

John Noone, Government Photo-lithographer, 1861–1888

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A set of forty-two photo-lithographic prints is housed in the Rare Books collection of the State Library of Victoria. Across the lower border of each print are the words "Photo-lithographed at the Crown Lands Office Melbourne by J. Noone, Government Photo-lithographer." (see Fig. 1) The collection is prefaced with a title page which reads *The Albert Durer Album. Photo-Lithographed [sic] Under the Direction of the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library, by John Noone, Esq., Government Photo-Lithographer. By Permission of the Honorable J. M. Grant, Minister of Lands* (Melbourne, 1869).

My interest in John Noone was stimulated by this collection of prints. I have set out here to show what is known about Noone, these prints, the process used to produce them and Noone's connection with the Melbourne Public Library.

We know that these photo-lithographs were exhibited at the 1870 Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition by the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library,¹ and that they won a medal—and that there are a few sets extant, for example, at the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Library of Australia and the State Library of South Australia. According to a report on the 1870 Exhibition in the *Sydney Morning Herald*,² Noone won the bronze medal in Section I, the Fine Arts section. The Trustees exhibited other items in this same section, and Noone again appears under the Library's name³ with some five "specimens" of photo-lithography, two of which are mentioned along with the forty-two Dürer photo-lithographs in the awards list. The *Sydney Morning Herald* report also explains the award system: a silver medal "may be awarded to mark articles of superior excellence, especially those which betoken the advent of any important industry." However, just the one medal was awarded in each class at this Exhibition—a bronze medal—where "anything of sufficient value appeared."⁴

John Noone was born in Galway, Ireland on 1 October 1820. He arrived in Australia in May 1856, on the *Edward Koppisch*, and married Julia Ann Rieley in 1857. He first appears in the 1858 *Sands & Kenny* directory as a photographer, located at 9 Collins Street West, Melbourne.⁵ He shared this address with George Nichols (bookseller, stationer and printer), John Skardon (dentist), and G. Woodward (surveyor and land agent). He appears to have been a rather enterprising immigrant,

¹ *Catalogue of the Victorian Exhibits to the Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition of 1870* (Melbourne, 1870), 15–16.

² "Intercolonial Exhibition," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 1870.

³ *Catalogue of the Victorian Exhibits to the Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition of 1870*, 18.

⁴ "Intercolonial Exhibition."

⁵ *Sands & Kenny's Victorian Diary and Almanac for 1858 ... with Government, Legal, Commercial & General Information* ([Melbourne]: Sands & Kenny, 1858), 108.



PHOTOLITHOGRAPHED AT THE CROWN LANDS OFFICE MELBOURNE BY J. NOONE, GOVERNMENT PHOTO-LITHOGRAPHER

Fig. 1. Albrecht Dürer, The Four Horsemen (Apocalipsis cum figuris), 1498, photo-lithographed by J. Noone, 1869.

as evidenced in an advertisement he inserted in *The Argus* in 1858 offering an allotment of land at Talbot, a small township just south of Maryborough, for every portrait taken during the following two months!⁶ (Fig. 2) Whatever response he received to this advertisement, the 1861 *Sands & Kenny* directory makes it clear that Noone had intended to make his living as a commercial photographer.⁷

However, on 1 January 1861, Noone was in the employ of the Crown Lands Office, as the Government Photo-lithographer. What happened to bring about this sudden career change?

The photographer in the Crown Lands Office at that time was a John Walter Osborne (1828–1902), an Irish immigrant who arrived in Melbourne in 1852. Osborne had held that position for nearly two years, since March 1859, and was employed concurrently in the Magnetic Survey Department. To manage these two positions, Osborne allegedly paid an assistant £10 per month to cover the evening, night and Sunday watches in the latter position.⁸

When Osborne joined the Crown Lands Office, maps were produced by reducing and transferring surveyors' plans by hand to a lithographic stone surface—a process that was costly both in time and wages. In early August 1859 the Surveyor General, C. W. Ligar, asked Osborne why it was not possible to print a negative directly onto the stone—the immediate answer was, that to obtain a sharp print, absolute contact between the glass plate and the stone was necessary. Early experiments in Europe using this method had failed, as the glass tended to break under the pressure required.

