SARAH DAWES AND THE COAL LUMPERS:
ABSENCE AND PRESENCE ON THE SYDNEY WATERFRONT
1900-1917

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

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CERTIFICATION

I, Margo Beasley, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Department of History and Politics, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Margo Beasley

20 October 2004
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ABBREVIATIONS

GKOHC: Grace Karskens Oral History Collection
ML: Mitchell Library
NBA: Noel Butlin Archives
NSWBCOHC: New South Wales Bicentennial Oral History Collection
NSWLA V&P: New South Wales Legislative Assembly, Votes and Proceedings
PC: Proceedings of Council
SCC: Sydney City Council
SCLU: Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union
SHT: Sydney Harbour Trust
SMH: Sydney Morning Herald
SPOHC: Susannah Place Oral History Collection
SRO: State Records Office
SWLU: Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union
WWF: Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia
ABSTRACT

This thesis is, primarily, a feminist account of meaning and significance in working class households on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. Initially, the raison d’être of the thesis was to redress the patent absence of women and their domestic labour in my earlier work on the history of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia (WWF). However, in response to feminist epistemological arguments - about forces that determine historical absence and presence, and the symbolic nature of concepts of masculinity and femininity - the concerns of the thesis broadened. It now encompasses all members of waterfront households - men and children as well as women - and it also examines, to a lesser degree, hitherto neglected aspects of the history of men’s waterfront work.

A central proposition of the thesis is that history that awards significance from the perspective of public life (as histories of trade unions do) necessarily privileges masculine relationships (actual or symbolic). Such history generates presence and absence along lines that are often gendered. By contrast, history that seeks meaning and significance from the perspective of the household can scrutinise women, children and men with relative equality. Through this route the interactive and entwined experiences of gender, class and generations can be made more visible, and alternative accounts of meaning and significance can emerge. The thesis utilises a range of documentary and oral sources to support this proposition, but it also employs inference and deduction to argue its case. Through this method it draws attention to the contrast between the kinds of meaning and significance that emerge from a study of day-to-day life, and the meaning and significance that external constructs award.

The subject matter of the thesis is organised into three areas: historical absence and presence; practical aspects of the day-to-day life of the household; and work of all kinds. The thesis demonstrates that processes affecting historical absence and presence occur for contemporary as well as historic reasons, and apply to men as well as to women. Biases in socially constructed records, which are blind to many women’s activities and disregard their domination of particular categories, allow the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront to be characterised as a masculine place. However, the same records reveal the
widespread existence of categories of male waterfront work that challenge the wharf labourers’ contemporary hold on waterfront labour history.

Household finances, housing and fertility highlight differences between lived life on the Sydney waterfront and ideological, and gendered, constructs that purport to account for women and men’s behaviour. The breadwinner/dependent spouse dichotomy is demonstrably false for early twentieth century waterfront households; gendered use of waterfront housing did not accord with the ideology of its architecture; and atypically high fertility amongst waterfront women of the period contradicts both feminist and economistic arguments about the meaning of fertility limitation.

Work of all kinds provides a lens for viewing the spousal, parental and filial relationships of the waterfront household. The economic purpose of some women’s home-based work is demonstrably similar to men’s waged work, and aspects of their domestic work challenges notions of male power within the working class household. However, the meaning and significance of unpaid domestic work for the women who did it remains relatively obscure. Waterfront children’s paid and unpaid work was prompted by filial obligations to the household that entailed a lengthening of childhood, which contrasts with economistic constructions that perceive childhood in terms of the school/work divide. When the spectrum of men’s paid and unpaid work and work-based activity is analysed it bears a marked similarity to the pattern of waterfront women’s work. Because waterfront men can be argued to have put the private relationships of the home ahead of their relationships with other men the meaning of their work is arguably similar to the meaning of women’s work.

The thesis concludes that when the private life of household is scrutinised an alternative account emerges that challenges the meaning and significance implied by historical accounts of public life. Women and men can be understood less as symbolic constructions than as real people for whom meaning and significance were similar. In this the thesis offers a feminist alternative to the masculinist and economistic approaches of institutional history.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people to thank for their assistance in preparing this thesis. The staff of the Mitchell Library, the State Records Office of NSW, the Noel Butlin Archives at the Australian National University and the NSW Historic Houses Trust were unfailingly helpful. John Coombs and Paddy Crumlin gave me permission to access records belonging to the Maritime Union of Australia. Rae Francis initially alerted me to the existence of the NSW Court of Arbitration transcripts from 1905 that have been used extensively as a source in this thesis, and both she and Bruce Scates gave generously of their ideas and experience in the very early stages of the project. A debt of gratitude is also owed to Grace Karskens for her general discussion about waterfront life and her generous offer to provide me with a copy of some of her interviews with waterfront people. Those interviewees have also kindly given permission for me to use this material. Two friends, Judy Nancarrow and Barbara Page, were particularly kind and generous with their time and support. They listened patiently and asked many questions well beyond the requirements of friendship.

Special thanks are owed to my supervisors from the University of Wollongong: co-supervisor, Dr Maree Murray (formerly of the Department of Management), and senior supervisor, Dr Ben Maddison (Department of History and Politics). This thesis would not have been completed without their intellectual guidance, general support, friendship and ongoing availability, over several years. In the final stages Ben Maddison spent countless hours reading and rereading penultimate and ultimate drafts, always compelling me to lift my game, improve my standards and to say what I actually thought, even when he didn’t agree with me. The thesis could not have been completed without him.

The much loved men of my nuclear family, Ward, Tom and Conal O’Neill, are to be thanked for teaching me, over decades, that men are not so very different from women, and for showing me why families, in their many forms, continue to endure. In particular, the support of my husband Ward O’Neill deserves special mention. Not only was his gentle encouragement constant and unwavering, but as the main breadwinner for our
family his ungrudging dedication to the task allowed me to continue work on the thesis long after the scholarship had petered out. This thesis is dedicated to him, and to our loyal friend, the late Tas Bull, former general secretary of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia.
A NOTE ON CONVERSIONS

Since their measurement doesn’t alter, weights and distances in this thesis have been converted to metric for ease of comprehension. Since the purchasing power of currency is in a constant state of change, it has been retained in its early twentieth century imperial form because conversion to decimal currency is meaningless.
INTRODUCTION

I keep them [the family] on £2/5/- just middling.
(Sarah Dawes, wharf labourer's wife.)

I like to be with my wife and children. I do not like to be away all the time, what is the use of being married?
(Frederick Hales, hoodlum coal lifter, explaining why he chose to work for poor wages on land rather than going to sea.)

This thesis is (primarily) about the life of the working class household on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. Its main purpose is to recast perceptions of significance and meaning in waterfront history away from labour institutions and towards personal life. The raison d’etre of the thesis is a professional and personal intellectual journey that arose from my authorship of a commissioned history of the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF), Wharfies: The History of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia, published in 1996. During the course of this work I became aware of the many historical areas that conventional history of labour institutions didn’t or couldn’t address, in particular the way in which it separated, unproblematically, the all-male adult waterfront workplace from the work, genders and generations of the household. In histories of labour institutions, significance and

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1 Transcript of evidence, Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union v The NSW Steamship Owners Association and the NSW Coastal Steamship Owners Association, NSW Court of Arbitration, 2/59 Vol 2, 1905 (hereafter referred to as the wharf labourers’ 1905 case), p.1266
2 Transcript of evidence Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union v Sydney Steam Collier Owners and Coal Stevedores’ Association, NSW Court of Arbitration 2/64 vol 8 (hereafter referred to as the coal lumpers’ 1905 case), pp. 1005-6
3 My commissioned work includes Wharfies: A History of the Waterside Workers Federation of Australia, Halstead Press in Association with the Australian Maritime Museum, 1996; The Missos: A History of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union, Allen and Unwin 1996; The Sweat of their Brows: One Hundred Years of the Sydney Water Board 1888-1988, Sydney Water Board 1988; and Sydney Town Hall: A Social History, Hale and Iremonger 1998. Most commissioned histories are predominantly about men because it is male institutions that tend to be those with sufficient resources for the task.
4 In his review of Wharfies, Bruce Scates criticised it for its exclusion of women, arguing that although it was ‘an exemplary history of a male union leadership’ women were nevertheless ‘marginal’ in the narrative. Australian Historical Studies, no. 111, October 1998, pp. 384-5
meaning are primarily found in men’s relationships with one another in the world of waged work, rather than in the personal relationships of the home. This thesis redresses that imbalance.

My personal circumstances during the writing of *Wharfies*, as the intermittently self-employed and home-based spouse of a wage earning man, made me acutely aware of the daily complexities of relationships between private life and work of all kinds, for both women and men. In response to this perception, I began to question the relatively simplistic way that relationships between work and home were represented in many histories of trade unions, including my own work. These most usually perceived relationships with home as emanating from the world of paid work and the outside society *in* to the world of the family, most often through the market-determined medium of (usually male) wages. They rarely approached work or life from the perspective of the private experiences of the household. The myriad internal and external influences that deeply affected the contemporary household’s internal and outward relationships were not evident in many historical representations of working class life, especially those that wrote history from the institutional perspective of the organised working class.

**Feminist and masculinist**

The terms ‘feminist’ and ‘masculinist’ are used in opposition to one another throughout this thesis. The thesis is feminist in approach because it seeks to write history that challenges the criteria of significance in history ‘that privileges culture over nature, or public over private’; and history for which the lives of women are as integral as those of men. The thesis is also feminist also because it foregrounds aspects of the personal lives of women and men in a way that offers an alternative to conventional, phallocentric history. The term ‘masculinist’, on the other hand, is used throughout to mean that which is defined by ‘masculine standards of significance’. In the case of history the term refers to that in which the ‘the larger historical drama is masculine’.

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6 Matthews, *ibid*, p. 147; Marilyn Lake, ‘Women, Gender and History’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, Nos 7 and 8, Summer 1988, p.8
Masculinist history in general perceives the household and personal life as subservient to, and less significant than, larger social structures such as the economy, the labour market, and trade unions.

The terms ‘feminist’ and ‘masculinist’ are not intended to encompass women and/or men literally. Rather, they are used in a metaphoric or symbolic sense with reference, for instance, to the private and symbolically feminine world of the home and family, or the public and symbolically masculine world of waged work and the market. Indeed a primary purpose of the thesis is to draw out the similarities and genuine differences between real men and women, rather than accept at face value the dichotomy implied by gendered constructions of the world.

The quotes from Sarah Dawes and Frederick Hales at the beginning of this Introduction highlight two central concerns of the thesis: that constructions of femininity and masculinity conceal the humanity that women and men share; and that most documentary records and the historiography that results effectively keep certain kinds of experience out of historical arguments. Both Sarah Dawes and Frederick Hales were ‘conventional’ working class people: Dawes was a home-centred mother of six and the wife of a wharf labourer, and Hales was a wage earning hoodlum coal lumper with a young family. But when Dawes [the lone woman whose personal testimony was available for use in this thesis7] spoke of the financial responsibility entailed in ‘keeping’ her family she might just as well have been a wage earning, working class man. When Hales indicated that maximising his wages was secondary to the paramount focus of his life - his personal need to be with his family - he could just as well have been a home-centred, financially dependent working class woman. The quotes illustrate the ways in which men and women might speak in metaphorically ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ ways, irrespective of their actual gender.

7 There may have been other women giving evidence at the wharf labourers’ 1905 case, but Volume 1 of the transcript is missing.
The private lives of the kinds of people that Dawes and Hales represent appear infrequently in historical records and although the reasons for their exclusion are not identical, they are similar. In Dawes’ case she was a woman whose domestic work confined her to the unrecorded, and thus largely invisible, ‘private’ sphere. Because Hales was a waged worker, like most other men of the period he does make some appearances in the formal records. However, as a casual ‘hoodlum’ coal lumper his lowly (and now non-existent) occupation means that many aspects of his public working life remain obscure, and any work he may have done in his private life is as invisible as that of Dawes, for the same kinds of reasons.8

The kinds of personal meanings suggested by the Dawes and Hales quotes are usually concealed by, or at best submerged within, the vast majority of records relating to working class life. Such records necessarily privilege outward, observable and public activity over the personal and private world of the individual, the family and the home. Thus they privilege work that is publicly performed over work that is privately performed and although the two categories often divide along gender lines, this privileging usually applies irrespective of who is doing the work.

By taking the internal world of the household as its main point of view this thesis attempts to address some of these historiographical problems. It uses discussion of many aspects of waterfront life as a lens to focus on the artificial ordering of human experience into public and private, and feminine and masculine, categories. In arguing for the private life of the household to be taken as the starting point for an analysis of significance and meaning in waterfront life, the thesis offers a feminist alternative to dominant streams in Australian labour history that still largely consider working class

8 Additionally, his occupation and the union of which he was a member no longer exist. The high profile survival of the Waterside Workers Federation (now the Maritime Union of Australia) has ensured that wharf labourers ‘own’ the waterfront labour story. Contact with former officials of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union failed to locate any records.
life (with regard to either women or men) in terms of that which is most visible: waged labour, politics, institutions and elites.9

The bourgeois ideology of the family that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, and lives on in the present day, perceived masculine waged labour as the bridge between the ‘public’, or masculine, world of the market, and the ‘private’, or feminine, world of the home. This was and is a fundamentally masculinist perception of familial relationships because it understands the family as dependent upon, and subservient to, the outside world of market relationships (in the form of wages), and it accords authority in private life to men by virtue of their status as wage earners. The thesis argues that it is a kind of ‘wage fetishism’ to perceive the dynamics of private gender relationships as determined in one way or another by wages.

If an account of these relationships is to offer a genuine alternative to masculinist constructions of family life it must seek meaning and significance from the other direction, from the ‘inside’ world of the home and family. Through this alternative method non-market, feminist explanations can surface to challenge the dominant masculinist accounts of significance and meaning on the Sydney waterfront. Such a project must be prompted by the historian’s interrogative purpose, rather than by the well-travelled narrative themes of Australian trade union and labour history.10

* * * * * *

The focus of this thesis shifted and broadened as my perceptions of the practice of history, and what it should be trying to achieve, deepened. My initial concern, writing women back into the waterfront labour picture, was a relatively straightforward intellectual task (limited records notwithstanding). It was about the paid and unpaid

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9 See, for example, the papers of the Seventh National Labour History Conference held at the Australian National University, Canberra, April 19-21, 2001, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra Region Branch, Canberra, April 2001; and recent editions of Labour History, A journal of Labour and Social History, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. It’s not that alternative ways of thinking about working class life are absent, but the private experiences that undeniably inform our own lives remain marginal in the historiography

10 Allen, op cit, p.183
work women did to support, complement or enhance men’s waged work. But this approach effectively ‘compensation’ or ‘contribution’ rather than genuinely feminist history, because it really only sought to show that women ‘were also there’. In arguing for women to be recognized for doing something that was ‘as good as’ what men it was masculinist. It both ranked what women did according to masculine standards of significance, and it perceived what women did as prompted by, or responsive to, what men did. It did not entail an alternative interrogation of the kind that Marilyn Lake proposed when she said that gender should become ‘a central category of all historical analysis’.

As the research for the thesis evolved the framework of its questions changed. It became clear that whilst what women actually did was important, of greater significance was why they did it, and in turn this prompted questions about layers of meaning: personal meaning, externally constructed meaning, and the various ways in which historiography dealt with meaning. It also became clear that women were not the only exclusion from the dominant waterfront labour story. Hitherto unrecorded and unacknowledged aspects of waterfront men’s lives, and waterfront children’s lives, also surfaced. The household became not simply the place to find what women did (as masculinist constructions of reality imply) but the place where men, women and children lived together, literally and metaphorically. The privileging of public activity over private that occurs in most historiography not only excludes many women’s experiences, but also many men’s experiences of men as well. Scrutinizing men’s and women’s activities from the perspective of private life offered a way of equalizing attention towards both genders that is not possible if they are understood from the ranking and privileging perspectives of the outside world.

When the contributions of all members to the waterfront household were viewed side-by-side questions that were more about similarity than difference were suggested. Marilyn Lake’s observation that ‘women’s history cannot be fruitfully written without reference to men, [and] neither can men’s history be properly written without reference...
to men’s relations with women’ became a guiding principle for the thesis.\textsuperscript{13} Rae Frances’s \textit{The Politics of Work, Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880-1939}, which deals with the boot, clothing and printing industries, is an excellent exemplar of this approach, applied to the world of waged work.\textsuperscript{14} Such approaches seek to challenge models of ‘social reality’ that are fundamentally masculinist.\textsuperscript{15}

The frame of reference of the thesis shifts between the material and empirically establishable aspects of waterfront work, home and family, and all the ‘qualifications and uncertainties’ of which more ‘social’ history makes use.\textsuperscript{16} A central concern of the thesis is the way in which a reliance on positivism can actively mislead the historian about the material reality of the subject under consideration and fail to encourage more difficult, less tangible, explanations. Judith Allen argues that positivist conceptions of history are masculinist because they necessarily exclude most of the experiences that are common to women. She argues they rendering the discipline of history a prisoner of ‘effective discourses’ that leave ‘little room for deduction, inference, symptomatic reading or accounting for absences and silences’. Allen argues that positive evidence ‘probably never existed for the questions that feminism must put to the past,’ and that it is only through deduction, inference and symptomatic reading that absence and silence can be evaluated and a meaningful history of women written.\textsuperscript{17} Although such was not her intent, Allen’s arguments are equally valid for the history of men. It is only through an interrogation of absences and silences about men that a non-masculinist history of men can also be undertaken.

The thesis approaches its themes on several levels. It retrieves ‘lost’ or ‘hidden’ but nevertheless empirically establishable evidence to counterbalance dominant thematic representations of waterfront life; it critiques this and other evidence and relevant historiography for representations of meaning and significance; and it enters into the territory of inference, deduction and symptomatic reading that are required to produce alternative historical narratives. The twin purposes of the thesis are to provide an

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} ibid
\textsuperscript{15} Marilyn Lake, ‘Women, Gender and History’ \textit{Australian Feminist Studies}, nos 7 and 8, Summer 1988, p.9
\textsuperscript{16} Paula Byrne, ‘Economy and Free Women in Colonial New South Wales’ \textit{Australian Feminist Studies}, vol. 11, no. 23, 1996 p.89
\textsuperscript{17} Allen, \textit{op cit}, p.176
\end{flushright}
alternative account of the past and to attempt to explain it. In this approach it seeks to do as Jill Matthews has suggested should be the project of feminist history. Matthews wrote that what matters in the writing of history ‘is not doing theory but using it: doing history, researching and writing in ways that are empirically rigorous as well as informed by a theoretically sophisticated historical consciousness.’

**Why the waterfront?**

The Sydney waterfront was chosen as the focus of this thesis for two main reasons. It was the place that contained the households of those men whose public working lives I had previously recounted and there were direct, visible, geographic relationships between the two. In addition, because the waterfront holds a special place in the European history of Australia (and another special place in the indigenous history of Australia) there is a body of relevant historiography to provide historical background and conceptual frameworks to work within or against. However, whilst the thesis focuses on waterfront households, and is largely contained within certain geographic boundaries, it is not a study of the relationship between a particular industry and the home, nor is it a study of a locality in the geographic sense.

**Why the early twentieth century?**

The early twentieth century was chosen as the period for this thesis for several historical and practical reasons. By the turn of the twentieth century the Sydney waterfront was almost exclusively a working class community and was thus a good site to explore issues about working class life. At this time the Sydney waterfront had the appearance

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of a ‘classic’ working class community, such as those associated with the mining industry.\textsuperscript{21}

The early twentieth century was part of a major and formative period for modern Australian society because it was shifting from a pre-industrial and colonial, to an advanced industrialized, economy.\textsuperscript{22} This change entailed specific economic and social dimensions relevant to the issues with which this thesis is concerned. Economic historians generally see the early years of the twentieth century as something of a golden age for the Australian people because of the country’s favourable economic statistics (although there is significant debate about the extent to which Australian working people can be understood to have actually benefited). Since the thesis seeks to challenge the ‘wage fetishism’ of conventional history it was necessary to study a period of economic ‘health’ when male wages were theoretically adequate to the task of keeping a family, rather than a period entailing industrial strife or economic depression (such as the 1890s) which could be judged to be an aberration.

At the turn of the twentieth century Australia had the highest per capita income in the world, attributable to a ‘brilliant’ and unprecedented phase of world economic expansion. This was fuelled by Britain’s economic pre-eminence, which was based on the manufacture of goods from raw materials extracted from colonial economies such as Australia. Wool was the Australian economy’s most important earner, up from £15.9 million in 1898-1900 to £25.9 million in 1913. This picture was severely disrupted by the outbreak of World War I in 1914, but up to that point the buoyant movement and ever-increasing volume of imports and exports through the port of Sydney implies an abundance of work for waterfront men.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} The community studied by Metcalfe, \textit{op cit}, was one such. However, the Sydney waterfront is not quite so ‘classic’ as it might seem. Eric Hobsbawm has remarked on the fluidity and inexact shape of industry on the waterfront in his \textit{Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour}, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976 (first published 1964), p.205
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid}, p.130; Kerreen Reiger, \textit{The Disenchantment of the Home: Modernizing the Australian Family 1880-1940}, Oxford University Press 1985 p.1
There were other reasons for choosing the early twentieth century, that relate to the strength and specificity of ideological perceptions of masculinity, femininity, work, home and family in that period; and concomitant deep social change in Australian society. The combination of the two provides a framework within which to ask questions about the life of the household. Australia in the early twentieth century is often regarded as an advanced social laboratory, with an active and efficacious labour movement, and high levels of state intervention and legislation relating both to social welfare and the way in which wage rates were determined. Indeed, the ‘historically changing formation of institutions’ that is the state is often seen as a distinguishing feature of Australian historical development.\(^{24}\) Home, family and work were primary amongst the Australian state’s many interests and it increasingly intervened ‘in relationships between capital and labour, between men and women, parent and child, warder and prisoner, teacher and pupil, doctor and patient’.\(^{25}\)

State intervention in early twentieth century Australia was underpinned by intense debates in industrialised societies generally about the nature of these issues. These debates entailed specific assumptions about class and gender and largely revolved around a notion of the family that accorded with the bourgeois model. The family was nuclear in form, marriage was companionate and life long, and it was headed by an income-earning husband who took care of a financially dependent wife and children. Men worked away from the home in the world of markets, and women remained within the home taking care of their husbands and children.

These constructions of masculinity and femininity were reflected in the development of the so-called wage earners’ welfare state in Australia. The dominant story is the development of a state-sanctioned industrial relations system that modified and regulated relations between labour and capital along with a concomitant massive growth in the size and number of Australian trade unions. This system played out in a gendered way however and most activity and legislation was discriminatory. Such benefits as it entailed went primarily to men, often at direct cost to women who were usually recognised in industrial legislation as either the dependents of men, or as wage earners

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25 ibid, p.11
of lower economic value than men.\textsuperscript{26} The landmark Harvester Judgement (basic wage) of 1907 enshrined the concept of the family wage as a masculine entitlement.\textsuperscript{27} The smaller number of women than men who were in paid employment earned significantly less than men, and in 1919 their economic value was formally set at 54 per cent of the Commonwealth male basic wage. In associated legislation the workplace was often seen as dangerous for women and an ideology of helpless femininity underpinned regulations relating to factories, conditions and hours of work.\textsuperscript{28}

In a separate, but not unrelated, ideological push, first wave feminism was making a significant impact on other legislation related to women. Some laws were aimed specifically at women’s physical lives including those related to prostitution, abortion, infanticide and the age of consent. The early twentieth century feminist movement also succeeded in changing some laws that discriminated against women in terms of property, guardianship and equality in marriage and divorce law, which in Australia reflected the nineteenth century British view that husband and wife were ‘one’, a concept that denied women the personal and political rights entailed in legal autonomy. Much of the movement for female suffrage, acquired universally in the Australian Commonwealth in 1901, was connected to the desire to change this kind of discriminatory legislation.\textsuperscript{29}

The early twentieth century was also a period of deep change within the non-legislated personal and private life of the family because of a dramatic decline in the birthrate, which had begun in the later decades of the nineteenth century in western industrialised countries. In Australia this international trend was accompanied by a vigorous pro-natalist ideology with which feminist rhetoric of the period often overlapped. In both

\textsuperscript{26} Desley Deacon ‘Seeing the State’ in Terry Irving (ed) \textit{Challenges to Labour History}, University of New South Wales Press 1994, p.137
\textsuperscript{27} The degree to which the concept translated into practise is highly debatable. See, for instance, P G Macarthy ‘Justice Higgins and the Harvester Judgement’ \textit{Australian Economic History Review}, vol. ix, no. 1, March 1969, ‘Wages in Australia, 1891 to 1914’ \textit{Australian Economic History Review}, vol. x, no. 1, March 1970; and ‘Wages for unskilled work and margins for skill, Australia, 1901-21’, \textit{Australian Economic History Review}, September 1972.
\textsuperscript{28} Rosemary Hunter ‘Women Workers and the liberal state: regulation and the workplace 1880s-1980s’ in Dianne Kirkby (ed) \textit{Sex, Power and Justice: Historical Perspectives on Law in Australia}, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1995, pp. 22, 229
camps women were still seen as belonging primarily in the home, responsible for creating and raising Australian citizens.\textsuperscript{30}

Concomitant with the declining birth rate (and a slowing death rate) was the development of compulsory education for children, which impacted significantly on the work they did within and outside the home in the early twentieth century period. Thus the early twentieth century was a period in which a great deal was happening for men, women and children, both from the outward perspective of the wider society, and from the internal perspective of the household.

\textbf{HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THEORY}

This thesis traverses the territory of several different historiographical schools. Because of the scale of these branches of historiography, selective rather than comprehensive use has been made of work from each of them.

\textbf{Waterfront}

There is a considerable body of historiography that relates specifically and generally to Sydney and other Australian waterfronts, and which overlaps with work from the academy such as urban studies, labour history and social history, and various reports associated with archaeological and heritage work. The following discussion about waterfront historiography is by no means definitive and there are countless journal articles, mainly relating to industrial relations and the economics of waterfront labour, that are not included here.

The type, quality and focus of history about the waterfront varies and has been written from many different perspectives, for many different purposes and within many differing historical conventions. Some historiography about the waterfront trades on the area’s reputation for colour and exoticism for instance, other historiography focusses on the waterfront as a place of visual interest, and yet other historiography related to the

\textsuperscript{30} Summers, \textit{ibid}, p.339
waterfront is primarily autobiographical. Most of this particular work has been of limited use for this thesis because its purpose is primarily narrative and as such offers little in the way of interpretation.

The development of urban studies in the 1980s, particularly through the Sydney History Group, resulted in a body of work in which the waterfront was often included as part of larger studies. This work is particularly useful because it situates changes around the waterfront in the wider urban, industrial and economic context. Successive waves of redevelopment of the Sydney waterfront have also prompted a large amount of heritage and archaeological work. Most heritage work relies on a literal interpretation of demographic and other data, but archaeological work, especially that of Grace Karskens, has brought new and challenging interpretations of waterfront life through an examination of material culture. Relatively recent social history has also interpreted the waterfront as a complex place in which many influences, of which class and male occupation were but some, played a part. The dynamic historical context provided by this work has been extremely useful for the thesis.


33 These include Terry Kass, *A Socio-Economic History of Millers Point*, NSW Department of Housing 1987; and Damaris Bairstow *Millers Point Site 8900*, Historical Archaeology, Excavation Master Strategy, NSW Department of Housing, June 1995.


The body of waterfront historiography that was written, with a political purpose, from a trade union or labour movement perspective is much simpler in its approach. Some of this work is academic, some of it commissioned and some of it was written by former union officials or employees. It is, unsurprisingly, masculinist in its approach because women, and other alternative stories, necessarily occupy a subsidiary place within the structured conventions of institutional histories whose raison d’etre is the masculine world of work and politics.

**Labour history**

Such problems also occur in the much larger body of work that constitutes Australian labour history. Until and including recent decades, the written history of the Australian working class was almost entirely about the way in which certain kinds of men and their institutions responded to historical circumstances. As Stephen Garton has written, in this ‘old’ labour history, which subscribed to the dominant radical nationalist version of the Australian past, organised working class men occupied such a special place that the terms ‘Australia’ and ‘labour’ were ‘virtually synonymous’. Russell Ward’s influential book *The Australian Legend* equated the Australian character with the rural
ethos of the ‘noble bushman’. The resultant national outlook, developed through the
industrialised trade union movement, was ‘independent’, ‘strongly collectivist’ and
exhibited ‘cherished and familiar sentiments associated with the concept of mateship’.39
Since this notion of the Australian character was obligatorily and exclusively male, the
school has been much criticised by feminist historians.40

The radical nationalist version of Australian history is now somewhat diminished in
influence, but it is discussed here because of the way in which it has influenced much of
the extant history of Australian waterfront men, in particular my own work on the
WWF. This work understands the waterfront in terms of it being a collective masculine
and class experience, because it is concerned with militant organised labour. In this it
reflects the work of ‘old’ labour historians of a Marxist persuasion, such as Robin
Gollan, Ian Turner and Eric Fry, who were primarily concerned with demonstrating the
historical importance of class struggles between working class organisations, and
employers and governments.41 Broadening out from that base, the radical nationalist
school understand the history of the Australian people in general as ‘the history of the
struggle between the organised rich and the organised poor’, as Brian Fitzpatrick has
described it.42

Similar to the big picture economic version of Australian history, the struggle between
classes in Australia is judged a positive story for Australian working class men because
they enjoyed ‘relative prosperity and enhanced status’ compared with working class
men elsewhere.43 Relatively high levels of union membership, relatively high standards
of living, and the development of labour parties and a strong welfare state in Australia
are seen as evidence of a strong, largely united and more or less successful working
class, one with a particularly Australian sense of identity. In terms of masculinity,
Australian working class men were more successfully masculine than working class
men elsewhere. Few working class men in Australia could be judged to be more
‘masculine’ than those who worked and struggled on the Sydney waterfront.

39 Ward, The Australian Legend, ibid, pp. 212, 213, 214
40 For example: Miriam Dixson, The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia 1788 to 1975,
and Summers, op cit, pp. 57-68.
41 Susan Magarey, ‘Labour History’’s new subtitle: social history in Australia in 1981’ in Social History
Vol 8, No 2 May 1983, p.213
42 Fitzpatrick, op cit, p. 62
43 Ian Turner, op cit, p.1
Although the exclusion of women and other kinds of men (indigenous or non-union for example) is a legitimate criticism to make of this version of Australian history, for the purposes of this thesis there are also questions about the way in which the radical nationalist school represents the men who are, effectively, its story. If waterfront men are perceived as more or less ‘fitting’ this narrative, the household for them occurs only on some abstract level, in terms of the way in which wages and working conditions translate to standards of living on the home front. The relationship between the two originates in the masculine world of work to bestow its benefits on the private world of the home. It is, in effect, another version of the idealised bourgeois family model because it understands the relationship between the market and the family as one-directional, as occurring from the outside in; as determined by what men do in the world of the market, but not the other way around. It paints a simplistic and one-dimensional picture of men as if they had no private world. It is only by studying men from the perspective of the household that alternative accounts of masculine life, especially those lives that have been written to conform to radical nationalist outlines, can be encouraged to surface.

Labour history has adjusted, evolved and changed in response to criticisms from social, cultural, feminist and post-modern historians to include such subjects as women, aborigines, work, leisure and community. Historians such as Rae Frances and Bruce Scates have defended, critically, the discipline to which they owe their basic political allegiance. Although a few historians deal with private life on some levels, and many more draw attention to its potential significance, private life has nevertheless remained in the shadows of most labour history: acknowledged, but studied rather rarely and then largely with reference to women in isolation from men.

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44 As Stephen Garton has observed, along with all the other contributors to Irving (ed) op cit, p.42; see also Anne Curthoys, ‘Labour History and Cultural Studies’, Labour History, no. 67, November 1994; and Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates ‘Is Labour History Dead?’ Australian Historical Studies, vol 25, no. 100, April 1993

The symbolic femininity of the private sphere may have something to do with this exclusion but the relative absence of records, which are by and large constructed according to masculinist principles, is another. For these kinds of practical and cognitive reasons, studies of the ways in which working class men and women live together in private life are also uncommon, although there is a handful of well-known examples that traverse this territory in different ways.46

Work

Work is one of the main lenses through which this thesis approaches its tasks. Until relatively recent times most historical thinking about work has emanated from a model of social reality that is symbolically masculine because it has been about the economics of work in one form or another. Waged work has been studied in terms of its presence or its absence, and its social and/or financial purpose. Unpaid work is also often studied according to those constructs: its purpose under various economic systems for instance, and whether or not an economic value can or should be imputed to it.

There are many exceptions to this generalisation and studies of waged (and other) forms of work are increasingly approached from many different directions. Changing historical perceptions of the nature of work have assisted this thesis.47 As Charlie Fox writes: ‘Work has no intrinsic meaning. Its meaning is produced by the culture in which it is performed.’ Patrick Joyce suggests that there is now a basic recognition that the ‘non-economic’ has a critical role in the ‘economic’ and that values related to work are ‘socially constructed.’ With reference to Australia, John Shields argues that we know ‘more about the institutional history of Australian working life – about conflict and compromise between unions and employers, and about the workings of industrial tribunals and awards – than we do about the lived experience of ordinary workers themselves’. His edited collection demonstrates that work has complex historical links


'between workplace experience and broader social and cultural factors – from family structures and gender identity to consciousness of class, community and nation'.

**Feminism**

The women’s movement of the 1960s and ‘70s gave rise to several landmark Australian feminist works that were useful for general background and context in this thesis. Much of this work was about the early women’s movement project of recovering women’s history and it was necessarily stronger on outline than detail or theory. Subsequent Australian work about the purpose of genuinely feminist history and the inadequacy of positivism has been very influential. Judith Allen has drawn attention to the inherent problems in the ‘very procedures of history’ and says that feminists expose as ‘untenable and indefensible the public/private sphere dichotomy that characterizes the work of most historians’. Allen argues that most history is patriarchal, and this observation includes Marxist practitioners who, in spite of pretensions to the contrary, embrace ‘a public/private split that is no less impoverishingly sexist than mainstream historians’, she says.

Including women’s experiences in historical practice ‘will never be just a matter of putting women back, as if they somehow slipped out’ Allen says. Rather, she argues, the ‘entire basis and procedures of the discipline have been inadequate to the task’ and it is only when consideration of gender becomes ‘central’ that history can offer an ‘entirely different account of the past’.

Fundamentally useful work for this project has been feminist history that scrutinizes class and gender in terms of one another. Alice Kessler-Harris writes that since labour history is about the political, cultural and economic processes that amount to class formation and class relations, it must also take account of ‘the central organizing principle of human life, the sexual division of labor, and all that that implies for social relations’. Kessler-Harris paraphrases E P Thompson’s famous definition of class, from his *The Making of the English Working Class*, to argue that gender is also not a

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49 These include Summers, *op cit*; Dixson, *op cit*; Kingston, *op cit*
50 Allen, *op cit*, pp. 174, 181
‘structure’ or a ‘category’, but rather an ‘historical phenomenon’ a ‘process’, ‘something that happens in human relationships’. Class, she says, is understood as being ‘rooted in the material reality and social relations of the workplace’ but gender is understood as emanating from the ‘material reality and social relations of the household’. Contemplating gender encourages us ‘to think about the unity of home and work’ she writes. 51

Fellow American feminist historian Joan Scott takes issue with Thompson’s notion of class on the grounds of its symbolic and literal exclusion of women. Scott writes women are ‘awkward’ and ‘marginal’ in Thompson’s work because ‘they serve to underline and point up the overwhelming association of class with the politics of male workers’. She argues that Thompson’s association of women with domestic life ‘somehow discount[s] them from full immersion in the economic relationships that give rise to the articulation of worker interest as class consciousness.’ Domesticity can’t give rise to the ‘collective identity of class interest that is class consciousness,’ Scott writes and thus ‘class, in its origin and expression, is constructed as a masculine identity, even when not all the actors are male.’ When women are included in working class history it tends to be as ‘special examples of the general (male) experience, or to be treated entirely separately’, she writes. 52 Jill Matthews has observed a similar phenomenon with regard to Australian labour history. 53 Scott’s insight about the symbolic nature of concepts of class underpins this thesis, but it is used to interrogate the exclusivity of that notion of class for certain kinds of men and male activities as well as for women.

The work of British historian Caroline Steedman has also been highly influential in this thesis. Steedman’s biting memoir Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives provides a penetrating psychological portrait of her working class mother’s complex and contradictory perceptions of gender and class. 54 Steedman’s insight has been invaluable in encouraging me to approach working class women and men as complex historical subjects and to avoid the easy traps of stereotype and one dimensionality that

52 Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, Columbia University Press, New York 1988, pp. 71, 72, 75, 74, 72, 84
53 Matthews, ‘Feminist History’, p. 147
are so often their fate in the historiography. Both Scott and Steedman’s work, in different ways, functioned to remove the (metaphorically) gendered scales from my eyes, and compelled me to think anew about the way in which perceptions of human experience are constructed within the boundaries of both class and gender, in a social reality that is constructed along masculinist principles.

Whilst working class men’s lives have the drama of class conflict to propel them into historical gaze, working class women are often rendered in a passive way in the historiography. This is because they ‘fail’ to have a dynamic relationship with the world through waged work. A significant exception to this picture in the Australian historiography is feminist work on convict and free women in the early colonial period, which recognizes the complex way in which these women negotiated life more or less independently. Paula Byrne writes:

> Historians of women wish sometimes to see women attached to the economy, contributing to it, having opportunity in it and being disadvantaged by it. This is predicated by the idea that they should be ‘equal’ in it … But women in their usage of the economy deconstruct it, move it, change it and force us to question the organization of such methodology which sees labour and the female economy in male terms, measured against the male economy.55

Byrne’s women are perceived as active in forging their own destinies, given a certain set of historical circumstances. Such arguments are relatively achievable for convict and early colonial women because it is demonstrable that they did not conform to the bourgeois model of the home-centred dependent wife. However, many of the working class women of a century later, some of whom are a focus of this thesis, were primarily located in the home. From an historical perspective their lives appear to strongly resemble the passive femininity that is an essential component of the bourgeois model.

This perception is reflected in much of the relevant historiography, and it can render an impression of working class women as somewhat lifeless, not only in contrast to men,

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55 Paula Byrne, op cit, p.95; see also Deborah Oxley, ‘Packing her (Economic) Bags: Convict Women Workers’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 102, April 1994; and Karskens, *The Rocks*, pp. 80-102.
but also in contrast to middle class women. Beverly Kingston, for instance, sees early twentieth century middle class women as having taken the ‘initiative’ on a range of moral issues. Kingston says she doesn’t want to ‘idealise or romanticise the working class woman’ so she argues that working class women were in general ‘vulnerable to the images and mirages of middle class morality and middle class standards of living and must be held partially responsible for their continuing acceptance and penetration’.56 Equating vulnerability with blame seems hardly fair, but the deeper and unasked question is: were working class women vulnerable to middle class images and mirages at all? Might they not have conducted life on their own terms, even if such conduct is invisible to the contemporary historian?

Similar kinds of assumptions about working class people occur in Kerreen Reiger’s *The Disenchantment of the Home*, an important secondary source for this thesis, in which she seeks to demonstrate the contradictory ideology, aims and practices of the state and the new professional classes in pursuit of the bourgeois ideal of private, home-centred family life. Reiger describes the bourgeoisie as ‘leading’ and ‘dominant’, resulting in the [presumably unwitting] implication that working class people followed and were passive.57 But much of Reiger’s evidence comes from the rhetoric of groups that were seeking to lead and dominate and whose rhetoric therefore dominates the record. Drawing out the differences between the rhetoric and the actuality is another task of this thesis.

The notion of (inherently female) passive receptivity is carried to extremes in Alastair Davidson’s intense scrutiny of the legalistic Australian state. Davidson argues that because women were regarded as having the power to shape the national character in Australia, various groups tried to ‘educate’ working class mothers towards certain social objectives. Promotion of these objectives, directed at moulding women into housewives of a particular socially desirable kind, was undertaken through women’s journals and by various professional groups and institutions acting as agents of the state. In this they

56 Kingston, *op cit*, p.14
57 Reiger, *The Disenchantment* ..., p.3
were aided by ‘their accomplice in the home, their product, the Australian housewife’, Davidson says. [My emphasis]58

The perception of passivity also exists specifically in relation to waterfront women of the early twentieth century. Winifred Mitchell’s groundbreaking journal article ‘Home Life at the Hungry Mile: Sydney Wharf Labourers and their Families’, was an early attempt to include the home within the then too-narrow parameters of labour history. But Mitchell makes many inadequately sourced assertions, for instance that the electoral rolls ‘show that waterfront women were slow to exercise their voting rights’ and that even ‘the wives of trade union officials did not register for voting for some years’, that paint a portrait of generalised inaction.59

Mitchell is compelled to fill the void created by the (seeming) absence of evidence with a description of women who are defined more by external male institutions than they are by their own experience. A woman was expected to be engaged in home duties ‘by herself, her husband, by his union and by all the other institutions and individuals who preached that a woman’s place was in the home,’ she writes.60 This may be an accurate (if unsourced) depiction of some of the rhetoric of the period, but it leads only to perpetuation of stereotype: ‘Frugal, compassionate, patient, they tended the stove at home,’ Mitchell says, and waterfront women ‘remain in the shadows, and are illumined only by the reflected light of the men’s lives’.61 More recent historiography, with the benefit of several decades of feminist scholarship to assist, deals more comprehensively with the complexities of working class women’s experience.62

The Family

The association of women with domestic life is closely linked with the way in which the family is understood historically. The thesis recognizes that there is no ‘natural’ form of the family and that families of many different forms occur in different societies and historical periods, but it is not directly concerned with the relationship between family

59 Mitchell, op cit, p. 96; it is simply not possible to establish this from the electoral rolls.
60 ibid, p.89
61 ibid, pp. 96,87
62 For example, Davin and Ross, op cit; and, particularly, Caroline Steedman, op cit
form and the larger society per se. It will be evident throughout, however, that the families the thesis deals with are more-or-less flexible versions of the nuclear family that is understood to have developed out of the changed conditions of production initiated by the industrial revolution. These kinds of families were typical of the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century.

Many theorists have argued that most notions of the nuclear family’s relationship to capitalist economies are highly simplistic, not least because of the exclusion of women and children as economic actors of one kind or another. Recent work in Australia and elsewhere, some of it in response to feminist concerns, has related the family or household to the broader economy in terms of such things as measuring the monetary value of household tasks, or estimating the contribution of households to GDP. The assumptions behind these studies, including those that are Marxist in approach, tend to be masculinist because they are economistic and value the work of households or families in terms of the market place.

