and was easily accessible by train or tram for day-trippers or those seeking entertainment at Luna Park or the Palais Theatre.

While living in St Kilda, Pownall continued to paint in his spare time, when he was not wielding the baton at the Lyric Theatre. He found inspiration in the streets and historic buildings of St Kilda and along the Esplanade fronting the beach.

One structure of great historic interest which he depicted was 'The toll gate, St Kilda Road, in 1854'.⁵⁶ In that year tolls were introduced in Melbourne on livestock passing along the main roads. For the next twenty-five years these tolls were the main source of income for local government authorities, such as those of St Kilda, Richmond and Collingwood. The toll house in St Kilda, where the levies were collected on flocks passing along St Kilda Road stood on the corner of Bowen Street, near the barracks and St Kilda Road until 1964, when it was demolished. Pownall's watercolour portrays a coach held up at the barrier while a man heaves a bale of grain on his shoulder as he struggles towards us. On the right is the tollkeeper's house and on the left, the bluestone Victoria Barracks, still standing today. The rural setting gives no indication of the city developing beyond, but the area to the right was to become Melbourne's domain. The painting was probably inspired by an etching, for the tolls were only in operation for twenty-five years, ending well before the artist's working life commenced.

A work which more accurately depicts life during his era was 'Fitzroy Street, looking towards the George Hotel' (c. 1925).⁵⁷ Also a watercolour, the scene is depicted late in the day and typically Pownall portrays a tram approaching, with its headlight illuminating the darkening street. A car recedes into the distance, with smoke belching from its exhaust, while pedestrians amble across the street. A man followed by his faithful dog crosses in the foreground. On the pavement to the right a myriad of figures are clustered around the illuminated tram stop. The buildings behind it, recessed from the street, were originally mansion houses. Many are still there today but blocked out by a row of shops constructed in front of the facades. The bulky George Hotel (formerly the Seaview Hotel) dominates the scene to the right of centre in the background. In Pownall's painting it still has its dome, of which the hotel is now bereft. To create a sense of recession the artist uses a row of telegraph poles receding into the distance, a technique Clarice Beckett employed slightly later. The tram tracks also achieve this sense of recession. Pownall truly evokes the atmosphere of evening with reflected light

illuminating the grey-blue street and the ochre-tinted buildings.

Travelling along Fitzroy Street in the opposite direction towards the Bay one comes to the Esplanade, which also attracted Pownall's interest. From the top of the Esplanade, which curves around towards Luna Park, Pownall painted a scene of the Bay in a soft half-light with pale tones. 'His interest lay in portraying the features of the bayside area – the lawn with its path-ways between the Beach Road and the sea, the long slender pier and break-water, the pavilions, shrubbery, etc.'⁵⁸ There are also some activities in the painting, with boats plying the water, people strolling and a cyclist passing by. 'With few colours and linear forms Pownall had depicted a scene delightful in its simplicity.'⁵⁹ The emphasis is quiet and restrained, a sharp contrast to the same scene which he depicted some years later.

The event which captivated Pownall's interest and led to a recreation of the scene, this time as a hive of activity, was the arrival in Australia of HRH Prince Edward, Prince of Wales (later the Duke of Windsor) in 1920. 'He made the tour as the representative of his father, King George V to thank Australians for their support in World War I.'⁶⁰

On 26 May 1920, the Prince arrived at St Kilda Pier. Because of the dense fog 'the battleship cruiser HMS Renown had to cast anchor off Melbourne Heads. As the fog did not lift destroyers from the Australian fleet had to come and get the Prince as there were enormous crowds waiting in Melbourne and he was anxious not to disappoint them. He travelled to St Kilda Pier on HMS Anzac and was met by the Governor-General, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, the Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes and other dignitaries. Surging crowds of people cheered him as he departed for Government House,⁶¹ reflecting an extreme sense of patriotic fervour.