However, Osborne began experimenting, and within a month had developed a process that could be put to use immediately. The first planning map produced by this method went on sale on 3 September 1859, two days after Osborne had deposited an application for a patent with the Chief Secretary's Office. In a paper read before the Philosophical Institute of Victoria on 30 November 1859,⁹ Osborne noted that the process was chiefly applicable to the reproduction of drawings formed of hard defined lines such as maps, pen and ink sketches and important documents—and less so for photographic views of landscapes or sketches composed of tints and shades.

To produce one negative using the Osborne process took two to three hours and involved a number of steps. In brief, paper was sized with albumen, then coated with a solution of gelatine which had bi-chromate of potash (i.e., potassium dichromate)

⁶ "Freeholds and Photographs," *The Argus*, 8 September 1858. Talbot is 160 km north-west of Melbourne.

⁷ The alphabetical listing records John Noone as "photographic artist, 41 Collins-street west"; *Sands, Kenny & Co.'s Diary and Almanac for ... with Official, Legal, Commercial and General Information* ([Melbourne]: Sands, Kenny & Co., 1861), 256.

⁸ Alan Elliott, "John Walter Osborne (1828–1902): A Melbourne Inventor," *The Royal Photographic Society (Victorian Chapter) Newsletter* (June 2001).

⁹ "On a new photo-lithographic process," *Transactions of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria* (1860): 172–83.

FREEHOLDS and PHOTOGRAPHS
Mr. J. NOONE,
 Photographic Artist,
 9 COLLINS-STREET WEST,
 With a view to giving the utmost publicity to his
 Photographic Establishment, has made arrange-
 ments with the Proprietor of the Township
 Talbot for the Distribution of
 700 ALLOTMENTS
 therein to all Persons who shall have Portraits
 taken at his establishment during the ensuing two
 months.
 Each person will have—1st, a portrait to the
 full value of the payment (see note); 2nd, a free-
 hold allotment of land; 3rd, a complete parchment
 title deed to the freehold; and 4th, a lithographic
 plan of the township of Talbot and its vicinity.
 Note.—Mr. Noone begs to announce that each por-
 trait will be of the full size, finish, and value, and in
 every respect equal to a picture of the same price as
 charged at any other respectable photographic estab-
 lishment in Melbourne.

Fig. 2. *The Argus*, 8 September 1858

added. A negative of the surveyor's plans reduced to the size required was placed on the paper and left in the sunshine. The light reacted with the bi-chromate of potash, which in turn reacted with the gelatine, turning the transparent part of the negative (which matched the black lines on the surveyor's plans) brown. The paper was then inked. The chemically altered gelatine readily adhered to the greasy ink while the unaltered gelatine was softened, then washed away, leaving a drawing in a greasy ink that could be transferred to the stone in the normal way.

The process was so successful that Osborne applied for a government grant. An inquiry followed between August 1860 and January 1861; it concluded that the process was superior to any similar process produced overseas, and was valuable for the reproduction of survey maps for land sales. Osborne was awarded the sum of £1000 for the use of his process in Victoria.¹⁰ He immediately confirmed his intention to resign from the Crown Lands Office to sell his invention overseas.

Osborne was replaced by John Noone. How Noone came to the notice of the Crown Lands Office we don't know, although from the advertisement in *The Argus* of 1858 we do know that he was in possession of up to seven hundred lithographic plans of the township of Talbot and its surrounds; these, no doubt, he had obtained from the Crown Lands Office. We also know, as mentioned, that a co-tenant of 9 Collins Street West was a surveyor and land agent who may well have put in a word on his behalf. It's also quite possible that Noone and Osborne knew each other, both being recent Irish immigrants and photographers. Whatever scenario, it appears that a speedy appointment was made so that the new photographer could be trained before Osborne departed.

¹⁰ *Report of the Board Appointed by the Hon. the President of the Board of Land and Works together with Evidence taken before the Board* (Melbourne, 1860–61), 267.

As it turned out, Osborne remained in Melbourne for most of 1861, working on his invention. On 15 May, he and Noone submitted a joint patent application for the prevention of forgeries of written or printed documents using the photo-lithographic process.¹¹ A few weeks later, on 6 June, he submitted yet another patent application—this time an amendment to his 1859 patent.¹²

Toward the end of the year, Osborne's process was used to produce the season tickets for the 1861 Melbourne Exhibition; and Osborne was mentioned in Sir Redmond Barry's opening address at that Exhibition, as follows:

The clear letter-press of this minute publication, smaller than that of any moveable type, is printed by photo-lithography, a process for the invention of which Mr Osborne is entitled to well-earned praise. It is usually applied here to the rapid and economical transfer of maps and plans. Simultaneous, but independent efforts were directed to this discovery in England, in America and in this country. That in use with us anticipated the others by several months, and it is conceded that this process, patented by Mr Osborne, has not only gained a priority of invention, but attained a degree of perfection admitted by the generosity of his competitors.¹³

Osborne exhibited specimens of his photo-lithographic process at this Exhibition and received a first-class certificate—the highest award given. At the ensuing London International Exhibition in 1862 he was awarded a medal (there being only the one level) “for the photo-lithographic process invented and patented by himself.”¹⁴

In the meantime John Noone became the Government Photo-lithographer, employed to produce maps using the Osborne process, and, it seems, he was encouraged to experiment as opportunity arose. However, Noone had a slow start to his Public Service career. At the next major exhibition, the 1865 Dublin International Exhibition, we find the Surveyor General of Victoria, C. W. Ligar, awarded a medal “for maps of Victorian gold fields, obtained by the photo-lithographic process of W. [sic.] Osborne.” Osborne himself received a medal “for his photo-lithographic process, shown under the name of C. W. Ligar, Victoria.”¹⁵

By the 1866–67 Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition Noone had the Osborne process under better control. This Exhibition was held in the newly built Great Hall behind the Melbourne Public Library (where the La Trobe Reading Room now stands), and Noone exhibited “photo-lithographic maps and plans”¹⁶ and some

¹¹ Patent no. 458 of 1861.

¹² Patent no. 465 of 1861.

¹³ *Catalogue of the Victorian Exhibition, 1861* (Melbourne, 1861), 26–27.

¹⁴ *International Exhibition 1862: Reports by the Juries on the Subjects in Thirty-Six Classes into which the Exhibition was Divided* (London, 1863), Class XIV, 14.

¹⁵ *The Illustrated Record and Descriptive Catalogue of the Dublin International Exhibition of 1865* (London, 1866), 127 and 529.

¹⁶ *Intercolonial Exhibition 1866: Official Catalogue* (Melbourne, [1866]), 34.

“specimens of photo-lithography,”¹⁷ for which he received an honourable mention. While no medal was awarded in this section, presumably because the standard was not considered sufficiently high, Noone received a special mention, for “perseverance and success in carrying out Mr Osborne’s process of photo-lithography.”¹⁸

Several questions remain concerning the Dürer prints and the 1870 Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition: What are the prints? Why were they photo-lithographed by John Noone but exhibited by the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library?

In the early 1860s there had been a concerted push by the Trustees of the Library to promote the arts in Victoria. A Commission had been established in 1863 to address the issue and to come up with a scheme to create and manage a combined Public Library, Museum, Gallery and School of Art. The final report, presented to Parliament in 1865, recommended, amongst other things, that an annual art exhibition be held in Melbourne.¹⁹ Redmond Barry, the driving force behind the Library Trustees, the Victorian Exhibition Commission and the Fine Arts Commission, was tireless in his efforts to solicit donations for the Library. One such donation—which included the *Dürer album*—came from the Prussian government in late 1864.

Dürer’s works had enjoyed a resurgence of interest in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and this particular album was published on the directive of King Frederick Wilhelm IV (1795–1861) in, scholars suggest, 1861. The work was edited by Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–74), director of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf at Munich, and August von Kreling (1819–76). It was published in Nuremberg and was intended to be the first in a series of twelve such volumes, designed to come out at intervals of three months. The aim of the series was to produce high quality copies of a selection of Dürer’s works, in the same size as the original. As Dürer (1471–1528) produced some seventy paintings, one hundred engravings, three hundred woodcuts, two thousand drawings and watercolours, three major treatises on art theory, and a work on fortifications during his lifetime, there was no shortage of material to choose from.

This first volume contained three divisions: the first series, *The Sufferings of Our Lord*, known as the *Large Passion*, consisted of twelve plates; the second, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, comprised some twenty plates. These plates were originally published by Dürer in volume form in 1511. Prior to that date, single-sheet impressions of the woodcuts had been available for purchase—however, the completed volume included an extra five sheets in the *Passion* and three extra sheets in *The Life of the Virgin Mary*. In the 1511 publication the prints were also accompanied by Latin verses on the verso of the print. The third division in the first volume of this new and ambitious series comprised a selection of Dürer woodcut prints, three from the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹ *Second Progress Report of the Commission of the Fine Arts: Presented to both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency’s Command* (Melbourne: John Ferres, [1865]), 6.

series *The Apocalypse* (or *The Revelation of St John*), and a selection of other woodcuts from the *Lives of the Saints*. The evidence suggests that this first volume was the only one published.