Some feminist work challenges these approaches by arguing either for alternative views of economics, or for alternative views of the interaction between the family and the wider economy. For instance, in Counting for Nothing, Marilyn Waring argues that national accounting systems exclude a great deal of the world’s production, including most women’s labour, because it is unpaid, and that they are inherently destructive because of the kinds of economically measurable activities that they reward. Waring’s purpose is directly political and she is arguing not so much for an alternative theory of

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economics as for a system of national accounting that will include and prioritise such things as a value for the environment.\textsuperscript{66}

J K Gibson-Graham argue that conventional economics understands the household economy as capitalism’s ‘feminized other’,\textsuperscript{67} and in *Family Economy*, Kerreen Reiger argues that ‘the neglect of the family as a locus of work as well as of affection, seriously limit[s] our understanding of social change in Australia’.\textsuperscript{68}

Countless studies have been inspired by feminist debates about the relationship between women’s unpaid housework and capitalism.\textsuperscript{69} This work has been useful for this thesis because of the questions it asks about the way in which economic accounts of the family in the wider society have been framed, but it is not central to its concerns. But because the thesis is concerned with significance and meaning from the perspective of the household, some particular historical studies, that take the household in total into account, have been especially valuable. These are those that look at families in terms of them being an ‘enterprise’, similar to the way in which pre-industrial revolution families and farming families are sometimes understood.\textsuperscript{70}

Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes* is about British middle class families in the early stages of the industrial revolution. Davidoff and Hall sought to examine the growth of the British middle class through a study of families because, as they put it, they were concerned with the inseparability of class and gender, both of which come together in families. They argue for ‘the centrality of the sexual division of labour within families for the development of capitalist enterprise’ but they write that the ‘world of production and the state has been systematically privileged as central to

\textsuperscript{68} Kerreen Reiger, *Family Economy*, McPhee Gribble, 1991, p.3
\textsuperscript{69} See, for example, Heidi I Hartmann ‘The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle: The example of Housework’ in Sandra Harding (ed) *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp.109-29; Anne Curthoys ‘Women – a ‘reserve army of labour’?’ in her *For and Against Feminism*, Allen and Unwin 1988, pp. 48-53. M Barrett and R Hamilton (eds) *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1986 has a several articles on the feminist/marxist debate by theorists and historians such as Roberta Hamilton, Bruce Curtis, Angela Miles, Bonnie Fox, Wally Seccombe, Pat Armstrong, Hugh Armstrong, Patricia Connelly and Mary O’Brien
\textsuperscript{70} Davison, McCarty and Cleary, *op cit*, pp. 303-304
historical understanding’. Their work ‘confronts the commonly accepted division of the world between public and private and the related theoretical difficulties of production and reproduction.’ Although women are confined to home and family, ‘sites which are accorded no conceptual or analytic importance in the social theories’, the success of wealthy, powerful and influential middle class men was ‘in fact, embedded in networks of familial and female support which underpinned their rise to public prominence’.  

Marilyn Lake’s Limits of Hope performs a similar task with relation to soldier settler families in rural Victoria between the world wars because it examines a scheme which was predicated on, and was certainly dependent upon, the labour of the entire family. Lenore Davidoff observes of Limits of Hope that it is a study of contradiction between ideologies, but it takes account of gender and class at the local level to become ‘a classic contribution to social history in encompassing a whole society refracted through the prism of a selected issue.’

In Family Time and Industrial Time: The relationship between the family and work in a New England Industrial Community, Tamara Hareven says that the specialized nature of historical studies has fostered a sense of division between work and family. Although the focus of Hareven’s work is different to this thesis (it was an extended study of several generations of men and women who worked not only in a single industry, but for a single company), its value lies in the way in which it treats work and home as inseparably entwined. These three studies focus on aspects of family life and work in different classes, time periods, and locations from the one under discussion in this thesis, but they are united in their perception of the significance of the internal and external relationships of the household as complex, dynamic, flexible and shaped by notions of gender and class. Although references to these works do not appear frequently in the body of the thesis, they have all sharpened and deepened the questions that I have asked of the material studied.

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71 Davidoff and Hall, op cit, pp. 13, 29, 13
73 Hareven, op cit, p. xi
SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Primary sources for this thesis, particularly direct evidence about the private experiences of women, were not abundant. However, limited sources offer particular opportunities for historical enquiry because they compel a closer and more rigorous scrutiny of the evidence they contain and they must be read ‘symptomatically’ for what is not there, as much as for what is.\textsuperscript{74} There is of course no such thing as a ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ source because they are all created within a particular set of social circumstances and for particular purposes. They will necessarily privilege certain facts, narratives and voices over others. The face value information of all primary sources must necessarily be vigorously interrogated because other stories will always lie beyond the boundaries of any source, or be subsumed unevenly within its outline.

These observations about the nature of sources may be especially true for working class people under capitalism, some of whom are the focus of this thesis. As Caroline Steedman has remarked, one effect of a class society has been the shaping of the historiography of working class life. Sources about working class people often don’t tell the story of working class lives, Steedman writes but rather ‘working-class people, their image, their appurtenances … [have been used] to tell other people’s stories: to tell some kind of story of the bourgeois self’.\textsuperscript{75}

There are similar issues in the way that sources deal with concepts of gender. Feminists have made the anti-positivist case with regard to the history of women, but the sheer volume of records relating to men encourages the perception that it is a relatively straightforward process to write men’s history because it seems that the stories are ‘there’ in the records, just waiting for the telling. But men’s history is only straightforward if it doesn’t challenge the stories that already exist. This thesis seeks to draw out meaning and significance for both women and men from the point of view of the household and neither perspective is readily apparent within any of the sources.

\textsuperscript{74} Allen, op cit, p. 176 \\
\textsuperscript{75} Caroline Steedman, \textit{Dust}, Manchester University Press 2001, p. 127
The main primary sources for this thesis were transcripts of evidence from the Court of Arbitration in 1905, and various oral history collections. Use of the latter has to be more strenuously defended than use of the former, because of the view that documentary records pass some kind of ‘objectivity’ test that oral history doesn’t. Objections to oral history circulate around the way in which it is influenced by such things as hindsight, collective amnesia and myth making. But from the perspective of accuracy, reliability or objectivity, it’s arguable that there is no substantial difference between something that is written down and something that is spoken. Indeed, the ‘subjectivity’ for which oral history is sometimes attacked is one of its strengths, because it makes no misleading claim to objectivity. Rather than speak of events themselves, oral history speaks of their meaning.

Paula Hamilton has drawn attention to the way in which oral history is a form of autobiography, and Janet McCalman has observed that an oral history interview is in fact a dialogue between two historians, ‘one of whom has complete and exclusive control of the evidence and has already selected and interpreted the story now made public’. I would add to McCalman’s observation that the interviewer in the oral history process is also selective and interpretive in terms of questions posed, and that further selection and interpretation occurs when the material in the interview is reworked for yet another purpose, such as a PhD thesis. The purposes for which oral history collections are created also shape their content.

In the case of the New South Wales Bicentennial Oral History Collection (NSWBOHC), which is used extensively in this thesis, the purpose was to celebrate Australia’s bicentennial year (1988) by recording the reminiscences of many of the state’s oldest citizens. The focus of these interviews is thus rather general and framed in terms of the contrast between life then and now, in terms of difference rather than, say, the potential for sameness. By contrast, the content of oral histories from Susannah Place (SPOHC), an extant row of terraces in Millers Point now run as a museum by the

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76 The wharf labourers’ case of 1905 and the coal lumpers case of 1905, cited above; the New South Wales Bicentennial Oral History Collection, the Susannah Place oral history collection, oral histories conducted by Grace Karskens in the pursuit of her historical and archaeological work; and oral histories conducted by Paul Ashton in Kate Blackmore.
77 Shields, op cit, p. 3
78 Sue Rosen, citing A. Portelli, in ‘Not Bringing Home the Bacon’, in Shields, op cit, p. 242
Historic Houses Trust, is focussed on information that can assist a contemporary interpretation of built heritage. Oral histories conducted by Grace Karskens (GKOH), on the other hand, are framed in terms of the concerns of her archaeological and historical work: who was related to whom, through what kinds of social relationships did objects from foreign lands appear on waterfront mantelpieces, and in what way did female networks underpin the local community.

Oral histories are first person accounts and most of those used in this thesis come from very old people who were recalling a way of life that they experienced as children many years previously. Thus their evidence is necessarily shaped in a combined way by the child’s perceptions and the experiences of the intervening decades. But the most valuable documentary sources for this thesis were also first person accounts, like the oral histories, but in their case they appear in the transcripts of two major cases in the Court of Arbitration in 1905. These first person accounts differ from the oral histories in a fundamental way because they are contemporary accounts from adults who were living in the same period that the oral histories recall.

The accounts contained in the Court of Arbitration transcripts virtually all come from men (one volume of transcript is lost, and Sarah Dawes’ is the only woman’s testimony to survive) and the testimony is shaped by the concerns of the early twentieth century Court of Arbitration, primarily whether or not waterfront workers deserved a wage rise on the grounds of their cost of living and/or the arduous nature of their work. The cases were ostensibly about the masculine and class-based world of waged work and working conditions, but the transcripts also contain a great deal of evidence about material and other circumstances of waterfront life such as household income, budgets, priorities in expenditure and family size. Thus although the information in the transcripts is structured in masculinist terms it also happens to reveal matters pertaining to gender, family and the personal life of the home in ways not dissimilar to the oral histories.

Because the thesis is concerned with personal experience its main focus is ‘practices and relationships, rather than statistics’, but it does use some quantitative data from such sources as Commonwealth Yearbooks, Sands directories, censuses, and,

80 As Davin describes her work of food and the poor, op cit, p. 168
particularly, electoral rolls. Because the thesis seeks to reveal the gendered way in which records construct the past and influence historiography such data is used in a critical way. Various newspapers, journals, trade union records and annual reports of the Sydney City Council, the Sydney Harbour Trust and the Central Methodist Mission are used to add to the empirical base of the thesis and to provide contemporary ideological context.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

With the exception of this Introduction and the Conclusion, this thesis contains eight chapters that are organised into three sections.

Section 1 contains two chapters. Their linked themes are the absences that occur as a result of the processes involved in evaluations of significance. Such absences occur from two directions, through two separate but not unrelated processes: the creation of historical records, and the shaping of contemporary perceptions of the past.

Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage introduces definitions of the waterfront and its people and draws some geographic, temporal and occupational boundaries. It sets the scene for many of the themes of the thesis through a discussion of the way that historical records reflect a ‘social reality’ determined by the ideology of the period in which they were created. It analyses the demography of the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront to show that a positivist reading of evidence based on masculinist constructions is misleading and interpretively suspect particularly with regard to women, but also with regard to men, children and the household in general.

Chapter 2: The Missing Waterfront Men builds on some of the evidence raised in the previous chapter to show that aspects of men’s history can also become ‘hidden’ because of the way that contemporary perceptions shape perceptions of the past. In this case records challenging the wharf labourer’s claim to the dominant waterfront labour story exist, but a perceptual void has occurred because of the selective privileging that occurs in the ongoing political and historical process.
Section II contains three chapters that are all concerned with meaning and significance implied by the practicalities of life in early twentieth century Sydney waterfront households.

Chapter 3: Family Finances deals with household expenditure and income to argue that the breadwinner/dependent spouse dichotomy had little relevance in early twentieth Sydney waterfront households. It analyses the gendered, class and generational factors that influenced the financial maintenance of waterfront households. The chapter reveals a dynamically fluctuating set of relationships involving all members of the household that does not reflect the fixed gendered and generational relationships assumed in masculinist models.

Chapter 4: Waterfront Housing discusses the social and ideological context of early twentieth century housing to contrast it with the daily experience of living in waterfront dwellings. It argues that the social intentions of the architecture of newly built waterfront housing was at odds with the way that people used their houses. The chapter draws out the gendered uses of housing that differed, for arguably class reasons, from the bourgeois model of family life.

Chapter 5: Babies mounts an anti-economistic argument about fertility on the Sydney waterfront on the early twentieth century. This chapter analyses representations of working class women and fertility in the Australian historiography. It argues that the large families that continued to exist on the waterfront at a time of generalized fertility decline can be ascribed to the meaning of families for waterfront women that were cultural rather than economic.

Section III contains three chapters that provide accounts of the meaning and significance of waterfront work of all kinds for women, children and men when focus is redirected from the market to the household. The chapters arrive at explanations for gendered and generational work and draw out similarities between the forms of work that waterfront women, children and men did, in contrast to the differences entailed in masculinist constructions.
Chapter 6: White Aprons and Boarders, discusses the many kinds of work, paid and unpaid, that home-based waterfront women did. It argues that many aspects of waterfront women’s home-based work, paid or unpaid, can be understood as having a financial purpose that is similar to men’s waged work. However, the meaning and significance that is attributed to the ‘domesticity’ of caring for a family and husband remains obscure for the women themselves. The authority and personal power held by women within the household, particularly with regard to financial management, challenges assumptions that wages confer power on men within the household.

Chapter 7: Billy Carts discusses the range of different kinds of work that waterfront children undertook in the early twentieth century. It entails an anti-economistic position because it argues that definitions of childhood resting on the economic passivity or activity implied by the school/work divide were not reflected in perceptions of childhood in early twentieth century Sydney waterfront households.

Chapter 8: Finding the Femininity, applies a feminist analysis to many aspects of waterfront men’s work. It argues that contrary to masculinist constructions of difference between men’s and women’s work, on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront they bore many similarities. This was reflected in the amount of unpaid domestic work that men did and the unpaid time that was associated the paid work. Men’s adaptive income-generating strategies were also more similar to those conventionally understood as female than they were to the male occupational categories of masculinist constructions. The degree of self-sacrifice and competition between men that was entailed in men’s waged waterfront work implies that relationships with their households were more important to individual men than the relationships with other men that are foregrounded in masculinist history.
SECTION I: ABSENCE AND PRESENCE
CHAPTER 1

DEMOGRAPHIC CAMOUFLAGE

Demographic information is a major positivist tool for historical enquiry. The Introduction to this thesis discussed the weaknesses in the empiricist or positivist approach to history because of the way in which it fails to account for ‘absences and silences’ in the record, to use Judith Allen’s phrase again. The main aim of this chapter is to establish this methodological point with reference to demographic information about early twentieth century waterfront Sydney. The chapter argues that a reliance on a positivist interpretation of demographic information leads to a masculinist construction of waterfront life that is misleading not only with regard to women and children, but also with regard to men. However, the chapter also demonstrates that aspects of demographic evidence can challenge contemporary perceptions of historical significance, a topic to be addressed in detail in the following chapter.

The collection of statistical information, which escalated rapidly after Federation in 1901, has provided the foundation for a great deal of historical work about Australia in the twentieth century. For the purposes of this thesis such statistics would desirably yield information about who lived where and with whom, what kind of work they did, and how such places and activities interacted in various social and economic ways along the Sydney waterfront. Information such as the numbers of men, women and children who lived at any given time on the waterfront, their occupations, marriage rates, family size, religious denominations, and residential and employment addresses would all be pertinent.

No single demographic source can provide all this information, but nor can the collective use of sources because of the different bureaucratic or commercial purposes for which each was established. Direct correlation of demographic statistics from different sources is perennially problematic because they overlap meaningfully only occasionally. For instance, although Sands Directories reveal a certain kind of house-by-house information, they recognise individuals only in terms of a nominated ‘householder’ and occupations only in terms of businesses proprietors of one kind or another. Thus most waterfront people are not described within its parameters. Such
things as the number of people who might be living in a household, their non-commercial or industrial occupations, and whether or not they might be related by marriage or blood are not revealed.\footnote{Sands Sydney and New South Wales Directory 1858-1933}

Many local government records are similarly narrow because although they might provide a landlord’s name, or the name of the individual nominally responsible for paying rent, they are blank on other questions.\footnote{The City of Sydney Archives contains a large range of such records, including Ratepayers Assessment Books 1845-1950.} Whilst censuses and yearbooks are useful for general statistical information about such things as family size, marriage rates, and male and female occupations, their lack of local specificity limits their usefulness to contrast and comparison purposes. Some narrower sources, such as trade union-related records, yield small amounts of relevant information, but are useful only to amplify other more detailed statistics.\footnote{For instance, the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union membership lists from the early twentieth century, which are held in the Noel Butlin Archives at the Australian National University, provide union members’ names and addresses but of course don’t include women, nor waterfront men who weren’t members of that union. (NBA Z248/43)}

Most of the information discussed in this chapter comes from Commonwealth electoral rolls. Other evidence pertaining to the demography of the waterfront is used in a supportive rather than comprehensive way. Like all other sources, electoral rolls are by no means fully revelatory on all statistics that might be relevant to an understanding of the waterfront household. Such things as marital status, familial relationships, ethnicity, numbers of children and religious denominations are all absent - but they do provide person by person information about numbers of adult men and women, and their residential addresses and occupations, from which interpretations about household life might begin to emerge. Since the subdivision of Gipps in the Commonwealth electorate of West Sydney included the Rocks and Millers Point, which are the areas recalled in the relevant oral history collections and also alluded to in the 1905 Court of Arbitration transcripts, the main focus of this discussion is contained within Gipps’s boundaries.
Households and families

Since this thesis is concerned with significance and meaning from the perspective of the household, demographic information on waterfront families would be an appropriate foundation for this discussion. For the purposes of social and economic policy in Australia, central importance was (and is) attributed to families because they are perceived as an essential or core social and economic unit. This was especially true of the early twentieth century because of local and received political, economic and ideological concerns. These included such things as alarm amongst government, religious and other bodies about the declining birth rate and the advocacy of the male breadwinner/dependent wife roles in labour and other circles, as the Introduction to this thesis has discussed.

But in spite of such concerns, and in spite of the state obsession with collecting statistics, families as such were not counted in early twentieth century Australia because it was (and remains) an impossible task. Indeed, the whole concept of ‘family’ is so amorphous that it is impossible to nail down as a concrete entity at any given point in time. The apparently looser term ‘household’ similarly eludes statistical measurement. What exactly could or should be measured or counted: numbers of residences, one-generational ‘nuclear’ families, multi-generational ‘extended’ families, households wherein everyone is biologically related but none are married to one another, or households where there are no blood ties but shifting populations of people cohabiting under a single roof? And so on. Nevertheless, abundant Australian statistics from the early twentieth century imply the existence of families and/or households of one kind or another: population figures, sex ratios, marriages, birth rates, divorce, widowhood, remarriage and so on. Censuses count such things as marriages, rates of ‘issue’ for women of particular age groups and religions, and numbers of children within certain age bands.

Like many other sources, the electoral rolls for Gipps also imply the existence of families and households of one kind or another, even though they were not established to provide direct information of this kind. Because the rolls provide the names of adults who are registered to vote, it is sometimes evident that individuals in particular households are related in some way because they share the same last name. However,
although it is probable that John and Mary Abbott, say, who live at the same address, have some kind of familial relationship, it is impossible to tell from the rolls if they are brother and sister, husband and wife, or father and daughter. Similar problems apply to households that seem to be entirely male and amongst whom many share a last name. Are they brothers, cousins, or fathers and sons? Where are their biologically related female relatives, who, even if they no longer cohabit, must have existed at some time? Are they living at the same address but not recorded on the rolls, living somewhere else, or, because they have a different last name, do they appear elsewhere in an ‘unconnected’ way in the rolls, which are arranged alphabetically by last name?

Because women routinely changed their names on marriage, their familial relationships are more elusive than those of men, but the problem is even more difficult when an attempt is made to include children in any statistical analysis of the household. Concern about children, their numbers, their health, their education and emotional care, played a central role within the intense debates about families in early twentieth century Australia, but demographic information does not reveal how many children existed house-by-house in any particular locale at any given point in time. For instance, the 1901 New South Wales Census provided figures on children for the Gipps Ward of the Sydney City Council (which closely resembled the outline for the Commonwealth subdivision). If the definition of a child is taken to mean those less than fourteen years of age (the then legal school leaving age) then the total in the Gipps ward in 1901 was 2629, of which 1378 were male and 1251 were females. However, there is no way of knowing how many families or households they belonged to.

Thus although demographic information of all kinds implies the existence of families, and non-demographic evidence such as oral histories and court transcripts confirm this implication, actual families or households in Gipps cannot be counted or measured in any statistically meaningful way. However, electoral rolls required all enrolled adults to list both their residential addresses and their occupations so it appears that where people

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4 Grace Karskens observes in *Inside the Rocks: The Archaeology of a Neighbourhood*, Hale and Iremonger, 1999, that through using family histories ‘Suddenly a list of seemingly unconnected men’s names, and a blank row of houses, are transformed into a neighbourhood of homes owned and occupied and linked by sisters, mothers, cousins, aunts.’ p.137

5 T A Coghlan, Government Statistician, *Census of New South Wales, 1901*, Government Printer, p.8

6 An attempt at a breakdown of this kind could be done through a search on the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, but it would be an enormous task well beyond the scope of this thesis.
lived (home), and what they did (work), are relatively concrete and measurable categories that might indirectly yield information about the household.

The demographic information to be discussed here is taken from the Commonwealth electoral rolls for the years 1908 and 1917. Because the thesis is concerned with economically ‘healthy’ years, 1908 is the more significant of the two. By that time the Australian economy had recovered from the depression of the 1890s and the drought years of the early 1900s. It could thus be argued that this year occurred in a period of relatively plentiful supply of work for waterfront men. For women, a different factor affected the choice of 1908 as a ‘good’ year, in research terms. They had gained the vote federally in 1902 and it was judged that by 1908 sufficient time had elapsed for most adult women to have registered for compulsory voting and thus appear on the rolls.7 By contrast, 1917, the Commonwealth electoral year closest to a decade after 1908, was a year of crisis. The Australian nation had been involved in World War I since 1914, and the General Strike that occurred in August/September of 1917 was preceded and followed by high levels of unemployment. For these reasons the discussion of information about 1908 is more comprehensive than that about 1917, which is used rather more for purposes of comparison and contrast.

**Home**

To take the category of ‘home’ first: the electoral rolls refer to home in the sense that everyone registered to vote must also provide a nominated ‘place of living’. With regard to this, the most striking aspect of the electoral lists for 1908, and 1917, is the extent to which the number of men living in Gipps exceeds the number of women living there. The masculinity rate is a ratio that indicates the number of men for every one hundred women. Men outnumbered women in Gipps and there was a significant increase in this dominance between the first and second decades of the twentieth century. In 1908 the masculinity rate in Gipps was 153, but by 1917 this had increased to 192.3.8 That is to say for every two women in Gipps in 1908 there were around three men, but by 1917 for every two women there were now almost four men.

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7 Robin Walker in ‘Aspects of Working-Class Life in Industrial Sydney in 1913’, *Labour History*, no. 58, May 1990, p. 38, suggests that some working-class women may have been tardy in enrolling.

8 These masculinity rates were calculated from the electoral rolls of those years for the Commonwealth of Australia.
Although a relatively high masculinity rate was a feature of Australian life in general in the early twentieth century, the rates for both New South Wales and the nation in general declined in the first two decades. In 1908 the masculinity rate for New South Wales was 110.77, which was slightly higher than the national masculinity rate of 107.64. By 1921, however, the masculinity rate for NSW was 104, and for Australia the figure was 103. So whilst the state and national rates were declining, the masculinity rate in Gipps was growing.

Taken in isolation, the Gipps masculinity rate seems to imply that there must have been many single men in this subdivision. As a consequence, there would have been a low rate of family formation, which clearly has implications for the way in which questions about the household in this locality might be framed. But a more complex picture emerges when the Gipps masculinity rate is compared with the masculinity rates for subdivisions that were its near neighbours. Table 1.1 below shows the masculinity rates in 1908 for nearby subdivisions to highlight differences in pattern. Denison comes closest to the masculinity rate for New South Wales in general, but none of the other subdivisions reflects it precisely. Indeed, whilst Gipps, Lang and George St North have markedly higher masculinity rates than the state and national picture, it is also interesting that nearby Blackwattle, Toxteth and Balmain have markedly lower masculinity rates. There were, in fact, more women than men living in these subdivisions, in contrast to the entire state and national picture.

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9 Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1912 and earlier years, Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1913, p.110 (the rate was higher in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia)


11 As Graeme Davison concluded in Graeme Davison, J. W. McCarty and Ailsa McLeary (eds) Australians 1888, Fairfax, Syme, Weldon and Associates, 1987, p. 204. ‘The proportion of bachelors living in the waterside wards of Sydney was twice the city and three times the suburban average.’ This conclusion relies on a literal interpretation of the ‘facts’ and in any event is not actually empirically establishable.
MASCULINITY RATES FOR THE COMMONWEALTH SUBDIVISION OF GIPPS AND NEIGHBOURING SUBDIVISIONS: 1908

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBDIVISION</th>
<th>MALES</th>
<th>FEMALES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blackwattle</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denison</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balmain</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gipps</strong></td>
<td><strong>153</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lang</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George St North</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toxteth</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1

These divergent but parallel masculinity rates may imply a relationship between the two and evidence to this effect will be discussed in subsequent chapters. But in any event there is no reason to conclude that the high numbers of men who recorded their ‘place of living’ as Gipps necessarily meant large numbers of bachelors and low levels of family formation. Such men may well have had some kind of ‘home’, or at least a familial or marital relationship, elsewhere. As Shirley Fisher has argued, mobility was an occupational requirement of (male) casual labour (as most waterfront work was) in the late nineteenth century. This was as much a factor in female-headed households as other issues such as divorce, widowhood or abandonment.\(^\text{13}\)

Accompanying the rapidly increasing masculinity rate in Gipps in the early twentieth century was a growth in the total population of that electorate from 4,042 in 1908 to 4,920 in 1917. Indeed, this growth in total population is explained almost entirely by an

\(^{12}\) These rates were calculated from the raw figures contained in the electoral rolls. George Street North was a subdivision of the Commonwealth electorate of East Sydney; Balmain was a subdivision of the Commonwealth electorate of Dalley; the remainder were all subdivisions of the Commonwealth electorate of West Sydney.

increase in the total number of men, as the total number of women in the electorate remained fairly constant between the two dates, having increased only marginally from 1,627 in 1908 to 1,683 in 1917. If the masculinity rate for 1908 is accepted unquestioningly as an indication of high levels of unattached men, then the masculinity rate for 1917 suggests a level of waterfront bachelordom of absolutely extraordinary proportions at a time when the national masculinity rate was on the decline. Evidence to challenge this literal reading of statistics will be discussed in following chapters.

Work

Because all enrolled adults were required to list their occupations on the electoral rolls, the category of ‘work’, both within and outside the household, at first seems relatively unproblematic. Indeed, a common sense explanation for the high masculinity rate in Gipps is the proximity to paid employment that this waterfront locality offered. When masculine occupations in Gipps are studied it is clear that many men were engaged with occupations that can be understood as either ‘waterfront’ or the closely related category of ‘maritime’. Such occupations included seamen, stewards, mariners, stevedores, boatmen, boat builders, firemen, engineers, watchmen, donkey men, sea captains, master mariners, ships’ riggers, timekeepers and carters, as well as wharf labourers and coal lumpers.

Employment in Gipps was not exclusively waterfront or maritime though, and men engaged in other occupational categories also lived in the locality. They included, for instance, billiard markers, barmen, postal assistants, painters, slaters, tinsmiths, paperhangers, builders, gangers, bricklayers and tram conductors. Some of these occupations are an indication of the construction and demolition that was occurring around Millers Point and the Rocks in the early twentieth century, others of the proximity of the waterfront to the commercial functions of the nearby CBD, and others to the expansion of local infrastructure.

14 Commonwealth of Australia, Division of West Sydney, Roll of Electors for the Subdivision of Gipps, 1908 and 1917
15 Calculated from the electoral rolls for Gipps, 1908
16 Shirley Fitzgerald and Christopher Keating, Millers Point: The Urban Village, Hale and Iremonger 1991, pp. 65-78
Although there was a sprinkling of men in Gipps who had skilled occupations such as ironworkers, plumbers, blacksmiths, boilermakers, saddlers and woodturners, the area was dominated numerically by ‘unskilled’ occupations, including those directly engaged in waterfront work of various kinds. These included wharf labourers, coal lumpers and general labourers. At 387, coal lumpers were the most strongly represented of these occupations, closely followed by labourers at 383 and wharf labourers at 363.

Coal lumping and wharf labouring are occupationally specific terms but the term ‘labourer’ can mean many things. It most usually indicates an unskilled man who works at physical labour of one kind or another. Both wharf labouring and coal lumping were, theoretically at least, unskilled physical labour, performable, again theoretically, by any man with the requisite strength, so it is probable that many men who called themselves labourers worked in some form of waterfront work at least some of the time.

In the contemporary sense the term ‘waterfront worker’ means, by and large, a wharf labourer, a man who labours on the wharves loading and unloading ships, but the term is not so straightforward historically. For instance, although the term ‘stevedore’ was and is sometimes used more-or-less interchangeably with ‘wharf labourer’, in Sydney in the early twentieth century it most often meant a man who was an agent who hired wharf labourers for shipping companies, whose income came from providing labour for the wharves rather than from labouring on them.¹⁷

A more significant point about use of the term ‘waterfront worker’ in early twentieth century waterfront Sydney, however, is that it also encompassed coal lumpers. This occupation is virtually non-existent today but was then very well known. It is the revelation of the numerical prevalence of coal lumpers in the demography of early twentieth century waterfront Sydney that challenges contemporary perceptions of what constitutes historically significant waterfront work. (This proposition is discussed in Chapter 2: The Missing Waterfront Men.) In addition to those men who described

¹⁷ This distinction is reflected in the contemporary and high profile company name Patrick Stevedores. There were also local and regional differences in the use of this term. For instance, in the port of Melbourne, ‘stevedore’ entailed a certain status amongst wharf labourers because it was applied to men who loaded ocean going, as opposed to coastal, ships, reflected in the early union the Port Phillip Stevedores’ Association. Margo Beasley, Wharfies: the History of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia, Halstead Press in Association with the Australian Maritime Museum, 1996, p.19
themselves on the electoral rolls simply as coal lumpers, the occupational category also included men who said they were winchdrivers, planksmen, trimmers and shovellers. When these occupations are counted together coal lumpers outnumber wharf labourers in Gipps. But since the apparent membership of the wharf labourers’ union was about triple that of the stated membership of the coal lumpers’ union it is probable that the former included some men who described themselves by the catchall term of ‘labourer’.  

The historiographical references to the dominance of wharf labourers in Gipps in the early twentieth century thus rely on a rather loose interpretation of all these occupational categories. The more precise occupational description of wharf labourer is probably one determined by union and arbitration-derived categories in the early 1900s, which grew in specificity through the twentieth century. The more pertinent point, however, is that since many men who worked on the wharves must have been calling themselves simply ‘labourer’, this implies that they worked not only on the wharves, but elsewhere when opportunity and/or need dictated. That is to say, the structuring of the electoral rolls implies that men had a single occupation at any particular time, but many waterfront men must have had more than one.

For all these reasons, the term ‘waterfront worker’ is taken in this thesis to mean men who described themselves as wharf labourers; men who sometimes worked as wharf labourers, lived near the waterfront and described themselves by the more fluid category of ‘labourer’; and men who described themselves as one or other category of coal lumper. For the reasons outlined above, stevedores have been excluded from this analysis. Thus, if male occupation is assumed to be the defining characteristic of a community, early twentieth century Gipps can be described as a community dominated by waterfront workers when wharf labourers, labourers and coal lumpers are all counted together. This dominance of waterfront workers remained as the masculinity rate rose in the first two decades of the century. In 1908, 47 per cent of men in Gipps were engaged

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18 Secretary of the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union, S T Harrison, said that there were ‘about 3,000’ men on the union’s books in 1906, in the Grain Bags Regulation Bill, *Votes and Proceedings of the NSW Legislative Assembly 1906*, p.4; secretary of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union Angus McDonald asserted: ‘about 890 men in the [coal lumpers’] union, about 750 financial’ in the wharf labourers’ 1905 Case, 2/59 vol 2, p. 691.
in waterfront work. By 1917, when the population and masculinity rates for Gipps had both increased, 49 per cent could be categorised as waterfront workers.\textsuperscript{19}

This characterisation obligatorily excludes women, for both numerical and occupational reasons. As the figures discussed above revealed, there were far fewer women than men in Gipps in 1908 and in 1917. Additionally, the number of Gipps women engaged in paid employment of any kind was, according to the electoral rolls, proportionately tiny. Because of increasing industrialisation in Australia towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, there had been growing employment opportunities for women in cities. Beverly Kingston asserts that as early as 1890 ‘about one-third of Australian women also belonged to the workforce outside the home’.\textsuperscript{20}

The proposition that women’s workforce participation increased in early twentieth century Australia is widely accepted but it is difficult to arrive at any reliable statistical picture, as the dearth of relevant tables or statistical information in the secondary sources indicates. However, sources assert such propositions as: the ratio of women to men employed in factory work had been ‘about one to seven’ in 1886, but was ‘rather lower than one to three’ in 1912. The main areas of female employment in Australia in the early twentieth century continued to be domestic work of various kinds; but also included clerical and commercial work; textiles and clothing; and ‘food, drink, narcotics and stimulants’. Women also worked in retailing in growing numbers. Many of these occupations had always been done by women, but newer ‘trades’ were also specifically female, including, for instance, bookbinding and lighter aspects of the drug trade such as wrapping.\textsuperscript{21}

Whatever the precise figures on women’s workforce participation, in Gipps very few women were engaged in paid employment in the early twentieth century, but their participation in the workforce grew through those years, as it did elsewhere in the country. Of 1,627 adult women registered to vote in Gipps in 1908, only 125, or less

\textsuperscript{19} In 1908 1133 men of 2415; in 1917 1601 men of 3237; calculated from the Commonwealth electoral rolls for the relevant years
\textsuperscript{20} Beverly Kingston, \textit{My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Anne}, Nelson Melbourne, 1977, p. 7. It’s difficult to know what such a figure means – did they work ‘outside the home’ throughout their lives, as young women, or in times of financial difficulty etc. Was this a fixed relationship between women’s lives and paid work, or a changing one?
\textsuperscript{21} The \textit{Official Commonwealth Year Book of Australia, 1912 and Earlier Years}, pp. 534, 152-5
than eight per cent, indicated they were in paid employment at that time. In 1917, this figure had grown to 329 women of a total of 1,683, or 19.55 per cent.\textsuperscript{22} Those women who were involved in paid employment were engaged in a range of occupations that more-or-less reflected the state and national patterns, if not the proportions, for women’s employment generally. The relative availability of these kinds of employment for women was probably linked to concentrations of industry and commerce associated with the wharves such as hotels and laundries (as opposed to, say, the kind of employment women undertook in rural areas). Unlike the occupations of the men discussed above, none of the Gipps women’s employment can be defined as ‘waterfront’ because it could, in effect, be performed anywhere.

The women of Gipps were employed as barmaids, cooks, domestic servants, and laundresses; in clothing manufacture as dressmakers, tailoresses, milliners, and needlewomen; in retail as cashiers, saleswomen, manageresses, grocers and shop assistants; in clerical work as book-keepers, clerks, typists, stenographers, post and telegraph assistants, and typesetters; in factories as machinists, packers, cigarette makers, umbrella makers, and rubber workers; and in hospitals, correctional institutions and private households as matrons, assistant matrons, nurses, warders, wardsmaids, and midwives. In tiny numbers Gipps women had ‘professional’ occupations such as teachers, musicians, and photographers (probably employed nearby in the CBD as photographers’ assistants), or had their own businesses such as hotel or restaurant keepers, shopkeepers and ‘dealers’.\textsuperscript{23} Although a greater proportion of Gipps women was participating in the workforce in 1917 than in 1908, the range of female occupations was distinctly similar.

This discussion about the details of the paid employment of women who lived in Gipps is possible because of the extent to which the state was interested in paid employment of all kinds, a category that largely consisted of men, but also happened to include a smaller number of women. But the far more important statistic regarding the employment of women who lived in waterfront communities is that most of them were not technically ‘employed’ at all, but declared themselves to be engaged in ‘home

\textsuperscript{22} Calculated from the Commonwealth electoral rolls for 1908 and 1917.
\textsuperscript{23} These occupations are merely representative, there were very many more.
duties’. Table 1:2 below shows that proportionately more women were occupied with home duties in Gipps than they were in any other nearby subdivision.

In Gipps the proportion of women who described their occupation in this way in 1908 was 93 per cent. By 1917 this proportion had declined to around 80.45 per cent, in keeping with the relative increase in women’s workforce participation at that time. George Street North was an unusual and tiny subdivision, subsequently abolished, that contained a mix of commercial and residential facilities. Its proportion of women on home duties was the lowest, at 73 per cent.

WOMEN OCCUPIED WITH HOME DUTIES IN THE COMMONWEALTH SUBDIVISION OF GIPPS AND NEIGHBOURING SUBDIVISIONS: 1908

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subdivision</th>
<th>Percentage of Women on Home duties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gipps</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denison</td>
<td>87.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toxteth</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrmont</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackwattle</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lang</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balmain</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George St North</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1:2

Interpretations

Thus the demography about ‘work’ in the Gipps electorate in the early twentieth century asserts that the largest occupational category for men was paid waterfront employment.

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24 These percentages were calculated from the Commonwealth Electoral Rolls for 1908
that took place away from the household, and the largest occupational group for women was unpaid ‘home duties’ that took place within the household. (About children’s occupations, this source is entirely silent.) If work is understood narrowly as only that which was paid and occurred away from the household, then interpretations of what characterised Gipps must inevitably be skewed in favour of masculinist constructions because many more men than women were in paid employment. On this interpretation Gipps was a waterfront community dominated by men and masculine pursuits.

But if what defines a community is understood in terms of occupation, rather than whether or not such an occupation is paid, then it is possible for alternative characterisations to emerge. In Gipps in 1908 the total number of men engaged in waterfront work was 1,133 but the total number of women engaged in home duties, at 1,502, was actually greater. Thus it could be argued that if occupation, as opposed to paid employment, characterises an area, then Gipps was an area characterised by women engaged in domestic duties. Through such a reorienting of focus the household can emerge as a site that competes with masculinist constructions of significance.

From the internal perspective of the household, the bald demographic facts about Gipps seem to tell a straightforward story about how relationships between men and women within its boundaries worked. If waterfront men worked for wages and most Gipps women were occupied with unpaid home duties the obvious implication is that most of these women were married to some of these men in a ‘traditional’ breadwinner/dependent spouse arrangement where men supported families financially and women took care of husbands and children within the home. Unpaid work in the household, largely performed by women, is understood as economically valueless in these kinds of constructions. (For similar reasons children are also excluded more or less wholesale from many statistical sources.)

The most loudly voiced complaints about this kind of interpretation are related to concern about the way in which various kinds of statistics under represent the remunerative work that women did. Electoral rolls, censuses, and other statistical records generally define occupations in terms of what counts as economically
‘productive’ resulting in a general statistical bias towards the (male) breadwinner. In other words, such records rest on a masculinist perception of social reality.

A close analysis of the biases entailed in the way in which demographic information is constructed suggests complex stories. There are many reasons why an accurate representation of what women do, and their relationships to work, men and family life, are not represented on the electoral rolls. Women in socially undesirable occupations such as prostitution may not have recorded this on the electoral rolls or other records; women who worked with their husbands in shops or other small businesses may not have recorded such activity either, and the same can be said for women whose primary task was husband and childcare, but who took in laundry, boarders, or piece work to earn additional income. Women who were only intermittently or occasionally in the formal workforce may not have described themselves in this way, and the same could be said for women who were, effectively, unemployed.

Desley Deacon and Katrina Alford have addressed the way in which particular ideological biases, especially those held by the colonial middle class, influenced such issues in the Australian context. Deacon has argued that the characterisation of men as economically active and women as economically dependent occurred in an extreme way in colonial censuses because of particular political and economic debates that rested on specific perceptions of gender. The economic contribution of women towards the support of their families, and the degree to which women might compete with men for jobs, was perceived as an indication of declining standards of living for the whole community. An economy where few women worked or sought to work outside the home was perceived as desirable and, reflecting this ideology, the notions of (male) breadwinner and (female) dependent spouse became institutionalised in colonial censuses.

Although Alford disagrees with the way in which Deacon holds New South Wales government statistician Timothy Coghlan more or less personally responsible for this

26 Desley Deacon, Managing Gender: The State, the New Middle Class and Women Workers. 1830-1930. Oxford University press, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 140-1
process, she nevertheless agrees that censuses are ‘social constructions’ that ‘reflect dominant philosophies and ideologies as much if not more than they provide realistic accounts of the incidence and nature of women’s paid employment’. She says that by revising women’s workforce participation downwards, the actions of twentieth century economic historians had only ‘reinforced and aggravated the original bias.’27 In other words, censuses (and other demographic information) are often less about what was actually happening than they are about constructing perceptions of the world according to what is thought ought to happen.

For the purposes of this thesis, the issue is not so much the way in which waterfront women’s paid employment may have been underestimated in the electoral rolls because non-demographic evidence, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters, supports the notion that married women in Gipps, especially those with children, were by and large not employed outside the home. Rather, the issue here is the way in which such women were constructed as economically passive and dependent on the grounds of their gender rather than on the grounds of the work that they were or were not doing. Not only is domestic work not accorded any economic value but women who had no men to take care of, or who had, say, a pension or private income, are still described in terms of the occupation that implies economic dependency and/or practical support for a male breadwinner. Whilst the category of home duties suggests the domestic labour entailed in wifehood and motherhood, it also included, but didn’t isolate, women who were widows, women whose children had left home, economically dependent elderly mothers, non-employed adult daughters, female invalids, some women with no visible means of support, and so on. Some of these women may well have been performing little or no domestic work at all.

But there are also other less well-recognised issues about the misleading nature of occupational constructions in the statistics. These are issues that apply to perceptions of men. For instance, the way in which men’s paid occupations are recorded implies a kind of immutability that conceals the extent to which individual men might have moved in and out of a range of occupations, aspects of which have been referred to above. But the more important point is that the way in which men are virtually always categorised as

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economically active fails to allow for any perception of them as economically passive or unproductive, as women are most often categorised. Men who were invalid, ill, unemployed, working only one day a week, or taking care of a sick wife are not described thus on the electoral rolls, because they are always described in terms of the masculinist construction of paid male employment. No man in Gipps in the early twentieth century described his occupation as ‘home duties’ even if he spent all of his time at home, was perhaps engaged in domestic tasks of one kind or another, or was in fact dependent on some form of female income.