A commentator of the time describes the landing vividly:

A shrill whistle from the paddle-steamer 'Hygeia' and the Prince of Wales stepped on to the St Kilda Pier. The cheering from the shore front that greeted him was one continuous roar of welcome. A great toss of pigeons filled the air with white wings, a beautiful sight. The time when the Prince landed was a quarter to four o'clock.⁶²

It was this scene that Pownall depicted, in a small oil painting⁶³ displaying the festive occasion and the waiting crowd. He portrayed the scene from the Upper Esplanade with the crowd in the foreground. One man on the left is viewing the arrival with a pair of binoculars. The Prince's ship has arrived at the pier that runs out at right angles from the grassy range at the base of the Esplanade. Other ships from the Australian fleet are staggered across the Bay. The colouring is muted in pale greys, blues and browns, reflecting the hazy day. However, there are bright flourishes, with red flags staggered across the foreshore, while the image is framed by the Union Jack, protruding from the upper left-hand side and a red flag on the right. A flock of pigeons, released from the pier, fleck the grey-blue sky in celebration of the occasion.

Another view Pownall painted from the Upper Esplanade at St Kilda looks diagonally towards the Palais Theatre on the Lower Esplanade. Since its opening in 1927 the theatre had been used as a cinema and for live theatrical performance and it is distinguished by two Islamic-inspired domes on either side of its lofty façade. In the

foreground well-dressed figures promenade on the Esplanade as it curves round to the theatre and Luna Park.

VI

Typical of his interest in major events and new constructions, Pownall was drawn to painting some of the latter toward the end of his artistic career. One of these developments 'was the erection of the spires for St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne between 1926 and 1931.⁶⁴ Constructed to the design of William Butterfield, the well-known London church architect, 'Melbourne's Anglican Cathedral was built between 1880 and 1891'⁶⁵ in Victorian Gothic style on the north-eastern corner of the intersection of Flinders and Swanston Streets. However, the spires were not constructed for another forty years, owing to inadequate funds. 'Butterfield had intended to have gable or saddleback roofs on the lower front towers and an octagonal central tower and spire. However, he had resigned in 1883 after trying to supervise the original construction by correspondence from England'⁶⁶ and was long since deceased when the project for the spires was finally undertaken. The project was made the subject of 'a competition and was subsequently won by John Barr of Sydney'.⁶⁷ His plan was for a lofty central spire, named the Moorhouse Spire after the second Archbishop of Melbourne, and two smaller spires over the Flinders Street entrance.

Pownall, in a watercolour of the construction, dated 1931, has depicted the gradual completion of the Moorhouse Spire. He painted his work from the south-west corner of the intersection, where Flinders Street Station stands. The bulky Gothic form of St Paul's dominates the scene. The two smaller spires have been completed, while scaffolding encases the nearly finished central spire. At street level Pownall has depicted the usual bustle of people and traffic at probably Melbourne's busiest intersection. The vehicles are now all motorised. A car emerges from the bottom right-hand corner in Swanston Street, while a tram has stopped at the Cathedral. Opposite St Paul's is the Princes Bridge Station, later demolished for the twin tower Gas and Fuel buildings (now also demolished), while behind St Paul's looms the Cathedral Hotel, demolished for the planned but doomed city square. To the right is the original Gas and Fuel building. The tone of the painting is muted, Pownall employing his favourite shades of orange-brown and grey-blue. A shaft of light uplifts the scene as it shines upon the Princes Bridge Station and the left-hand side of the Cathedral.

Pownall also painted in the same year a broader view of Swanston Street, in watercolour, looking north with the construction of the spire of St Paul's progressing (reproduced on page 30). The scene is very reminiscent of the work of Dora Wilson,⁶⁸ who painted this view slightly later and many times, when the central spire was completed. Pownall painted the view in broad daylight, with the Cathedral situated to the right with the central spire covered in scaffolding. Flinders Street Station, with its distinctive dome, is apparent on the left, also in the distance. Pownall uses his pictorial devices effectively, with lampstands creating a sense of verticality and tram tracks receding into the distance to create a sense of depth. One light stanchion on the median strip effectively divides

the scene into two halves. In the foreground there are touches of whimsicality with a lady sitting on the pavement on the left, with two young children, painting a scene and a street sweeper sweeping up leaves in the middle of the road to be placed in a barrow. With increased traffic and more pedestrians such activities would hardly be possible today.

Another view which Pownall favoured at this time was Princes Bridge, which spanned the Yarra River, connecting St Kilda Road with Swanston Street and providing access to the city from the southern suburbs. One view depicted in watercolour is from the southern side of the river looking towards the city. A winding path is featured as it cuts through the Snowden gardens towards the bridge, while a misty view of the city appears in the background. In his somewhat sketchy delineation of the buildings in Flinders Street, the recently constructed Herald and Weekly Times Building (1921-23) appears. This five-storied steel framed building is instantly recognisable because of its grand façade of Ionic pilasters⁶⁹ and enables us to help date Pownall's painting. It is certainly a later work and the sketchiness in the detailing of the buildings reminds one of the trend in McCubbin's later works towards a more impressionistic rendering of form. Pownall also painted Princes Bridge in oils from the same perspective. Another view from the south-eastern side, also in oils, displays the bridge in the evening with the city outline to the right, the only illumination being street lights along the river.