The Prussian donation was accessioned in early 1865, and the Library's copy was bound locally by George Robertson. Some three years later, a report in *The Argus* noted that the trustees of the Public Library were planning to hand the pictures over to Mr J. Noone, Government photo-lithographer, to be reproduced.²⁰ Complete copies were then to be presented to other public libraries in the country, and some were to be offered for sale to the public at a price to cover expenses. At that stage John Noone had produced one facsimile print—of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane—and the newspaper report noted that it was difficult to find fault with its resemblance to Kaulbach's reproduced engravings. Presumably this was part of the initiative by the Trustees to promote the fine arts.

In 1869 Library Trustees held an art exhibition in the Great Hall. From newspaper reports it appears to have been a huge success, with some 1406 exhibitors, including John Noone, now described as Photographer to the Public Library, who exhibited "five photo-lithographs, after Albert Dürer."²¹

The year 1870 heralded the first Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition, organised by the Agricultural Society of NSW; it was a rather rushed affair. Commissioners for Victoria were not appointed until the end of June, while the closing date for entries was 15 July. On appeal this date was extended to 30 July—but it was simply not enough time to get a large number of exhibits to Sydney. Of the five hundred and fifty Victorian exhibits quickly assembled, three hundred and eight were shown in the Fine Arts Section, and one hundred and twenty-four of those were exhibited by the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library. Of those one hundred and twenty-four, Noone contributed the forty-two Dürer photo-lithographs, plus a further five specimens of photo-lithography. As mentioned earlier, Noone was awarded a bronze medal for the Dürer photo-lithographs and two of the other specimens, even though the work was owned and exhibited by the Melbourne Public Library.

After the 1870 Exhibition Noone continued on as Government Photo-lithographer, almost uninterrupted, until his retirement on 30 September 1888, at age sixty-five.²² He continued to show specimens of photo-lithography at other Exhibitions, sometimes competitively, sometimes as a display only. He was also one of the three hundred or so casualties of the Berry Government Crisis of 1877–78, when the Legislative Council rejected the Appropriation Bill.²³ However, during the

²⁰ *The Argus*, 30 April 1868.

²¹ *Catalogue of the Works of Art Ornamental and Decorative Art, Exhibited by the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library and Museum, in March, April and May 1869* (Melbourne: Printed for the Trustees of the Public Library by Mason, Firth & Co., [1869]), 38.

²² Noone had held the position of Government Photo-lithographer in the Crown Lands Office, Melbourne, for twenty-seven years.

²³ The rejection of the Appropriation Bill led to the dismissal of more than three hundred civil servants, including fifty-seven officers from the Department of Lands and Survey.

four months Noone was officially retrenched, the NSW government employed him to re-organise the photo-lithographic branch of the Sydney office. Actually, Noone did quite well out of the whole saga, because he also ended up receiving £687 19s in compensation for his retrenchment—a large amount considering his annual salary at the time was £485.²⁴

The write-up in *The Argus* on Noone's retirement in 1888 probably sums him up well. It reads, "Mr Noone has been a valuable officer, highly respected, both personally and because of his great scientific attainments. He was made the recipient of a very handsome testimonial in the shape of a solid gold snuff-box with monogram and suitable inscription engraved. The box is of colonial manufacture, made specially, and is a beautiful piece of work. It was presented by his brother officers as a mark of esteem, and with their hearty good wishes for his future prosperity. The surveyor-general, in the unavoidable absence of the Minister of Lands, made the presentation, and Mr Noone feelingly responded."²⁵

John Noone lived another five years, and died at his home, 70 Roden Street, West Melbourne; his death notice describes him simply as "the dearly beloved husband of Julia Ann Noone."²⁶

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²⁴ "Dismissed Civil Servants—classified and unclassified," in *Parliamentary Crisis, 1877–8: Parliamentary Documents Showing the Proceedings taken by both Houses of the Legislature Respecting the Parliamentary Crisis, 1877–9, Together With the Printed Papers, Reports, etc., Connected Therewith* ([Melbourne, 1880]), 4.

²⁵ *The Argus*, 6 September 1888.

²⁶ *The Argus*, 26 June 1893.