Male unemployment is a particular case in point. The increase in the numbers of men resident in Gipps in 1917, all of whom recorded occupations on the electoral rolls implying they were in paid employment, were in fact far more likely to have been men seeking work because of the general unemployment and other circumstances that prompted the 1917 general strike. Their economic inactivity, and possible dependence, is obscured in the same way that women’s economic activity or independence is obscured, by the masculinist bias of the demographic record.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that an interrogative approach to demographic information about the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century reveals the weaknesses in a positivist interpretation of ‘factual’ evidence. Although households and families were and are of central social and economic importance, and their existence is implied in censuses and many other sources, families as such are not detectable within the demographic evidence. Marital, blood and non-familial relationships between adults are also obscure. Women’s relationships with others are particularly elusive because of routine name changing on marriage. Although children are measured in various ways in Australian statistics no source reveals such things as average family size within a locality, or numbers of offspring house-by-house. Although the greater numbers of men than women in Gipps in the early twentieth century is assumed in some historiography to mean a high level of bachelordom and a low level of family formation, this proposition is not demonstrable within the statistical evidence.
Occupational categories for waterfront men and women (and children) are less about the actual work they did than they are about gendered constructions of perceived economic passivity or activity. A masculinist interpretation of relationships within Gipps households is the only one possible when such statistical representations are taken at face value because the implication is that such relationships accorded with the male breadwinner/dependent spouse model of family life, and to an exaggerated extent relative to other parts of Australia. But if occupation rather than paid employment is what characterises a locality, Gipps was less a community characterised by male waterfront work than it was a place characterised by women’s domestic labour, in other words, characterised by the concerns of the household. With the exception of Chapter 2: The Missing Waterfront Men, subsequent chapters examine forms of evidence that challenge impressions created by a reliance on positivism. The Missing Waterfront Men, however, discusses the way in which a positivist interpretation of evidence contained within the demographic sources can also challenge contemporary perceptions of past significance.
CHAPTER 2

THE MISSING WATERFRONT MEN

Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage drew attention to the pitfalls of a positivist reading of demographic evidence. In the case of the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront, such a reading led inevitably to constructions of the relationships of the household that were masculinist because they were shaped by the ideologically inspired gendered division of the breadwinner/dependent spouse dichotomy. Women were the main losers in this construction, and children were also excluded.

However, the chapter also drew attention to evidence about men that was revealed by the demography and which challenged contemporary perceptions of historical significance vis-à-vis men’s waged waterfront work. A breakdown of occupational categories for Gipps showed that amongst the men who were defined by their waterfront work a large proportion described themselves as one or another kind of coal lumper, even though the history of waterfront labour in Australia has been more or less exclusively ‘owned’ by wharf labourers.

This chapter is concerned with retrieving the coal lumpers’ ‘lost’ history by contrasting their working conditions with those of the wharf labourers. Through this method the chapter argues the coal lumpers’ case for inclusion in the history of waterfront labour in Australia. Like the home-based women of Gipps they are another absence in the dominant narrative of waterfront labour, but their exclusion has come about for different reasons.

Absences that affect the history of men are often different from absences that affect the history of women, but they are absences nonetheless. In the case of the history of waterfront men such absences have less to do with the lack of evidence that is often the lot of women, than they do with the way in which the history of waterfront men is constructed. In spite of the coal lumpers’ substantial presence on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront their story has not survived into the present. However, historical evidence about the nature of their work is abundant and reveals that in terms
of its symbolic masculinity, the coal lumpers have as much right to a place in Australian waterfront history as the wharf labourers.¹

The history of wharf labouring in Australia exemplifies the way in which certain kinds of stories come to dominate historical accounts, irrespective of the existence of competing evidence. In the early twentieth century coal lumpers were as visible a presence on the Sydney waterfront as wharf labourers, but it is the latter group that constitutes the archetypal waterfront worker in the contemporary Australian imagination. In spite of the very steep decline in the numbers of Australian wharf labourers throughout the twentieth century, they were and remain a highly visible and active segment of the Australian workforce.²

Many factors have contributed to the ongoing visibility of these men, not least their union’s industrial strength. The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which was born of an amalgamation between the seamen’s union and the WWF, remains highly influential in Australian industrial and political life. This union reveres its industrial and political history and valorises past struggles, leaders and members. It keeps its history alive through calls to arms in industrial disputes, celebrations of the ‘struggle’ at funerals and other occasions, through commissioned and less formal historical work and via relationships with other institutions such as maritime museums. The formal archiving of the MUA’s extensive records has assisted this active process.

In addition to the union’s efforts many other records of wharf labouring also exist, such as those related to ongoing political and industrial events, and photographs and paintings of wharves and wharf labourers from the early twentieth century onwards. For example, the Sydney Harbour Trust, the government agency that had responsibility for the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century, recorded in words and pictures many aspects of the waterfront that had a bearing on wharf labourers’ work. Thus it is not only possible to see wharf labourers in the present, the availability of these records

¹ That said, there is a significant group of waterfront men the history of whose work can never be recorded. This group is comprised of the non-union men who we know were a constant presence on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront because of references to them in newspapers, journals, court transcripts and union records from the period. Because these men were not part of the record-generating industrial relations system and their numbers and range of activities is inestimable, their influence can’t be gauged nor their history recorded.
² From around 25,000 nationally in the 1950s to perhaps 1,000 today.
ensures they can also be ‘seen’ in the past. The net result has been that wharf labourers ‘own’ the harrowing story of waterfront working conditions, and the dominant story of work on the Sydney waterfront belongs to them. Coal lumpers have not only dropped from sight, but also from historical awareness.

In my own work on the history of the WWF, and other historiography about the Australian waterfront, little distinction is made between these two occupational categories. Coal lumpers are most often treated as versions of wharf labourers who worked exclusively on coal. However, although both groups of men worked around ships and seagoing trade, they were occupationally distinct in the early twentieth century, and saw themselves that way, because they did different kinds of work.

WATERFRONT WORKING CONDITIONS

The following discussion begins with an account of wharf labouring working conditions and then proceeds to a lengthier account of coal lumping conditions, to put the history of coal lumpers’ work on the record and to contrast the two occupations. In both cases the discussion refers to conditions experienced by unionised men. Non-union men are yet another (irretrievable) absence in the historical record and the historiography and it may be assumed, for several reasons, that non-union men endured more extreme hardship than unionised men. They may have been prepared to put up with worse conditions because of their desperation for work; they may have been physically taxed to a greater degree because they were less physically capable than unionised men who had more experience of the work; and they also did not have the (very limited) protection that membership of a waterfront union in the early twentieth century could offer.

The perception of the waterfront as a masculine place is enhanced by evidence about male waterfront working conditions. Many of these records arise from the predominantly masculine industrial relations system, and the images that are contained within those records are masculine images. Just as the demography effectively describes the waterfront in terms of a masculine construction, the extreme nature of waterfront working conditions that is revealed in the records also encourages a perception of
pervasive masculinity. Men’s waterfront working conditions were about the physicality, strength and endurance of men, about tasks occurring in places where women had no presence, and tasks that women were (theoretically) incapable of performing. The evocative and sometimes shocking nature of this evidence renders images of other kinds of work less vivid or compelling by comparison.

**Wharf labouring**

In Australia the occupation of wharf labourer is now highly mechanised as a result of the international advent of containerisation in the 1960s and various other technological developments in the intervening years. But although there were various technological aids and developments in the early twentieth century such as chutes, cranes and hydraulic lifts, wharf labouring work at the time relied largely on men’s physical strength. The following definition describes, in a purely technical way, the occupation of wharf labouring in the early twentieth century.

> “Wharf labourer” means, as regards loading, a man who after cargo has been dumped, pressed, branded, sacked, sorted and generally dealt with prior to shipment, handles it from the time it has been delivered to him in the shed or shore or from wharf or cart, or marked ready for shipment, until it is stowed in the ship in accordance with the stevedore’s or wharfinger’s directions and means, as regards discharging, a man who, from the time the ship is ready to discharge, handles her cargo in taking it from the hold, receiving it on the wharf, and conveying and placing it in some convenient part or place on the wharf or near the shed or store as may be directed by the stevedore or his representative or by the wharfinger or his representative.\(^3\)

The use of bland words like ‘handles’, ‘placing’ and ‘discharging’ belies the very harsh nature of the work involved in moving cargoes that were often extremely heavy and highly obnoxious. Different cargoes could include lime, cement, blood manure, sulphur, bone dust, superphosphates, gypsum, rock phosphates, blister copper, manganese,

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\(^3\) NSW Court of Arbitration transcript, reference no. 76 of 1902, Industrial Dispute between the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union and the Interstate Steamship Owners Association and the NSW Coastal Steamship Owners’ Association, 27 September 1905, p. 25.
plaster, pig iron, ammonia, wet hides, lead bullion, ore, ballast, carbolic powder, copper matte, zinc ashes, log timber, cased mineral oils, acid, broken glass, and pipes covered in creosote. Wet hides, for instance, were infested with maggots and, because they were rotting, emitted disgusting odours. Bone dust was literally ‘nauseating’ and one wharf labourer reported in 1906 that he expectorated blood for two or three days after working with it because it ‘gets on your lungs’.  

Wheat was a notoriously arduous cargo, requiring intensive wharf labouring work for a few months each summer. Only around ten per cent of wharf labourers’ union members, about 275-300 men of the unions’ approximately 3,000 membership, were strong enough to handle it. Some men developed compressed chests because of the weights involved and there were usually six or seven wharf labourers hospitalised for this condition at any particular time in the season. Wharf labourer J McMahon said he had developed a very bad shoulder because of the combined effects of the weight of the wheat bags and heavy perspiration. His shoulder had a hole in it that ‘you could put an egg into’, he said. John Gildea said his back was ‘skinned’ at the start of every season, while he got used to the strain and pace of the work anew. Gildea was ‘getting on for thirty’, had lost 2 stone 7 lbs, (about 16 kilos) and believed he wouldn’t be able to work the wheat for much longer. Lead was another particularly hazardous cargo. H J Hill said about shifting lead:

I have myself worked a day and a night [i.e. continuously], and I have gone home practically exhausted to such an extent that I have laid down all that day and also that night, and then felt stiff on the following morning … There are a great many men do not care about this lead work, it is a dangerous class of work, and a man requires to be very careful or he is liable to be maimed for life.

The hours worked by wharf labourers exacerbated the ill effects of their working conditions. The secretary of the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ union said in 1906: ‘The employer puts a gang of men on, and he works them until they drop dead … so long as

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5 ibid, pp. 4,7,8,10,11
6 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59 vol. 2, p.722
he can get others to take their place.’ Men often worked day and night and sometimes up to forty hours at a stretch.7

The extreme nature of wharf labouring ruled many men out of the work. Robert Mahoney, secretary of the ships’ painters and dockers’ union said that his members ‘would not care about humping a bag of maize [as wharf labourers did]; it requires greater strength’. Although some ships’ painters and dockers were as big as wharf labourers, ‘they do not care about humping spuds’. Mahoney said he would rather do his trade for less money than wharf labouring for more, and added that few of his members would be capable of wharf work. ‘I could not tell you whether there are many men in the union [ships’ painters and dockers] who could work 20 hours of wharf labouring without giving it up’ he said.8

Wharf labouring entailed many different tasks such as going over the hatch, trucking (pushing the wheeled carts containing cargo), and working ‘down below’ in the hold doing the carrying and stacking. There were various debates about which aspect of wharf labouring (as opposed to which cargo) was the hardest. There was general agreement that trucking was probably the most ‘inferior’ class of wharf labouring work because it did not require as much skill or exertion as stacking the hold, for instance.9

Others regarded trucking as ‘the most arduous work on the wharf’. President of the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union, Billy Hughes, for instance, argued that work in the hold might, ‘in some respects, require more skill or knowledge’ but that by the end of the day trucking would make a man more tired than working down the hold. The men had to push great weights on the trucks ‘and supposing you have to work for 10 hours, it is a question of calculation: you walk so many yards here, and so many yards back, and if you keep that up for hours, you will have walked a good number of miles, and you have pushed a great weight’.10

Technological ‘advances’ only made the men’s work harder. In 1905 wharf labourer George Cole remembered that four years previously ‘a ship would put out 250 bags an

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7 Grain Bags Regulation Bill, op cit, pp. 3, 4
8 Wharf Labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol. 2, pp. 600, 606
9 ibid, p.557, 592; 2/60, vol. 4, pp. 1379-80, 1432-5; 2/59 vol. 2, p.676
10 ibid, 2/59, vol. 2, pp. 652, 735
hour; they put out 400 now’. Fewer men were needed for this increased output but those that remained were compelled to work more strenuously to keep up with the new pace. ‘The wharfinger [the man in charge of the work on the wharf], as a rule, keeps us up to the scratch’ Cole said. H J Hill also said working conditions had been better a few years earlier. Now, ‘you will go into a ship’s hold, and for four solid hours you will be wringing with sweat, and not have a minute to yourself’.11

Wharf labourers suffered very high levels of accident and illness. In 1902 the NSW Premier tabled a paper in the Legislative Assembly that referred to the number of wharf labourers killed and injured in the previous five years whilst following their occupation on the Sydney waterfront. The details were supplied by the Police Department and were broken down into police divisions: in No 1 police division, 20 wharf labourers were killed and 24 were injured; in No. 3, 6 were injured; in No. 4, 3 were killed and 6 injured; in No. 13 10 were killed and 13 were injured. The total was 33 wharf labourers killed and 67 injured.12

Coal lumpers

Although the occupation of coal lumper is virtually unknown in present day Australia, such was not the case in the early twentieth century. Large groups of coal lumpers gathering and waiting for work were a feature of Sydney waterfront life. It was coal that fuelled the steam-powered vessels that dominated sea transport at the time (as well as its many other domestic and industrial uses) and the coastal and international port of Sydney was dependent on coal for trade. In contrast with the work performed by wharf labourers however, most coal lumpers’ work was not generally visible because most of it took place out in the harbour (or ‘in the stream’ as it was also termed), away from the wharves, shifting coal between one vessel and another. Additionally, fifty percent of coal lumping work was done at night, adding to the occupation’s reduced visibility. Small numbers of coal lumpers did work on shore, shifting coal to and from vessels, but this situation was more unusual.13 Although coal lumping appears to resemble wharf

11 ibid, 2/59, vol. 2, pp. 608, 721
12 SMH, 7 August 1902, p.6. I attempted to follow this document up but could find no other information relating to it.
13 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol. 2, p. 691
labouring because of its association with loading and unloading ships, in many respects it was closer to mining, with which occupation coal lumpers compared themselves.14

Because coal lumping mainly took place out of sight away from land, others rarely observed it. Few accounts of it exist apart from those provided by coal lumpers themselves in the New South Wales Court of Arbitration transcripts. Broader economic and political factors have also contributed to the coal lumpers’ historical invisibility. As the use of coal for fuel has declined through the twentieth century so has the occupation of coal lumper and unions of coal lumpers also have not had the ongoing visibility of those of wharf labourers. Indeed, for pragmatic reasons, many coal lumping unions in different ports amalgamated with branches of the WWF at various times, further contributing to the conflation of the two occupations.15

Additionally, the records of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union have disappeared leaving little trace to encourage historians, and there is no contemporary presence to valorise or memorialise the coal lumping past. As the previous chapter discussed however, some demographic estimates imply there were more coal lumpers than wharf labourers living on the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century.16

In the early twentieth century the main tools of the coal lumpers’ trade were shovels, baskets, boots, ropes and their own brute strength. Although baskets were sometimes run on wooden rails and called trolleys, they were mostly carried on the men’s shoulders and could weigh up to 250 lbs (113.5 kg) when they were full.17 There were five categories of coal lumping work. Planksmen, winchdrivers and shovellers worked on the collier or hulk that was carrying the coal, and trimmers and carriers worked on the ship that was being loaded with coal. The planksman effectively had charge of the others in the gang and it was usually he who engaged them. The planksman was

14 Coal Lumpers’ 1905 Case, 2/64, vol. 8, pp. 885-9
15 This was never the case for the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union, which declined repeated approaches for amalgamation from the WWF, and finally amalgamated with the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Engineering Union in the 1980s; personal communication, 8/3/2002, Tas Bull (former WWF General Secretary). Even the New South Wales Labour Council’s records reveal little about the coal lumpers other than that their union existed and was affiliated at some time.
16 Since this demographic evidence suggests differing numbers than those for reported membership of the coal lumpers’ and wharf labourers’ unions, the figure most likely included a large number of non-union men.
answerable to the stevedore, who was the agent for the shipping company. On the collier it was the planksman who supervised the work. The ‘gear’, which included winch, rope (called the ‘fall’) and baskets, had to be rigged so that the coal could be shifted from down below in the collier up to a level that was suitable for moving it into the ship that was to be loaded. In the hold the shovellers, of whom there were usually a minimum of four in a gang, had to shovel the loose coal into the baskets that had been lowered into the hold. The baskets were attached to a hook, which was fastened to the fall, which was run through a pulley and a winch on the deck above the hold.18

The planksman ‘walked the plank’ above the open hold and directed the work from there. He looked down at the shovellers in the hold and when a basket was full he instructed the winchdriver to bring it up. As the basket came up the planksman took hold of the fall and gripped it as it rose. When the basket reached a height that was level with his shoulder, he took it on his shoulder and ran with it to the end of the plank that reached the other vessel. There the carriers got hold of the basket, or put it on a trolley, and then they tipped the contents down the chute into the hold of the receiving vessel. The trimmers then ‘trimmed’ the coal in the bunkers, that is they spread it wherever it was supposed to go, to make it available for the use of the steamer and to ensure even distribution of its weight.19 Planksmen were at extreme risk because they were on their feet all the time, on a plank that was 16 inches (37 cm) wide and from which there was ‘no getaway’. Alfred Hutchinson described the planksman’s work:

> At the risk of his life he travels the plank; suspended by a spar sometimes 30 feet [9 metres] from the deck. The planksman in one hour with 180 baskets has to travel 2,520 yards [2304 metres], and handle a basket 360 times; he has to handle the basket twice each time – one to land it, one to take it again; you have to land one and put on another.20

To maintain balance the planksman had only himself and the fall. The fall was about one inch (2.3 cm) in diameter, thicker when wet, and men often had to wear gloves because it burned their hands. The least thing could throw the planksman off the plank.

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18 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol. 7, pp. 55, 52
19 *ibid*, p. 53
20 *ibid*, p. 631
He easily lost his balance if the fall was run too quickly, or not at the correct height. The basket had to be breast high of the planksman; if the winchman couldn’t see clearly or was not sufficiently skilled he might heave it too high and topple the planksman forwards or backwards. He could tumble anywhere between 20 feet (6.1 metres) and 45 feet (13.7 metres) to the bottom of the hold. If the basket didn’t come up high enough that could also cause the planksman to topple forwards, and if he grabbed the basket it would dip and he would also go down. The weather affected planksmen directly and in windy weather it was very dangerous to go on the plank. Planksmen had very many accidents and according to one coal lumper they were no good on the plank by the time they got to the age of 45 or 50 years because they ‘lose their nerve’.21

Shovellers’ work was extraordinarily arduous. They did not work on a level floor, but on the uneven surface of the loose coal in the hold. The height of the baskets was fixed by law at 2 feet 5 inches (67 cm), which meant that the height of each lift was about 2 feet 6 inches (69 cm) and the shoveller took about 16 lbs (7.2 kg) of coal in his shovel for each lift. They used two kinds of shovels, a round-nosed shovel and a scoop. They each had to be fitted with special handles because they weren’t strong enough for the load they had to carry. The new handle was also strengthened additionally with an iron ring. Shovelling was exceedingly hard work because there was no cessation once the movement of the coal began and the men were unable to straighten their backs. After two hours they were ‘all out’ and couldn’t stand any more. At that time they had a (legal and paid) break. Gear sometimes broke down, which meant the men were able to stop, but the gear was improved in the early twentieth century and as a consequence there were fewer breakdowns and fewer stops, and the work had become more continuous and more exhausting.22

Carriers and trimmers worked on the ship that was being coaled. The carrier took the basket on his shoulder from the planksman at the end of the plank and dumped it down the chute to the bunker to the trimmers. A uniform pace was set for the carriers and they had to carry the baskets on their shoulders between 18 to 36 feet (5.4 – 10.9 metres), and sometimes up 54 feet (16.4 metres), whilst keeping their place in the procession. There were usually at least two carriers in each gang, and sometimes more. The men

21 ibid, pp. 356, 53, 54, 56; 2/64, vol 8, pp. 834, 842
22 ibid, 2/63, vol. 7, pp. 56, 57, 58
had to ‘go very hard’ and insisted on having a 20 second spell between getting rid of one basket and taking a fresh one. As with planksmen, there was no protection from the weather and sun in the summer time, and only the alleyways to protect them in the rain. They crawled into these at times for protection, but they could become very hot. Peter McDermott, a shore carrier, who carried coal from the vessel to the shore, argued that this was more dangerous than carrying between vessels because the plank extended some distance over water. Running along the plank to the shore with a load of coal required a great deal of practice if hazards, such as toppling, were to be avoided.23

Trimmers worked in the bunker, which was ‘not an inviting place at the best of times’. The carriers would dump the coal in the bunker for three hours before the trimmers arrived at the job. There were hatches and chutes on either side of the bunker. The trimmers entered the bunker by climbing down a chute. It took 5 or 6 minutes to adjust when they got there, to ‘get their eyes’, and then the coal was sent down. The adjustment period was on their own time. The light was always feeble in the bunker and the trimmers often worked by candlelight. They had to climb out of the bunker, via a rope in the chute, also in their own time, in order to have their breaks. The climbing caused additional strain on the knees. In some bunkers they couldn’t climb out by themselves, so in the event of an emergency they were dependent on the awareness and availability of others to be hauled out.

Trimmers were exposed to specific dangers. For instance, if the fireman opened the trap and the coal on which they were standing started to sink they could be ‘drawn down’. Trimmers took the coal as it fell and threw it 12, 14, or even 20 feet (3.6 – 6 metres). They had to build it up so that it lay level. Sometimes that effectively meant they had to trim uphill, and if the coal shifted suddenly the trimmer could be buried, and hurt or killed. When the coal built up unevenly operations had to be suspended until the trimmers could build up more coal to remedy the list. The air in the bunker was full of coal dust, which the men would spit for 20 hours after they had finished work. Work was sometimes suspended while the coal was watered to keep the dust down.

23 ibid, pp. 58, 59; 2/64, vol. 8, pp. 635, 941-954
Trimmers often worked naked except for a loincloth and boots, because of the extreme heat in the bunker. ‘In fact, it is impossible to adequately portray in words the conditions under which trimmers work,’ Billy Hughes said. When it was 66°F on deck it might be 85°F in the bunker. They had to emerge from the bunker to take a break and would sit on the cold wintry deck to eat their meals. The change of temperature had the potential to be deadly. Some vessels were extremely poorly ventilated and some had ‘pocket’ bunkers constructed on top of boilers that held 60-70 tons. When such a vessel went down there was no hope of the trimmers getting out. There could also be collisions between the collier and the vessel being loaded, and trimmers reportedly had a higher risk of accident than coal miners.24

The effects of the heat and the dust they swallowed in the bunkers made the trimmers ‘terribly sick at times’ one coal lumper reported. He said ‘I have seen men in bunkers that have almost fainted’ and he had also seen them lying on the deck, ‘gasping for breath’. George Wittingstall reported he had been dragged down in the bunkers and had nearly passed out. Men fainted at times and were sometimes almost delirious, because they had nearly suffocated. The candles often went out because the ventilation was so poor. These conditions could cause men to be laid up for perhaps three weeks, because they were hurt ‘inwardly’ by gas and foul air. A man who had recently been drawn down had been unable to work because he had been spitting blood since. Trimming was the least popular form of coal lumping work because trimmers were ‘out of sight of daylight too long, they [were] underground too long.’ Men often started on the trimming when they commenced coal lumping but after they were ‘broken in’ they would start carrying or shovelling, or go on the plank or drive the winch.25

Although the winch driver’s job was less physically laborious than the work of other coal lumpers, it entailed much greater psychological strain, and winchdrivers reputedly sometimes went mad, like men who worked in signal boxes. Winchdrivers might have had to stand at the winch for 14, 20, 30 or even 40 hours [including meal breaks], and had to avoid making a solitary slip. Along with enormous mental strain they were also susceptible to gout and other conditions of the feet, because most of the impact of their work was on the nervous system and the legs. The winchdriver had to be exceptionally

24 ibid, 2/64, vol. 8, p. 634; 2/63, vol. 7, pp. 60, 61, 62, 63
25 ibid, pp, 831, 832, 978 – 981, 618
reliable because not only the planksman depended on him for his life. Shovellers also
depended on the winchdriver’s skill and accuracy because if a basket was brought up
too quickly the heavy load of coal fell out onto the men below and could kill or maim
them. Edward Wagner judged that most winch drivers were worn out after 20-25
years. A young man starting at 21 could only last until he was 50 ‘with great care’, he
said. Winchdrivers spent very long hours on their feet, sometimes with hot steam pipes
under them, and there was enormous strain on their eyes because of working at night or
in poor light. Ultimately, Wagner said, the winchdrivers eyes, feet or both would give
way. 27

At least half of coal lumping work was done at night and one coal lumper said he found
that night work was ‘very oppressive, and makes a person feel very miserable to work
in those hours’. Some vessels had rudimentary electric light and others had flare lamps,
but night work increased the hazards of the work because of poor visibility. Carriers
couldn’t see what they were doing because of smoke and haze from the lamps,
planksman couldn’t see down the hatch and might drop an empty basket on a man
below, and the winchman had difficulty judging exactly how high to heave the basket.
Accidents were much more frequent at night than in the daytime. 28

Another coal lumper reported: ‘At night time when you go aboard the collier you only
have the deck to sit down on, and the dust, wind and rain all affect you, you have
nowhere to go; in the alleyways the heat is so great in the colliers that you cannot stop 5
or 10 minutes before you get out’. He hated working at night and said he would ‘feel all
right up to 12 o’clock, and from 12 to 5 you feel half dead and if you were getting 5/- an
hour [about three times the going rate] you would sooner go home and have a sleep’. 29

Coal lumpers’ working conditions were worsened by the extraordinarily long hours they
worked. Fourteen hours was the average length of a job in the years up to 1905, but
twenty was also common and jobs of forty hours also occurred. Foremen, who were
often non-union men, were sweated and sometimes worked 110 hours in a week. Alfred
Hutchinson recalled working 40 and 50 hours, and once 56½ hours in a stretch, without

26 ibid, 2/64, vol. 8, p. 632; 2/63, vol. 7, p.569
27 ibid, p. 12
28 ibid, pp. 59, 80, 352, 353
29 ibid, pp. 597, 606
having a wash or a sleep.\textsuperscript{30} He once did 102 hours in a week [i.e. approximately seventeen hours a day for seven days] and would ‘drop down in the mealtime’ to sleep.

J Wilson also claimed to have worked extraordinarily long hours, coaling the troop ships during the Boer War. ‘I worked 111 constant. I never knocked off … I had a bit of a sleep now and again. I had my clothes on and never had my boots unlaced for a week,’ he said. Such hours were a common occurrence Wilson averred, and he added that as a foreman he had worked 50 hours at a stretch as many as seventy times.\textsuperscript{31} Alfred Hutchinson said ‘I think a man who works long hours gets a bit daft. Several of our men have died in the asylum. I think it is nothing but working long hours, and getting hit on the head with bits of coal.’\textsuperscript{32}

Herman Nielsen said he put in very long hours because it helped to curry favour with the stevedore who allocated work, and to retain access to the work in a highly competitive casualised labour market. Although some jobs required only a fourteen-hour stretch the men would then take on another job if they could get it because they might not get any more work for a fortnight. Men were ‘pretty willing’ if they didn’t have much work, and they also put up with bad conditions for fear that they would lose access to it.\textsuperscript{33} Men who were the least in favour usually got the worst and hardest work, but to be able to do this work with any ease a man had to be used to it. Men who worked at coal lumping only one day a fortnight found the work much harder than those who did it more often. In this way it was the men who were the least able who got the worst jobs, and they suffered accordingly.\textsuperscript{34}

Many men who took on coal lumping could not keep up the pace. Billy Hughes said that the work ‘finds out the weak places in a man. If a man has a weak spot in his heart, lungs or back, or himself generally, say his nervous system is not all that it should be, he falls out.’ This was a process of natural selection, Hughes argued, and only the very strong remained in the work. He said that those men who were aged 45 or 50 who were still able to do the work were simply ‘the strongest who have survived’; it was not a

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{ibid}, 2/63, vol. 7, pp. 52, 495; 2/64, vol. 8, p. 614
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{ibid}, 2/64, vol. 8, pp. 790, 789
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{ibid}, p. 628
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{ibid}, 2/63, vol. 7, pp. 484 49; 2/64, vol. 8, p. 615; 2/63, vol. 7, p. 531
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{ibid}, pp. 69, 70
matter of most men of this age being able generally to do coal lumping work. Indeed, many men tried the work for a week or two, and even an hour or two, but they couldn’t last. One coal lumper said that some men were forced to leave the work because they hadn’t started at a ‘reasonable’ pace. Because they had started at too hard a pace they were unable to keep going.\textsuperscript{35}

Coal lumpers suffered many generalised health problems and one man said the majority of coal lumpers’ union members suffered from bad backs, rheumatics, bad knees, varicose veins, rupture and conditions related to working in the wet. He said he often had to work in his singlet ‘and the wet gets on your back and settles in the kidneys’. He had formerly been a carrier but had stopped doing that kind of work because it caused ‘pressure on the heart’.\textsuperscript{36}

Another coal lumper talked of having to stoop to carry baskets under beams. Stooping caused great physical stress: the weight of the basket was borne by the chest and across the loins, and there was great strain on the muscles of the legs. He said there were boats in Sydney where the men had to work like that for 9 ½ hours, with 5 men running. He had been unable to work for weeks after one of those jobs and one of his colleagues had been unable to come down the stairs for three weeks afterwards. He had also had four ribs broken from slipping on iron decks. Another coal lumper observed that men who had been carrying coal for a number of years were visibly 2 inches (4.6 cm) higher on one shoulder than the other. Another regarded coal lumping as ‘the most detrimental of all kinds of work to a man.’ He said that if he had any alternative work of any kind ‘I would take anything I could make a living at.’\textsuperscript{37}

It is not possible to get any particular statistics on coal lumpers and morbidity. It is likely, for instance, that they suffered high levels of silicosis, as coal miners did, but there is little available evidence to that effect. However, lung disease in general was mentioned in association with coal lumpers in some newspaper reports of the period and one of the oral history interviewees recalled that coal lumpers often died early from

\textsuperscript{35} ibid, pp. 58, 340
\textsuperscript{36} ibid, 2/64, vol. 8 627, 880, 756
\textsuperscript{37} ibid, pp. 878-9 964, 961, 991
pneumonia or pleurisy. The records of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union no longer exist and there is no breakdown in any general statistics on accidents into the category of coal lumper. However, in the Court of Arbitration in 1905 union representatives referred to members who had died or suffered serious injury in preceding years.

Winchman John Pearson had had the muscle of his left arm torn out when it got jammed in the winch on the ‘Dangerfield’. It took about one and a half hours to release his arm and the accident ‘took the muscles clean off’. Sam Taylor fell off the plank on the ‘Kurrajong’, lived a few days and then died. It was thought he may have missed his step or become dizzy, but in any event when an empty basket fell down into the hold, Taylor went with it. A planksman called Kelly fell on the ‘Illaroo’ because the winchdriver was inexperienced and lifted the basket too high. Kelly overbalanced and fell.

Archibald Henderson was killed on the ‘Wallsend’. He fell face down and sustained a wound so severe that ‘you could shove your hand inside him’. Henderson also cut his face, broke his thigh and the bone in his arm splintered. ‘I had him on my lap for about an hour and a half before they took him to shore,’ his mate remembered, saying the accident wouldn’t have happened if there had been proper gear for receiving coal. Mick Duggan was killed on the Australian Steam Navigation Co’s ‘Phoebe’ when he was struck in the head. Another coal lumper, called McLeod, was killed on the ‘Tonkin’, as was a man named Perkinfeldt on the ‘Tasmania’. John Gilmore was killed on the ‘Aldinga’ at Smith’s Wharf, Charles Thompson on the ‘Governor Blackall’, and George Clarke on the ‘Herga’. When this evidence was being given in 1905 James Sealy was the most recent accident victim. He fell 35 feet (10.6 metres) into the collier ‘Mount Kembla’ because of a full basket striking him in its journey. At that stage he was believed to be at the point of death.

Billy Hughes, who was president of both the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ union and the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union in the early twentieth century, described coal lumpers’ work as ‘exceedingly difficult work, very, very hard work indeed’ and he judged that no

38 SMH 23 May 1907; The People, 4 January 1902; Ellie Byrnes, NSWBOHC, no. 102, 1/2, p. 17
39 I attempted to track former officials of the coal lumpers’ union and succeeded in finding one, who was about seventy years old. He said he had no idea what had happened to the records, and that coal lumpers probably caused their own health problems. He offered no other information.
40 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/64, vol. 8, pp. 618, 621, 622
41 ibid, pp. 625, 619, 620, 623 626
other occupation called for the exercise of greater physical strength and endurance. That this was so was evidenced by two illustrations: employers were unable to get sufficient men who could do the coal lumping satisfactorily, or even unsatisfactorily, during strikes and lockouts; and the work necessitated certain conditions that didn’t occur in any other trade: paid two hourly breaks because a spell was ‘absolutely essential for recuperation and food and rest’. As a result of the working conditions and the physical strength that was required to endure them, coal lumpers were also able to demand a higher hourly rate in the early twentieth century than wharf labourers and thus were probably the most highly paid casual labour in Australia at that time.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed men’s working conditions on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront for the dual purpose of retrieving ‘lost’ history, and discussing the ways in which absences arise in historical narratives about men. Unlike the relative absence of historical information about women, children and the life of the household, there is abundant evidence about waterfront working conditions in the records. Nevertheless, absences in perceptions of historical significance arise because of the economic, political and historical process.

In the case of the Sydney waterfront wharf labourers effectively ‘own’ the waterfront labour story because their occupation and union survive and wharf labourers remain industrially and politically influential in the present day. By contrast, coal lumpers and the union that represented them no longer exist and few records about their union survive. However, evidence about the ubiquity of coal lumpers on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront and the extreme nature of their working conditions, retrieved during the course of research for this thesis, challenges the wharf labourers’ ongoing ownership of the masculine waterfront labour story. Not only were the coal lumpers as well known as the wharf labourers on the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century, their work required greater strength and endurance. If symbolic masculinity is

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42 *ibid*, p. 50
43 *ibid*, 2/63, vol. 7, pp. 264, 50-51, 217-22; this distinction has previously been awarded to the wharf labourers. See Beasley, *op cit*, p.32
the measure, coal lumpers have a greater claim to historical waterfront labour significance than wharf labourers.
SECTION II: INSIDE THE HOUSEHOLD
CHAPTER 3

FAMILY FINANCES

This chapter builds on arguments raised in Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage. Its main concern is to show that the breadwinner/dependent spouse division implied by demographic records about Gipps is illusory, and that the distinction was of little relevance to the financial arrangements in early twentieth century waterfront households. The chapter argues throughout that reliance on ‘factual’, because measurable, evidence about issues relevant to household finances entails a positivist interpretation that is misleading. It fails to take into account evidence that is more revealing about the reality of household financial arrangements, however much less measurable.

The chapter focuses on the internal and private financial arrangements of waterfront households that occurred in response to both internal and external factors. As such, it is not concerned with the several historical and contemporary debates that all deal, in one way or another, with relationships between the family or household as an abstract economic unit, and the wider economy.\(^1\)

The chapter shows that financial arrangements in waterfront families were comprised of a dynamic and fluctuating set of relationships both between household members and in response to outside economic circumstances. It is underpinned by the argument that a masculinist interpretation of household finances pays little attention to the way that many social factors, including gender, influence both expenditure and income. My own work on the WWF perceived the financial welfare of waterfront households in a somewhat simplistic and one-directional way, understanding male wages as the only really significant factor in household financial welfare.

The chapter first deals with the multiplicity and variability of elements involved in expenditure in waterfront households. It then proceeds to examine the financial

\(^1\) These debates include such issues as which groups actually benefit from broad, national economic health; how terms such as ‘standard of living’ should be understood; and whether unpaid work that occurs within households can or should be measured in some way, for instance as a proportion of GDP.
contribution made to household income by women and children, as well as men, to waterfront households. Through this method the chapter demonstrates that gendered perceptions of economic activity and passivity fail to reflect the real financial conditions of waterfront life in early twentieth century Sydney.

There is little consistency between the kinds of evidence that are available for issues of interest to this chapter. The most direct documentary evidence about household finances on the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century comes from the wharf labourers’ and coal lumpers’ cases in the NSW Court of Arbitration in 1905. There is no immediately comparable evidence for any other year in the early twentieth century, and in any event World War I and the general strike of 1917 severely disrupted waterfront family and working life in the later years of the second decade. However, other evidence can be brought to bear on the early twentieth century picture: there is statistical information about prices over the first two decades, and the oral history collections contain impressionistic information about many aspects of life relevant to this chapter including income, expenditure and consumption.
EXPENDITURE

This section first discusses the extant ‘factual’ evidence about waterfront household expenditure in the early twentieth century. It then argues that this evidence is not a reliable indicator of expenditure in waterfront households because of the many unquantifiable factors influencing expenditure that ‘measurable’ constructions exclude. The section then argues that many other costs, including gender-specific costs, must be taken into account if the reality of household expenditure, and its relationship to household welfare, is to be understood comprehensively.

Household Budgets

During the wharf labourers’ and coal lumpers’ Court of Arbitration cases in 1905 several people tendered budgets of household expenditure as part of their evidence. These figures were a calculated weekly average for family expenditure on particular items in the preceding six months. Household budgets of this kind were a tool used by progressive reformers in various parts of the early twentieth century western world to highlight the plight of poverty-stricken working class people. They focussed on male wages as the primary determinant of household wellbeing, a position strongly reflected in the Australian arbitration system’s approach to factors affecting wage determination.

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2 Household budget studies were usually based on certain middle class premises about social and family structure. Whereas early analysts of this kind of material had understood mothers and wives as essential labourers in the family, as these studies became more ‘scientific’ married women’s domestic labour was increasingly hidden under an emphasis on men’s wages as the chief determinant of standard of living. This was linked with the development of the notion of the family wage, that is to say a wage earned by a male sufficient for all family needs. Male wages became the criteria by which standard of living was judged. Martha May, ‘The “Good Managers”: Married Working Class Women and Family Budget Studies, 1895-1915’, Labor History, vol. 25, no. 3, Summer, 1984, pp. 351-4; see also Kerreen Reiger, Disenchantment of the Home: Modernizing the Australian family 1880-1940, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, pp. 65-6; and Maude Pember Reeves, Round About a Pound a Week, Virago, 1979, pp. 75-93

3 The view that male wages determined household wellbeing was also reflected in several cost of living inquiries in New South Wales in the second decade of the twentieth century. See, for instance NSW Board of Trade Transcript Cost of Living Inquiry, Males and Females General 1920, SRO 2/5775, NSW Board of Trade Transcript Cost of Living Inquiry, Adult Female Employees 1919, vol 2, SRO 2/5770; NSW Board of Trade Transcript Cost of Living Inquiry, Males 1918, SRO 2/5767. Evidence given by eighteen working class (non-waterfront) housewives in 1913 to the NSW Court of Arbitration inquiry to establish the living wage is discussed by Robin Walker in ‘Aspects of Working-Class Life in Industrial Sydney in 1913’, Labour History, No 58, May 1990, pp. 37-43
## Average weekly costs for waterfront households: 1905

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>John Cleary</th>
<th>Herman Nielsen, Coal lumper</th>
<th>John Anderson, Coal lumper</th>
<th>Sarah Dawes, Wharf labourers’ wife</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wharf labourer</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coal lumper</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coal lumper</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wharf labourers’ wife</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent: 6/6 (joint tenant with another family)</td>
<td>Rent: 13s</td>
<td>Rent: (own house at Botany), 4s for a room at Millers Point</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread: 3 loaves per day: 3d each if ‘booked’, 2½ if not booked</td>
<td>Butcher: 6/4½</td>
<td>Fares: 2s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat: (Sunday): 2s</td>
<td>Baker: 3/7½</td>
<td>Lodge: 1/2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat: (remainder of week): 1/6</td>
<td>Groceries: 13/7</td>
<td>Coal, vegetables and other household items: 7s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea: 1/3 - 1/6</td>
<td>Green grocer: 3s</td>
<td>Meat: 7/9½ 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butter: ‘very little’</td>
<td>Clothing and boots: 6s</td>
<td>Groceries: 1/8½ 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jam: 2 tins (no cost supplied)</td>
<td>School fees: 6d</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden syrup: 2 tins (no cost supplied)</td>
<td>Doctor and medicine: 1/3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar: 3 lbs (no cost supplied)</td>
<td>Firewood: 2s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling: 1/6 (for three children)</td>
<td>Milk: 2/4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodger: 1/5</td>
<td>Incidental expenses: 1/6 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union dues 10/- (annually)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3:1

4 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2, pp. 757-8
5 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, pp. 409-10
6 ibid, 2/64 vol 8 pp. 993-6
7 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2, pp. 1263-4
Many other witnesses provided to the court figures for one or two items of expenditure, rent in particular, rather than more comprehensive household budgets. Harry Copeland paid 7s rent in Balmain and ferry fares were 1s weekly. William Millard paid 8/6 for rent in Redfern, Robert Lisk paid 8/6 in Glebe (an amount which was sometimes shared with another family), J. Mackay paid 25s in Millers Point and D. McCartney paid 18s for rent on the waterfront. George Cole paid 8s in Redfern, W. Parsons 16s, L. J. Hill 6s in Rockdale and A. Hutchinson paid 13s in Millers Point. Charles Williams (who owned his house in Botany and was still paying 5-6s per week in interest) mentioned that he also paid 3s rent for a room at Millers Point in which he had his own furniture, and J. Hill said that he paid 1s per week for schooling for four of his eight children.8

Because the budgets supplied to the court varied in the kinds of things they took into account, and many witnesses were only asked about individual items rather than total expenditure for the household, different households can’t be compared precisely and no picture of average weekly costs for Sydney waterfront families at this time can be established. It was noted by the Court that Sarah Dawes’ budget, for instance, did not include any allowance for such items as fruit, fish, tobacco, doctor, Lodge, clothing or boots. Dawes mentioned that she mended the household’s boots herself when she could, that she gave ‘the girl’ (her eighteen year old daughter) money for clothes when she was working as a laundress, and that she also hadn’t included more occasional purchases such as mustard and ‘blacking’.9 So her budget, and the others tendered to the Court, can’t be understood as in any way genuinely comprehensive on the matter of household costs, even though that was their purpose within the evidence given to the Court. They do show, however, the great variability of waterfront household costs, meaning that aggregate measurements have little real meaning when individual circumstances are taken into account.