One new building that Pownall depicted during his later years was the Temperance and General Life Assurance Building, erected between 1926 and 1928.⁷⁰ This massive cement rendered structure was ten storeys high and was the first new building in Melbourne to fulfil new height limits. It also had a distinctive peaked tower typical of Art Deco buildings of the period. In his painting of Collins Street (1934) in gouache and watercolour the newly completed T&G building rises left of the centre, dominating the nocturnal setting. The incandescent lights of the city merge in the bottom centre, while taxis approach with their white headlights beaming. A lamp-post seems to flare with orange light at its top. The scene resembles Pownall's earlier London nocturnes with the streets glistening after rain and the dark grey-green expanses of sky, but is far more impressionistic in style. One is again reminded too of Clarice Beckett's street scenes painted about the same time, such as 'Passing Trams' and 'Taxi Rank' with figures emerging from the darkness and vehicles approaching. However, Beckett's scenes are far more tonal and muted in effect.⁷¹

The last commemorative event that Pownall celebrated was the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1931. Connecting the eastern suburbs with the north shore, the bridge, with its curved steel arch was a great engineering achievement and was depicted by many post-impressionist artists of the period, including Grace Cossington Smith and Roland Wakelin. These artists even painted the bridge in the course of construction, before the spans of the arch were joined in the middle. Pownall, however, preferred a more romantic image in watercolour, with the completed bridge viewed from a distance and framed by trees on the foreshore of the harbour. The work is painted in pastel shades with buildings reflected in the water and wisps of pale blue smoke rising behind the

bridge from ferries passing underneath. Pownall painted a number of views of the bridge and must have visited Sydney at this time for the opening.

VII

When George Hyde Pownall died on 24 January 1939 in St Kilda, seven months before the outbreak of the Second World War, he left behind a remarkably diverse body of work. His oeuvre covered the London years before he arrived in Australia in 1911 and the paintings he completed during his twenty-eight years in Australia, mainly in Victoria. He painted many rural scenes, but the focus of his work in this study has been his contribution to the cityscape and the portrayal of urban life.

The urban paintings of Pownall reflect his interest in many themes. His theatrical involvement was reflected particularly in his paintings of the theatre district in the west end of London at night. This interest and also his support for the monarchy when the British Empire was at its height is demonstrated too in his scenes of pageantry and ceremonial occasions, such as the Coronation of George V and the arrival of the Duke of Windsor at St Kilda Pier in 1920. London was the centre of the Empire and Melbourne, as the temporary capital of the Commonwealth, was also known as the Empire city of Australia. Pownall exploited themes related to these cities' prominence in his works. However, he was also interested in depicting modernity and change. He recorded the construction of new works, such as the spires of St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne and the Sydney Harbour Bridge; also the transition from horse-drawn vehicles to motorised transport. Above all he was interested in portraying the bustle of city life in the industrialised and expanding cities of London and Melbourne.

Stylistically Pownall seems to have been influenced by a number of artists and movements. In his sometimes cursory use of paint to depict figures moving along streets, especially in the late afternoons, he was clearly influenced by the French Impressionists. Also the high vantage point he employed to paint many of his cityscapes was popular with the French artists, Monet and Pissarro. In London Whistler also depicted scenes from a high position. Pownall also owes a lot to Whistler for his interest in tonalism and the depiction of reflected light. Both artists used a similar atmospheric technique in their nocturnes. Atkinson Grimshaw, who also specialised in nocturnes and reflected light could also have been an influence upon Pownall, although Grimshaw painted in a more linear style and was less impressionistic in approach.

Although Pownall may be considered a minor artist compared to shining lights of the Heidelberg School, his work records many key events and much change during the first third of the twentieth century. Many of his works have a subtlety and feeling for the times that have accorded Pownall an assured place within the art market. An amazingly prolific artist, his contribution and appeal are reflected in an increasing interest in his work in the major auction houses today, in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. And in his adopted country, he is rightly becoming to be better known.