For the benefit of the Court, however, Billy Hughes made a calculation of what he judged to be the average minimum weekly cost of living for single and married coal lumpers in 1905. Hughes calculated that the basic cost to sustain a single man on the

8 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2, pp. 638, 718-26; Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/64, Vol 8, pp. 630-1 and pp. 993-6; Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2, pp. 718-26
9 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60 vol 4, pp. 1265, 1266
waterfront was at least 24s, which included rent for a room at 4/6, expenditure on eating at ‘cookshops’, and the cost of having laundry done. (Contrary to the general assumptions about the relationship between breadwinners’ wages and expenditure, this actually means that single men without dependents effectively had some greater costs than married men with families because the former had to pay for work that wives otherwise did for nothing.) For a married coal lumper with two or three children [many waterfront workers had more children than this – see Chapter 8: Biological Reproduction] Hughes estimated the minimum cost of living as 42s per week. In his opinion, anything less than 14s for waterfront rent meant that the accommodation was a ‘slum’. General living costs for married coal lumpers with families were broken down in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weekly Costs for Married Coal Lumpers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent: 14s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butcher: 4/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker: 2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocer: 10s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firewood: 1/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk: 2s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School fees, books, lodge and doctor: 2s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing: 6s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidental expenses including furniture: 2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 44/6.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2

Hughes’s two estimates (of 42s and 44/6) don’t exactly tally, but in any event both were significantly less than the amounts the men themselves estimated as the essential minimum expenditure for men with families. For instance, coal lumper Herman Nielsen estimated 50s a week as the bare minimum to maintain a household. A. Wilson estimated basic weekly expenses at 45s, Edward Wagner said that nothing less than 50s

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10 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, p.163
was adequate, that he really needed 60s as a minimum, and he said that men with large families needed quite a bit more than that. James Christiansen also said he needed 60s per week to keep his household going and that if he had to pay more rent (at the time his rent was a relatively small 8s) he would have to go without food and clothing to cover it. One childless wharf labourer reported that his wife said she needed 35s a week to keep the household for just the two of them.11

Prices

The estimates of expenditure contained in the detailed household budgets, and implied in the general weekly figures men provided, are simplistic even according to the most straightforward and measurable expenditure variable: prices. And indeed, witnesses complained frequently about the depleting effect of increasing prices on their household finances. One coal lumper argued, for instance, that large quantities of meat were essential for him to have the strength to perform his work, but that the price of meat had recently increased. Whilst he had formerly been able to save a little, increased prices meant that his wages were now, in 1905, just sufficient, and he could only pay off a small amount of what he owed in arrears. According to this man’s evidence, it cost a great deal more to live in 1905 than it had ten years previously, primarily because of increases in the cost of food. Wharf labourer W. Parsons also complained about increased prices and said that meat had formerly been 6d for 5 lbs [2.26 kg] but now it cost the same amount for as little as 1½ lbs [.68 kg]. A loaf of bread had been tuppence two years previously but was now 2½d, he said.12

Hughes added general statistical evidence about price increases, saying ‘… lately living has gone up and conditions altered very materially’. According to Hughes’ figures, 67 per cent of every £50 went towards buying food in 1891, but in 1905 81.5 per cent of every £50 was needed to buy the same things. Even the employer advocate, who opposed most other points supporting arguments for wage increases, agreed that prices had risen substantially between 1903 and 1905.13

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11 ibid, p. 402, and 2/64, Vol 8, pp. 912-5, and 933-5; wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2, pp. 714-5
12 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63 Vol 7 pp. 409-10; wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59 p. 638
13 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, pp. 81, 164
Although there is no detailed information about expenditure in waterfront households in the second decade of the twentieth century, general statistical evidence about prices fleshes out the cost picture for years after 1910. The *New South Wales Industrial Gazette* estimated prices for the cost of food and groceries in Sydney to have increased significantly between 1911 and 1918. Meat alone rose by 66.7 per cent between July 1914 and November 1918, and other food and groceries by 30.3 per cent in the same period.14

**Sydney Food and Grocery Prices (1911=1,000)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>July 1914</th>
<th>Nov 1915</th>
<th>Nov 1916</th>
<th>Nov 1917</th>
<th>Nov 1918</th>
<th>Nov 1919</th>
<th>Percentage Increase 1914-1919</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,153</td>
<td>1,153</td>
<td>1,508</td>
<td>1,490</td>
<td>1,567</td>
<td>1,569</td>
<td>1,919</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *New South Wales Industrial Gazette*, vol. XV, no. 6, December 1919, p.804

*Table 3.3*

**Variations in Sydney Retail Price Levels (cost in July 1914=100)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meat</td>
<td>95.3</td>
<td>128.6</td>
<td>144.3</td>
<td>166.4</td>
<td>161.4</td>
<td>162.4</td>
<td>181.5</td>
<td>163.2</td>
<td>166.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other food and groceries</td>
<td>97.2</td>
<td>106.1</td>
<td>121.3</td>
<td>118.6</td>
<td>121.2</td>
<td>122.0</td>
<td>122.5</td>
<td>126.8</td>
<td>130.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>111.9</td>
<td>127.3</td>
<td>131.0</td>
<td>131.6</td>
<td>132.4</td>
<td>137.7</td>
<td>136.2</td>
<td>139.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *New South Wales Industrial Gazette*, vol XIV, no 6, December 1918, p. 668.

*Table 3.4*

**Unquantifiable variables**

The implication of the combination of detailed waterfront household costs in 1905 and more general statistical information on price increases in basic foodstuffs in the following decade is that expenditure in these households must have increased over that

14 These were extracted from figures published by official Commonwealth and State statisticians. *New South Wales Industrial Gazette*, vol. xiv, no. 6, December, 1918, p.669
period. [This would not necessarily mean that these households were less well off of course, because that conclusion would depend on relative income.] This proposition is not quantifiable in any meaningful way, however, because there is no directly comparable evidence to support it. In any event it disregards the multiplicity of factors, including a range of non-economic factors, that are not taken into account in either calculation.

The consumption of food is a significant case in point. Abundance of food appears to be a relatively uncomplicated indicator of household welfare, and since it is a basic human need, the purpose of measuring its cost in government and other statistics is clear. And indeed, when the several categories indicating food in the household budgets of 1905 are totalled (butcher, baker, milk and grocer) food was the greatest household expense, with rent running second. Rent, however, is a relatively rigid expense, but expenditure on food is more ‘flexible’ because the degree and pattern of its consumption expands or contracts according to many different circumstances. Although food by and large has to be paid for, its consumption is influenced by many non-economic factors such as status, cultural background, personal preference and general availability. But because the consumption of food encompasses so much symbolic and emotional meaning, descriptions of food entail perhaps the most subjective judgements to be made about personal or household welfare.

An examination of different kinds of evidence about food consumption patterns on the waterfront in the first and second decades of the twentieth century shows enormous variability. In 1905 waterfront men testified to sometimes having insufficient food for themselves, and for their families. Wharf labourer Edward Barker said he took two eggs with him when he went looking for work in the mornings, but if he didn’t manage to find work he ate nothing else until he returned home in the evening. James Horsenell, a wharf labouring father of seven, said that he and his family did not ‘get many sundries; we have to go without those. On some days I have two meals; on some days I have one myself. I see that my children have a bit …’. Horsenell added:

15 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case 2/59, vol 2, p. 542
Perhaps one day a week I have only one meal a day; it is a piece of bread and cheese, or bread and butter, or anything I can get hold of. I get up and have my breakfast before I leave home … a cup of tea. I may walk about all day. I have nothing to eat for dinner. I do not say it often happens but it sometimes happens … I am able to do the stacking one day a week or two days a week on the bread and butter. I feel very tired at night. I do not want any rocking to go to sleep. I do not go to any restaurants for any of my meals; I cannot afford it.\textsuperscript{16}

However Sarah Dawes, whose evidence indicated that the purchase of food had always to be regulated and restricted according to price and income, nevertheless testified that even in lean times she purchased special, more expensive, items, such as eggs, for the post-church Sunday lunch ritual. She also wouldn’t eat rabbit, simply because she didn’t like it.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, even in relatively tough periods a degree of flexibility could be exercised in food consumption according to the significance of cultural, non-economic, factors.

Evidence from the second decade of the twentieth century about food consumption in waterfront households is different in kind and content from that of 1905. It comes from the oral history collections and suggests abundant food, and therefore improving household welfare, relative to the earlier years. Ellie Byrne recalled that her family had plenty of milk, vegetables, fruit, meat and fish and Marguerite O’Farrell said there was always plenty of food in her household.\textsuperscript{18} But on the other hand, Dorothy Beckhouse’s evidence shows the way in which circumstances vary and memories of one period are different to those of another. Although Beckhouse recalled that her family had fruit and vegetables ‘all the time’ and that typical meals consisted of baked dinners or steak and kidney pies, and desserts, when questioned she remembered the period of the 1917 general strike quite differently. During the strike and its aftermath there was ‘no money coming in’ and ‘everyone was in debt’, she recalled. Some people were able to get credit for food from shopkeepers with whom they had been dealing for many years, but others had to rely on welfare and charity coupons to purchase essentials such as milk, flour, meat and butter. Mary Ryan also remembered the meat, bakery and grocery orders

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16}ibid, pp. 595-6
\item \textsuperscript{17}ibid, pp. 1266, 1275
\item \textsuperscript{18}Ellie Byrne, NSWBOHC, 1/2, pp. 18-20; Marguerite O’Farrell, NSWBOHC, 1/1, p.17
\end{itemize}
people were given in 1917, and the humiliation associated with their use. The butcher would ‘just cut off a couple of things and throw them down. You’d pick them up and put them in your bag,’ she said.19

Just as the concrete measurement of food prices doesn’t reveal the cultural complexities of food consumption, nor its fluctuating affordability according to relative income, expenditure on rent is also less transparent than its more rigid cost suggests. For instance, Hughes’ figures on rent that related to essential expenditure for single men working on the waterfront may also have applied, in a more complex way, to many married men. At least part of the disproportionate numbers of men living in Gipps (discussed in Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage) is in fact explained by the widespread practise of men boarding with waterfront households. Many of these men actually had families that lived away from the waterfront, but the men boarded on the waterfront for part of each week to be close to the waterfront work. They returned to their families on those days when they weren’t working.

While they boarded, these married men actually sustained the kinds of costs that single men sustained. But since they also maintained families elsewhere they sustained familial costs as well. So the real expenditure for these men included the double figure of sustaining themselves as individuals and whatever was devoted towards keeping a family elsewhere. Although some of the household budget figures hint at this arrangement (by the inclusion of the odd figure for the rent of a room), they generally do not take it into account because the construction of the budgets and lists of expenditure that both the court and its witnesses accept are based on the perception that a breadwinner lived permanently and exclusively with his more-or-less dependent family.

Coal lumper Herman Nielsen’s circumstances provide a relevant example. Nielsen lived with his family at Willoughby on the northern side of Sydney Harbour, but he also rented a room at Millers Point for several days of each week. Nielsen said that most coal lumpers ‘lived’ at Millers Point under this kind of arrangement whilst their families lived elsewhere. Even those men who lived as close to the Gipps waterfront as nearby

19 Dorothy Beckhouse, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p. 22, 2/2, p.17; Mary Ryan, NSWBOHC, 2/2, p.26
Pyrmont and Woolloomooloo had to rent a room close to their work for this purpose. Apart from needing waterfront accommodation, men also needed somewhere to keep their filthy work clothes, and to wash and change, because they were too dirty to travel on public transport.\textsuperscript{20} The expenditure calculations for rent contained in the household budgets in the 1905 court evidence were not about what was \textit{actually} happening in many cases but rather were based on an idealised version of what \textit{ought} to be happening.

Many other factors, material as well as cultural, also had a profound impact on household expenditure. Family size, for instance, was particularly important. To take just one among dozens of potential examples the consumption of bread, a staple in the early twentieth century, was staggering in large families. There were eight children in the Parsons family and it consumed 35-6 loaves each week; and the Hill family, which was the same size, consumed 27-8 loaves each week. Sarah Dawes reported that her family, in which there were six children, consumed 42 lbs [19.5 kg] of bread each week.\textsuperscript{21}

Health also had a long-term, but largely unquantifiable, impact on household expenditure and costs in terms of medical bills and lost income (for men, women and children). There were also short and long-term costs sustained by the family if any member died, both in terms of funeral bills and lost income. Dental health was also poor and people paid to have their teeth pulled and replaced with dentures, in preference to more expensive repair.\textsuperscript{22}

Different households prioritised different kinds of expenditure, for individual and cultural reasons, and according to level of income. For instance few oral history interviewees recall being given birthday or Christmas gifts as children, but Mary Ryan mentions being given toys for Christmas and she had a tea set, a toyshop and dolls.\textsuperscript{23}

Waterfront people also moved house frequently, and sustained, or tried to avoid, the expenditure entailed in that. Dorothy Beckhouse recalled that although carts were

\textsuperscript{20} Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol. 7, pp. 352, 512-4
\textsuperscript{21} Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59/ vol 2, pp. 638, 2/60, vol 4, p.1276
\textsuperscript{22} Ryan, \textit{op cit}, 2/2 p. 7
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{ibid}, 1/2, pp. 12-13
sometimes hired, because people often moved between houses that were relatively close by ‘of course everyone carried everything’ (when her family moved between 96 and 80 Upper Fort St).  

Furniture was a cost for some but not others because sometimes ‘a spare this or a spare that’ was passed on at marriage.  

Sarah Dawes reported that when she needed furniture she simply went without.  

Seasonal factors also influenced household expenditure. There was a greater need for such things as clothing, bedding, fuel, candles and matches in winter for instance.

Even within the kinds of expenditure that is potentially measurable, many factors that might affect household welfare are not included for both practical and cultural reasons. For instance, gambling was probably widespread on the waterfront but it is completely unacknowledged in the budgets or other statistics. Similarly, the use and cost of credit and debt, although often alluded to in documentary evidence and oral histories about the waterfront, doesn’t appear as a measurable figure in the household budgets or any other statistical information.

Debt (along with charity) is strongly implied by the shortfall between what men estimated were the costs of keeping a family and what men said they earned (see ‘Income’ below). Debt could add to costs in small and large ways.  

For instance, some men mentioned they paid more for bread if they put it ‘on tick’, but others referred to an ongoing level of indebtedness. In 1905 coal lumper James Christiansen said that the £35-36 he had saved during the financially good year of 1900 had all been used to buy household necessities such as bedding and clothing, and he said he had been much in debt since 1903. However, the use of credit, as opposed to debt, is not necessarily an indication of financial difficulty. There was widespread use of credit at waterfront shops and it was often used as a more-or-less conventional method of time payment that did not necessarily entail extra expenditure.

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24 Beckhouse, op cit, 1/2, p. 12  
25 Byrne, op cit, 1/2, pp. 21-2  
26 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, vol 4, p. 1266  
27 According to Robin Walker, time payment in 1913 could incur as much as twenty five per cent interest annually. Walker, op cit, p. 44  
28 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/64 pp. 928-35  
29 Dutchy Young, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1 pp. 5-6.
Gender-specific variables

Most of the expenditure discussed above refers to the general household, but some costs and expenditure were gender specific. For instance, a waterfront man had to spend in order to be a wage earner. All waterfront workers needed boots and other clothing to work in, wharf labourers purchased their own hooks for shifting bales of wool, and coal lumpers purchased their own shovels, of which they needed two. Unionised men paid union dues (non-union men did not) and many unionised men contributed about 1s per week to a burial fund. Some men contributed weekly to a Lodge that provided some form of health insurance. Coal lumpers who worked out in the harbour took food with them, sometimes enough for four meals, depending on the anticipated length of the shift. The purchase of food for these meals was estimated at between 1s and 1/3 each. Coal lumpers also argued that their general expenditure on food was much higher than that for other men because they needed bigger meals, and more of them, owing to the great physical exertion entailed in their work. James Butler estimated that he and his colleagues needed twice the nourishment of miners because coal lumpers needed twice the strength. Meat, which was expensive and subject to inflation, was regarded as particularly important in this respect.30

Alcohol consumed on the job was another significant masculine variable for which the cost to the household appears nowhere in the budgets or the statistics. In 1905 some men testified that they didn’t drink (because they couldn’t afford it) but one coal lumper said he took spirits to any job that was anticipated to be more than twelve hours long. He said the consumption of beer or spirits on the job was quite customary amongst most of the men. In a gang of eight men there might be only one or two who didn’t drink, he said, and he argued that working shifts of 20 hours continuously was impossible without the assistance of alcohol. Stevedoring agents, some of whom were also publicans, encouraged alcohol consumption on the job. They sold the alcohol to the men on credit, keeping them more or less permanently in debt to the agents on whom they depended for work.31

30 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/64, vol 8, pp. 743, 449; wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, vol 4, p. 1273; coal lumpers 1905 case, 2/64, vol 8, pp. 630-1, 885, and 2/63, vol 7, pp. 409-10
31 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, pp. 413-4, 36,51
Women also incurred gender specific expenditure and costs. It was women who were responsible for the widespread boarding arrangements on the waterfront in the early twentieth century, and, like men, they also had to spend in order to do this work. Such expenditure entailed additional cleansing materials, fuel, and food depending on the level of service provided, but such costs are not isolated in any of the estimates of household expenditure. Women in paid employment outside the home also sustained significant costs, as the 1918 enquiry into working women’s wages revealed. Employed women who worked in restaurants and hotels for instance, as some waterfront women did, were required to dress appropriately and have their work clothing maintained to a high standard, including laundering, starching and replacement and repair.32

Deeper and more complex costs relate to the biology of being female. These are the short and long-term expenditure and costs to the household that were entailed in the birth of each child. These highly variable costs can’t be represented by any single figure and they are generally not suggested in the 1905 household budgets except with regard to the amount of direct expenditure on such things as food and school fees that families required. There are complex arguments about relationships between the long-term cost of children and fertility rates, which are dealt with in Chapter 5: Babies. But even in the relatively short-term sense, every time a waterfront woman gave birth to a child, there were additional and significant expenditure and costs for her household.

Sarah Dawes’ evidence to the Court of Arbitration in 1905 made this situation clear because in it she alluded to the fluctuating nature and impact of her own biology on her household. Dawes had recently given birth to her sixth child and she provided some detailed information about the effect of a newborn on household expenditure (and income). Dawes’ oldest child, an eighteen-year-old daughter, was a laundress, but had ceased work two months previously ‘on account of baby’.33 When calculated as a proportion of household income (that included the wages of Dawes’s husband and employed son), the 8s or 9s the daughter earned weekly could have amounted to as much as 15 per cent of the total. The loss of the daughters’ wages was a direct cost to the household caused by her mother’s fertility.

32 Board of Trade, Transcript of Proceedings, Cost of Living of Adult Female Workers 1918, p. 224
33 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case 2/60, vol 4, p. 1265.
There was other expenditure associated with the birth, such as doctor’s fees (which remained unpaid some months later) and Dawes also said that household costs increased after the baby was born: for instance more oil was consumed because she burned a lamp all night so that she could attend to the baby when necessary. Although two of Dawes’ younger children had kept bank accounts that were dedicated to the costs of their first communions, Dawes withdrew most of the money in the accounts because she needed it to pay for various expenses after the baby was born. The Court of Arbitration also assumed that because a breastfeeding mother needed additional nourishment that household food consumption, and thus expenditure, also increased after the baby was born. (Dawes did not confirm this.)

There may also have been additional factors related to the birth of each child such as expenditure on sanitary items and medicines, and bedding, clothing and other items for the baby.

This section has drawn on a variety of evidence to illustrate the many factors, including gender, that influenced expenditure in waterfront households in early twentieth century Sydney. The purpose has been to show the range of non-economic and economic influences on expenses that are not accounted for in masculinist breadwinner/dependent spouse constructions that are contained within the demographic evidence. An examination of these issues from the opposition end of the equation, income, strengthens this argument.

34 ibid, pp. 1265, 1269, 1272, 1277
INCOME

Women’s incomes

The demographic evidence about Gipps in the early twentieth century, which confines waterfront men and most waterfront women to the economically derived categories of breadwinner and dependent spouse, encourages the perception that male wages determined the material welfare of waterfront households. And indeed demonstrating the significance of male wages is a relatively straightforward process because evidence about wages is plentiful. Men’s incomes will be discussed below, but this section is concerned first with the less readily apparent financial contribution that waterfront women, and children, made to their households. It is arguable that ‘dependent’ women contributed to household welfare in many non-financial ways (that issue is discussed in Chapter 6: Boarders and White Aprons), but the concern here is to show that waterfront women often did have incomes that demographic categories don’t recognise, and that these incomes were more significant than masculinist interpretations allow.

As argued in the previous chapter, waterfront women’s paid employment outside the home is probably underestimated in the demography, along with paid employment that women did inside the home, piecework for instance. Those women who described themselves by such occupations as tailoress or dressmaker may have been working from within their homes, and there may have been many others doing the same kind of work who did not record it as their occupations on the electoral rolls.35 Similarly, the number

of women who worked in family enterprises such as shops is unquantifiable and is particularly invisible when the enterprise was attached to the home.\textsuperscript{36}

Whilst demographic sources pose difficulties in estimating the extent of women’s paid employment outside the home, non-demographic sources also have their problems. For instance, although one man admitted in the 1905 Court of Arbitration cases that his wife earned up to 12s a week doing washing and office cleaning, other men all said their wives were not employed outside the home.\textsuperscript{37} But employer advocates, who were opposed to wage rise for waterfront men, implied that wives’ incomes should be taken into account for estimations of household income [contrary to assumptions about the pervasiveness of the breadwinner/dependent spouse ideology in early twentieth century Australia]. So it is possible that waterfront men concealed the extent of their wives’ paid employment. The net result is that waterfront women’s income from various kinds of paid employment can’t be quantified to the same extent as men’s.

However, there was one significant avenue for income generation that many early twentieth century waterfront women made use of for which informal records exist. This was the provision of board and/or lodging for the many men who needed accommodation around the waterfront. This activity is acknowledged in demographic statistics only when it was at the level of a substantial commercial enterprise, but many other sources, such as the oral history collections and the transcripts from the NSW Court of Arbitration, attest that it was widespread as a less formal activity. In this case women provided board and/or lodgings within their own homes for those very many waterfront men who needed accommodation near their work on a full or part time basis.

The provision of board and/or lodging is sometimes understood as a compensatory female activity that was undertaken because male wages were inadequate.\textsuperscript{38} But when the level of income that women gained from the provision of board and/or lodging is drawn out, the perception of it as a financially subsidiary activity isn’t sustainable. For instance, Sarah Dawes gave evidence to the Court of Arbitration in 1905 that she took in boarders on a regular basis. She had one lodger at that time and he paid her 5s per

\textsuperscript{36} Dutchy Young’s mother was one such. Young, \textit{op cit}, Tape 1 Side 1, pp. 5-6

\textsuperscript{37} Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, Vol 2, p.32

\textsuperscript{38} Shirley Fitzgerald and Christopher Keating, \textit{Millers Point: The Urban Village}, Hale and Iremonger, 1991, p. 94
week, but at other times she had had two or three lodgers simultaneously, which could bring in as much as 14s per week. Several wharf labourers also testified that their wives took in boarders and/or lodgers. J. Mackay said his wife let part of their house, for which they paid 25s in rent, to lodgers. At one stage Mrs Mackay had had three lodgers in a house for which the Mackays paid rent of £1 a week. Wharf labourer W McCartney’s wife earned 12s a week from her lodgers and although she didn’t provide them with meals she occasionally washed their clothes for additional payment.

Although rents in other areas such as Balmain, Redfern or Glebe might be as low as 7s or 8/6 respectively it was rare for rents in Millers Point and the Rocks to be less than 14s per week, and they were often 16s. \(^{39}\) A woman who had two or three lodgers each paying 5s a week could virtually offset the high cost of rent for a house in Gipps. The provision of board and/or lodging was often supported by the unpaid labour of children: waiting on the table, washing dishes, or, in the case of an older girl, not taking on paid work in order to help her mother with the boarders. \(^{40}\) This last point implies that the amount of money gleaned from the boarders was a larger figure than that which could be earned as wages by a young woman engaged in paid employment outside the home.

It will be shown below that for a host of reasons male waterfront incomes fluctuated constantly and in some weeks many waterfront men earned little, and even nothing. This implies that women who provided board and/or lodgings in their homes could actually at times have earned more than their husbands, that is to say through this activity the women could have had as much, or more, claim to the title of breadwinner as the men. That said however, logic suggests that when waterfront men’s incomes were down, income from the provision of board and lodging would also have declined because fewer men would have been seeking accommodation on the waterfront during periods of reduced employment prospects. But this scenario was also not necessarily the case.

Firstly, requirements for board and/or lodging were sometimes independent of local economic circumstances. For instance, some women had boarders and lodgers who

\(^{39}\) Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60 Vol 4, pp. 1263, 1268, and 2/59 Vol 2 p.591, 688, 714, 767-8; coal lumper’s 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, pp. 512-4
\(^{40}\) Evelyn Goodwin, NSWBOHC, 1/3 pp. 9-16, 2/3 p. 11,3/3 p.34
were not local men, but seamen or officers from abroad, who kept and paid for their rooms permanently so that they were always available to them when they were in port. Even within the local economy lean times and various seasonal factors in employment opportunities could actually mean that the waterfront was flooded with men who were seeking (but not necessarily gaining) casual waterfront work. As Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage noted, the numbers of men in Gipps reached extraordinary proportions in 1917, a year of high unemployment and widespread industrial unrest. That the additional men in Gipps in that year were registered on the electoral rolls implies they were not merely transient, but rather that they ‘lived’ on the waterfront to some degree. Many of them were living in boarding and/or lodging arrangements with waterfront women, which implies that the women’s incomes were still coming in and possibly increasing, during times of high male unemployment. The provision of board and/or lodging by waterfront women provides an illustration of the way in which genuine economic activity and passivity are concealed by masculinist demographic constructions.

Children’s income

The other ‘dependents’ in the masculinist demographic construction, children, also contributed income to their waterfront households, both before and after they were eligible for formal employment. Some children earned wages from an early age, which was either contributed to the family coffers, or, if retained, offset the cost of their own upkeep. Like women (and men), they often worked in family enterprises of various kinds and they also earned money in work that was traditionally undertaken by children. Fred Hughes, for instance, had a paper run in Circular Quay and from the age of eleven he worked for wages for a few hours each week in a local grocery shop, for which he earned 5s. Older employed children usually contributed all or most of their wages to the household finances. Sarah’s Dawes’ eighteen-year-old daughter worked in a laundry earning a weekly wage of 8-9s, most of which she gave to her mother towards general household expenses. Dawes’ sixteen-year-old son worked in a foundry and also gave most of his

41 Mrs Grant (pseud), GKOHC
42 Young, op cit, tape 1, side 1 pp. 6-9; Fred Hughes, SPOHC, Tape 1 side 1, pp. 12-14
wages to his mother. Coal lumper Alfred Hutchinson said he would have been in debt without the 7/6 per week his ‘small boy’ contributed to the household each week. As children got older, their financial contribution could grow. Coal lumper John Anderson’s twenty-three-year-old son had formerly been unemployed for two years, but in 1905 he was earning between £2 and £2/10/- a week at a Botany wool washers, significantly more than most coal lumpers earned. A second son also worked there, earning around £2 a week, and a third working son gave his father between 15s and £1 a week. Wharf labourer W Parsons had eight children. Seven of these lived at home and of these, three were working. Parsons estimated total weekly income for the household at £3/17/6. His eldest son, a manufacturer, contributed £1/5/-, another son 15s, and a third son 12/6. Even the nineteen-year-old invalid daughter of wharf labourer R Smith managed, when she was well enough, to bring in 3s a week, which she contributed to the household.43

Men’s incomes

This section on income has dealt with what women and children earned first in an effort to dislodge the more conventional way of dealing with male and female income, which is to examine male income first because of its perceived greater significance for household finances. That said, it is nevertheless quite possible, however unprovable, that in general waterfront men earned more than their wives (particularly those wives who lived away from the waterfront and did not provide board and/or lodgings) in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Before proceeding to a discussion of waterfront men’s incomes however, there is a general point to be made about the degree to which many waterfront men can genuinely be understood as ‘breadwinners’, irrespective of how much they earned. When the financial and social implications of the board and lodging arrangements are drawn out men really can’t be understood as conventional sole providers if they boarded or lodged, or if they had boarders or lodgers within their own homes. Those men who boarded in Gipps when they were working and returned home to their families on other days were

dividing their wages (in whatever proportions) between their own families and the
households with which they boarded.

The other side of the coin is that several adult men, (of whom some ‘belonged’ to the
household and others boarded or lodged) contributed part or all of their income to many
waterfront households. The conventional perception of the male breadwinner implies
one adult wage earning man per household, but it is simplistic in the case of the early
twentieth century Sydney waterfront. Mention is made of these complicating elements
to make the point that however much money waterfront men earned it is not a reliable
indication of their breadwinning ability. Just as the breadwinner/dependent spouse
construction conceals the economic reality of women’s lives, it is also fails to reveal the
economic reality of men’s lives.

Those issues aside, there is an abundance of evidence about waterfront men’s work that
appears to make establishing their incomes a simpler task than was the case for
waterfront women. To begin with, improving national economic health, wage rates and
other relevant statistics strongly suggest that waterfront workers were relatively well-off
compared to other casual workers, and that they had increasing amounts of work in the
early twentieth century, at least until the 1914 outbreak of war (and well before the
crisis year of 1917).

In the wharf labourers’ and coal lumpers’ cases of 1905, men gave evidence about their
earnings in the early part of that year. At a base rate of 1/6 per hour, coal lumpers were
more highly paid, in terms of hourly rates, than any other ‘unskilled’ casual labour in
Sydney in the early twentieth century. They also enjoyed privileges not shared by other
casual labourers, such as a paid break every two hours, and some payment for time lost
if they had to cease work because of heavy rain. In 1905 the average hourly rate that
unionised coal lumpers had earned was 1/8, which included some payment at higher
rates for overtime.\footnote{Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63 Vol 7, pp. 264, 50-51, 217-22} Within coal lumping ranks different kinds of coal lumpers could
earn even better hourly rates. Planksmen could sometimes earn 2s or 2/6 per hour for
particular jobs and rates for onshore jobs varied up to 2/6 per hour. So-called ‘constant’
men, who had formal employment onshore and were non-union men tolerated by the
coal lumpers’ union, had a lower hourly rate than unionised men but they were in more-or-less ‘constant’, or full-time, employment. About 20 constant men worked for Warburton’s coal yard at Pyrmont on a weekly wage of £1/18/-, with 1s per hour for overtime; others at the Fresh Food and Ice Company were paid 1s per hour, and coal lumpers at the sugar works were paid 3d per ton.45

Wharf labourers were paid a lower hourly rate than coal lumpers, but their rate was also relatively high, compared with other unskilled workers in Sydney in the early twentieth century. In 1905 the hourly rates for wharf labourers differed according to whether they worked in the deep-sea (international) vessels at Circular Quay, or the interstate and coastal vessels at the Sussex Street wharves that serviced Walsh Bay and Darling Harbour. Wharf labourers on the deep-sea vessels earned 1/3 per hour, with 1/9 for overtime, but in Sussex Street the respective rates were 1s and 1/9.46 Like coal lumpers, wharf labourers sometimes earned higher hourly rates for such things as overtime, working through meal breaks, working on Sundays or public holidays, and for the hazards of exertion represented by particular cargoes.

As well as the favourable hourly rates commanded by coal lumpers and wharf labourers, other more general evidence, such as unemployment statistics and the growth in vessels and tonnage moving in and out of Sydney Harbour, also suggests that waterfront workers should have enjoyed relatively healthy incomes as a result of good rates of employment. Although it is impossible to get precise statistics on unemployment for waterfront workers, information contained in Table 3.5 asserts that general unemployment rates were not especially high in early twentieth century Australia.

45 ibid, pp. 526, 259, 217-22
### NSW AND NATIONAL UNEMPLOYMENT: 1901-1918

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>NSW (Trade Unions) Percentage</th>
<th>National (Butlin) Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3:5

Unemployment estimates from economist E A Boehm are generally similar to those contained in Table 3.5. Boehm’s figures indicate higher unemployment figures for trade union members than the total labour force, but his figures on that topic begin earlier, in 1906. In that year Boehm estimates percentage unemployment of members of trade unions in Australia at about six per cent, decreasing to about five per cent in 1910, and peaking at about twelve per cent in 1915.\(^\text{47}\) Exactly what constitutes ‘unemployment’

\(^{47}\) E A Boehm, Twentieth Century Economic Development, Longman Cheshire, 1979, pp. 18, 22
and which groups of workers were counted (were women included for instance?) is not indicated for either set of figures. However, taken at face value the figures imply that men who were members of trade unions (as many waterfront workers were) did not experience very high levels of unemployment, even if they experienced higher unemployment levels than the general labour force.\textsuperscript{48}

The statistics on tonnage and vessels for Sydney Harbour, for which figures are available between 1906 and 1916, suggest similar conclusions about the availability of work for waterfront workers, because tonnage and vessel numbers grew in response to expanding trade. As Table 3.6 demonstrates, the amount of cargo that was shifted in and out of Sydney Harbour grew steadily in the first and second decades of the century, implying an increased volume of work for both wharf labourers and coal lumpers.

When wage rates, unemployment statistics and the generally steady increase in tonnage and vessels in Sydney are combined, the implication is that waterfront workers should have enjoyed fairly healthy levels of income due to reasonable levels of employment from the turn of the century until at least the outbreak of war in 1914. But this positivist implication of statistical evidence is challenged when information from a range of sources is compared and contrasted. A more complex picture emerges which reveals that the most important variable for waterfront men’s incomes was the amount of work accessible by an individual man. Because wharf labouring and coal lumping work was almost always casual, many factors actively influenced how much work each man got. Hourly rates, general economic health and throughput in Sydney Harbour mattered little in a competitive labour market that saw fluctuating numbers of men competing for the available work, irrespective of its quantity. The following discussion refers mainly to unionised waterfront workers because it is records about union members that survive due to the record-generating propensities of the Australian industrial relations system.

\textsuperscript{48} The conclusion that unemployment was higher amongst trade union members than the general population is very curious and seems unlikely in view of the way trade unions isolated control over various areas of work to exclude non-union workers. It has possibly arisen because some trade unions actually reported unemployment figures, but that could not have been the case for non-union workers particularly if they were casual and/or intermittently unemployed. The figures for them can only have been ‘guesstimates’. This is perhaps another example of the misleading nature of a positivist reading of evidence and in any event the estimates are quite at odds with unemployment estimates for wharf labourers and coal lumpers, discussed below.
VESSELS AND TONNAGE IN SYDNEY HARBOUR: 1906-1916

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year ending June 30</th>
<th>Vessels</th>
<th>Net tonnage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>9,885</td>
<td>6,114, 530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>10,213</td>
<td>6,898,887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>10,422</td>
<td>7,237,683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>9,633</td>
<td>7,054,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>8,324</td>
<td>6,713,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>9,332</td>
<td>7,606,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>9,524</td>
<td>8,191,083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>9,673</td>
<td>8,714,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>10,142</td>
<td>9,437,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>9,466</td>
<td>8,164,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>9,285</td>
<td>7,535,277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3:6

In the wharf labourers’ and coal lumpers’ cases of 1905, several men gave evidence about annual income for some of the preceding years. Although, as might be assumed, most men had fared badly during the strike and depression years of the 1890s, some coal lumpers testified that they had actually had very good years in the early 1890s. Alfred Hutchinson said he averaged £3/7/- per week in 1893 ‘running the plank’, i.e. working as a planksman (which paid an extra 3d per hour); and he had averaged £3/1/6 per week in 1894. He claimed he had sometimes earned between £8 and £10 a week [a very large amount for the time] during that period but that it was only possible to earn that sort of amount for a week or fortnight at a time. Charles Williams earned more than £133 in 1892 but during the Boer War he had his best year ever and earned more than £143. Herman Nielsen said that in one week of the Boer War he had earned more than

49 ‘Vessels’ includes steam and sail, overseas, interstate and state; net tonnage is for all vessels. The drop in the vessels and tonnage and the for 1909-1910 is explained by business being at a standstill for ‘a considerable time’ during the coal strike; and the similar reduction for 1915 and 1916 is explained by the outbreak of war in August 1914.
£6/18/9 and Christian Poulsen said he had earned more than £176 pounds in 1901.
James Christiansen’s best years had also been 1900 and 1901, when he earned a weekly
average of £3/1/3 and £3/1/5 respectively. This was achieved by long hours and large
quantities of overtime, some of which was paid at double the usual hourly rate. At the
other end of the scale, wharf labourer William Millard said he averaged around £1/10/-
per week in 1896 and in 1904, but recently he had not managed to average even £1/5/-
for each week worked.\(^{50}\)

Other men gave evidence about average weekly earnings for the first half of 1905.
Secretary of the coal lumpers’ union Angus MacDonald said that of the 700 or so men
in the union, perhaps 100 might make £3 in some weeks, but that did not occur every
week; and coal lumper Herman Nielsen estimated that most men in the union averaged
around £1/8/- per week. Former coal lumper and union official Alfred Hutchinson
estimated that between 460 and 470 men in the union earned £1/15/- per week but
around 250 members usually earned less than that. Different categories of coal lumper
earned different hourly rates and had different quantities of work. A shoveller, for
instance, might earn £1/10/- in a week but a trimmer might earn as little as £1-£1/5/-. 
Winchdrivers were in a different category again because they were paid by the ship.
Although they could earn up to £3/15/- in a single week, that didn’t occur every week.
In Hutchinson’s view about half the men in the union earned around £1/15/- per week.\(^{51}\)
Table 3:7 shows figures provided to the Court of Arbitration by several coal lumpers
and wharf labourers for average weekly earnings for the first part of 1905.

Sarah Dawes said that large numbers of coal lumpers in Gipps were pretty well
unemployed in 1905. Her brother-in-law, for instance, had lived with her for about three
months as a result. He could make up to £3-£4 pounds in some weeks, she testified, but
at other times might make only 15s. Another coal lumper relative, one Avery, had
recently earned only 18s for an entire three-week period and his three little boys had
been without boots all winter, Dawes reported. Although plenty of people were worse
off than the Dawes family, her own household nevertheless also experienced great
variability. Before Christmas in 1904, Dawes said, ‘we were in great clover’ because

\(^{50}\) Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63 Vol 7 pp. 571-80, 2/64 p. 993, 2/63 p. 526, 2/64, pp. 982, 928-35; wharf
labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2, pp. 704-8

\(^{51}\) Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, Vol 7 pp. 402, 577, 2/64, Vol 8, p. 610, 2/63 vol 7 p. 577
her husband had brought in £2 or more for four or five weeks in succession. It was the ‘best time’ her husband had ever had, but in other weeks he earned as little as 17s, she said.52

**AVERAGE WEEKLY EARNINGS FOR EARLY 1905**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coal Lumpers</th>
<th>Wharf labourers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Christiansen: £2</td>
<td>William Cavanagh: £2/5/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Welch: £2</td>
<td>J Scully: £1/12/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Wilson (pref trimmer): £1/17/-</td>
<td>Earl Falk: £1/13/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(sometimes averaged £3 when he was a foreman)</td>
<td>Edward Barker; £1/11/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Eilersen: (carrier hoodlum): £1/15/6</td>
<td>John Andrews: £1 - £1/2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter McDermott: £1/7/6</td>
<td>J. Mackay: £1- £1/2/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernard Jackson (ordinary hoodlum): £1/7/6</td>
<td>James Horsenell: £1/5/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Olsen (trimmer): £1/6/-</td>
<td>George Cole: £1/12/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick Hales (trimmer): 17/6 53</td>
<td>Andrew Kennedy: £1/5/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D. McCartney: less than £1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>William Millard: less than £1/5/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H. Copeland: £1/15/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Cleary: £1/5/- - £1/7/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert Lisk: £1 54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3:7

External factors also influenced what any man could earn from waterfront work. At the annual level waterfront employment fluctuated seasonally because it occurred in response to the trade in seasonal produce, in particular the wheat, wool and sugar that produced great rushes of work in the summer months, but left leaner times in the winter. The deepsea (or international) trade in particular was slack in the winter months and wharf labourers who usually worked the overseas ships at Circular Quay moved over to the Sussex Street wharves at Darling Harbour to compete with those who worked on the

52 *ibid*, 2/64 pp. 1270-71, 1263, 1271, 1267
53 *ibid*, 2/64, vol 8, pp. 933-5; 830; 966-8; 972-5; 998-1002
54 *Wharf labourers’ 1905 case*, 2/59 Vol 2, pp. 526-687; 696-767
coastal and interstate boats. The potential amount of work for each man was diluted as a result.\textsuperscript{55}

Over the long term, the availability of work around the waterfront was also deeply affected by the larger economic cycles and events of the broader Australian economy. In the first years of the early twentieth century, for instance, the Australian economy was recovering from the 1890s depression but Sydney waterfront workers were still compensating for the financial losses of the earlier decade. Similarly, most waterfront workers’ incomes were negatively affected by the severe national drought of the early 1900s because the volume of exports declined.\textsuperscript{56} Coal lumpers, however, were able to earn extraordinary money during the Boer War years because the coaling of troop ships provided the opportunity to work extraordinarily long hours. Coal lumper J Wilson reported that he had worked 111 hours in one stretch (apart from meal breaks) and said such hours were commonplace during the war. Even as a foreman he had often worked 50 hours straight, he said, returning home only for meals.\textsuperscript{57}

Other factors, such as the real levels of unemployment in the general population, not recorded in measurable economic statistics, also affected the ability of all waterfront workers to earn income. Evidence given to the Court of Arbitration in 1905 also revealed generally high levels of unemployment and underemployment in Sydney amongst unskilled labourers, and some skilled men as well.\textsuperscript{58} For instance, Arthur Vernon, secretary of the United Labourers’ Union, reported in 1905 that although seventy five per cent of his members were technically employed, this was usually for only three days a week.\textsuperscript{59} According to the Ships’ Painters and Dockers union secretary Robert Mahoney, membership of his organisation membership sometimes increased during a ‘rush’ of work, but these men had come from the ranks of the unemployed. Mahoney added that unskilled men such as his members were the first to feel the effects of depression because skilled men, such as unemployed former boilermakers, competed with them for the available painting and docking work.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{ibid}, 2/59 Vol 2, pp. 549-50
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{ibid}, 726
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Coal lumpers’ 1905 case}, 2/64 vol 8, p. 790
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{ibid}, p. 652
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Wharf labourers’ 1905 case} 2/59 vol 2 p. 736
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Coal lumpers’ 1905 case}, 2/64, vol 8, pp. 604-5
Unionised wharf labourers and coal lumpers also experienced unemployment and underemployment. In 1901 there was an oversupply of waterfront labour in Sydney causing Billy Hughes, as president of the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union, to hotly deny a London shipping company’s claim that there was a shortage of wharf labourers in Sydney.\textsuperscript{61} In the same year the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union, which had had tight control over membership numbers until a protracted lockout, was forced in defeat to accept unrestricted membership numbers. The result was that more coal lumpers competed for more or less the same volume of work and the average amount of work available to each man was reduced. A consequence, said Billy Hughes, in this case as president of, and advocate for, the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union, was that even in the busy times, ‘some men get only a jackal’s share’.

One official estimated in 1905 that at least thirty per cent of the coal lumpers union membership was earning only ‘a bare living wage’ and another thirty per cent was not making a living at all, but surviving on charity from friends and other sources.\textsuperscript{62} Coal lumpers’ union secretary Angus McDonald said in 1905 that of his 900 strong membership, 700 men were available to work but he estimated that about eighty of these got coal lumping work as infrequently as once in every six weeks, and then only because no better man was available. When there was a ‘rush’ on, when the entire fleet of colliers was at work, an additional two hundred men was needed to work the coal, McDonald said, but in ‘normal’ times about 480 men were sufficient for the available coal lumping work on mail and cargo boats in Sydney Harbour.\textsuperscript{63}

Most of the evidence about waterfront men’s incomes discussed so far comes from the first decade of the twentieth century and there is no directly comparable evidence for the second decade. However, in 1913 the \textit{New South Wales Industrial Gazette} began publishing Department of Labour estimates about the state of employment for union members in particular occupations, along with other general information about the economy. For instance the \textit{Industrial Gazette} described general employment in May 1914 as ‘fairly good’, but it also noted that a ‘large surplus of unskilled labourers’ attended the Men’s Employment Agency in George Street North (close to the

\textsuperscript{61} SMH 29/5/1901
\textsuperscript{62} Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, p. 47
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{ibid}, pp. 188-192
waterfront) each day seeking work. These men were probably seeking waterfront work. Employment was more ‘brisk’ in June than July, and wharf labourers, along with many other groups of workers, were affected by the downturn.⁶⁴

The Industrial Gazette’s employment estimates are more impressionistic than measurable, and it used imprecise terms such as ‘brisk’, ‘fair’ and ‘bad’ to describe the situation for specific callings. The uncertain meaning of such terms is exacerbated when it is applied to casual workers for whom work opportunities were uneven at any time, as was the case for waterfront workers. Adding to the vagaries of these estimates the Industrial Gazette’s reporting categories changed over time, unions sometimes failed to supply information, and some estimates may have been aggregates for New South Wales rather than Sydney alone.⁶⁵ The net result is that the descriptions can’t be taken as ‘reliable’ in the measurable way that economic statistics might require, but those difficulties aside the Industrial Gazette’s estimates do provide a broad-brush picture of work volume for unionised waterfront workers between 1913 and 1916. This picture stands in marked contrast to the unemployment figures in Table 3.5 above.

Whilst wharf labourers’ descriptions and expectations for most of 1913 were described as ‘fair’ or ‘very fair’, coal lumpers judged January ‘bad’ and the rest of the year as ‘fair’. In 1914 estimates of work prospects ranged between ‘fair to good’ and ‘gloomy’ and ‘very bad’ but in that year the Industrial Gazette also began to include union estimates of unemployment figures for their members, along with descriptions of employment. Whilst coal lumpers’ unemployment for 1914 peaked at 31 per cent in both August and December, wharf labourers reported that 65 per cent of their union membership was unemployed in September.⁶⁶

It is clear from these estimates that WWI had a drastic effect on wharf labouring and coal lumping work, and thus on income men derived from these occupations. The Industrial Gazette described general unemployment in 1914, at the beginning of the

⁶⁴ NSW Industrial Gazette, 1914, June, pp. 1244, 1247; August, 1914 pp. 549, 462
⁶⁵ There was more than one branch of the wharf labourer’s union in New South Wales for instance, and there were separate coal lumpers’ unions in Sydney and Newcastle. Nevertheless, the similarity of the figures to the membership numbers of the Sydney unions implies the figures were for Sydney alone.
war, as ‘more rife than at any previous time in the past five years’. At over seventy one per cent, only metalliferous miners had higher unemployment rates than coal lumpers and wharf labourers, with the exception of some small groups of workers such as stove makers, cold storage employees and wicker workers. These figures, however, did not include those many thousands who were not members of trade unions. The Gazette reported later in 1914 that many of these unquantifiable numbers of people were working ‘broken’ time.67

In 1915, amidst descriptions of work prospects as ‘slack’, ‘quiet’ and ‘poor,’ coal lumpers and wharf labourers reported unemployment highs of fifty per cent in January and February respectively. In April 1915 the Gazette described unemployment amongst wharf labourers as ‘considerable’. It estimated that 600 wharf labourers in Sydney were unemployed, but that a further 2,400 had only part-time employment. (The total of these two figures is likely to be greater than the membership of the Sydney union, so it implies the figures also include at least some non-union men.) In June two hundred coal lumpers were reported unemployed and a further nine hundred were employed only ‘part-time’.68 There were no specific figures for wharf labourers and coal lumpers in 1916, but estimates of employment for both categories were described mostly as ‘bad’, ‘quiet’ or ‘slack’, and only occasionally ‘good’. Whilst unemployment figures for that year were mostly not provided, ‘some hundreds’ of coal lumpers were reported unemployed in January.69

The general state of the employment market remained weak in 1916 and although wharf labourers reported some improvement in April and May, things remained bad for them throughout the rest of the year. In contrast, employment improved for coal lumpers in 1916, probably because of the work associated with coaling of transports and other war-related activities. Indeed, unionised coal lumpers entered into a contractual arrangement in 1916 (they were called the Coaling Battalion) that gave them good pay and

67 NSW Industrial Gazette 1914: December pp. 36, 38,39,172; September pp. 843-5
68 NSW Industrial Gazette 1915: May pp. 1156, 1158; July pp. 61, 65
conditions in return for first call on their labour for the Department of the Navy and a guarantee that they wouldn’t strike.\textsuperscript{70}

From 1917 the \textit{Industrial Gazette} began reporting employment and unemployment figures grouped into industries, with no breakdowns into particular occupations, but it was in that year that waterfront workers of all kinds experienced the most serious reduction in their incomes, due to the 1917 general strike and its consequences. It was the most major dislocation for Sydney’s waterfront workers in the first two decades of the twentieth century and both wharf labourers and coal lumpers, along with many others, became involved in support of railway workshop employees who were striking against a time card system.\textsuperscript{71} When the strike ended, however, wharf labourers returning to work found their jobs taken by ‘loyal’ labour, many of whom were members of other unions recruited through the various employment bureaus set up by shipping companies and the government. Unionised wharf labourers’ access to work was limited for years to come.\textsuperscript{72} ‘Loyal’ labour was also brought in to coal the ships and the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union was deregistered.\textsuperscript{73} The economic circumstances for waterfront households in 1917 may well have been catastrophic, combining as they did periods of high unemployment, high inflation, and a general strike.

\textbf{Other factors}

Several other factors affected the volume of waterfront work that any individual man could access and the picture of unemployment and underemployment amongst unionised waterfront workers is intensified these are taken into consideration. For instance, both coal lumpers and wharf labourers worked within preferential employment systems, wherein particular men were favoured for particular areas of work. So although they earned the same hourly rates of pay, in reality some men were better able to access particular areas of work than others, and earned more as a consequence. Within coal lumping, for instance, men were classified as ‘preference’ men, constant hoodlums, or casual hoodlums, categories that were independent of the particular task they did.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{NSW Industrial Gazette}, February 1918, pp. 255-64
\textsuperscript{72} SMH 27 September, 3 October 1917; Beasley, \textit{op cit}, pp 47-53
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Daily Telegraph} 8, 10, 11, 14, 16 and 21 August, and 25 September 1917.
Constant hoodlums (different to non-union constant men) could rely on getting work when there were insufficient preference men, but casual hoodlums only got work when there were no other coal lumpers available. Billy Hughes remarked that constant hoodlums had something between them and ‘the pavement’, but the casual hoodlum, in the ‘aristocracy of the coal lumpers’ world – he is a derelict – he is on the pavement’.

Descriptive occupational categories imply continuity and consistency in the kinds of work that men did but whilst it is true that some men worked solely at wharf labouring or coal lumping for periods of many years, many other men were also engaged in these occupations as only one amongst several callings. Self-employment is one example, and some waterfront men developed forms of self-employment that could exist side-by-side with waged work, in order to earn additional income. Daphne Toni and Ken Conwell recall that when there was a shortage of wharf work their wharf labourer father took his eldest son to the markets. There they’d hire a horse and cart that they filled with vegetables and fruit, which they then sold around the district. This eventually developed into a fully-fledged carrying business that their father ran in later life from his sickbed. Dutchy Young’s coal lumper father was actively involved in the family’s grocery shop, which was run mostly by his wife.

Proximity to the harbour made fishing another common self-employment practise around the waterfront. Young recalls that professional fishmongers who regularly sold fish around the district often had competition from ‘irregulars’ when there was a big influx of bream, mullet or flathead. These men would hire a horse and cart and sell off their excess door to door. Martin and Jim Brothers’ coal lumper father owned a motorised fishing boat, which was moored in Berry’s Bay and accessed by ferry from Dawes Point. Martin Brothers recalls his father didn’t worry about strikes, because he could always turn to fishing as a source of income.

Such forms of self-employment offered the advantage of expansion or contraction according to requirements, and they didn’t preclude waged work should the opportunity

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74 Coal lumpers 1905 case 2/63, vol 7, p. 69
75 Daphne Toni and Ken Conwell, GKOHC
76 Young, op cit, tape 1 side 1 p.7, Tape 1 side 2 p.3
77 ibid Tape 1 Side 2, p.15
78 Martin Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/3 p. 15, 3/3 p.14; Jim Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/2 pp. 9-10
for it arise. Indeed, some men organised forms of self-employment within their waterfront work, in order to maximise the income they might achieve. Some coal lumpers formed a syndicate and worked the coal for a tonnage rather than hourly rate; and coal lumpers at the sugar works were apparently paid at the rate of 3d per ton per man. A syndicate of coal lumpers operated for a period at the gasworks at Sydney’s Mortlake. They received a regular dividend. John Anderson worked in a syndicate whereby coal lumpers were paid by tonnage and would get around 19s per job.79

The extent to which men were involved in self-employment in addition to waterfront work implies that the income from waterfront work was inadequate, but it also implies that for many men, the income they derived from waterfront work, to the degree that this is estimable, was not their only income. This observation adds to the case against a positivist acceptance of apparently straightforward statistical information.

Early twentieth century waterfront men also sought multiple forms of waged work. Unionised coal lumpers, for instance, sometimes left coal lumping in the hot weather to work as wharf labourers or seamen on the intercolonial boats, returning to coal lumping in the winter.80 Others went shearing and cane cutting or worked at the wool stores during the wool season.81 Coal lumper Alfred Hutchinson said he went to sea after a period at coal lumping because the pay and conditions in coal lumping had been so poor.82 Marguerite O’Farrell recalls that her coal lumper father worked at everything he could think of. ‘In those days men worked on the wharves and … as coal lumpers and on the railway lines and all that sort of thing. Wherever there was work he went for it’ she said.83

Wharf labourers’ circumstances were similar because their incomes from that calling were also often inadequate. Emanuel Scully said he was always looking ‘for anything outside’ in addition to wharf labouring, as did John Emil Andrews who looked for jobs in building or at foundries, and James Horsenell who could drive a one-horse cart. Although many men sought work on the wharves, W. Parsons, who had been a grocer

79 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63 Vol 7 pp. 199, 219; 2/64 Vol 8, pp. 595-6, 748
80 SMH 18 March 1901
81 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2 p. 693
82 ibid, 2/64 Vol 8 pp. 747, 572-3
83 O’Farrell, op cit, 1/1 p.5
and a storekeeper for wine and spirit merchants, judged it was a ‘last resort’ for men from other occupations who were unemployed and couldn’t get anything else.\(^ {84}\)

A further factor that affected the volume of work, and thus relative income, of unionised men was the active presence of non-union labour around the waterfront.\(^ {85}\) Because of the shifting nature of the masculine population around the waterfront, both daily and long term, it is impossible to put a figure on the numbers of ‘non-union’ men who might have been seeking work on the waterfront at any given time. Nevertheless, the ready availability of non-union labour during virtually every waterfront dispute of the period, and the (often violent) conflict it gave rise to, is an indication that such men were a constant presence. In 1907, for instance, there was a bitter fourteen-week coal lumpers’ dispute. The socialist journal *The People* reported that the coaling of ships continued throughout this lengthy dispute through the use of the ‘standing army’ that normally contented itself with ‘looking over the fence’. Hundreds of such men (unemployed, presumably) had been ready and available to do the coal lumpers’ work, the journal said.\(^ {86}\)

In January 1908, a wharf labourers’ dispute that was initially about differing hourly rates for deep sea and coastal work, developed into a battle about the widespread use of non-union labour.\(^ {87}\) Free labour was also used to do coal lumping and wharf labouring work whilst the wharf labourers and coal lumpers supported for the miners strike of 1909 and 1910, and wharf labourers struck against seamen performing wharf labouring work in 1912. Similar disputes about non-union labour occurred in related occupational groups such as seamen and ships painters and dockers.\(^ {88}\) Since non-union labour was always ready to undercut the cost of unionised labour, its existence often had an influence on the amount of income that union members could earn. The other side of the coin was that men who were not members of the relevant unions were also often excluded from various types of waterfront work, with consequences for their incomes.

\(^ {84}\) *Wharf labourers’ 1905 case*, 2/59, Vol. 2, pp. 527, 566, 592-4, 640-1,

\(^ {85}\) Such men may well have been members of other unions, but not the wharf labourers’ or coal lumpers’ unions.

\(^ {86}\) *The People*, 20 July 1907; 2 May 1907

\(^ {87}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January and 12,13,14 and 18 March, 1908

\(^ {88}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22,24,26 January 1910; *NSW Industrial Gazette*, 1912: September p. 86, November p. 659; 1914: January p. 927
Conclusion

This chapter has examined expenditure and income in early twentieth century Sydney waterfront households to show that the breadwinner/dependent spouse division in demographic evidence held little relevance for daily life. A focus on male wages as the single determinant of household welfare is simplistic and misleading. The chapter argues that reliance on factual (because measurable) evidence entails a positivist, or masculinist, interpretation that is demonstrably erroneous when less measurable but more meaningful evidence is taken into account. The chapter shows that household budget and other expenditure figures from the early twentieth century are relatively meaningless when many other measurable and unmeasurable factors, including gender-specific factors, are added to the picture.

The chapter utilises a variety of evidence to demonstrate that women and children contributed income to their households, and that women’s income from the provision of board and lodging within their homes may have exceeded men’s waterfront wages at different times. The chapter shows that perceptions of a household headed by a sole breadwinner don’t hold up for many of the living arrangements on the Sydney waterfront and that economic statistics implying healthy incomes for early twentieth century waterfront men in Sydney are misleading. A variety of evidence from different sources shows that waterfront men sometimes had little or no income and that their incomes waxed and waned according to a range of influences including work volume, preference, alternative employment and the availability of non-union labour.

In contrast to the economic measurability implied by the breadwinner/dependent spouse model, the ever-fluctuating relationship between expenditure and income in early twentieth century Sydney waterfront households shows that the striking characteristic about family finances is their immeasurability. When Justice Heydon, President of the NSW Court of Arbitration, complained in 1905 that wharf labourers didn’t know how to economise because they didn’t keep books of household expenditure, advocate Billy Hughes replied that the reason they didn’t do so was because ‘the amount varies each week so much that it unsettles people a good deal’. 

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89 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, Vol. 4, p. 1276
CHAPTER 4

WATERFRONT HOUSING

Chapter 3: Family Finances argued that the gendered concepts of breadwinner and dependent spouse had little meaning in the real financial conditions of daily life on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. This chapter applies similar themes to arrive at an account of the way that households experienced housing on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. It introduces the historical context for early twentieth century waterfront housing and critiques some relevant historiography. The chapter then contrasts the early twentieth century ideology of working class housing with the day-to-day experience of living in waterfront dwellings to draw conclusions about gender and class on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront.

In British and European historiography there is a complex debate about the definition of the home or the house, and determining what constitutes such a building is not a straightforward process. This particularly applies to the ‘lower-class’ house in the years after the Industrial Revolution, which is understood as ‘extricating itself from its role as a place of production where all members contributed equally to the upkeep of the household’.¹

Whilst the terms ‘house’ and ‘home’ are often used interchangeably because both imply a dwelling of some kind, their precise meanings don’t always coincide. The term ‘house’ belongs to a physical, bricks and mortar, category but ‘home’ is a term laden with subjective meaning, often suggesting a place that is not necessarily physical but rather something that represents the centre of emotional and social attachments. On this level, ‘home’ can mean one’s country, for instance, or the locality or building in which one grew up, as well as meaning a physical space in which to reside. Evidence and arguments in this chapter about housing often shift between these dual meanings because the two categories intersect and overlap in the historical and contemporary imagination.

In both the physical and abstract senses houses reveal the dynamics of relationships between men and women because of the way in which they frame, literally and metaphorically, gendered and class constructions of public and private life. Unlike the highly gendered divisions of the world of waged work, the house is the physical space that the genders share, however much in different ways. Thus attempting to understand the subjective experience of the house can assist an understanding of the subjective and interactive experience of both class and gender.

Most Australian historiography about working class housing is concerned with standards of living and with refuting conventional economic assumptions that the material quality of Australian working class life was relatively high. Max Kelly has argued, for instance, that since housing quality is a ‘potent’ determinant of ‘quality of life’, an examination of housing demonstrates that high living standards were illusory for many working class families in late nineteenth century Sydney. Kelly includes the Sydney waterfront in his argument that the root cause of much of Sydney’s chronic slum problem at the end of the nineteenth century was attributable to a ‘combination of nearby workplace, falling supply of residential accommodation and rising rents’.

Whilst a direct relationship between material poverty and poor quality housing is clearly establishable, there are other ways of looking at this equation. For instance, Grace Karskens has argued with specific reference to the Sydney waterfront, that the received impressions of observers in the sources have contributed to an overemphasis in the historiography on poor quality housing that belies more complex subjective experience. Caroline Steedman has also observed that historians of working-class life tend to write in the mode of the nineteenth century rhetoric that abounds within the sources they use. ‘All the descriptions we have are from observers, from those who penetrated the maze of greasy streets and stepped through the door of another kind of space’, Steedman writes. She notes that voices ‘from the working-class interior are an extraordinary rarity’.

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3 Grace Karskens, Inside the Rocks, Hale and Iremonger, 1999, pp. 186-190
and the manifold presence of observers’ voices in the records has necessarily impacted on historiography.\footnote{Caroline Steedman, \textit{Dust}, Manchester University Press, 2001, pp. 118,117}

However literally accurate descriptions of relatively poor standards of working class housing are, they are framed in opposition to the relatively high living standards of the historic or contemporary observer. What is less clear is what meaning should then be attached to relatively good working class housing and how working class people themselves might have understood or experienced such housing. The early twentieth century Sydney waterfront actually saw improved quality in working class housing but this did not mean that working class standards of living had increased. On the contrary, housing remained an acute practical problem for waterfront people because accommodation was essential for men to be available for waterfront work, but it was expensive and in short supply. At the same time however, larger forces were affecting the quantity and type of housing that was available around the waterfront. Local and international industrial and commercial developments had an acute impact on accommodation availability; and working class housing occupied a large amount of ideological space in the minds of reformers in Australia, and elsewhere in the industrialised world.

**Historical context**

The most immediate practical issue that affected the housing of waterfront people in the early twentieth century was its availability. The final decades of the nineteenth century had seen increasing interest and intervention in the management of the waterfront amidst concern from bodies such as the Sydney City Council and the Suburban Sewage and Health Board about slums and health. As a result, some slum clearance and demolition occurred at that time and in the early twentieth century mass demolitions took place around the Rocks and Millers Point. These have appeared, retrospectively, to be directly related to concern about slums, poverty and hygiene. In particular, waterfront demolition and rebuilding programs appear to have been prompted by an
outbreak of Bubonic Plague in Sydney in 1900, which was followed by several smaller outbreaks up to 1909.⁵

Some historians have argued, however, that the association in the contemporary rhetoric between occurrences of the plague and the mass demolition of waterfront dwellings is misleading as to the root causes for the physical restructuring of the area. They argue that the causes actually lay in the changing technological and commercial requirements of international trade.⁶ That similar changes occurred in other international cities such as London, for similar reasons, adds credibility to this argument.⁷ At the turn of the twentieth century Sydney’s wharves and related facilities were seriously neglected due to decades of uncoordinated private ownership and the state government had already expressed its desire to improve wharf facilities before the plague came to Sydney. In the wake of the 1900 outbreak State cabinet resumed the wharves from the head of Darling Harbour to Circular Quay, along with land up to 300 feet (91 metres) from the high water mark. These and subsequent resumptions did not conform to the pattern of plague incidents, but they did allow substantial remodelling of the topographical and built waterfront environment.⁸

Intense government was installed over the Sydney waterfront in the early years of the twentieth century and several governmental bodies had responsibility for housing, amongst other things, in the resumed areas around the Rocks and Millers Point. These areas included the Darling Harbour Resumption area, the Rocks resumption area and the Observatory Hill resumption area. The most significant authority was the Sydney Harbour Trust (SHT), which was established in 1901 to administer housing along with shipping and port facilities. Other bodies with responsibilities for housing were the Rocks Resumption Board, and the City Improvement Advisory Board, which was an arm of the Department of the Public Works. The state government often adjusted areas

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⁵ Dan Coward, Out of Sight: Sydney’s Environmental History 1851-1981, Dept of Economic History, Australian national University, 1988, pp. 207-12
⁶ Shirley Fitzgerald and Christopher Keating, Millers Point: The Urban Village, Hale and Iremonger, 1991, pp. 70-3; Karksens, op cit, p.197
⁸ Fitzgerald and Keating, op cit, p.68
controlled by the different authorities, and the Sydney City Council (SCC) also maintained a strong interest in housing issues in the area.9

Under the auspices of the SHT wharves were renewed and large-scale road construction took place, requiring the removal and disappearance of whole cliff faces and streets, along with many dwellings. Increased traffic in the wheat trade saw developments such as a new grain shed at Pyrmont Bay, close to Darling Island, which included sheds, rails, weighbridges and travelling gantries.10 Plans for a bridge to span Sydney Harbour (not realised for many years) added to the push for demolition and remodelling. The Argyle Cut was completed in 1914, the old Cumberland St disappeared to be replaced by a long wide thoroughfare then known as York St North and street gradients were improved to assist traffic flow. Two storey wharves were built to allow wagons and lorries to enter at the top level by ramp or bridge. Not only was the whole waterfront area regarded as an ‘important national asset’, it had also become a ‘most valuable’ one. By 1911-12, the Sydney waterfront had become a paying prospect for the government.11

Although the need for housing for waterfront workers was acknowledged throughout this complex process, the net result of the resumptions, demolitions and rebuilding of the waterfront was that more old houses disappeared than new ones were created.12 In the same period the residential waterfront population increased, as Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage has shown. Although the SHT reported that it was ‘policy’ to provide houses for waterside workers who had, of necessity, to live near their work, it argued that much of the land in its control was required for improvements to shipping facilities and was thus ‘too valuable’ to be used for housing.13 The final report of the 1909 Royal Commission on Improving Sydney and its Suburbs said that unlike European cities, which had mown down and rebuilt slum areas, Sydney had mown down but not rebuilt. According to the Royal Commission no effective administrative machinery had been created to ensure residential improvements.14

9 ibid, pp. 5-8
10 SHT Annual Report, 1906, p.6
11 SMH 11 December 1913
12 Fitzgerald and Keating, pp. op cit, 65-81; Karskens, op cit, pp. 191-3
13 SHT Annual Report 1909 p. 7
14 SMH 27 July 1909
The debate about waterfront housing ranged around several issues. These included concern about the injustice arising from the contradiction between the industry’s need to have waterfront men living near where they worked and the demolition that forced them away; the impracticalities of living in the suburbs whilst working on the waterfront; the insanitary condition of remaining older houses; and what form new housing should take and how much should be charged for it.

In 1905 the SCC complained that resumptions in the Athlone Place and Wexford Street areas would result in 600 houses being demolished and 2,503 people would be displaced. ‘Where are these people to be housed?’ the Council asked. ‘Are they to seek suitable accommodation in the immediate suburbs or are they to become housed in the already thickly populated parts of the City and thereby lead to the creation of another inevitable slum area, or are suitable dwellings to be erected on the resumed and remodelled land?’ In 1908 the SHT reported that demand for housing in Millers Point was so great that twenty two new dwellings were let before they were completed. The Trust said in 1909 that ‘everything was being done’ to provide workmen’s residences and that thirty four of a ‘suitable kind’ had already been erected with a further fifty planned for when sites became ‘available’.15

Local people and their representatives were vocal in defence of their right to housing, mainly through the mechanism of labour organisations and leaders. The Sydney Labour Council, for instance, made representations to various authorities about the quality of remaining houses in resumption areas. Billy Hughes (Federal member and leader of several unions) complained that Rocks residents had been driven out ‘quietly but surely’ by a policy of ‘wholesale eviction’ and argued that the SHT ought to promote general welfare as well as make profits. Families in Bettington and Thornton Streets had been given notices to quit and ‘many hundreds’ of men were driven out of West Sydney in the early years of the century. Hughes argued that waterfront men existed as an essential ‘convenience to the shipping industry’ and that living in the suburbs was impractical since they could be called to work at all hours. Even if they did manage to travel in to the waterfront for work, they then had to wait around for hours to get home. What was needed was decent accommodation at a modest rental, Hughes argued. The SHT

15 SCC PC 1905, pp. 1-2, 91; SHT Annual Report 1908 p. 8; SMH 20 August 1909
responded that everything was being done to provide workmen’s residences, but that ‘houses had to be sacrificed for the extra needful accommodation for shipping’. Workmen were not being driven off to make a deer park’ the Trust President said, ‘ … the utilisation of the area has been for the general good of the community’.16

In 1909 a deputation of waterfront people complained to the NSW treasurer, Mr Waddell, about the housing situation, asking that at the very least existing dwellings remain until new ones were erected to take their place. A 1910 deputation from the Darling Harbour Branch of the Political Labour League complained about the growing number of Chinese in the Rocks Resumption Area and wanted them excluded from the new houses that were being built there. The deputation argued that more than one family often had to live under a single roof, and exceedingly high rents had left many people in arrears since the coal [1909 mining] strike. The Labour Council passed various resolutions on the issue, prompting the Sydney Morning Herald to state: ‘Even the Labour Council, which outrages every principle of constitutional government by its domination of the legislative function of Parliament, has reasonable warrant for pleading the cause of workers who are too squalidly housed’.17

In 1912 Alderman W. P. Fitzgerald of the SCC complained that successive governments had treated the resumption area purely as one to be leased ‘more or less for capitalistic purposes’, reducing available housing and causing overcrowding that should be abolished in ‘the interests of health and public decency’. That year a meeting of Rocks residents expressed great dissatisfaction with the government administration of the Rocks, which had ‘been a grievous disappointment’. The resumption of twelve years previously was supposed to have established ‘clean and wholesome surroundings’. The meeting said that the main objective had been that ‘whole streets full of miserable slum dwellings were to be transformed into comfort and respectability’. But demolished houses had not been replaced and ‘a state of unhealthy overcrowding is being set up which threatens the Rocks with as much disrepute as it had in the old days’.18

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16 SCC PC 1906, p. 32; SMH 19 August 1909
17 SMH 27 August 1909, 1 June 1910, 8 March 1911
18 SMH 10 October 1912; 11 October 1912
In 1913, the NSW premier weighed in to the debate and argued that tenants of European origin who needed, for their work, to live in the area, should be given priority over Chinese, who didn’t. He said that some Chinese had already been given notice to quit by the Housing Board and the government endorsed this action because it discriminated on the grounds of occupation, not race. The *Sydney Morning Herald* supported these general arguments. The ‘steady increase in wharfage accommodation and in the huge warehouses essential to our maritime trade’ implied the need for more accommodation, not less, the newspaper argued, but the houses were pulled down, the sites often remained empty and nothing was done to improve existing properties because of the expectation that they would also be demolished. In 1912 it was estimated that 250 families had had to leave the Rocks in the preceding twelve months because of the housing squeeze.\(^\text{19}\)

The immediate financial upshot of the housing shortage for waterfront people was escalating rents. The SHT charged market rents for houses because this income (along with rents for commercial premises) contributed to offsetting the costs of rebuilding the port. Thus rents only grew as the number of houses declined. According to Valuer General’s files, rents for dwellings prior to the resumptions were between 12 and 15s per week but by 1905, most watersiders living in the area were paying well over 20s per week.\(^\text{20}\) Tenants given notice by the SHT of a rent rise of nearly one hundred per cent in 1911 were told that Chinese would be happy to pay the sum if they wouldn’t, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. There was overcrowding and ‘improper provision for the health of men, women and children’, the newspaper said, adding that tenants were charged additional rents if baths were provided. Pointing to the NSW Labor government the newspaper said: ‘Regard for cleanliness of body, apparently, is to have its financial disadvantage in the millennium days of the democracy’. There was rack-renting and complaints were voiced about the unfairness of charging 22/6 per week for four rooms and a kitchen.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{19}\) SMH 24 September 1913; 25 August 1909; 19 September 1912
\(^{20}\) SRO Correspondence to Minister for Public Works, in Valuer General’s Special Bundles Millers Point Resumption 1901-4; and Special Bundles Millers Point Resumption 1904-9
\(^{21}\) SRO Correspondence to Minister for Public Works, in Valuer General’s Special Bundles Millers Point Resumption 1901-4; and Special Bundles Millers Point Resumption 1904-9
The ideological context

The squeeze on waterfront housing in Sydney in the early twentieth century coincided with (and was not unconnected to) international and Australian debates about workingmen’s housing. These debates were related to arguments for the necessity of slum clearance (a by-product of industrialisation and suburbanisation), and for homes that promoted health, hygiene and idealised versions of nuclear family life in the working class. They were underpinned by ideological perceptions of the way in which gendered differences in relationships between work and home should be played out within the working class house.

Kerreen Reiger has written about some of these issues in the Australian context, and their relationship with both the architecture of houses and perceptions of the function of the house as a family home. She argues that the increasing separation of paid work from the private world of the home after the industrial revolution was accompanied by physical changes in the way in which space was allocated in houses, which both shaped and revealed perceived patterns of familial relationships. These perceptions were reflected in the way in which bourgeois reformers sought to improve the physical environment of working class homes, and in various attempts to separate residential and industrial areas. There were various inquiries into slum housing, schemes for the provision of working men’s housing were developed, and town planning and slum reform advocates were devoted to encouraging ‘sanitary sensitiveness’ within the working class home.22

A fundamental sexual division of labour was assumed and there was a particular focus on the working class woman’s role within the home: her ability to be a good housekeeper in bad surroundings; the importance of the physical and emotional support she supplied to the male breadwinner; and her responsibility for the supervision of children. Concomitant were concepts about correct patterns of family living such as the right use of rooms, and ideas about the general moral tone of the household, which included notions about appropriate sleeping arrangements for the sexes. Whilst good

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housing was understood to elevate family life, slum housing was perceived as lowering it.\textsuperscript{23}

This broad ideological framework about the kind of housing that was desirable for working class families had purchase in the context of the waterfront housing squeeze. Notions of good housewifery, sexual propriety, hygiene and respectability overlapped in the general concern about the hazards of slum housing and overcrowding. For instance, the Town Clerk of the City of Sydney applauded British industrialist Sir Bernard Samuelson who had introduced baths for workmen at his works near Middlesborough. A husband who came home greasy and grimy from work and who dirtied everything he touched was ‘not an unreasonable excuse for the wife being something of a slattern’, he said. A clean husband, however, was ‘more likely to expect and in time find a clean home awaiting him because wife and children would feel themselves compelled by the force of a powerful example to be clean and tidy to a far greater extent than they do now’. An added plus was that if workmen were clean when they used public transport this would help to break down class divisions. In response to its general concerns about slum housing the SCC attempted to have a Housing of the Working Classes Bill introduced into state parliament in 1902.\textsuperscript{24}

Whilst the SCC pursued its interests in housing in this way, other organisations pursued the SCC, for the same kinds of ideological reasons. For example, the Women’s Progressive Association of New South Wales pressured the Council to appoint women sanitary inspectors, because, they argued, male inspectors were appropriate for public buildings or factories and workshops, but there were ‘departments of house life which the women more fully understood’. Women inspectors could operate ‘amongst the private dwellings, instructing householders how to keep the homes clean and disinfected, and advising them generally in relation to other important matters connected with sanitation and hygienic conditions’. The SCC appointed a Lady Sanitary Inspector in 1902 (the first in the Commonwealth) and amongst other tasks she was charged with visiting houses where infantile deaths had occurred to advise housewives ‘as to the sanitary maintenance of their dwellings’. This practise, along with house-to-
house inspections and reinspections (and inspections of common lodging houses, restaurants and other establishments) was continued through the next two decades.\textsuperscript{25}

Other agencies also reflected the general ideological climate vis-à-vis housing and working class life, especially with regard to the responsibilities of women. The Sydney Central Methodist Mission was active around the waterfront and through its Prince’s Street Branch sought to assist various men, including seamen and the unemployed, and others in needy circumstances such as ‘fallen’ women. One of the Mission’s ‘sisters of the people’ worked exclusively on the Rocks. The sisters conducted regular meetings for mothers, and willingly went on their knees ‘to teach slatternly women how to scrub floors and keep their houses tidy’.\textsuperscript{26}

Similar perspectives about the impossibility of living in the ‘right’ way in poor housing, and the particular responsibility of women for home life, underpinned the report of the 1913 \textit{Housing of Workmen Inquiry} in Sydney. ‘Decent family life’ was impossible in slum houses that had dark, airless rooms that led one into the other, were often shared by several families or with lodgers, and had no bathrooms or laundries. Children played in the streets under various corrupting influences and where ‘juvenile and adult immoralties [were] said to be practised with little or no check’ in badly lit laneways. Slum housing encouraged men away from the house because the local public house was the only ‘pleasant spot’. In the daytime hundreds of women sat ‘on the kerbstones gossiping with neighbours, or reading “Comic Cuts” and penny dreadfuls’, and babies were ‘brought up literally in the gutter’. Women who had worked in factories were ‘ignorant of all the household arts’ and working class women needed to be taught how to make the best of their homes; ‘how to keep them clean and orderly; how to cook a plain meal; how to furnish economically’.\textsuperscript{27}

Along with elected, philanthropic and religious bodies, and government enquiries, representatives of the working class also sought to promote their views on the ‘right’ way for working class people to live, linking them to decent wages for male breadwinners. For example, Mrs Catherine Dwyer from the Trades Hall Council in

\textsuperscript{25} SCC PC 1902, pp. 226,227; 1911, p.6; 1916, p.6
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Our Coming of Age: Birthday Souvenir}, Sydney Central Methodist Mission, 1904, p.9
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Housing of Workmen in Europe and America}, NSWLA V & P, 1913, pp. 16, 17, 18, 20, 21
Sydney gave evidence to the 1909 *Royal Commission for the Improvement of Sydney*, in which she voiced opposition to any proposal that tenement houses and flats be provided as working class dwellings, on moral grounds. This kind of housing destroyed family life she said, and ‘was not conducive to morality’. She thought that when men came home from work they ought to be able to enjoy the company of their families in peace. ‘But in a tenement just separated by a staircase, with a narrow hallway, we think that family life is destroyed.’ Dwyer linked US tenements with high infant mortality rates, and said ‘tenement houses dishonour womanhood, destroy manhood, and spoil the whole future of childhood’. Although creches were desirable for mothers in paid employment they shouldn’t be necessary because women ‘should not be obliged to go to work.’ Dwyer argued that every man ‘should get a living wage’, because nothing could compensate for ‘the destruction of home life’. Whilst she thought the suburbs were the most desirable place for workmen to live, this was not the case for waterfront workers. Some workmen’s dwellings had to be retained in the city proper for them, because they had to live near their employment.28

Debate about the architecture of new accommodation that was built on the waterfront in the early twentieth century was informed by the ideological preoccupations of the day. It was concerned that housing should reflect certain kinds of social desirability, whilst also remaining affordable for working class people. The Sydney Labour Council argued that dwellings ‘equipped with modern sanitary appliances and fittings and bath accommodation,’ should be erected on the waterfront but added such houses should not be too large, ‘as people with small families were obliged under existing circumstances to become joint tenants of large houses and to take in boarders to enable them to meet rent charges’. This, the Labour Council urged, ‘destroyed everything that was sacred in home life, and young children consequently became neglected’. The Labour Council thought an appropriate rent was the equivalent of one day’s [male] wages, and should not exceed 10/- per week but argued that the real remedy for the housing problem on the waterfront ‘lay in providing ready and cheap means of transit to and from the suburbs’. In 1908 the Labour Council complained again that rents were prohibitively high for

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workmen. It wanted a cap on rents, and a scheme whereby men could eventually own their houses, such as one that existed in New Zealand.29

The SHT actively reduced the supply of housing but nevertheless shared the view that newly built workmen’s houses should be an improvement on the old. The Trust thus built ‘model dwellings’ for waterside workers, the first of which, in 1903, were in Napoleon Street.30 Subsequently, ‘first-class houses’ with flat roofs, designed by the government architect, replaced demolished ‘rookeries’ in George and Upper Fort Streets. Similar to hot climate houses elsewhere in the world, it was anticipated that families could lounge, promenade and sleep on the roofs of these dwellings because in Sydney’s warm climate the health benefits of ‘fresh air’ could not be over-estimated. Rooms would be large, and roofs would be sufficiently spacious to accommodate drying laundry, and a garden.31 Demolitions in Windmill St were replaced with artisans’ dwellings that had ‘all modern improvements’. New dwellings erected in High St had three bedrooms, a living room, a washhouse, and a bathroom. They were ‘built on the divisional system, each having a separate hall door, and having reinforced concrete floors between the upper and lower divisions rendering them fire-proof, water-proof, and nearly sound-proof.’32 The Public Works Department also built houses of three storeys. Each floor was let as an individual flat with a living room, three bedrooms, a washhouse, bathroom, pantry and balcony. More similar flats, with two or three bedrooms, were built in 1913.33

Given the restraints that lack of space and the desire for industrial and commercial expansion imposed, most newly built waterfront dwellings did not conform precisely to the bourgeois ideal of separate detached dwellings on suburban blocks of land. But the new housing did conform, in an ideological way, to contemporary notions about suitable housing for the working class. Even in the flats, for instance, there were sufficient bedrooms to allow for the division of the sexes and the generations, and built-in amenities to encourage home cooking, personal hygiene and household cleanliness.

29 SCC PC 1906, p. 32; 1908 pp. 26-7  
30 SMH 19 November 1903  
31 SMH 14 July 1908; 13 December 1907  
32 SHT Annual Report, 1911, p. 4  
33 SMH 14 July 1908, 26 April 1910, 11 December 1913
These dwellings were quite different from the scandalous working class tenements in the US that had raised the alarm of Mrs Dwyer from the Labour Council.

**Living in waterfront housing**

Most of the oral histories relating to the Sydney waterfront recall life either in these kinds of ‘modern’ dwellings, or in an older but nevertheless well-built terrace called Susannah Place. Built heritage was a primary or secondary focus of many of these interviews so they contain detail about the layout of the houses, and the use to which various parts of the houses were put. But the recollections also provide, incidentally, insights into the different ways in which women and men used domestic space. Inferences can be drawn from this information about the human, gendered and class meanings houses had for waterfront people, but with several important qualifications. It is working class families of a particular kind that are recalled in these interviews. They tend to be families that had a long association with the waterfront, although not necessarily a single house, and they experienced a generational stability of location that wasn’t universal.

The estimates of the numbers of families forced to move from the waterfront because of the demolitions, discussed above, indicate that long-term attachments to waterfront houses or the locality itself are less common than later impressions suggest. A cursory examination of the electoral rolls for 1908 and 1917 revealed almost no one still living at the same address between the two years. However, this doesn’t mean that all those people had left the locality. Some waterfront families moved frequently from one house to another. For instance, Marguerite O’Farrell recalled that her family moved several times within the immediate waterfront locality: from Matthew Place to Prince’s Street to Upper Fort St and then to Argyle Place, where she subsequently remained living until at least the late 1980s. So whilst the particular house didn’t remain constant, the locality did. This locational stability implies ‘success’ of a relative economic or social kind that may well have implications for meaning. Very poor or deeply fragmented families, and those forced away from the waterfront through the disruptions and

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34 Susannah Place dates from 1844, still stands today and is administered as a museum by the Historic Houses Trust. Helen Proudfoot, *Susannah Place, 58-64 Gloucester Street Sydney*, Report for the Historic Houses Trust, June 1986, p.3

35 Marguerite O’Farrell, NSWBOHC, no. 101, 1/1 pp. 1
vicissitudes of financial necessity, injury, war or industrial action appear only marginally in the recollections, as they do in other more formal records. The meaning of home for such men and women may well have been different from the tentative conclusions drawn below.

That said, the main observation to be made about waterfront working class housing was that although much of it conformed architecturally to bourgeois notions about the ‘correct’ way to live, especially with regard to constructions of gender, the way in which working class waterfront people lived in such houses didn’t conform to the bourgeois model, although there were resemblances. It is, of course, only a model, and in all probability many bourgeois families also did not conform to it in a strict way either. However, this observation is more important with regard to working class families on a number of levels, because the differences in material circumstances that may have been a factor in some of the variances from the model seem to imply that, given sufficient resources, working class people would live according to some other (non-working class) ideal. The available evidence regarding the waterfront provides no grounds for such a proposition, and although interviewees and the people they are recalling sometimes sought to improve their situations there is no suggestion that this was prompted by a desire to emulate the middle class.

Most of the houses recalled in the oral histories had three levels, one at street level, one below and one above with usually two rooms on each floor, one of which was a walk-through. The rooms above street level were bedrooms, and there was often a verandah, sometimes enclosed, that was also used for sleeping. The rooms at street level were often also used as bedrooms, but also as parlours or dining rooms, depending on the number of people in the household. It was rare for any fewer than three rooms to be bedrooms. Bedrooms were small, might contain as many as four beds and were used for sleeping and getting dressed, but little else. There was little furniture and in the bedrooms there may have been a small chest of drawers but there was no cupboard. Clothing was generally hung on hooks behind the door and on the walls.36

36 Jim Brothers NSWBOHC, 89, 1/2, pp. 3-7; Martin Brothers NSWBOHC, 103, 1/3, pp. 1-13; Kathleen Berkley, NSWBOHC, 138, 1/2, pp. 2-16.
The third floor was below street level and opened to a backyard. The kitchen was situated on this level, with a fuel stove, sometimes a gas ring, perhaps a tap and a sink or basin, and a table with chairs or benches. This was the main ‘living’ room and there was another utility room on this level, which was sometimes used as a cellar, although one oral history referred to it as a ‘dining’ room. This room was often used to store coal, which was delivered weekly, or for other functional purposes such as maturing Christmas puddings, or disrobing on return from work.

The back yard was a service area for the house, sometimes used for growing vegetables and chooks, and often covered in asphalt with small garden beds at the sides. The toilet was enclosed and usually sewerred (because the area was so old) and there was often a copper and two tubs for washing laundry in the back yard as well. The latter was usually covered by a rudimentary shelter such as a sheet of canvas or a tin roof with open sides. Some houses also had a bath in the backyard, which was covered in a similar way to the laundry facilities. The first such bathroom did not appear in Susannah Place until 1913. In houses where there was no such arrangement, bathing took place in moveable tubs, perhaps on a verandah, and children were sometimes bathed in the copper. Bathing occurred once or twice a week, but possibly more often for men when they were working. They were filthy when they returned from a shift and there are frequent references to them bathing when they came home.37

There are a number of general observations that can be made about the way in which waterfront people used their houses. Activities within waterfront households reflected the values and mores of the broader community in their observance of social and religious rituals. For instance, Sunday lunch after church was ubiquitous amongst waterfront families. Dead bodies were laid out in the houses, babies were born there and the sick and injured were often tended there.

Along with the rituals and passages of life, houses were also places of leisure, entertainment and socialising. Fred Hughes remembers the kitchen as the room in which his family played musical instruments and card games. Evelyn Goodwin recalls that making music was a nightly affair in her childhood home and that music was intrinsic to

37 Jim Brothers, *ibid*, 1/2, pp. 8-13; Martin Brothers, *ibid*, 1/3 pp. 13-14; Berkley, *ibid*, 1/2, pp. 12-13; Evelyn Goodwin, NSWBOHC, 90, 1/3 pp. 8-15; Dutchy Young, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1, p.79.
social occasions in the house, especially since there was little money for other forms of entertainment. Other forms of socialising were less exuberant but no less important. Dorothy Beckhouse recalls that her parents’ house was always full of visitors and Marguerite O’Farrell’s aunts, who usually spoke only Gaelic, were visited throughout the day by other Gaelic speakers who, like the aunts, were emigrants from northern Ireland. Although one of her aunts rarely left the house, even to shop, she used her house to entertain visitors, who were mostly kin. 38

Houses also signified relative status and affluence, and the desire for improvements in material standards was also a factor in the high mobility that was a feature of early twentieth century waterfront life. Dutchy Young recalls that even though his parents’ house was small and cramped the family enjoyed it because the quality of the furniture ‘was what we would call at that time a little above average’ he said. Some people saved to leave their waterfront houses for ‘better’ places such as Northbridge, Balmain and Daceyville. Fred Hughes’ family moved out of Susannah Place to another dwelling on the waterfront because they wanted a place with electricity. Later they moved to suburban Marrickville because it was ‘better’. Dorothy Beckhouse recalls her family moving between 96 and 80 Upper Fort St because the second house was bigger, more modern and had a toilet and bathroom inside. 39

Houses were also places of enduring emotional significance and attachment. From the roof of the block of flats where Anne Caward’s family lived the ships departing for World War I could be seen. From her bed Caward listened to girls on the docks playing music to farewell the soldiers. ‘And you’d hear everybody singing out, all the boys, you know with all the boats going away, it was so … it was nice to hear them.’ As an adult living elsewhere in Sydney, Caward returned often to the waterfront to visit others who still lived there. Daphne Toni and Ken Conwell recall that their mother retained her house in the Rocks after she moved in with her family in Beverly Hills. She returned to her Rocks house each day until she died – one of her sons would drive her – and spent the day there cooking and cleaning before she returned to Beverly Hills. ‘Oh she did

38 Young, ibid, Tape 3 Side 1, p.8; Fred Hughes, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1 pp. 16,43; Goodwin, ibid, 1/2,p.7 and 2/3 pp. 1,2; Dorothy Beckhouse, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.15; O’Farrell, op cit, 1/1, pp. 17-19
39 Young, ibid, Tape 3 Side 2 p.11, Tape 2 Side 2 p.11; Hughes, ibid, Tape 1 Side 1, pp. 7,8; Beckhouse, ibid, 1/2, pp. 12,26
have a lot of affection for it’ Conwell said, and she wouldn’t give it up because there were too many memories there, she said.\textsuperscript{40}

Although many of these nostalgic and emotional associations with houses are not strictly gendered, in practical terms these households displayed many of the ‘modern’ or ‘bourgeois’ notions of the gendered way in which the home should function. For instance, although there were often more people in these houses than the model family of two parents and two or three children, the desirability of sexual and gender privacy is clearly reflected in sleeping arrangements.\textsuperscript{41} Parents mostly shared a bedroom (although occasionally a father slept on a verandah or in his sons’ room), and other bedrooms were occupied by the children of the household, and shared with boarders and lodgers in the case of males. In the Young household the father slept in with the two boys, and the mother and sister shared another bedroom. Evelyn Goodwin’s brother slept on the verandah, her sisters all together in one room and her parents in their own room. Dorothy Beckhouse’s three brothers shared the attic and she had an alcove partitioned off in there with them. Many of these dwellings included rooms intended as parlours and dining rooms but which were often used as bedrooms, and some households had a dining room in which boarders were fed. If a room at street level was used as a parlour its purpose was the entertainment of guests, rather than a place of casual relaxation for the family, but it could also be multi-purpose. In the Brothers household, for instance, a lone daughter slept in the parlour on a fold up bed. This room was used other times for entertaining guests.\textsuperscript{42}

But although the gendered division of some aspects of housing was strict, in other ways perceptions of gender differences in response to houses don’t hold up to scrutiny. This was so in the area of standards of cleanliness, for instance. In contrast to the image of the dirty working class household that permeated the ideology, the oral histories recall extremely high standards of cleanliness in waterfront households. Women were accorded full responsibility for this in the bourgeois model, but on the waterfront both

\textsuperscript{40} Daphne Toni, GKOHC; Ken Conwell, GKOHC [In Conwell’s late twentieth century view this attachment to a house is a female rather than male trait. For him, ‘a house is just a box to live in, sort of, it doesn’t matter if I live here or there.’]

\textsuperscript{41} Notional families of this size were institutionalised in the Harvester Judgement of 1907, Kerreen Reiger, ‘Clean Comfortable and Respectable: Working-class Aspirations and the Australian 1920 Royal Commission on the Basic Wage’, History Workshop Journal, no. 27, 1989, p.87

\textsuperscript{42} Young, \textit{op cit}, Tape 3 Side 2 p.3; Beckhouse, \textit{op cit}, 1/2, p.13; Jim Brothers, \textit{op cit}, 1/2, p.5.
men and women shared these standards, although their tasks were often different. Evelyn Goodwin remembered that way that women took care of their houses. They washed and whitened the front steps every day and were always ‘so very methodical. People said the Point [Millers Point] was the cleanest place they’d ever seen’ Goodwin recalled. The washing of windows and curtains was a weekly task and ‘there was no one dirty … [they] were always clean, they mightn’t have had much money but they were always nice.’

Other recollections reveal the way in which men were concerned with issues of cleanliness and hygiene. Daphne Toni’s father taught his children to use damp newspaper and damp tea leaves to pick up the dust while sweeping and Toni recalls her grandfather didn’t believe in having linoleum or any other covering on the floor because dust and fleas could be harboured underneath them. He insisted floorboards be scrubbed with caustic soda and they were ‘so white you could eat from the floor’, she said. Toni recalls her parents disinfected the old iron bedsteads with turps every Sunday and scrubbed the walls to get rid of bugs. The children also scrubbed the copper with vinegar and salt, under their father’s instruction.

The control of vermin was a constant worry and was a particular issue when the demolitions were occurring because rats and other pests were driven by the disruption into remaining houses. Dutchy Young recalled it was ‘quite a feat’ to find somewhere to sleep where there was no vermin in the summer time. Martin Brothers recalled frequent fumigation of his family’s house [which may have been connected to public health responses to the plague] for which his father took the main responsibility. Beds were dipped in methylated spirits and burned with blowlamps, and sealed rooms were fumigated with burning sulphur. His mother was also ‘fastidious’ and if she knew there was a rodent around ‘she’d go until she got the rat’ he remembered. It was often fathers who organised the children into scrubbing the concrete in the yard with caustic soda and in one case kept the children out of mischief by organising them into a regular

43 Goodwin, op cit, 1/3, p. 27
44 Toni, op cit
45 Young, op cit, tape 3 Side 2, p.9
46 Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3 pp. 18-20,
Christmas Eve clean up. Outdoor steps were scrubbed and brass taps polished along with regular scrubbing of the linoleum, all under paternal supervision.47

Waterfront men and women often shared household standards, but in other ways there were some similarities to the bourgeois model’s gendered division of private and public space. In the bourgeois ideal the house is understood as the place of women, where they did the domestic labour of housework and nurturing families. Men, although they also ‘lived’ in houses, are understood as working elsewhere, returning home to the house not for work, but for rest and replenishment. On the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront it was certainly women who primarily occupied, and ran, the houses to which men sometimes returned. Women cooked and cleaned and took care of their houses, often relating to them in a ‘feminine’ way, in the sense of wanting to, and taking responsibility for, making them comfortable and attractive.

Evelyn Goodwin, for instance, recalled her mother fondly as ‘a very homely person’ and Martin Brothers remembered his mother making paper cutout patterns to decorate shelving in the house. She would ‘fold the paper so many times and get the scissors and she used to cut lacy patterns and then stretch it out and it looked like lace flowers down on the shelf’, he said.48 [Domestic work is dealt with at length in Chapter 6: Boarders and White Aprons.]

The kitchen, wherein women spent a great deal of time, was also the main ‘living’ room, and the entry point for anyone arriving at the house: for men returning from work or other gatherings, children returning from school, work or play, and for boarders, lodgers, visitors and hawkers. Women’s more-or-less constant presence in the kitchen deepens perceptions of the working class woman’s strong association with the house. This association was played out literally as well as metaphorically because some waterfront women were so closely tied to their houses that they rarely ventured away from them. Daphne Toni’s mother rarely went out as an adult wife and mother, with the exception of shopping on Saturdays. Toni attributes this to the amount of physical work there was to do within the house, exacerbated by the size of her mothers’ large brood.

47 Conwell, op cit
48 Goodwin, op cit, 2/3, p.1; Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3 p. 13
Indeed, the opportunity for personal relationships was restricted by the amount of physical labour a woman had to do and Toni says that because of this a certain amount of privacy existed between women because time for other activities, and personal relationships, was limited by the sheer quantity of domestic work that was required to keep a household functioning. Evelyn Goodwin remembers, for instance, that the women didn’t have time to read books because they ‘were all too busy working, you know, around the house’. Marguerite O’Farrell also recalls that her aunts, who lived next door to one another, had no leisure time. One Aunt wouldn’t even go to the shops if the goods could be brought in. The way in which these waterfront women were contained by their houses stands in marked contrast to the images of other Sydney women gathering in the streets and gutters that had so scandalised the 1913 Commission of Enquiry into the Housing of Workmen (cited above).

These observations about the way in which the material circumstances of women’s domestic lives shaped their relationships with the outside world are important because they suggest that this containment within the physical space of the house, which heightens the perception of women’s association with domesticity, was not necessarily inherently female (although it applied in this case only to women), but rather something that might develop in anyone given similar material circumstances. This perception can also be examined by looking at the provision of board and/or lodging, an activity that was widespread on the early twentieth century waterfront, as Chapter 3: Family Finances has discussed, and seems to have always been conducted by women.50

The use or provision of board and/or lodging was a strategy that assisted waterfront people to deal with high rents. It resolved accommodation difficulties for men whose families were in cheaper housing away from the waterfront, and assisted significantly with the rent that those families remaining on the waterfront had to pay.51 In 1913 the Sydney Morning Herald reported that some of the coal lumpers had ‘hit on the plan of renting houses in the suburbs for their families, and themselves coming and boarding

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49 Toni, op cit; Goodwin, op cit, 2/3, p.4; O’Farrell, op cit, 1/1 pp. 20, 18
50 There are no references in the available evidence to men providing board and/or lodging for other men around the waterfront. However, the existence of all-male households containing men bearing different last names suggests that perhaps this did occur on some level.
51 Larger boarding houses were also established in old mansions that had once been occupied by the gentry. The SHT also administered the Model Lodging House (originally a philanthropic institution) and the numbers of men it housed, as well as the income derived from them, increased annually. SHT Annual Report 1911, p.39
during the week in the “Rocks”, until the weekend’, when they returned home. Since these arrangements were widespread at least a decade earlier, as previous chapters have discussed, they suggest that this strategy was not simply response to the waterfront housing squeeze caused by the demolitions, but one which was used rather more routinely.52

The provision of board and/or lodging looks like a simple extension or intensification of conventionally female domestic labour, but its appearance changes if the perception of the house begins from understanding it as a building, as opposed to something which was, in some innate sense, a family home. As Marguerite O'Farrell remembered: ‘women in those days didn’t go out to work … they had their houses and made their money from the lodgers and that’s how they lived.’ O’Farrell’s observation included the house of her childless aunt.53 In other words, women who provided board and/or lodging understood their houses as resources from which they could derive economic benefit, and they happened, conveniently, to also be homes. Their understanding of the function of a house was clearly different to, and more complex than, the way the bourgeois model understood the relationship between women and houses.

The practise of boarding and lodging also has implications for the way in which waterfront men understood the function of the house. Boarding and lodging in private homes cuts into the neat ideological outline of the single nuclear family within its own domestic space, but in the case of the early twentieth century waterfront it cuts more deeply for men than for women, because there is no simple explanation of what constituted ‘home’ for many of these men. As Chapter 3: Family Finances discussed, many of those men who boarded or lodged on the waterfront actually had two dwellings: one away from the waterfront, where their families resided, and one on it. One coal lumper testified that some men ‘lived’ in Pyrmont, but then he added ‘that is, their wives live there. They [the men] live in Sydney [i.e. the waterfront], they have a room’.54 His use of the word ‘live’ entails some ambiguity, because where indeed did these men actually ‘live’?

52 The Housing Advisory Board built houses which would be ‘suitable’ for boarding houses, so that those who travelled in and out from the suburbs could have ‘well-built modern lodgings’. SMH 11 December 1913. These arrangements were widespread at least a decade earlier, as previous chapters have discussed.
53 O’Farrell, op cit, 1/1, pp. 12,4
As Chapter 3: Family Finances argued, in the straightforward economic sense the boarding and lodging arrangements give the lie to the notion of the male breadwinner being financially and exclusively responsible for his own family within a single dwelling. The way in which some men lived in more than one household, each maintained by different women, heightens the sense of the house or home being the woman’s space or sphere. Because of the men’s need to access work the boarding and/or lodging arrangements can still be read as a necessary practical deviation from what would otherwise be a family organised, residentially speaking, along ‘conventional’ lines. The issue for this chapter however is what meaning the men themselves attached to the boarding and/or lodging arrangements. Whilst it is clear that the men accepted themselves as breadwinners in the financial sense, it is much less clear that they had a strongly held sense of the notion of ‘home’ as the place in which the breadwinner ‘lived’ and to which he returned for rest and replenishment. The implication of the evidence is that the boarding and lodging arrangements were not understood as especially out of the ordinary, implying that whilst houses were understood as (permanently) the place of women, men’s relationship to the house, even when the man was the technical provider, was not so readily defined.

This impression is strengthened by the extent of all-male spaces that existed on the waterfront, away from the home. Just as it has been argued that the material circumstances of waterfront working class women’s lives within the house played a large hand in determining, or limiting, their social relationships beyond it, a similar argument can be mounted for waterfront working class men. In both cases superficial resemblances to the bourgeois model conceal deeper class differences. Drinking, for instance, was an activity that largely took place away from the house and occurred in exclusively male company.

Marguerite O’Farrell recalls her uncle was a heavy drinker ‘and really he … spent more time outside than inside [the house]’ she said.55 Merle Gibson recalls that shift-working men mainly came home to sleep but they drank together in pubs, where women were not permitted.56 Martin Brothers remembers hotels as exclusively male ‘community

55 O’Farrell, op cit, 1/1, p.18
56 Merle Gibson, GKOHC
centres’ wherein ‘everybody that was anybody at all would go in and yarn and talk and one thing and another’. 57

Men also had other exclusively male gatherings. Evelyn Goodwin recalls that the men of Argyle Place gathered under the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ in the local park on Sunday evenings, where they brought the seats together and talked about work and politics. This was near where they got their work orders and then they all turned in at 9 p.m. Although women chatted outside their houses, [they were sometimes called ‘broomstick warriors’] they didn’t gather anywhere together in the ways that men did, she remembered. 58 Men also had union rooms in which they could meet. For instance they gathered to talk and play cards while waiting for work at The Coal Lumpers’ Hall (also known as the Louse House) in Millers Point. 59 The Waterside Workers’ Institute was erected in Sussex Lane in 1914, and along with offices and bathrooms, included an assembly hall, and reading and smoking rooms that were clearly intended for extended masculine social interaction of one kind or another. 60 Men also gathered in various places around the waterfront to await their work orders or to be selected under the bull system and, of course, waterfront work of all kinds was exclusively male.

Whilst the physical division between male and female space is readily apparent, there were other less tangible differences in the way in which men and women related to ‘home’. For instance the house can be understood as the place of physical sustenance for working class waterfront men, as it is understood in the bourgeois model, in only a quite rudimentary way. Men slept in houses, they consumed or prepared food to take to work there, and they washed there after work, if only within a cold tin tub or under a tap in the backyard. 61 But men could be and were replenished in many places away from home, including cookshops, hotels, restaurants and the like.

Indeed the degree to which waterfront houses were able to provide sustenance for men was dependent less upon the existence or emotional support of the wife implicit to the bourgeois model, than it was upon the household’s relative affluence. This was possibly

57 Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3, p.31
58 In contrast to descriptions of working class women given in the 1913 Housing of Workmen Inquiry, cited above.
59 Goodwin, op cit, 1/3 pp. 24-27
60 SHT Annual Report 1915, p.18
61 Beckhouse, op cit, 1/2, p.20; Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, p.514
especially so in the early years of the twentieth century, evidence for which shows that there was often insufficient food to feed waterfront families and men who needed to take meals to work sometimes couldn’t because there simply wasn’t any food in the house. One coal lumper complained that for financial reasons it was almost impossible to keep enough food in the house to take on long shifts that could entail three or four breaks.\textsuperscript{62} Although the ideology of gender relationships within the home dictated that women provide physical sustenance for men, it this case it was household income that determined the degree to which that gendered relationship was possible. The provision of sustenance within the home for the waterfront breadwinner was by no means a given in the early years of the twentieth century.

There was another, highly significant, gendered difference in the way in which these working class homes functioned internally. The pattern of hours worked by waterfront men were not ‘normal’ in any sense, and were directly contradictory with the daily rhythms of the wider world, including those of their own households. For instance, at least fifty per cent of a coal lumpers’ work was done at night and wharf labourers also worked extraordinarily long and ‘unnatural’ hours that had no basis in any daily or ‘natural’ pattern.\textsuperscript{63} Herman Nielsen recalled that when he had lived at Prince’s Street, Millers Point, he had sometimes worked as much as forty hours at a stretch. ‘I had to go to sleep the best way I could and sometimes I got no sleep at all if there were plenty of hawkers and dealers in the street, I got no sleep at all. ’ The houses were not well ventilated, Nielsen explained and if ‘you do a long spell you are actually that exhausted that you cannot sleep’. He said if the children were at home in the morning ‘you have no hope of getting any sleep before they have gone to school’. Prince’s Street was near the school and the Nielsen children came home for lunch. He said:

\begin{quote}
brothers and sisters do not agree well together, and you may have to get up to settle difficulties … there is your sleep gone. You then get a few hours’ sleep in the afternoon, between 5 and 6 if your collier is coming at 7 o’ clock, you have to make your appearance, and be ready for your call.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{62} Coal lumpers’ 1905 case 2/63, Vol. 7, pp. 360, 362
\textsuperscript{63} ibid, p.80
Like others, Nielsen sometimes started work at midnight, having to go to sleep early in the evening and then wake himself up in time for the start of the shift. If his shift began later than midnight, he was called for at the house by the planksman. Billy Hughes confirmed these conditions to the Court of Arbitration. He agreed that many waterfront houses were badly ventilated and that when a man came home at 6 a.m. his children couldn’t ‘bottle up their vitality’. When a man finally got to bed the room was hot and ‘every succeeding hour gets hotter’. Hughes confirmed that the daytime on the waterfront was the worst time for sleeping.

There are tradesmen, and the eternal lumbering of lorrymen along the street; in fact, the hundred and one noises that belong to the daytime; and the coal lumper has to sleep through this. As a matter of fact he finds himself ill-rested. To sleep you want to sleep in the cool and in the dark; he gets none of these things’. 

Men’s working hours meant that there was a deep fissure between their rhythms and the rhythms and patterns of women, children, and much of the wider world, which can only have impacted on household gender relationships. The extraordinary nature of the men’s working hours, coupled with the many opportunities for absence from home in the company of other men, brings to mind Caroline Steedman’s observation about the way in which working class households might often have been experienced as those of a ‘single female parent’. Steedman says this comes about ‘sometimes because of the passivity of a father’s presence, sometimes because of his physical absence.’

Such an observation has complex implications for the way in which household power relationships between working class wives and husbands might be understood. Some oral history interviewees recall straightforward, as in ‘conventional’, male/female domestic power relationships of the kind implied by economistic models of the family that confer authority on men because they earn wages.

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64 ibid, pp. 355-57
65 ibid, pp. 81-3
66 Caroline Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman, a Story of Two Lives, Virago London 1986, p.18
Merle Gibson recalled that the woman’s place was ‘to clean the house, cook and raise the children, and be pregnant, and get to bed any time they were wanted’. For Gibson, wives were more associated with the home than men; the home was ‘their place’. Men however ‘were the lord and master’ in the home. Gibson’s own father was very strict and proper and she recalled that her grandmother had been ‘really downtrodden’. If she bought a new dress she’d hide it from Gibson’s grandfather for fear that she would be in trouble.67 Ellie Byrne recalls similar relationships between men and women. She said the husband went to work and at home ‘he was looked after by the wife’ because he was the ‘top person in the house’ and when ‘he came home, he sat down’. Men ‘made it all possible’ because they worked so hard, perhaps finishing a job at 6 pm, only to be called at 9 pm for another shift starting at 11 pm or midnight. Byrne recalled that even husbands who drank to excess were ‘always looked up to’ and still ‘master of the house’.68

But other recollections challenge this perception of masculine dominance within the house. Mrs Grant recalls that her alcoholic grandfather tried to stay away from ‘them [the women] in the house’. In her view ‘men feel that women rule the roost in the house and that they don’t, their power’s diminished’. Her waterfront relatives were strong women, she recalled, and although her grandfather was always treated with respect the women wouldn’t let him go out alone, because if he was accompanied his drinking was inhibited. Even if the women ‘didn’t overtly run everything, they really did’, Mrs Grant said.69 Others also recalled female authority within the household. Martin Brothers remembered that although his father made the decisions in the family, his mother overruled him ‘when she wanted to’.70 His brother Jim said their mother made the big decisions in the family. She had a strong personality and ‘she was the boss’.71 Evelyn Goodwin remembered her mother as ‘the boss’ with the complicated and somewhat ambiguous rider, ‘Dad let her be the boss’.72

**Conclusion**

67 Gibson, *op cit*  
68 Ellie Byrne, NSWBOHC, 1/2, pp. 16-17  
69 Mrs Grant (pseud), GKOHC  
70 Martin Brothers, *op cit*, 1/3 p.25  
71 Jim Brothers, *op cit*, 1/2, p.26  
72 Goodwin, *op cit*, 3/3 p.35
This chapter has examined experiences of early twentieth century Sydney waterfront housing to draw out the ways in which class and gender influenced the life of the working class household on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. The chapter placed waterfront housing in its historical context and contrasted early twentieth century ideology about working class housing with the day-to-day use of housing in that period by Sydney waterfront people. The chapter argued that not only was the material standard of housing not a reliable indicator of standard of living, but that the social expectations of its architecture were not reflected in the ways that waterfront people used their houses. Whilst many of these uses were gendered, they were not gendered in the ways prescribed by the bourgeois model of the family.

Men and women shared high standards of domestic cleanliness, and working class women’s close association with the house was shaped more by the scale of the domestic workload than by the ‘domesticity’ of the model. The provision of board and/or lodging shows that women regarded their houses less as family homes than as financial resources that were also dwellings. The relationship between working class men and the waterfront house was less clearly defined than that of women and less clearly defined than that entailed for men in the bourgeois model. Many waterfront men ‘lived’ in more than one place, spent most of their work and other time away from the house in the company of other men, and intermittent poverty meant that houses were sometimes unable to offer the replenishment assumed for men in the bourgeois model. Additionally, waterfront men’s working hours were utterly discordant with the daily rhythms of the household, heightening gendered differences in the use of housing. Recollections contained in the oral histories also suggest that the notion that wages conferred familial authority on men within the household is questionable.
CHAPTER 5

BABIES

*Chapter 3: Family Finances* and *Chapter 4: Waterfront Housing* have analysed the way in which those features of life in early twentieth century households contradicted or challenged the masculinist perception of social reality that is reflected in the breadwinner/dependent spouse dichotomy. This chapter argues that an examination of another highly practical aspect of life, the business of having babies, also challenges economistic constructions of significance.

Biological reproduction is perhaps the most fundamental of all human activities. It may be defined as ‘pregnancy, giving birth, lactation and motherhood’. Debates about the purpose and function of biological reproduction butt against many complex historiographical questions related to gender, sexuality, ideology and culture. The first two decades of the twentieth century were highly significant in Australia for issues related to this subject. Fertility was in decline, first-wave feminism was highlighting issues of relevance to the private and physical lives of women, and a national prono-natalist ideology encouraged debates, enquiries and legislation related to many aspects of reproduction, including sexual relationships between men and women.

This high level of interest in matters sexual and reproductive has left an extensive textual trail, providing much historical meat for feminist historians and others interested in the period. But the sheer volume of this kind of evidence has meant that most historical attention has focussed on what was being *said* about reproductive matters, rather than on what might be deduced about the meaning reproduction had for the women who were doing it. This is perhaps especially true for working class women whose attitudes towards reproduction are less visible in the records than those of middle class women.

In contrast to national and international trends, large families were common in early twentieth century waterfront Sydney, as this chapter will show. The chapter argues that

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since the economic and social circumstances of waterfront households were similar to those of other working class people who were limiting family size, questions are prompted about the meaning large families had for waterfront households, and in particular for waterfront women. The chapter seeks to understand the implications of large family size for working class women’s agency.

Biological reproduction is of intense interest to feminist theorists because it is the site of sexual relations between men and women as well as being the site of the primary sexual division of labour. Sexual relationships can be crucial historical indicators of human motives and attitudes: affection, violence, pleasure, revulsion, spontaneity, and duty, for instance. However, the precise nature of sexual relationships is usually screened from historical scrutiny and this is true for waterfront people in early twentieth century Sydney. It is not possible to elucidate what negotiations might have taken place, if any, between waterfront men and women about sexual relationships and related reproductive issues. However, there are other ways of arguing a case about these matters. As Judith Allen has argued, ‘positivist evidence … is not extant, and probably never existed in literate form for the questions that feminism must put to the past’. Feminists must use deduction, inference and symptomatic reading to account for absences and silences in the extant evidence.²

The fertility decline

The early twentieth century occurred within the broader boundaries of a major demographic event: the so-called fertility decline or fertility transition, which began about three quarters of the way through the nineteenth century. At this time the fertility of married women, that is to say the number of children they bore and thus the average size of families, began to decline in most Western and Northern European countries.

Whilst a similar pattern occurred in English speaking countries of overseas European settlement such as Australia, there were also particular Australian manifestations to the international trend.³ These included the rate of decline of the indigenous population

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³ Lado T Ruzicka and John C Caldwell, The End of Demographic Transition in Australia, Department of
after European arrival in 1788 and the doubling of the European population by 1860, largely attributable to immigration. Subsequent declining immigration levels impacted on population growth between 1860 and 1930, but the main factor in Australia, as elsewhere, was an overall decline in the birth rate. Australian women born between 1836 and 1841 bore an average of 7 children but thereafter they bore successively fewer. For women born between 1906 and 1911, the average was 2.4. Of interest here are the figures relating to women who were childbearing in the early twentieth century. Women born between 1877 and 1882 bore an average of 3.8 children, women born between 1887 and 1892 bore an average of 3.3 children, and women born between 1897 and 1902 bore an average of 2.8 children.4

Retrospective explanations for the fertility decline have some differences but there is underlying agreement about its correlative association with changing economic circumstances within the development of industrial capitalism. Demographers Ruzicka and Calwell are the authors of the most comprehensive work on the Australian experience of this phenomenon. In The End of Demographic Transition in Australia they describe the decline as possibly ‘the most momentous event of our times’, evidence of ‘profound changes in society’ that in turn catalysed further social change. Economically based theories relate the change in fertility rates to the increasing costs of child bearing and child rearing. Demographers and sociologists add additional historical interpretation to that position, such as the diffusion and influence of family planning ideas or various historical battles between the risks associated with childbirth and economic factors.5

Ruzicka and Calwell argue that the ‘classical’ view of the fertility transition regards it as having been ‘occasioned by an increasingly rational attitude to life, one aspect of which is a purposive control over fertility, arising partly from the need to fit in with the more stringent demands and greater opportunities of industrial, urban life and partly from the individualistic rationalism engendered by such societies.’ But although the pattern of the Australian fertility decline was similar to that elsewhere, it was not identical and

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5 Ruzicka and Caldwell, op cit, pp. 1-2, 3
Ruzicka and Calwell argue that the relationship between fertility levels and, for instance, the level of industrialisation, is ‘far from clear’.6

One universal trend in western English speaking economies, however, was the introduction of mass schooling between 1870 and 1880, which ‘involved a major transformation of the role of children in the family and probably of the economic balance within the family’. By the early 1870s nearly three quarters of children in New South Wales attended school and the expansion of schooling ‘must have profoundly altered the place of children in both the family and society at large’.7

Longer periods of dependence of children along with increasing focus on their future prospects made smaller families more attractive and larger families a liability. Methods of family limitation provided the means to limit family size, and the shift in ideas that occurred during the transition saw a growing concentration of emotions within the family and ‘an increasing belief that the chief role of parents was to do the best for their children’. This belief may well have been the ‘chief mechanism of transition’, Ruzicka and Caldwell assert.8

Ruzicka and Caldwell’s argument that aspiration was the chief motive for limiting family size is not contradictory with more strictly economic analyses of the fertility transition. These look at changes in the economic costs and benefits of children and argue that compulsory schooling increased the cost of children, and that the contribution they made to families was curtailed by school attendance and concomitant restrictions on child labour. As the net cost of children increased there was a decline of the ethic that expected children to work full time from an early age. The increasing desire for consumer durables in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also contributed to the desirability of smaller families. The fertility decline began when the wealth flow from parents to children became ‘substantial’.9

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6 ibid, pp. 4,5, 6-7
7 ibid, pp. 17, 181-9, 21-22
8 ibid, pp. 60, 23-32, 55
9 Jackson, op cit, p.45
Family size on the Sydney waterfront

Little exact information about the way in which class differences might have been reflected in the fertility decline has been extracted in demographic or economic analyses. However, the logical implication is that the less well off a household was, the greater the impact of the relative social and economic factors. The movement of children from the workforce and into compulsory education, discussed in Chapter 7: *Billy Carts* clearly had significant ongoing economic implications for working class families. The aspirational component of the equation can only have applied more strongly to working class people, who theoretically had more to aspire to than to families of a higher social and economic status. To follow the logic then, Australian working class families in this period should have been small, and indeed many of them were.

But early twentieth century waterfront Sydney doesn’t conform to this picture. Although there is no precise statistical information on family size for waterfront families living in the Commonwealth electoral subdivision of Gipps, as Chapter 1: *Demographic Camouflage* has discussed, there is other more impressionistic evidence in the oral sources and the Court of Arbitration transcripts. These reveal that family size in this community didn’t reflect national and international trends because families there remained quite large. Real women don’t divide neatly into the generational categories used by demographers to demonstrate fertility rates, but the women in the following discussion all came from wharf labouring and coal lumping families living in Gipps in the early twentieth century and were bearing children between the late 1890s and about 1920.

Evelyn Goodwin grew up in a family of six and there were seven children in the Brothers family. In Mrs Beckhouse’s family there were six children, but a further two had died. Although there were only three children in Mrs Ellie Byrnes’ family, she recalls that most mothers in the area had four or five children, and some had as many as ten. Mrs Mary Ryan recalls that local women ‘all had big families’ and Kathleen Berkley remembered local families of eight or ten. Marguerite O’Farrell recalls that her next-door neighbour Evelyn had ‘four or five’ sisters as well as ‘so many’ brothers, and
Mrs Grant recalls that there were eight surviving children of eleven in her mother’s family. Ann Caward was one of a family of eleven, and Daphne Toni (who wasn’t born until 1923) said her mother had been one of nine. Naturally enough, the early death of a mother had a direct impact on family size: Keith McClelland was an only child because his mother died when he was very young, possibly because of complications arising from his birth; and Marguerite O’Farrell grew up with only two siblings, because her mother had died when Marguerite was five. Other evidence confirms the presence of large families on Sydney’s waterfront in the early twentieth century. In 1905 Billy Hughes told the Court of Arbitration that wharf labouring families still had a ‘fair number’ of children in spite of the general trend towards smaller families, and indeed men who were witnesses in the wharf labourers’ 1905 Court of Arbitration case had families ranging up to eight. Hughes said that coal lumpers also usually had four or five children ‘for the birth-rate here [Millers Point in Gipps] does not suffer as it does in more fashionable quarters’. Although most of the men who gave evidence in the coal lumpers’ 1905 case had three or four children, it is probable that many of these families were not complete and subsequently grew in size. Since waterfront families contradicted national and international trends, questions are prompted about what meaning should be attached to the phenomenon and in what way might the factors thought to have prompted the fertility decline have played out within these families?

The economic arguments

To take the economic arguments first: the economic disadvantage of large families was quite clear to waterfront people. Even before any calculation of ongoing cost, the birth alone of each child had a significant economic impact on waterfront households. Sarah Dawes’ evidence to this effect in the wharf labourers’ 1905 case has been discussed in Chapter 3: Family Finances. Dawes revealed the financial impact on her household of the birth of the latest child, her sixth. Dawes’ oldest daughter had given up work as a

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10 Kathleen Berkley, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.8; Evelyn Goodwin, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.4; Jim Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/3 p.2; Keith McClelland, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.1; Marguerite O’Farrell, NSWBOHC, 1/1 pp. 11, 6-7; Ellie Byrnes, NSWBOHC, 1/2 p.3; Mary Ryan, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.14; Mrs Grant (pseud) GKOHC; Anne Caward, GKOHC; Daphne Toni, GKOHC

11 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, Volume 4, p. 1284; Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, Volume 7, p.83
laundress because of the new baby. Dawes may also have been ill after the birth because she said that ‘Dr Bennie is waiting for his fee yet since baby was born’. Since almost all waterfront women used midwives for delivery at this time the presence of a doctor implies a medical problem. Midwives also required a fee, but illness implies further medical expenses. General household consumption and associated costs also increased because of the baby and Dawes had had to withdraw money earmarked for confirmations from the bank accounts of two of her younger children to cover expenses. The Court also assumed that household food consumption increased after each birth because breast-feeding mothers required extra nourishment, from eggs in particular.12

Just as the cost to the household of the mere arrival of each child was self-evident, waterfront families can hardly have been oblivious to the ongoing costs associated with large families. Oral history interviewees recalled a frequent association between family size and poverty. Kathleen Berkley recalled that some of the local children weren’t as well dressed as others, ‘the reason being’ she said, ‘that perhaps there was maybe eight or ten in the family’. Dutchy Young linked poverty with the intermittent work patterns of coal lumpers and wharf labourers and remembered that the ‘terribly poor’ customers at his mothers’ shop were often those with very big families. Mrs Grant said that her grandfather, a winch driver who had eight surviving children of eleven born, had ‘too many children for the amount of money he had to feed them’ and that his family struggled as a result.13

Feeding a large family was no small accomplishment. Chapter 3: Family Finances has discussed the evidence to this effect contained in the household budgets tendered to the Court of Arbitration in 1905, including there staggering consumption of bread in large families.14 There were many reports in evidence of the greater costs of other kinds of food relative to the number of mouths to feed, along with the costs of clothing, fuel and incidental expenses. Many men also mentioned the cost of schooling for their children and the cost of rents, which increased in proportion to house size.

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12 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, vol. 4, pp. 1265-1278
13 Berkley, op cit, 2/2, p.8; Dutchy Young, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1 p.6; Grant, op cit
14 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59 Vol 2, pp. 638; 718-26
The aspirational arguments

In addition to understanding the economic consequences of large families there is also clear evidence that waterfront households were generally aspirational. One wharf labourer father ended up owning a carrying business, for instance, in which his sons also worked. Mrs Grant’s grandmother owned a boarding house, cleaned offices, invested in the share market, eventually owned five houses and gave her daughter the deposit on a house as a wedding present. Marguerite O’Farrell’s father was ‘a great one for education’ and wanted his children to attend school because ‘he never had much education himself’. Lesley Goodwin’s grandmother, who ran a boarding house for ships’ officers, eventually bought two blocks of land at Clovelly.

Evelyn Goodwin (Lesley’s mother) was educated at St Brigid’s but gained a scholarship to Fort Street High School at the age of fourteen. She later did the Post Office examination and went to work there until her marriage (she returned to the Post Office when she was widowed at an early age). Mrs Goodwin said that quite a few local people owned property; one of her aunts owned two semi-detached cottages in Millers Point and another had property in Balmain. Jim Brothers recalled that after his mothers’ death, all his brothers chipped in to send the youngest, Martin, to board at St Joseph’s College. His older brother Michael was a surveyor and another had a commercial career.15

Kathleen Berkley recalled that local priests ran night schools for boys who were working, to educate them to a sufficient standard to enter accountancy or the law. She recalls that one local woman, whose husband was a drunkard, cleaned offices and went out washing to ensure her children were ‘put to trades’. Berkley’s own mother liked reading things ‘that improved her mind’ such as history and newspapers. Keith McClelland’s wharf labourer father had only six weeks schooling and was virtually illiterate, but Keith finished high school, gained a teachers’ college scholarship and was an avid reader and library member. Fred Hughes’ brothers and sisters all went to Fort St High School, gained their qualifying certificates (QC), and one brother won a bursary.

15 Grant, op cit; Toni, op cit; O’Farrell, op cit, 1/1 p.5; Lesley Goodwin, GKOHC, 13/12/95; Evelyn Goodwin, op cit, 2/2 pp. 14-18; Jim Brothers, op cit, 2/2 p.2; Martin Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/3, p.9.
Fred became a waterfront clerk and finished up a Department manager managing the wool dump at Darling Harbour for P&O.\(^{16}\)

**Fear of the future**

Waterfront households clearly had the same kinds of aspirational reasons as others that might have encouraged the limitation of family size. There were also other factors that encouraged working class people to limit family size, which waterfront people also experienced. According to evidence given in 1904 by Mr Edward Riley, plasterer and president of the Sydney Labour Council, fear of the future was widespread amongst working people who believed that technological change would limit future work opportunities. For this reason they were limiting the number of their offspring.

Thinking had changed amongst workers, Riley said, because ‘the tendency is to replace labour by machinery; and, through that tendency having full scope, by free competition, there is not the great demand for labour that previously existed’. According to Riley the boot, tailoring and textile trades had been ‘completely annihilated by machinery’ and the Sugar Company was also mechanising bag filling, a task formerly done by hand labour. ‘Boy labour’ was displacing both men and women from work and men didn’t want to produce a family that ‘would compete against them for a living’, Riley said. Poor people had the largest families he said, because sexual relaxation was an outlet for men who were in the depths of despair.\(^{17}\) John Edward West, master plumber and president of the Trades Hall Committee, broadly concurred when he asserted that it was ‘very often the fear of poverty’ that caused reduced family size.\(^{18}\)

The threat of poverty was constant in waterfront households because of the vagaries of waterfront work. Like other working class men, waterfront men were also aware that technological change was contributing to a decline in employment that had implications for their future. In the Court of Arbitration in 1905 wharf labourer George Cole said improved machinery had increased the number of bags a ship could put out each hour.

\(^{16}\) Berkley, *op cit*, 1/2, p.21, 2/2 pp. 8-9, 1/2, p.6; McClelland, *ibid*, 1/1, pp. 15, 18, 20-1; Young, *ibid*, Tape 3, Side 2, p.11; Hughes, *ibid*, Tape 1 Side 1 pp. 7-12.

\(^{17}\) *Royal Commission into the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales*, Volume II, pp. 194, 195, 198

\(^{18}\) *ibid*, pp. 200, 199
from 250 to 400. Men worked harder as a result, but fewer men were actually needed to do the work. Compressed air drills had recently thrown ships’ painters and dockers out of work and there were experiments at Morts Dock for a machine to do the painting ordinarily done by the men. Additionally, the strikes and depression of the 1890s were recent memories for Sydney waterfront people in the early twentieth century. Thus waterfront households had as much reason to be fearful of the future as others of their class.

Other factors influencing family size

To this point it can be said that the broad social and economic circumstances of waterfront people in the early twentieth century correlate with those judged to be factors influencing the fertility decline. Their children were attending school and thus the wealth flows towards the children had lengthened; the families were aspirational in a range of financial and educational ways; and they had fears about the future because of technological change, reduced employment opportunities, intermittent unemployment and recent experience of industrial strife and economic depression. Why then did waterfront families not do as others did, and limit the number of children they had?

One possible answer is that waterfront families, unlike other members of the working class, simply didn’t know how to limit family size. The following discussion analyses this proposition. In 1903 the Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales was established to ascertain the reasons for the fertility decline. The report of this Commission is the most studied primary document relating to the fertility decline in Australia and has come under intense scrutiny from demographers, historians and feminists. This Royal Commission was established in a fiercely pro-natalist climate generated by strong fears that the declining birth rate, which was occurring throughout the western world, would result in the demise of the European race within Australia. Much of the Royal Commission’s attention focussed on women, in particular with respect to methods thought to be used by them for birth control. The Commissioners sought to lay blame for the fertility

\footnote{Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol. 2, pp. 606, 608, 681,721}
decline on those who were choosing smaller families ahead of what was perceived as the national interest.

The broad statistics show that many working class people must have been actively limiting family size. Edward Riley and John Edward West, cited above, certainly believed that this was the case, as did other witnesses to the Royal Commission, and the Commissioners themselves. In Riley’s opinion compulsory education had given working class people the ability to not only reason out their future prospects, but also a desire to improve their ‘social state’ and enjoy the ‘rights and social comforts’ that other people enjoyed. West said working class people were carrying out voluntary family limitation, including abortion, to ‘a disgusting extent’ and he thought that working class people feared large families would curtail ‘their pleasures and enjoyments’. West linked these changes with a decline in the influence of religion because now that people had become greater readers as a result of education, they no longer believed everything that was preached to them, he said.

The Royal Commission concluded that the decline in the birth rate had been caused by the active use of contraception or abortion, as well as the effects on fertility that resultant pathology might cause. Society was in a ‘decadent state’ because people were unwilling to ‘submit to the strain and worry of children’ and disliked the interference with pleasures and comforts which child-rearing and bearing posed. There was an increasing ‘love of luxury and social pleasures’ and women wanted ‘to avoid the actual physical discomfort of gestation, parturition, and lactation’. Two factors had formerly restrained any desire to limit family size: religious feeling, and ignorance of the methods by which family limitation could be achieved. But now, religious belief was on the way down and knowledge of contraception and other forms of birth control was on the way up. Did waterfront people who continued to have large families not know what everybody else seemed to know about fertility control?

It is clear from the Royal Commission into the birth rate, and other evidence such as newspaper advertisements, that both artificial contraception and abortion were widely

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20 Royal Commission into the Decline of the Birth-Rate, op cit, p.197
21 ibid, pp. 200, 199
22 ibid, Volume I, Report, pp. 14-15
23 ibid, pp 16,17
available in Sydney in the early twentieth century. Whilst waterfront women may have been too uneducated or ignorant to avail themselves of these options, it’s difficult to see that this could be any more the case than it was with other sections of the working class, sections that can only have been limiting family size. Indeed, ignorance of contraception and abortion is probably less likely on the waterfront than in other working class areas of Sydney because pharmacies that dispensed contraception were very close by in Sydney’s central business district, and midwives (who may have doubled as abortionists) lived and worked extensively in the area.

Additionally, people in waterfront areas, as opposed to rural areas, lived cheek-by-jowl, allowing for the ready communication of any knowledge that might be sought. Many waterfront women were directly related to one another, and most women used midwives for the delivery of babies. Whilst they may have been ignorant of sex and reproduction before they married, they can’t possibly have remained so afterwards, or at least no more so than other working class women.

A further factor relates to the movement of ideas that may well have occurred on the waterfront, along with constant ebb and flow of people, goods and traffic from all points nationally and internationally. If knowledge about contraception, or abortion, was available in other parts of Sydney, it can only have been available on the waterfront. Many of the men in waterfront families were or had been sailors, an occupational group exposed to many cultural experiences and notorious for promiscuous sexual activity when in port. There is no evidence to say either way if sailors used contraception more than other men, but it seems reasonable to argue that if other working class men knew about artificial contraception, then waterfront men also did.

**Fertility control and women’s agency**

The issues raised by the Royal Commission are of intense interest to feminist historians because they inform debates about women’s ‘agency’. Some theorists argue that the equation of an increase in the cost of children with a decrease in the number of children is flawed. In Marilyn Waring’s view, for instance, they ignore ‘the possibility that a woman’s political struggle to control her own fertility might determine such
decisions’. Wally Seccombe argues similarly that sexual desire and conjugal power are absent from economic explanations for the fertility decline. In Seccombe’s view an adequate theoretical framework would allow for differences between spouses on reproductive issues and ‘specifically on the changing terms and conditions of marital coitus’. There is no fundamental contradiction between the feminist position of these writers and the conclusions of the 1904 Royal Commission. All are arguing that the explanation for the fertility decline lay in women acting upon their desire to control the number of children they had. In this scenario the fertility decline is evidence, in one way or another, of female agency.

Australian historians have scrutinised the Royal Commission’s findings from various perspectives. Neville Hicks has argued that because of its ideological bias the Royal Commission lost a unique opportunity to examine in depth a fascinating social event, and Hugh Jackson has argued that the Royal Commission’s assertions about increasing knowledge of contraception and a decline in religious feeling were probably correct. Rosemary Pringle’s early second wave feminist work argues that the conclusions of the Royal Commission can’t be taken seriously because of the imposition of an extreme ideology of ‘national and racial chauvinism, military power and glory … male interests which were presented as community interests to which women should be glad to sacrifice themselves.’

In *Sex and Secrets*, Judith Allen has utilised evidence from the Royal Commission in her general analysis of the history of crimes involving Australian women. In another work Allen looks deeply at the Royal Commission and the circumstances surrounding it to find evidence of women’s agency in birth control practises. She says that in blaming women rather than couples for the decline in the birth rate, the Commissioners were arguably ‘more correct in the agency they ascribed to women, than subsequent liberal

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24 Waring, *op cit*, p. 160
historians have acknowledged. Allen’s views on agency and fertility control are particularly pertinent for this thesis because her focus is on working class women. She accepts that working class women in Australia were actively controlling their fertility in the early twentieth century, but her interest is in the methods they employed to do so.

Allen regards the simple equation between the availability of artificial contraception and the fertility decline as simplistic because it entails a ‘questionable technological determinism’. Whilst she accepts that the degree to which artificial contraception was used is ultimately unquantifiable, in her view there were class differences in methods adopted by women for fertility limitation. She argues that because of the cost of contraception it was the middle class that had access to its most effective forms, but that working class women must have been using other methods to achieve the same result, to wit: infanticide, abortion and baby farming.

Allen’s assumption that the cost of artificial contraception necessarily limited working class use of it is weak. Infanticide may have been free, but abortion and baby farming were not. There is always an economic cost to reproduction or the prevention of it, unless women were either celibate or had cooperative husbands willing to abstain or use the (hazardous) withdrawal method. Working class people in the early twentieth century did many things that they couldn’t strictly ‘afford’ such as drinking, gambling, paying the school fees and even eating at times, but money was juggled and debt incurred to cover all sorts of unaffordable items. Artificial contraception may have been a low priority, and men and women may have differed over its use or importance, but arguing that cost alone caused working class women to transgress very deep social taboos is highly questionable. However, Allen argues that official statistics on illegitimacy, maternal and infant mortality, infanticide and the criminal abortion rate were all underestimates, and through the use of abortion, infanticide and baby farming working class women ‘by and large determined their own fertility and family sizes’ in response to social, economic and patriarchal pressures.

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30 ibid p.112
31 ibid, p.113-4, 129
There are difficulties with some of Allen’s arguments, not least the absence of hard data on differences or similarities in fertility patterns for women of different classes. Whilst there can be little argument against the proposition that many women used abortion to control fertility, and no doubt some working class women committed infanticide or deposited babies with baby farmers, Allen’s arguments that such actions, infanticide in particular, were more or less routine birth control methods for working class women carry certain unpalatable implications.

Whatever her intention, Allen’s arguments could be read as meaning that the class position of these women rendered them somehow emotionally deficient relative to middle class women; capable of casual and habitual brutality. If not this, the alternative implication of Allen’s arguments is that an ability to transgress deep (the deepest?) social taboos is evidence of working class women’s agency and thus something more-or-less desirable from a late twentieth century feminist perspective. Either way, early twentieth century working class women may have wished for concrete evidence to support such conclusions.

Other historical work weakens the Allen proposition with regard to the Sydney waterfront. Grace Karskens has argued that archaeological evidence from the Rocks suggests that by the late nineteenth century working class people on the Sydney waterfront had recognisably ‘modern’, in the sense of emotional attachment, attitudes to children, just as other people did. High levels of infant and child mortality resulted in a certain practicality about death, but childhood was seen as a time of innocence in keeping with the general Victorian sentimentalisation of childhood.32 Similarly, nothing emerges from the oral histories about waterfront life in the early twentieth century to suggest that working class women on the waterfront were less emotionally involved with their children than any other women, and since those interviews were conducted, by and large, with the children of early twentieth century waterfront women they were the people most likely to know.

Allen’s arguments about methods used by working class women to limit family size are in a sense a side issue for this chapter because early twentieth century Sydney}

waterfront women continued to have large families and it is thus unlikely that they, at least, were routinely killing their children. However, the relevance of Allen’s work is in the questions it prompts about what ‘agency’ means with regard to fertility. Second wave feminist theory was developed in a period when safe and effective contraception was becoming readily available in the West, and the desire and ability to control reproductive function was high on the feminist agenda. Thus historical evidence of fertility control is sought that will contradict assumptions about the ‘naturalness’ of maternity and women’s willingness to succumb to it. But does that mean that working class women who did not limit family size somehow fail late twentieth century tests for agency?

The discussion that follows argues that high birth rates amongst working class waterfront women in the early twentieth century are explicable in terms of who they, and to a lesser extent their husbands, were, and in terms of what they might have wanted or expected from families. The purpose of the exercise is to demonstrate that large families were effectively a choice made from the point of view of the cultural backgrounds of the people involved, rather than in response to the larger forces that were encouraging the population as a whole to limit family size.

**Who were the people of Gipps?**

The women who lived and worked in early twentieth century Gipps bore little resemblance to their predecessors of a century earlier who, according to Grace Karskens, were unconfined by domestic life, liked ‘to drink, dance and sing’, cohabited frequently and sequentially, and often bore ‘illegitimate’ children. There was a huge social transformation between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that saw a shift from pre-industrial patterns of spousal relationships and parenthood, to ‘modern’ ones that involved church and other official intervention and policing. These changes had deep implications for women and by the mid nineteenth century women’s lives in Australia were increasingly defined by their role within the family. The ‘norm

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of the middle class family, with the wife dependent on the male breadwinner’ was increasingly established in urban areas.\textsuperscript{34}

The extent to which this middle class norm was sought or realised by (or is even legitimately applicable to) working class families is debatable, but it is certainly true that early twentieth century waterfront women lived very differently from those of a century earlier. The portraits that emerge from the oral histories and other sources show women who were not often engaged in paid work outside the home, who were very much contained by their domestic duties, and who undertook church sanctioned monogamous marriage, in most cases lifelong.

Outwardly at least, waterfront working class women in the early twentieth century can be seen to more closely resemble what is understood as the middle class norm of home-centred wife and mother than they did their predecessors on the waterfront. Such a perception poses particular problems about the way in which women might be understood. A case in point is Winifred Mitchell’s sympathetic picture of waterfront class women in the early twentieth century, researched and written in the 1970s, to which the \textit{Introduction} for this thesis referred.\textsuperscript{35} In failing to allow for a complex social and economic reality for waterfront women, Mitchell’s women can only be understood as worthy but bloodless, a working class version of the middle class stereotype, defined by the institutions and expectations of others rather than in terms of their own life experiences.

Many of Mitchell’s assertions appear to arise from an assumption that there was a correlation between the rhetoric about women that permeates the records and the way that waterfront women understood themselves. But such an assumption could lead to the conclusion that waterfront women who bore many children in the early twentieth century did so as a response to the vigorous pro-natalist ideology of the same period, unlike everyone else in Australia. But Sydney waterfront women had had large families long before the early twentieth century. Grace Karskens’ archaeological work has revealed that the average number of babies born to women on a particular waterfront

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Kerreen Reiger, \textit{Family Economy}, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 11-12
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
site over several generations was seven, and some families had as many as thirteen. Family and oral histories revealed a world where personal female relationships were a basic organising principle of ‘a neighbourhood of houses occupied and linked by sisters, mothers, cousins, aunts’, when family and personal relationships were traced, Karskens says.36

When the waterfront populations within which women’s familial relationships figure so prominently are examined, an outstanding feature is the high proportion of mixed nationalities, and it is the Irish who stand out in particular amongst these. Many of the people who were adults on the waterfront in the early twentieth century were either Irish themselves or had Irish parents who had chosen to come to Australia as immigrants. Although there were numbers of English and smaller numbers of Scots and other nationalities, another significant group was Scandinavian males, most of whom arrived in Australia as sailors who jumped ship rather than as formal immigrants.

Lesley Goodwin recalls the strong presence of Irish people around the waterfront, both Catholic and Protestant. His maternal grandmother, born in the late nineteenth century, immigrated to Australia and immediately went into service in the Rocks. In Australia she met and married an illiterate Irish coal lumper, Hugh Dixon. Martin and Jim Brothers’ parents were both Irish and Martin recalls that their house was a ‘second home’ for lots of ‘Liverpool Irish’ who came out on the passenger ships, bringing with them Irish whiskey and Guinness. Kathleen Berkley recalled that during her early twentieth century childhood Millers Point was known as ‘Dagoes, Dutch and Donegalers’. According to Berkley there weren’t many ‘Dagoes’, but there were a few ‘Dutch’ and plenty of ‘Donegalers’ (Irish), especially amongst the coal lumpers. Berkley’s mother was born in Ireland in the late nineteenth century and spoke Gaelic, and although her father was born in Bega in New South Wales, his people were Irish.37

Miss Ellie Byrnes’ grandparents were both Irish. They met here and settled on the Point. Miss Byrnes’ sister Mrs Mary Ryan recalls there were no ‘coloured’ people on the Point but there were Irish, ‘Dutch’ and Nordic. Merle Gibson’s grandmother was born in Ireland in 1863 and immigrated to Sydney as a child in 1870. She married a Swede,

36 Karskens, Inside the Rocks, op cit, pp. 137, 174-5
37 Lesley Goodwin, op cit; Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3 pp. 7-8; Berkley, op cit, 1/2, pp. 1-4.
Oscar Hellesten. Merle Gibson’s paternal grandfather was a German coal lumper. Gibson describes the Rocks then as an ‘Irish settlement’. Mrs Grant’s grandmother, who was Irish, ran a boarding house that was occupied by Scandinavian seamen of various ranks. Mrs Marguerite O’Farrell’s mother was born in Donegal and she emigrated with her three sisters and settled in Millers Point. One of them married an Irishman she met here. O’Farrell recalls that people from the North [of Ireland] ‘all lived in the one street’ and congregated together, that the Irish ‘stuck together as a community’. Keith McClelland’s parents were born in Australia, but their forebears were Irish protestant. Mrs Caward’s father was a Scottish seaman, but her mother, although Australian born, was of Irish stock. Mrs Beckhouse’s father was a Swedish coal lumper. ‘Dutchy’ Young’s maternal grandparents were (unusually) Australian born but his father was a Swedish wharf labourer. His original name was Lyundggren.38 ‘Dutchman’ was a nickname sometimes used for Germans and Scandinavians, so the reference to ‘Dutch’ above probably means the same thing.39

During the 1890 Royal Commission on Strikes, Ramsay McKillop, a long standing member of the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union said that about a third of the members of his union at that time were Norwegian or Scandinavian and ‘nearly three-fourths’ of the men were formerly sailors.40 The names of wharf labourers and coal lumpers reveal many of Scandinavian origin such as Anderson (reportedly Swedish), Christiansen, Eilersen, Poulsen, Williams (reportedly of Swedish and English descent), and Nielsen. Historian Jens Lyng says that Scandinavian sailors were ‘constantly met with in Australian waters and on the waterfront. They ranged from the perspiring coal trimmer to the dignified master mariner on the bridge.’

Several Scandinavian societies were established in Sydney in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Timetabling of the movement of cargo between hemispheres was not rigid at that time and there could be long waiting periods for the wool or wheat cargoes for the return journey, providing plenty of time to meet and fall ‘in love with a

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38 Ellie Byrnes, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.1; Ryan, ibid, 1/2, p. 27; Merle Gibson, GKOHC; Mrs Grant [pseud], GKOHC; Marguerite O’Farrell, NSWBOHC, 1/1, pp. 1-3, 17-18; Keith McClelland, NSWBOHC, 1/1 p.3; Anne Caward, GKOHC; Dorothy Beckhouse, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.1; Dutchy Young, SPOHC, Tape 1, side 1
39 Jens Lyng, The Scandinavians in Australia, New Zealand and the Western Pacific, Melbourne University Press, 1939, p.52
40 Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes 1890-91, Minutes of Evidence, p. 4
coal lumpers’ daughter’, as George Herbert, secretary of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union had earlier remarked. 41 Swedish sailors had a similarly strong presence in Port Adelaide, and one interpretation suggests that higher wage rates were the motivation for these Scandinavians to remain in Australia. 42 Wages may have been a factor but other chapters have shown they were hardly reliable on the waterfront. A broader interpretation might include personal relationships with local women as another significant influence in the desire to remain, as George Herbert suggested.

Patrick O’Farrell has written extensively about Irish immigrants to Australia. After peaking in the 1850s and ‘60s the rate of Irish migration declined and those who chose to migrate to Australia subsequently were not the poorest and the most desperate who had earlier crossed the world to flee the famine. According to O’Farrell, these were more ‘prosperous’ people from the east of Ireland, who were ‘carefully choosing a land of new hope’. They tended to be young people of both sexes, rather than families. Whilst many young Irish agricultural labourers went towards rural areas, young Irish women gravitated to the towns because it was there that they found employment as domestic servants. The famine was less a factor in Irish migration to Australia than it was in migration to the United States, but it was the fundamental changes wrought by the famine to the Irish economy and mentality that were significant for the Australian story.

Before the famine, marriage in Ireland had been ‘early, widespread and embarked upon lightly’, according to O’Farrell, but the institution was transformed by the new economic circumstances and marriage became ‘late, restricted and most cautiously viewed’. The economics of post-famine small farming made marriage and, by implication, large families impossible for many young Irish people. They thus chose to emigrate. This ‘revolution’ in attitudes to marriage was the background to most Irish immigration to Australia. In spite of some cautiousness, marriage and large families were encouraged by Australian circumstances and the large and vigorous family that had been severely diminished in Ireland reappeared, with some modifications, amongst

41 Lyng, *op cit*, pp. 32,73-4; Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes 1890-91, evidence of Mr George Herbert, Secretary of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union, p.12
the Irish here. O’Farrell argues that the decision by young people to emigrate was effectively an expression of the desire to marry. Chris McConville concurs when he says that by the 1870s Ireland ‘had become a society in which children grew up expecting either to emigrate or to remain unmarried’. 

Because they found work in domestic service, young Irish women in cities such as Sydney outnumbered young Irish men. Because too few of their countrymen were available they sometimes had to marry outside their own race and religion. Alternatively, to marry within their nationality and religion, they sometimes had to accept a drop in status and some Irish women in Australia never married as a result. That Irish women were willing to marry outside their national and religious ties was an indication, according to O’Farrell, that marriage itself was ‘a greater good than preserving relations with kin and religion’. O’Farrell misses an essential point that marriage was the only long-term economic option for women in general if they were to avoid economic dependence on (possibly geographically remote) kin. That issue aside, the point for this chapter is not so much that Irish women married, but the extent to which the women’s Irishness influenced family size.

The evidence gathered above shows that the marriage patterns and fertility rates of Irish women on Sydney’s waterfront followed the broad outlines described by O’Farrell. They sometimes married out of their national and religious communities, and they also had large families reminiscent of the archetypal ‘Irish’ family. This raises the question of the way in which differences in religious faith and national origin between marriage partners might have affected the issue of family size. O’Farrell argues that for most Irish Catholics in Australia the church, assisted by the Catholic education system, was ‘their social centre … their avenue to self esteem…’ and amongst Catholic women those in urban areas were more likely to retain their faith than those in more isolated parts.

The oral evidence relating to the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century is replete with references to the influence of priests, nuns, churches and parish schools and

43 Patrick O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, 1993, pp. 85,86,150
45 O’Farrell, op cit, pp. 157,151,152
46 *ibid*, p. 105
to the large Catholic community’s relationship to them. Although some local children went to Fort St High School, most went to the St Brigid’s school when they were younger, and many moved on to St Patrick’s. Daphne Toni recalls that fees were waived during periods of economic hardship but that her father, and others, sent food for the priests and nuns and gifts at Christmas. Families were strict about church attendance and went to mass every Sunday, Martin Brothers recalled, and his sister became a nun. Evelyn Goodwin’s family always said grace and thanked the Lord after each meal and observed other religious rituals. There was no meat on Friday, they carried a rosary and prayer book, and prayers were said regularly. Local girls took lunches to the nuns nearby, attendance at mass was frequent and trams stopped at the Holy Trinity Church whenever services were on. Goodwin also recalled that the Irish on Millers Point and Dawes Point would get together each St Patrick’s Day. Kathleen Berkley recalls traditional Irish wakes at which tea, cake and whiskey were served.47

The oral evidence also suggests that it was the faith of the women, rather than the men, which was likely to be the dominant religious influence in waterfront marriages. There was not infrequent conversion to Catholicism of non-Catholic males on marriage to a Catholic woman, and the upbringing as Catholic of children from mixed marriages where the woman was Catholic. For instance, Mrs Grant’s Anglican grandfather converted when he married her Catholic grandmother. Merle Gibson’s Catholic mother was married behind the altar at St Patrick’s church because her husband was Anglican, but their children were brought up as Catholics. Mrs Caward’s mother was an Australian of Irish stock and her father was a Scottish seaman, but Mrs Caward was brought up Catholic. 48

This leads, perhaps too readily, to the conclusion that it was simply the women’s Catholic belief that resulted in high fertility levels. The Catholic Church certainly had proscriptions against any form of birth control and abortion at the time, but all other denominations were also officially hostile.49 The very active relationships between the local Catholic Church and its waterfront community may well have been a factor differentiating waterfront women from those of other religious persuasions. But when

47 Daphne Toni, GKOHC; Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3 p.24; Jim Brothers, op cit, 1/2 p.14; Evelyn Goodwin, op cit, 1/3 p. 1, 2/3 pp. 10-11, 30; Berkley, op cit, 2/2 pp. 21-26
48 Toni, op cit; Ken Conwell, GKOHC; Caward, op cit; Grant op cit; Gibson, op cit,
49 Hugh Jackson, op cit, p. 265
O’Farrell’s work on post-famine Ireland is taken into account, a more comprehensive argument is that it was the women’s Irishness that was the strongest motivating factor for reproducing the archetypal large Irish family in Australia, and that religious belief was a part of that. As O’Farrell asserts, the central inheritance of Irish immigrants included mind-sets, values and mental furniture. Perhaps large families inhabited that mental landscape.

Whilst it’s likely that Irish men had similar expectations of family life to those of Irish women, there is little evidence about what expectations Scandinavian men may have held for families in Australia. Formal Scandinavian immigration was not common in Sydney (it occurred elsewhere in Australia) but Scandinavians who remained here after they jumped ship nevertheless came from a background of economic difficulty involving population pressure, poor harvests, landlessness and the demise of traditional livelihoods as mass production increased. There is little evidence about the religious beliefs of waterfront Scandinavian men but although there were several Scandinavian social clubs, attempts to establish Lutheran institutions in Sydney were unsuccessful. However, Scandinavian men were probably at least nominally Lutheran and had come from Lutheran backgrounds. According to the Commonwealth Census of 1911, Lutheran women had the highest birth rate of all groups in Australia, with Catholic women a close second. Quite what this figure might have meant for Lutheran men married to non-Lutheran women is unknown, but it implies that large families were unproblematic for people who were culturally Lutheran.

The foregoing discussion has argued that working class families on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront remained large against national and international trends because of the cultural and religious expectations of the people, especially the women, involved. The women’s actions in this regard mean that they were effectively making a choice, a choice to continue the culture from which they had come. Irish Catholic women continued to be Irish Catholic women by marrying and having large Irish Catholic families, even though they found themselves in new social and economic

50 O’Farrell, *op cit*, p.26
52 *ibid*, p. 84
53 *Commonwealth Census of Australia*, 1911, p.284
circumstances and were often married to men who were not Irish or Catholic. This is not meant to imply that such choices were at the forefront of their consciousness, nor that the church was not highly influential in their decision to have large families. Rather, it means that because of who they were these women (and men) did not pursue the alternatives that other working class people were pursuing, even though they had the same sorts of reasons for doing so. Those reasons were not reason enough for these women to alter their cultural definitions of themselves.

**Infant mortality**

Late twentieth century feminism generally applies the concept of women’s agency to those women who have in some way defied or subverted their biologically or culturally determined female destiny. There is, however, another body of evidence that can be used to argue that some concept of agency might just as well be applied to waterfront working class women who chose not to control their fertility. Amongst the many concerns of the 1903 *Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales* was anxiety about then high levels of infant mortality. Since the birth rate in New South Wales had declined by as much as thirty per cent in the previous fifteen years and further decline was expected, it was ‘of paramount importance to the future welfare of the State that the lives of the children that are born shall be preserved, as far as this is possible’. 54

Because the medical profession believed improper feeding caused a large proportion of infant deaths, the feeding and care of all new infants was a strong theme in evidence. The incorrect belief that artificial feeding was as good as suckling, poor knowledge of infant’s physical needs and the best methods of artificial feeding, the use of noxious drugs and ‘sterilised’ foods, the erroneous belief that infants could be separated from their mothers without injury, and poor domestic hygiene were all component parts of a generalised maternal ignorance that the Commission deplored. The Commission also blamed ‘recklessly advertised’ and injurious propriety and other artificial foods, milk and infant foods which were contaminated, insufficient hospital accommodation for poor women and sick infants, and the prevalence of preventable epidemic disease in

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54 *Royal Commission into the Decline of the Birth-Rate, op cit*, p. 18
infants, especially the undue incidence of ‘Summer Diarrhoea’ or ‘Acute Gastro-intestinal Catarrh’.55

In response to the issues raised by the Royal Commission and similar international concerns the first decade of the twentieth century saw a concerted effort to reduce infant mortality levels within the municipal area governed by the City of Sydney, which included the waterfront. The City of Sydney’s overall death rate compared favourably with the ‘great towns’ of England and Wales in the early twentieth century but infant mortality rates were still regarded as unacceptably high because many were perceived to be preventable. The forms of illness that could result in the early death of a child included prematurity, developmental disorders, diarrhoea and other ‘zymotic’ diseases such as whooping cough and measles, and respiratory diseases. As City Health Officer Dr Armstrong reported, some of these deaths were ‘irreducible’, but it was the diarrhoeal diseases, linked to climatic and seasonal conditions, that were most likely to respond to health and hygiene promotion.56 These concerns were linked with widespread international debates about public health and industrialised cities, and the sanitary condition of Sydney was an ongoing focus for municipal and State government.57 The City of Sydney had the added impetus of the bubonic plague outbreak of 1900.58

Women were the focus of public health programs concerned with the sanitation and hygiene of the home. Early in the century the City of Sydney appointed the first woman sanitary inspector in Australia. Amongst other duties, Miss M E Ferguson was directed to visit dwellings ‘to which the attention of the City Health Office has been directed by the occurrence in them of deaths from infantile diarrhoea, or in other ways, and advising housewives as to the sanitary maintenance of their dwellings’.59 This appointment was a local manifestation of the growth in the early twentieth century of a new group of middle class professionals who applied ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ principles to

55 ibid, pp. 38, 39, 40
56 SCC PC, 1904, pp. 496-7, 507
57 SCC PC 1901, p. 228
58 SCC PC 1902, pp. 28-32
59 SCC PC 1901, pp. 226-7
mothering. Most of this work, in which maternal ignorance was a strong theme, was aimed at working class mothers.\textsuperscript{60}

Within a short time of her appointment, the Lady Sanitary Officer’s duties expanded to become more directly interventionist and she began to visit every house in the ‘poorer and more densely populated’ areas (i.e. including the waterfront) within a few days of a birth being registered, rather than waiting until after the report of an infant’s death. At the houses she left a pamphlet about infantile diarrhoea. Miss Ferguson’s main task was to encourage breastfeeding amongst the mothers of newborns. In response, most mothers who were feeding their infants on inappropriate and poor nutrition foods reportedly abandoned those practices and began to feed their infants milk in suitable quantities. Breastfeeding was advocated not only for nutritional reasons. It was advised because many milk products and substitutes were contaminated. Combined with the problems of hygiene associated with using unsterilised receptacles for feeding a baby, these products were a major cause of infantile diarrhoea resulting in death.

Miss Ferguson made 1,414 visits between 11 May and 31 December 1904 and there was an immediate and marked decline in infant mortality rates in the City of Sydney. (See table below) City Health Officer Armstrong was convinced there was a causal relationship between the visits and the improved mortality figures and said that since ‘a large proportion of the infantile mortality of great cities is caused by the improper feeding of young children … any action which tends towards dissemination of sound information on this subject amongst the people most concerned cannot be without beneficial effect’.\textsuperscript{61}

In 1908 Sydney’s Lord Mayor reported that the 1904 figures were the first occasion on which infant mortality was lower in the City of Sydney than it was in Sydney’s suburbs, and it had remained lower in the years since. Between 1903 and 1907, 108 infants under the age of three months in the City had died from diarrhoea. Of that number only 14 were entirely breastfed and 94 were wholly or partially fed on other foods. The Lord Mayor said that since 75 per cent of children under three months were entirely

\textsuperscript{60} Kerreen Reiger, \textit{The Disenchantment of the Home: Modernizing the Australian Family 1880-1940}, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, pp. 128-9

\textsuperscript{61} SCC PC 1904, pp. 496-7, 507
breastfed, then the conclusion was that the death rate of children not wholly breastfed was twenty times that of children who were. Because of these figures, the Lord Mayor rejected a request from a deputation from the Women’s Council asking that milk dispensaries be established in the City specifically for infant feeding. He estimated that by 1908 eighty per cent of mothers in the City of Sydney were breastfeeding.6263

INFANTILE MORTALITY RATES
PER 1,000 BIRTHS; CITY OF SYDNEY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
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<td>1907</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Proceedings of Council, City of Sydney, 1911 p.3)

Table 5:1

There is the possibility that some factor other than breastfeeding might have been responsible for the decline in infant mortality in the City of Sydney in this period. Brian Gandevia, whose work confirms the general statistical picture outlined above, argues that a correlative relationship between improved sewerage and milk and water supplies was not causal in reducing infantile mortality in the City of Sydney. He supports the

62 SCC PC 1908, pp. 31-3
conclusion that Armstrong’s insistence on the efficacy of breastfeeding in this respect was correct.\(^{64}\)

**RECORDS OF NURSING MOTHERS VISITED IN THE CITY OF SYDNEY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1905</th>
<th>1905</th>
<th>1906</th>
<th>1907</th>
<th>1908</th>
<th>1909</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number visited</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>1,455</td>
<td>1,240</td>
<td>1,272</td>
<td>1,175</td>
<td>1,426</td>
<td>1,554</td>
<td>1,323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breastfeeding only</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>1,114</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>1,019</td>
<td>958</td>
<td>1,181</td>
<td>1,291</td>
<td>1,092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>82.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breastfeeding partially</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.86</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Breastfeeding</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Proceedings of Council, City of Sydney, 1911, p.3\(^{65}\))

*Table 5.2*

In another study, Milton Lewis examined evidence relating to Sydney’s milk supply in the early twentieth century to ask if its modernisation might not have been responsible for improved infant mortality figures. But Lewis found that when infant mortality in the City of Sydney began to decline in the early 1900s modern standards of milk safety had not been achieved. Public health measures such as the provision of adequate water and sewerage systems, and improvements in garbage disposal, reduced intestinal infection in all age groups, but (non-human) milk remained an efficient communicator of various infectious diseases, irrespective.\(^ {66}\) Although Armstrong was instrumental in improving the quality of Sydney’s milk supply, and in the maintenance of hygiene standards associated with it, milk quality could not be maintained in houses without refrigeration,


\(^{65}\) The method of reporting these statistics changed in 1912, and in some cases thereafter there was no report, perhaps because of World War I, making extrapolation of statistics more difficult

such as those on the waterfront. It is likely on this argument then that the emphasis on breastfeeding, associated with general hygiene, was the cause of the improved infant mortality figures.\(^{67}\)

That an increase in the numbers of women who wholly breastfed their children was the most probable reason for the decline in the infant mortality rate has implications for the way in which women’s agency might be understood vis-à-vis fertility levels. Reiger’s work has shown that the growing class of middle class professionals focussed on working class women because of what they saw as the twin evils of poor housing conditions and poor housewifery.\(^{68}\) This activity contained an assumption of middle class superiority, but does that necessarily mean that a visit from a middle class professional in the form of the lady Sanitary Inspector was necessarily a cultural problem for the working class women under discussion here?

The Lady Sanitary Inspector was not the first professional woman to enter these houses on reproductive business because most women in the area used a midwife for birthing. According to the City Health Officer’s reports Miss Ferguson was always welcomed into women’s homes and her success rate certainly indicates that this was so. Given that Miss Ferguson was not a nurse, and that her area of expertise was sanitation and hygiene, she was not advising women about the mechanics of breastfeeding but merely its *advisability* on general health grounds. The implication of these observations is that waterfront working class women must have been receptive to this advice and have acted on it immediately and successfully.

Precisely why many working class women were often not breastfeeding their babies in the early twentieth century is not clear.\(^{69}\) In any event, the highly judgemental tone of the Royal Commission obscures one of its important themes: that many mothers were indeed ignorant of the ‘best’ way to feed and look after babies, in the sense of protecting their health, and indeed why would or should working class women in particular have known about germ theory and contaminated babies’ bottles? The middle class reformers

\(^{67}\) *Ibid*, pp. 197-9, 200-205

\(^{68}\) Reiger, *The Disenchantment*... pp. 2, 32-46

\(^{69}\) It may have been due to many and varied factors such as an association of bottle feeding with status, physical exhaustion, ignorance of the nutritional benefits of breastfeeding, ill health or commercial pressure from the manufacturers of patent formulas.
who no longer saw motherhood as ‘natural’ but as something that needed to be taught might sometimes have had a point. In this case they were not so much undermining ‘traditional’ practises, as Kerreen Reiger has described them, as trying to reintroduce them.70

As to the women themselves, if all it took was one visit from the overworked Lady Sanitary Inspector (who sometimes conducted more than 1500 visits in a year) to convince women that breastfeeding was desirable if they wanted their babies to live, then they must have been receptive to the idea. This implies they wanted their babies to survive and did what they could to ensure it. When this argument is combined with the evidence about large families on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront it doesn’t square with Judith Allen’s claim that infanticide and baby farming were routine working class methods of fertility control. In this waterfront working class community at least, women were having many children and doing what they could to keep them alive. These arguments suggest that a concept of women’s agency that limits its application in the field of biological reproduction to the control of fertility rather than its expression is flawed.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that working class women on Sydney’s waterfront in the early twentieth century chose to have large families against the national and international trends of the fertility decline because of the cultural factors within which they defined themselves. Waterfront working class people had the same kinds of reasons to limit family size as other working class people such as changing economic circumstances, access to methods of birth control, compulsory education and a climate of aspiration, but they did not respond in the same way. It is probable that large family size was predominantly a reflection of the Irishness and the Catholicism of the women, and that they were seeking to reproduce the archetypal large Irish Catholic family in Australia. The decline in the infant mortality rates in the City of Sydney in the early twentieth century further supports this view because it is evidence that women took active

70 ibid. pp. 42, 128-9
measures to protect and ensure the lives of their offspring. This raises questions about what ‘agency’ means in relation to reproduction if it is only understood in terms of limiting family size. Because large families inevitably meant greater costs, evidence in this chapter demonstrates that cultural factors were more important than economic factors in reproduction, and that having a certain kind of family was more important than what such a family cost. This argument weakens the case for economistic equations that calculate personal relationships in terms of inward and outward wealth flows, and highlights the centrality of culture in issues of biological reproduction.
SECTION III: WORK AND THE HOUSEHOLD
CHAPTER 6

WOMEN’S WORK: BOARDERS AND WHITE APRONS

Chapter 4: Waterfront Housing concluded, amongst other things, that early twentieth century Sydney waterfront women used their houses differently from the domesticity ascribed to women in the bourgeoisie model of family life. Chapter 5: Babies argued that large families on the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century were a result of female-centred cultural factors, and that the expression, rather than limitation, of fertility could imply women’s agency. The conclusions of these two chapters are not contradictory. Together they simply mean that ‘domesticity’ is not a universal given for waterfront women, even those waterfront women who actively chose large families.

This chapter expands on issues raised in those chapters by examining various aspects of women’s work, primarily that done within the household, in depth. The chapter describes the various forms of work that early twentieth century waterfront women did and analyses it for significance and meaning. In terms of the personal project that prompted this thesis, the work done by home-centred women is a major absence in the kind of labour history that privileges the public and visible world of industrial relations, politics and waged labour. Women are sometimes acknowledged in such history in terms of ‘support’ - of the labour movement cause or of their menfolk in general - but they are always subsidiary to the main story because the work they did lies outside the boundaries of the convention.1 By focussing primarily on the work done by women within the confines of home, this chapter attempts to draw out the significance and meaning of women’s work for waterfront households.

Earlier chapters have demonstrated that most women’s work on the Sydney waterfront occurred within the home. Most of their work thus appears to be about domesticity, about the unpaid nurturing work of caring for husbands and children. Because relatively few waterfront women were engaged in paid work outside the home, paid employment

appears to be a deviation from the domestic pursuits that were ‘normal’ for waterfront women, qualitatively different from them and arising from different circumstances.

Such perceptions stem from constructions of women’s work that categorise it in terms of masculinist dichotomies: paid or unpaid, domestic or non-domestic, breadwinner/dependent spouse. This chapter argues that when different kinds of waterfront women’s work are scrutinised for meaning, stronger similarities emerge than the difference implied by perceived economic activity or passivity. The chapter also argues that women’s home-based work has many similarities to men’s waged work, and that the meaning of some areas of women’s work remains beyond the reach of historical enquiry.

Most of the historiography relating to working class work in Australia is about various aspects of men’s paid employment. Smaller amounts of historiography about women’s work ascribe more attention to women’s paid work than to women’s domestic work. However, as Beverly Kingston has observed, the experience of work that most women, married or unmarried, have shared throughout Australian [European] history, is housework. The favourable balance of attention towards women’s paid employment has occurred in part because historians are attempting to explain women’s social inequality, particularly with respect to the relative loss of privilege that their marginalised position in the workforce has entailed.

An unintended consequence of this focus is that women’s work is approached in a masculinist way, because it is understood in relationship to, and measured by, the predominantly masculine enterprise of paid work, rather than in terms of the work that most women actually did some or all of the time. Although women occupied by domestic duties probably constitute the biggest single occupational category in Australia, and this was certainly true of the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront, the lives of home-centred women appear to be without incident, excitement or influence, further reducing historical interest.

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This is not to say that housework has gone unnoticed in the theoretical debates that have arisen since second wave feminism. Historians, sociologists, geographers and economists of various kinds have all been concerned with questions about the way in which domestic work should be understood. Some of this scholarly attention seeks, in a way that is essentially masculinist, to elevate the status of domestic work by awarding it an economic value, as the Introduction has discussed. There has also been a lengthy international debate over several decades about the economic and social purpose of housework for capitalism. All these approaches acknowledge the ‘importance’ of domestic work but they are generally concerned more with its function for the broader society than with the meaning of domestic work for the women who did it.

In the early twentieth century women in industrial societies came under intense social scrutiny, much of it related to perceptions about ‘legitimate’, that is to say gendered, relationships for women between home and work of various kinds. The rhetoric of the period, the activities of feminist and other social reformers, legislation relating to paid work, social welfare and the promotion of childbearing and other kinds of state intervention all made this purpose clear. Women were ‘made’ for mother and wifehood, best understood as dependents to be taken care of, financially, by men.

However, the degree to which the rhetoric and associated state-sponsored and other activity permeate the historical record means that caution must be exercised when interpreting the lives of women in this period. It would be easy, for instance, to ‘see’ a connection between the high proportions of waterfront women who listed their occupations as home duties, and the rhetoric and activity of the period that believed in the ‘naturalness’ of that kind of work for women. The relationship between work and home for them could too easily be understood as a reflection of the ideology of domesticity promoted by influential sectors of society, rather than in terms of the meaning it had for the women themselves.

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3 To mention just one of a myriad examples: Heidi I. Hartmann argues a Marxist-Feminist analysis of the family in ‘The Family as the locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle: the example of housework’ in Sandra Harding (ed) Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues, Indiana University Press 1987
4 See, for example, Winifred Mitchell, ‘Home Life at the Hungry Mile: Sydney Wharf Labourers and Their Families, 1900-1914’, Labour History, No 33, November 1977, p.89
This interpretive problem is particularly intense for working class women because of the dearth of records and personal accounts pertaining to the daily events of their lives. As one writer has observed, ‘The search for working women’s autobiographies … has … largely failed to find material that could provide a window on the perceptions of working class women as active, complex subjects.’

In the case of the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront, only Sarah Dawes has left any direct contemporary testimony about her day-to-day life, but because this testimony occurred in the Court of Arbitration it is primarily about the expenditure of her husband’s wages rather than the meaning that her work had for her. Caroline Steedman has drawn attention to the way in which the paucity of records about working class women results in a tendency in the historiography to attribute to them a ‘kind of psychological simplicity’. The following discussion focuses on the extent to which the work done by waterfront women reveals them to be agents in their own lives, rather than background for the lives of others.

**Paid employment**

It is not necessary to argue here the general case that Australian women who sought employment outside the home were marginalised in work that was poorly paid. This proposition is well supported by demographic and statistical sources from the early twentieth century that show the limited range of jobs in which women were employed, and the relatively poor wages they earned. In the case of the Sydney waterfront Chapter 1: *Demographic Camouflage* discussed the limited (probably understated) extent of women’s paid employment in the Commonwealth electoral subdivision of Gipps in the early twentieth century. Shirley Fisher has also demonstrated the limited options for paid employment for women in the electorate of West Sydney, of which Gipps was a subdivision, at the end of the nineteenth century. She argues that there is overwhelming evidence that there was an oversupply of female labour in all forms of employment except domestic service (an unlikely option for women who lived within a family

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structure). For them only marginal work (of a domestic kind) such as laundry work, was available.\(^7\)

Whilst calculating the numbers of women in Gipps who might have been seeking paid employment in the early twentieth century is impossible, the demography indicates that the small proportion of women who were employed worked within the range of more or less conventional areas of female work, as Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage has discussed. The limited non-demographic evidence about women’s paid employment supports this general picture.\(^8\) Impressionistic evidence from the oral histories suggests that paid employment outside the home for married waterfront women tended to occur in response to the loss, in one way or another, of the husband and father. Such situations included men who had died, perhaps absconded, were injured or ill, or were alcoholic. Lesley Goodwin’s mother went to work in the General Post Office when she was widowed at a young age, for instance, and she stayed there for the remainder of her working life. Ellie Byrnes recalled that women whose husbands were sick sometimes sought cleaning work, and Kathleen Berkley remembered that a neighbouring woman had to go out washing and cleaning because of a drunken husband.\(^9\)

Because the relatively minor incidence of female employment outside the home appears, for married women, to have occurred as a response to the absence of more significant male income, it is easily constructed as a compensatory activity that was a function of female dependence, that is, in a way that is essentially gendered. This view perceives married working class women’s economic activity as having a dichotomous relationship with men’s, because it is perceived as occurring as a response to the absence of men’s.

Gareth Stedman Jones, for instance, observes in Outcast London that seasonal male and female employment in London in the late nineteenth century was complementary. Winter slackness in the grain and timber trades that reduced employment for London

\(^8\) For instance, of the many men who testified about this matter to the Court of Arbitration in 1905, wharf labourer William Millard alone reported that his wife went out doing washing and cleaning to earn income. Wharf labourers ‘1905 case 2/59, Vol 2-8, pp. 704-8.
\(^9\) Lesley Goodwin, GKOHC; Ellie Byrnes, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p. 15; Kathleen Berkley, NSWBOHC, 2/2, p. 8
dockworkers was ‘partially mitigated’ by the employment of their wives as fur-pullers and hat workers at other times.\textsuperscript{10} Whilst the literal accuracy of Jones’s observation of seasonally alternating male and female employment opportunities may be in no doubt, it implies that women are economically active only in response to male failure. The other side of this perception is that when men are economically successful, women need only be economically passive. An alternative, non-gendered, way to perceive women’s paid employment is that whether or not it occurred alternately with men’s, it can be understood as occurring for the same non-gendered reason: financial need. Had the opportunities for male and female employment occurred at the same time, might not men and women have sought employment simultaneously?

Whatever the case for London, in early twentieth century waterfront Sydney paid employment opportunities for women didn’t conveniently alternate with men’s. The seasonal patterns of male and female employment in the commercial and consumption centre that was nineteenth century London were not replicated on the less economically complex early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. To whatever degree waterfront women were employed outside the home, it is likely that the opportunities for this occurred according to similar seasonal factors as those that influenced men’s employment. For instance, women’s work in commercial laundries was closely related to the shipping and hotel trades, which, because of wool and wheat exports, were much brisker in the summer season, just as other aspects of waterfront industry were.\textsuperscript{11} Higher levels of import and export activity in summer would also have applied to other sites of female employment such as prostitution, or work done by women that was concealed within family enterprises such as restaurants and shops. So whilst it is true that waterfront women were sometimes compelled to seek paid employment when male income disappeared, it is also possible to think about their work in a way that doesn’t imply a gendered form of dependency. This argument is strengthened when evidence about women’s income from self-employment is examined.

\textsuperscript{11} NSW Court of Arbitration Transcripts, \textit{Laundry Employees’ Case}, 1904, p.24
Self-employment

Just as formal records can conceal the extent of women’s paid employment they also conceal, to perhaps a greater degree, the extent of women’s self-employment, particularly if they worked in a business nominally attributed to their husbands. Self-employment was a more achievable form of income generation for women than formal paid employment because in various forms, such as shop and hotel keeping, it co-existed with domestic responsibilities. Dutchy Young’s mother had a grocery shop as part of her dwelling at the end of the Susannah Place terrace, for instance and she combined this activity with family life.12

Little evidence survives about many of these forms of self-employment for waterfront women, so this section is concerned with the one form of women’s self-employment for which there is a body of evidence, the provision of board and/or lodgings. It was this activity that largely accounted for the disproportionate numbers of men ‘living’ in Gipps in the early twentieth century. This activity rarely appears in the formal records, its precise extent is difficult to gauge, and the work entailed appears to be subsumed within otherwise unpaid domestic work and thus is difficult to ‘see’ or understand as a separate activity. However, evidence in the various oral history collections and in testimony given to the Court of Arbitration in 1905 provides a general picture of this form of income generation for women. Its direct financial importance to waterfront households, when income from it might have exceeded that of male wages at times, was discussed in Chapter 3: Family Finances. Of concern here is the meaning that might be attached to this activity for the women who did it, and whether it is legitimately understood as a simple extension of women’s domestic work.

The terms ‘lodging’ and ‘boarding’ mean, respectively, renting living or sleeping space in someone else’s domicile, and doing the same thing but having meals provided as well. Some additional services, such as washing clothes, might also be provided for an additional fee. On the Sydney waterfront the terms referred to a range of different forms of accommodation and services of various standards, from large scale commercial

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12 Dutchy Young, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1, pp. 5-6
boarding houses to individual rooms maintained permanently in private houses for the periodic use of ships’ officers, to sharing a room part-time in a waterfront worker’s house, or even using a bed or stretcher in someone’s cellar on a rotating basis, according to the demands of shift work. Some women looked after boarders and lodgers at a more or less ‘professional’ level in the sense that they ran a boarding house as a formal business enterprise, but most working class women who undertook this form of self-employment did so in a fairly informal way, with boarders and lodgers living amongst the family to a greater or lesser degree within the woman’s home.

Because the provision of board and lodging is in some ways fused with unpaid domestic work, it appears to be a simple and unproblematic extension of the kind of work that any married woman who took care of a house, and husband and children, did. But the oral histories suggest that women who had been in some way professionally trained in servicing the domestic needs of others were those most likely to pursue it within their own homes after marriage. For instance, Fred Hughes’ mother was an orphan who had been sent into service on the waterfront at an early age, and she subsequently trained as a waitress and a cook. Marguerite O’Farrell recalled her mother had worked in a hotel as a young woman, and Dorothy Beckhouse’s mother had been a waitress before marriage. Evelyn Goodwin’s mother was a housemaid before marriage and Goodwin described her mother’s provision of board within her own home after marriage as ‘her trade’.

So whilst it is not necessarily inaccurate to think of these women as ‘capitalizing’ on routine domestic skills by providing board and/or lodging, it is more legitimate to conceptualise the activity as a professional one that happens to take place within the woman’s home, similar to, for instance, dressmaking. The appearance of similarity with domestic work, because the provision of board and lodging in some ways entails an intensification or amplification of it, conceals the extent to which it was a home-based business entailing various levels of organisation, financial management and formality. For instance, Marguerite O’Farrell’s mother and two aunts all had three storey houses and all took in boarders. One of these aunts was childless, but she had no leisure time at

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13 Daphne Toni, GKOHC
14 Fred Hughes, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1, pp. 11,28-9; Marguerite O’Farrell, NSWBOHC, 1/1 p. 20; Dorothy Beckhouse, NSWBOHC, 1/3 p. 18; Evelyn Goodwin, NSWBOHC, 1/3 p. 11.
all, O’Farrell recalled, because she was all the time ‘cooking and scrubbing’. Hers ‘was
life of work and [she] never went anywhere,’ O’Farrell said. This aunt may have
looked as though she was perpetually engaged in the domestic work that is the lot of the
financially dependent woman, but it was actually income generation, not the care of a
family, that occupied her.

The extent of this business activity was at times sufficient for some women to bring in
paid assistance to help with the work. Dorothy Beckhouse’s mother, for instance,
sometimes had paid help in house - washing, cleaning, ironing, and polishing the
floorboards - because of the work the boarders entailed. Other women elevated the
provision of board and lodging into fully-fledged commercial enterprises by taking over
the rent of large old residences that became available as the middle class left the area,
for the direct purpose of setting up a boarding house. When Merle Gibson’s
grandmother divorced she managed to get hold of a big house in (now non-existent)
Prince’s Street that had eight bedrooms. Seamen paid to keep permanent rooms there,
even when they were away, and they also received their pay there, in a room rented for
the purpose.

Like married women who sought paid employment outside the home, it appears that
women who were engaged with providing board or lodging on this kind of scale were
often widows with few or no dependent children. In such circumstances women could
forge a route to financial independence, even modest wealth, by providing board and/or
lodgings. Lesley Goodwin’s grandmother bought land at Clovelly on the proceeds from
letting rooms to seamen and Mrs Grant’s grandmother, who cleaned offices as well as
providing board, invested in the share market and eventually owned five houses.

If the provision of board and/or lodgings is understood as an extension of domestic
labour, it might also be understood as a (remunerated) form of servility. But the way in
which women imposed their personal standards on boarders suggests a more complex
picture, one in which the women exercised a level of authority and control over their

15 O’Farrell, ibid, 1/1, p.20
16 Beckhouse, op cit, 1/2, pp. 14-15
17 Grace Karskens, Inside the Rocks, The Archaeology of a Neighbourhood, Hale and Iremonger, 1999 p. 190
18 Merle Gibson, GKOHC
19 Lesley Goodwin, GKOHC; Mrs Grant (pseud), GKOHC
customers. Merle Gibson recalls her grandmother was very ‘strict’ with her boarders and ‘if anyone put a foot out of place they’d be out’. Lesley Goodwin’s grandmother let rooms to ships officers and ‘always insisted on everybody being nice’, he said. Mrs Grant’s grandmother ran a ‘very strict’ household in which there was never anything ‘untoward’. She had a ‘very gentlemanly’ permanent lodger, and he and others were required to be ‘scrupulously clean’, Mrs Grant recalled. Jim Brothers’ mother compelled her coal lumper boarders to disrobe and leave their dirty work clothes in the cellar before entering the house.  

There was sometimes a blurring in the emotional boundaries of relationships between women and their boarders that contributes to the impression that these arrangements were little more than an extension of conventional domestic work. For instance, some boarders were blood relatives. Ellie Byrnes’s mother had two brothers living with her before they were married and Dutchy Young’s mother-in-law had several relatives, as well as her own five children, living with her: her mother, two sisters who had left their husbands, and the children’s Uncle Teddy. One of Fred Hughes’ mother’s boarders was her foster brother whom the children called ‘uncle’ and amongst the boarders in the Brothers’ household was an uncle who was almost blind, a former seaman who conducted his own enterprise, making rope fenders for tugboats, from the backyard of the Brothers’ house.  

Such relationships might be understood as familial first and financial second, but relationships resembling those of family also developed between women and their non-kin boarders. Evelyn Goodwin recalled that her mother’s boarders often returned to her house because ‘there was always room for them, you know. It was very happy times in those days’. Her mother fed them well, Goodwin said, and some would return regularly on Saturdays, even after marriage, ‘for Mum’s good soups and dinners’. Dorothy Beckhouse’s mother had coal lumper boarders for years. They ate with the family and she packed their meals, along with her husband’s, to take down the harbour for long shifts. When they went off to WWI she collected their pay and banked it for them, and when they were issued with food coupons during the 1917 strike they gave them to her.

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20 Merle Gibson, *op cit*; Lesley Goodwin, *op cit*; Mrs Grant (pseud), *op cit*; Jim Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p. 4  
21 Ellie Byrne, *op cit*, 1/2, p.9; Mrs Young, SPOHC, tape 1 side 1 pp. 3,6,7, Fred Hughes, *op cit*, tape 1 side 1 p. 4; Martin Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/3, p.2
Marguerite O’Farrell’s childless aunt cooked for her boarders but this overlapped with her regular cooking of cakes and scones for the people, many of them relatives, who visited her regularly after church on Sunday.\textsuperscript{22}

Because of its overlap with familial relationships in both labour and emotional terms, the provision of board and/or lodging seems to be located at some soft juncture between the worlds of paid and unpaid work, a juncture that can only be occupied by women, an impression strengthened by its physical location within the home. But personal, almost familial, relationships can develop in all kinds of work, including men’s waged work, but male employment is not understood as any the less ‘work’ when this happens.\textsuperscript{23}

It could be argued, for instance, that the long-term affection and loyalty that existed between some women and their boarders may actually have developed because of the high standard and quality of services, in business terms, that the women provided. Good food, a clean house and a warm or maternal personality no doubt encouraged the financial loyalty of boarders and lodgers whose employment situation kept them in need of waterfront accommodation. But a similar observation could be made of a reliable family doctor, whose work is nevertheless understood as work, in spite of strong personal ties with his patients. That strong affectionate ties sometimes developed between women and their boarders is unsurprising, but it does not mean that this arrangement was somehow qualitatively different from other forms of remunerated work simply because it was done by women within their homes.

If the provision of board and/or lodging is accepted as a business, then it’s clear that women did it because they wanted to generate income, for themselves or for their households. But because they were women, this again raises the issue of whether this activity occurred as a female response to the inadequacy of the male breadwinner, i.e. for gendered reasons. But like other forms of paid employment the way in which this kind of women’s work operated is more complex than that.

\textsuperscript{22} Evelyn Goodwin, \textit{op cit}, 1/3 pp. 10-11; Beckhouse, \textit{op cit}, 1/2, p.13, p. 22; 2/2 p. 17, O’Farrell, \textit{op cit}, 1/1, p. 20
\textsuperscript{23} This was certainly the case with the formalisation of the gang system in the WWF during World War II, wherein wharf labourers chose with whom they would work. Gangs were often based on family members. Margo Beasley, \textit{Wharfies: A History of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia}, Halstead Press in Association with the National Maritime Museum, 1996, p. 118.
It is true that these waterfront families were not especially ‘well off’. Most boarding and/or lodging arrangements, particularly those that occurred in waterfront worker’s houses, were not of an especially high standard. None of the men who boarded or lodged with waterfront families had a room to themselves, according to the oral histories. They shared rooms with other men, or with male members of the family, usually sons, and the rooms often slept as many as four people simultaneously. Additionally, not all households offered other services such as meals or washing, the capability for which depended on such factors as whether there was sufficient room for large numbers of people to eat, and the availability and standard of cooking and washing facilities.

However, whilst the crowded living conditions experienced in these houses are indicative to some extent of financial need, Lenore Davidoff’s observation of nineteenth century London, that a certain material standard is implied by the capacity to provide even the most basic services for boarders or lodgers, is also applicable to Sydney. At the very least Sydney waterfront households that took in boarders were able to provide sleeping space, however rudimentary, and sometimes the space and organisational capacity to feed additional people as well. These were not the ‘terribly poor’ households who are mentioned in some of the oral histories about waterfront life. Rather, they were the households that had the wherewithal, however limited, to capitalise on others’ accommodation difficulties.

Thus the provision of board and/or lodging should not be understood as the activity of financially dependent women that was prompted by their marriage to men who were inadequate breadwinners. On the contrary, those women who had the material circumstances, and perhaps the professional training, to provide such services were likely to be better off than those who didn’t. So the provision of board and/or lodging should not be construed as a female activity that was a response to male failure of some kind because is more likely that relatively well off women were better able to take advantage of economic opportunity, just as relatively well off men were better able to

24 These ‘crowded’ living conditions, were, however, more ‘normal’ than today. See Lenore Davidoff, ‘The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century England’ in Sandra Burman (ed) *Fit Work for a Woman*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, p. 69

25 Dutchy Young, *op cit*, Tape 1 Side 1, p.6
access opportunities for waged work. This point can be pushed a little further still: it could be argued that in the face of prohibitively high rents on the waterfront it might actually be the woman’s ability to use her house to generate income that ensured her husband was permanently available for waterfront work, thereby improving his income. In other words, female capability in the area of the provision of board and/or lodgings may well have had a direct impact on a husband’s ability to earn wages.

As Chapter 3: Family Finances has already mentioned, there are no clear answers about whether the provision of board and/or lodging decreased during lean times on the waterfront. Logic suggests that it would have suffered during periods of high unemployment, but the increase in the masculinity rate of Gipps between 1908 and 1917, coincident with a decline in the number of dwellings in the locality (see Chapter 4: Waterfront Housing), suggests the opposite: that ever increasing numbers of men needed some form of accommodation on the waterfront. The raw numbers of men residing in Gipps were at record proportions in 1917 when industrial disruption and unemployment were at a peak in Sydney. Dorothy Beckhouse’s recollection that her mother’s lodgers gave her their food relief coupons at this time implies they continued to live with her even when there was little or no work, presumably in the hope that if some work became available, they would be in a position to access it. This possibility loosens the perception of a necessarily direct relationship between low male wages and household poverty. It strengthens the argument that resemblances between domestic work and the provision of board and/or lodging do not amount to them having similar meanings for the women involved. The provision of board and/or lodging was a business whose purpose was the same as other kinds of businesses or other forms of paid employment: income generation.

**Domestic work**

This section is concerned with the meaning that the unpaid work of caring for a house and family had for women on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. In the bourgeois model of family life this work is usually taken to mean emotional care and nurturing on the part of women, for the other members of their families. Unlike paid

26. How they paid for it is anyone’s guess.
27. Beckhouse, *op cit*, 2/2, p.17
employment that is physically separate from the home, when women’s unpaid labour in the home is imagined, the concepts ‘work’ and ‘home’ are almost synonymous. The ideological notions of domesticity and nurturing with which this work is so often invested are intensified because it takes place within the physical space of the home.

The oral history collections provide various accounts of domestic work in the early twentieth century. They reveal that most early twentieth century waterfront women who were wives and/or mothers were predominantly occupied within the home with the traditional female tasks that are associated with housekeeping and home making: they cleaned, cooked, washed, sewed, knitted, starched and shopped for their families, and made household linen for their daughters’ glory boxes. In many of their tasks and routines they resemble closely the working class women of other studies.28

Many similar rhythms and patterns arising from ‘traditional’ influences are discernible in the performance of particular domestic tasks on the waterfront. For instance, washing was traditionally done on Mondays on the Sydney waterfront as it was in working class households in other parts of the world, and other weekly rituals included clean up day and bath day.29 The formal Sunday family meal after church attendance, cooked by wives and mothers, was a widespread ritual in the area. According to one woman’s recollections there was a strict routine for women to clean the front steps of their houses early in the morning because you ‘wouldn’t want to be seen doing it later in the day’.30

Clean white aprons were almost a uniform amongst waterfront women, and signified special occasions, special tasks and emotional expression. Aprons were ‘beautifully starched and clean’, Merle Gibson remembered, and were worn for Sunday best and to tend the sick. One woman remembered a ‘lovely old lady’ who, before her wharf labourer husband returned for meals would say ‘I’ll have to see that I haven’t got a dirty apron on when Tom comes home’.

28 Berkley, op cit, 1/2 p. 5, 12, and 2/2 p. 13; Evelyn Goodwin, op cit, 1/3 p.15 and 3/3 p.8; Jim Brothers, op cit, 1/2, p. 33; such studies include Maude Pember Reeves, Round About a Pound a Week, Virago 1979, Margery Spring Rice, Working Class Wives, Virago, London, 1981; and Elizabeth Roberts, A Woman’s Place, an Oral History of Working-class Women 1890-1940, Basil Blackwell, 1984
29 Lesley Goodwin, GKOHC
30 Berkley, op cit, 2/2 p. 13. This routine may also have been related to local Australian conditions because regulations in the wake of the Bubonic Plague outbreak of 1900 obliged women to have cleaned, washed and whitened their front steps, and shaken out their rugs, by a certain hour before street cleansing operations; Evelyn Goodwin, op cit, p. 26
Women were central to the maintenance of life in the waterfront community, as they were in other working class communities. They took care of the ill, and of the children of women who were ill. When deaths occurred, they laid out bodies in the front room and draped the walls with white sheets dotted with small black crosses. They also policed standards in other women (‘Has your mother sent you with a clean handkerchief?’) and when mothers died, older daughters stepped up to take over their households.

Because flashes of individuality occur only occasionally in these generalisations a perception of ‘sameness’ amongst working class waterfront women is encouraged. But in spite of the broadly apparent similarities, women can only have been performing household tasks according to individual variables such as personal standards, social expectations, and the availability of amenities such as water supply and cooking facilities. That said, the most strongly shared image that emerges from the recollections about women’s domestic labour is nevertheless another kind of similarity: the similarity of its overall physical intensity. This focus in the recollections on the physical intensity of domestic labour probably occurs because it was an aspect of women’s lives to which their children (who are the oral history interviewees) bore witness. Additionally, the intensity of domestic work in the early twentieth century contrasts sharply with contemporary life, from which perspective the recollections are being formed.

Waterfront women’s domestic work in the early twentieth century was undeniably arduous. For instance, many houses had no internal water supply and those that did had only a single tap, usually in the kitchen, which was below street level at the rear of the house. If a large amount of hot water was required it was boiled in the copper in the backyard and thus most water for washing up, baths, or cleaning floors and windows had to be lugged from the backyard or the downstairs kitchen into the house and carried out again to be emptied. Many waterfront people bathed only once or twice a week, but employed waterfront men bathed more often because they were filthy after work. Since

31Merle Gibson, op cit; Evelyn Goodwin, op cit, 1/3 p. 21 and 2/3, p. 30; Jim Brothers, op cit, 1/2, p.38; Ann Caward, GKOHC; Byrne, op cit, 1/2, p.1
32Merle Gibson ibid; Ann Caward, ibid
33There must have been many individual difference but they are not noted. But Kathleen Berkley’s mother, for instance, who grew up on a farm, could do ‘everything around the house’, including making screen doors. Berkley, op cit, 1/2, pp. 5,30
water supply was rarely abundant, especially in summer, water was sometimes brought from further afield, often from a lone public water fountain near Fort St High School.\textsuperscript{34}

Washing of clothing and linen involved a regular pattern of overnight soaking, feeding the copper with wood, immersion and stirring of the washing in boiling water, feeding through a mangle and removal with a stick into a sink to cool. Washing was then hung out to dry, sometimes on a pulley arrangement that elevated the line to catch breezes and sunlight.\textsuperscript{35} Refrigeration was non-existent and shopping a daily activity.\textsuperscript{36} Many items were purchased at the door as men with carts called round the district selling fish, vegetables, rabbits, milk and bread. Chinese hawkers also carried items such as linen, feather dusters, buckets and mops; and more durable items such as crockery were purchased at Nock and Kirby’s in George Street North. Grocery shops, of which there were many in the area, stocked washing powder, kerosene, brooms, floor polish and other household supplies. The Queen Victoria Markets were a tram ride away in the centre of the city.\textsuperscript{37}

Although the intensity of domestic labour was universal, some factors, such as the total number of people within a household, increased the load for individual women.\textsuperscript{38} Boarders or lodgers, for instance, added to the total number of people in a household, for part of the week at least. But as Maude Pember Reeves observed in her classic study of working class women in London before World War I, the factor that most affected the volume and degree of women’s domestic labour was the number of children they had. As \textit{Chapter 5: Babies} has discussed in detail, early twentieth century Sydney waterfront women generally had large families.\textsuperscript{39} Additionally, the improved quality of newer waterfront houses, discussed in \textit{Chapter 4: Waterfront Housing} did not reduce women’s workloads. Larger houses have more rooms, floors, windows and furniture to maintain, and improved amenities increase the amount of cooking and washing that needs to be done and that it is possible to do.

\textsuperscript{34} Dutchy Young, \textit{op cit}, tape 1, side 2, p.7; Tape 2 Side 1, pp. 3-4,
\textsuperscript{35} Jim Brothers, \textit{op cit}, 1/2, p. 13
\textsuperscript{36} Mrs Young, \textit{op cit}, Tape 1 Side 1, p. 9
\textsuperscript{37} Dutchy Young, \textit{ibid}, tape 1 side 1 p.8, tape 1 side 2 pp. 4-11
\textsuperscript{38} Assuming only one adult woman to do all the domestic work. This was not always the case because older children, especially daughters, often assisted.
\textsuperscript{39} Reeves, \textit{op cit}, pp. 174-5
Although it is clear from the descriptions of women’s physical labour that they worked very hard and that this is what they did most of the time, it is less clear what meaning this work held for them and whether they did it according to personalised notions of, say, duty, virtue or love, or in response to the standards of others such as middle class reformers, churches or husbands. In other words, is there any good reason to think that just because women worked very hard within their homes that this meant they did so for reasons of the nurturing and caring implied by ‘domesticity’?

Domestic work is laden with this kind of ideological meaning within the bourgeois model of family life and because others were the beneficiaries of domestic work it seems logical to assume that it was ‘shaped’ by the needs and concerns of others, rather than by the needs or concerns of the women who did it. For instance, wage-earning husbands are understood as prime beneficiaries of women’s domestic work so it might be assumed that its patterns were somehow ‘shaped’ by the irregularity of the men’s working hours. Such a conclusion rests on masculinist assumptions that the public world of the market determines relationships in the private world of the home. But when evidence for such a proposition is sought within the sources there is little to support it.

Women did do some things for men, of course. But as Chapter 4: Waterfront Housing has already mentioned, the picture that emerges when the question of ‘shaping’ is interrogated is that women and children lived within the ‘normal’ patterns of the day and night, but the men, because their hours were shaped by market forces, did not. For instance, there are references in the sources to men returning home from work in the early hours of the morning and organising baths for themselves, but not to women rising in order to do this for them. Indeed, the fact that the men had cold baths at these times means that nobody had risen to heat the water in the copper in preparation for their return.40 The picture that emerges is not that the men’s hours shaped domestic life, but rather that the private routines of the home and the public irregularities of men’s work were in contradiction with one another. The notion that the meaning of women’s domestic work routines might have come from doing things for men doesn’t hold up to scrutiny.

40 (They couldn’t actually know when they would return.) Hughes, op cit, tape 1, side 1, p. 2; Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3, p. 14
Because of the dearth of first person accounts from early twentieth century waterfront women, such impressions as there are about the meaning of women’s domestic work come from others, almost all of them from the children of the women who are being recalled. Because of this maternal/child relationship certain not unpredictable themes emerge when the meaning of domestic work for women is sought in the recollections. For instance, the oral history interviewees repeatedly recalled their mothers having an extremely high standard of cleanliness, one described his mother as ‘fastidious’, and the women were generally recalled as having a high level of personal pride in their domestic work. Fred Hughes recalled his mother on her hands and knees, polishing the kitchen linoleum with kerosene. ‘When the fire was alight of a night time, when we were sitting there, she used to shine the floor, beautiful it was,’ he remembered. Another mother decorated her dresser with cut out paper patterns and scrubbed her white-topped kitchen table everyday. Her coal stove was ‘wonderful’, her ‘pride and joy’ and ‘you could see your face in every part of it’, Martin Brothers recalled. She used to wash the top of the stove over and over and she’d polish it up and it used to shine like a two shilling piece. Oh it was good. And oh, warm in the winter time, beautiful.41

These recollections are clearly invested with a warmth that is lovingly maternal. But how much are the recollections about the women themselves, rather than the emotional desires of their children? Caroline Steedman cites Gaston Bachelard’s description of how radiance is ascribed an emotional function in the memory. According to Steedman, Bachelard ‘suggests that polishing, the giving of a bright appearance to things, is the best mark of cherishing’.42

When this insight is applied to the oral histories about Sydney’s waterfront, it can be seen that it is the children, not the women themselves, who are infusing the women’s activities with emotional content. Whilst they seem to be telling the audience about their mothers, the interviewees are actually using the past to in some way ‘tell the stories of their own life’, to use a Steedman phrase. The maternal warmth with which these memories are invested implies that they, as children, were nurtured. As Steedman has

41 Daphne Toni, op cit; Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3, p. 20, p. 12; Hughes, op cit, p. 15.
observed elsewhere, nearly everything about the subject of mothering ‘assumes the desire to mother’.\footnote{Steedman, \textit{Landscape for a Good Woman}, pp. 8, 16} This is perhaps especially true when children recollect their own mothers. They seek to invest their memories of their mothers with maternal love.

Another aspect of domestic labour, the provision of food, also emerges as particularly potent with regard to the meaning that is ascribed to women’s domestic work. Food occupies a central place in human relationships, embodying symbolism, status, comfort and pleasure, and it is directly linked with both lean and plentiful times. Waterfront women in Sydney had a constant relationship with the acquisition and provision of food for their families, mediated by material circumstances, throughout the early twentieth century. But this relationship was not as clear-cut as the ideological requirements of the bourgeois model suggest.

In the early twentieth century, before large-scale demolitions and rebuilding took place around the waterfront, cooking facilities were limited and many households simply didn’t have the capability for families to actually eat home prepared meals together on a daily basis. Indeed, before the routine inclusion of fuel stoves in early twentieth century waterfront housing, even the ubiquitous Sunday roasts were often not prepared at home, but left to cook in the local baker’s oven and collected when they were ready.\footnote{Isadore Brodsky, \textit{Sydney Looks Back}, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1957, p. 32} So the idealised woman at the centre of daily at-home meal preparation in the bourgeois model couldn’t have existed in these circumstances.

Earlier chapters have already referred to the way that many men lived away from their families for several days of each week, and the irregular hours that they worked. This implies that a home-centred woman was not a necessary part of the physical sustenance of waterfront men. Evidence from the wharf labourers’ and coal lumpers’ cases of 1905 indicates that men often sought food from places other than ‘home’, and food in many forms, ready for consumption, was widely available around the waterfront. Cookshops, cafes and hotels provided food to be eaten on the premises or taken elsewhere, and other forms of ‘convenience’ food were ubiquitous, including many varieties of tinned and preserved fish.\footnote{Dutchy Young, \textit{op cit}, Tape 2, side 1, p. 1}
The importance of bread in the 1905 waterfront diets was discussed in Chapter 3: Family Finances. Bread is a ‘convenience’ food that is cheap, filling, requires little or no preparation and can be eaten without utensils. It can be taken to work as well as consumed at home and the level of its consumption in 1905 implies that home cooked meals were relatively infrequent. Other cheap, convenient (and appetite suppressing) foods were also consumed in large quantities, such as tea, sugar, jam and golden syrup. Men recalled often going without meals at this time, and that bread and jam was one of their staples. So waterfront mealtimes in the early years of the twentieth century can’t be conceptualised as the regular, woman-centred and family occasions of the bourgeois model. If women were rarely involved in such activity it is tenuous to link the provision of food with ‘domesticity’ and the nurturing that implies.

Chapter 3: Family Finances also discussed the way in which the quantity and quality of food consumed by waterfront working class households in the early twentieth century was not stable. Its short supply in the first decade of the twentieth century is demonstrable in the sources, but its general availability and level of consumption is less clear for the second decade. However, recollections of plentiful food in the oral histories suggest that waterfront families were in a position to consume larger quantities of food, and at more frequent mealtimes, in this period. Within such recollections it is mothers who are associated with abundant, nutritious and tasty food. There are memories of porridge, eggs, bacon and toast for breakfast; roast meat, steak, pies, stews, vegetables and soups for main meals; and steamed and plum puddings, cakes, scones, and sweet pies and tarts for desert. These stories are infused with nostalgic significance: for the past, for the food, and for the women who made it. Kathleen Berkley recalled a great variety of cooked food that was ‘all made by mother’ a woman who always ‘varied her meals’. Evelyn Goodwin attributed the long lives of her family members to the quality of the food their mother provided. ‘That’s why we all lived so long’ and ‘never had a day’s illness’, she said.

46 As Ross has observed, op cit, p. 49; Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol. 2, pp. 757-8
47 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, ibid, pp. 638, 718-26, 757-8
48 Perhaps the relative rarity of family meals was a contributing social, as opposed to religious, factor in the reverence applied to the regular family dinner on Sundays after church.
49 Berkley, op cit, 1/2, pp. 9-16; Evelyn Goodwin, op cit, 1/3 p. 11
Whilst relative affluence played its part in the kinds of food women provided, other factors also influenced its preparation and consumption. The allocation of food indicates that personal preference, status, religion and social ritual were also influential. Sarah Dawes’ evidence to the Court of Arbitration showed that she controlled the allocation of food in her household and that even in the relatively lean year of 1905 she wouldn’t eat food that she didn’t like.\textsuperscript{50} Saturday dinner in the Brothers’ household was regularly an ‘Irish’ meal – boiled corned brisket, with cabbage and other vegetables. In Catholic households there was fish on Fridays. Sunday lunch after church, irrespective of denomination, was the most sumptuous meal of the week [helpfully it was also the day after payday for waterfront men]. Some waterfront women also structured a comprehensive social life around their cooking. Dorothy Beckhouse recalls their house was always full of visitors who came for her mother’s meals such as pea soup on Saturdays, and hot scones each Sunday for her husband’s coal lumpers friends. Another made quantities of cakes for her regular visitors between the Sunday morning church service and lunch.\textsuperscript{51}

Because it is mothers who are credited with the provision of memorably delicious meals this task seems to be about the nurturing quality of their mothering, even when there are other cultural purposes for particular patterns of food consumption. But material circumstances affected a woman’s ability to perform any of these tasks. Although very little food was available at certain times, the appearance of amenities such as fuel stoves and, presumably, improved household income, gave women the material capacity to prepare the kind of food (culturally determined or not) that lodges in the memory. But if this material capacity is subtracted from the picture, what remains is not an image of maternal nurturing minus the food, rather it is only a kind of vacuum. The nostalgic fondness for mothers who provided a plentiful and varied range of food needs to be viewed in this material context. Mothers who only provided bread and jam were, presumably, no less ‘mothers’, but they can’t be recalled as nurturing their families through the provision of food. In the recollections it is actually the food that is remembered, but because mothers provided it those who are doing the remembering invest the process with maternal meaning.

\textsuperscript{50} Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60 vol 4, p. 1275
\textsuperscript{51} Martin Brothers, \textit{op cit}, 1/3 p. 16, p. 23, Beckhouse, \textit{op cit}, 1/2 p. 15
Food also provides a route for examining waterfront women’s relationships with their husbands. To what degree might it be understood as entailing the husband-nurturing component of domesticity? Most of the relevant evidence on this topic comes from the wharf labourer’s and coal lumpers’ cases of 1905, a period when food was not abundant in waterfront households. Indeed food was often mentioned in these cases because of its absence and the men and their advocate described the difficulty of paying for meals, or of having enough food in the house to take some to work.

When wharf labourers worked locally they sometimes returned home to eat, but wives and/or children also delivered meals to the wharves. Ken Conwell recalls his mother sometimes walked to Pyrmont with food for her husband. Ellie Byrnes remembers women transporting meals to their husbands between two plates that were wrapped in several tea towels to keep the contents warm. Some women even travelled by ferry to places such as Ball’s Head to deliver meals when their husbands were working there.52 Because it was (primarily) women who did this kind of thing for men, it seems to be about the domestic nurturing required of wives in the bourgeois model. But since the practice of carrying meals to husbands died out when canteens were established on the wharves in later years, the implication for meaning is that of practical necessity rather than female to male nurturing.

There are other indications for arguing that the nurturing component of female to male relations was not particularly strong on the Sydney waterfront. The nutritional privileging of the male breadwinner observed by Ross in working class London is not evident in the sources for waterfront Sydney.53 Whilst Sarah Dawes may have been privileging her sixteen year old foundry worker son by giving him an egg between slices of bread for his lunch each day, she doesn’t mention doing the same kind of thing for her husband. Although some wives sometimes packed meals for coal lumpers husbands to carry to work, other married men took care of themselves by taking the food that was left over after their families had eaten. Still others bought the food they took to work at cookshops and the like.54

52 Ken Conwell, GKOHC; Byrne, op cit, 1/2, p. 5
53 Ross, op cit, p. 33
54 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, p. 1275; Beckhouse, op cit, 1/2 p.2; Coal lumpers’ 1905 case 2/63, vol 7, p 363
There is general evidence that working class women suffered from diet-related poor health in early twentieth century Sydney but there is no evidence to the effect that waterfront women actually went without food in this period in order to give it to men (or children), as Ellen Ross has observed of London working class women. But some Sydney waterfront men testified that they went without food in order to ensure their children were adequately fed. It’s possible that this self-sacrifice was related to the reduced (masculine) status of being unemployed, but in any event the conventional assumptions about who did the self-sacrificing for whom are unsupportable within the available sources about the Sydney waterfront.

These arguments, that the case for domesticity being the meaning of waterfront women’s domestic work is weak, are not meant to imply that waterfront women did or did not love or nurture their children, or their husbands. However, the issue of domesticity is particularly relevant for working class women because of its centrality in the bourgeois model of affective family life. Domesticity was regarded as a desirable trait for working class women because they were sometimes perceived as defective in the nurturing department. Some historians have effectively accepted this view by attributing working class women’s apparent inability to live up to the ideal to the sheer volume of physical work they had to do, or to the toughness a working class woman needed to survive, and with which she inculcated her children.

Other historians have sought to demonstrate that working class women had, like other (middle class?) women, a strong emotional commitment to their families. Grace Karskens has argued, for instance, that the evident culture of mourning on the Sydney waterfront in the late nineteenth century shows the depth of feeling women felt for their children. Ellen Ross has argued of London working class women that ‘the emotional or intellectual nurture’ of their children and even their actual comfort ‘were forced into the background’ because the daily struggle for survival was the mother’s ‘main charge’.

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55 NSW Board of Trade Inquiry into the Cost of living for Adult Female Employees 1919, vol 2, p. 445; Ross, op cit, p. 29
56 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59 vol 2 pp, 595-6, 542
But the proposition that working class women loved, nurtured or valued their families as much as any other women is inherently unprovable because it can’t actually be measured in any meaningful way. In any event, such arguments not only assume the desirability of some idealised version of womanhood, the (probably unintended) implication is that the same case doesn’t need to be demonstrated for middle class women. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the issue is not whether waterfront working class women loved their families as much as other women, but rather whether that can be understood as the meaning of the domestic work that they did. In determining the limits of what it is possible say historically the conclusion on this matter is that when domesticity is ascribed to women’s domestic work, this meaning comes not from the waterfront women themselves, but rather from the people who are remembering them. The meaning of domestic work for the women who did it remains opaque.

Financial Management

Although women’s physical domestic labour was a prime determinant of household comfort, the significantly more cerebral, and less visible, task of managing family finances was also central to a household’s wellbeing. On the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century women performed this task, like working class women elsewhere. The household budgets tendered as evidence in the wharf labourers’ and coal lumpers’ cases of 1905 implicitly acknowledge the importance of this activity for the wellbeing of waterfront working class families.

The management of household finances overlaps with many aspects of domestic work in the sense that it stretches resources in order to, for instance, make flavoursome meals from frugal ingredients, repair clothing to extend its life, and purchase goods at the best price to free up income for other purposes. A focus on men’s wages as the chief determinant of standards of living obscures the importance of this aspect of women’s work because if financial resources are scarce, it is the quality of their management that extends or dissipates them and determines a household’s capacity to survive.59

59 Kingston, op cit, p. 100
The ostensibly ‘private’ activity of managing household finances was as closely connected to the economics of the public world as men’s wages, because it mediated the financial relationship between the market and the household. It required constant manipulation of consumption and expenditure according to how much was coming in, and the allocation of what had to go out. It was women who negotiated this relationship in waterfront working class households in the early twentieth century to orchestrate some kind of equilibrium whilst income and prices fluctuated along with trade cycles, seasons, depression and war.

Although sometimes an apparently ‘rational’ process, the allocation of resources was also determined by cultural, religious, social and personal priorities. For instance, although Sarah Dawes was unable to save any money because she spent to the limit of her husband’s wages each week, she regularly allocated money to two of her children’s bank accounts so that they could save for the cost of their first communions. The bank accounts were raided in 1905 to cover the costs associated with the birth of Dawes’ most recent baby, but the practise is an indication of the priority she placed on the religious instruction of her children. Even when food was scarce the Sunday lunch ritual received more than its fare share of financial resources because of its religious and social significance. Dawes said ‘I always make it a rule to have pudding on Sunday’ even though the family had none during the week. Eggs were purchased for the pudding, along with other unspecified Sunday ‘extras’.60

Expenditure in waterfront households followed some regularised patterns. Dawes said she paid cash for meat during the week but other bills, such as the baker, were accumulated until the end of the week and paid with cash on Saturdays, because Saturday was payday on the wharves. Wharf labourers were ‘not allowed to run the second week’ with this kind of credit, she said, presumably because of the perceived risk associated with the vagaries of waterfront employment. ‘Some days you might be short,’ Dawes said ‘and as you cannot get credit that week, and have not put anything by from last week, you are in an awkward position.’ When her husband had good weeks, Dawes spent more than when he had bad weeks, she said. If there was a succession of bad weeks ‘sometimes I have to pawn’ she added.61

60 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, vol 4 pp. 1722-8, 1266
61 ibid, pp. 1267, 1277-8
Although the widespread use of credit with local shopkeepers on the waterfront was a
form of debt management primarily conducted by women, it was so commonplace that
it should also be thought of as a customary pattern of financial management that was
used routinely in good times as well as lean. Pawning, for instance, was not necessarily
an indication of poverty. Mary Ryan recalled that ‘everyone’ went to pawnbrokers and
children were often fitted out for their first communion with clothes from the pawnshop.
Women also used pawnbrokers to dispose of unwanted gifts, and chose something they
preferred as a replacement. 62

Many waterfront men testified to the Court of Arbitration in 1905 about their financial
arrangements with their wives. The wives managed the household finances and they, the
men, handed their wages over to them for this purpose. Wharf labourer H. Copeland
gave all his pay to his wife, who took care of the house and their child, and she gave
him 1s for his personal expenses. Copeland agreed that his wife was the ‘banker’ for the
household. ‘I do not spend the money’ he said, ‘I do not interfere with the wife’s
household accounts’. If a bill was unusually large he discussed it with his wife, but ‘she
pays all the bills’ he said. Evelyn Goodwin remembers her father gave all his wages to
his wife, who gave him ‘pocket money’ in return. The same arrangement applied to the
employed children of the household. Coal lumpers John Anderson said he was generally
unaware of prices because his wife took care of that kind of thing. 63 Sarah Dawes’
evidence to the Court of Arbitration in 1905 confirmed this pattern. ‘I keep them [the
family] on £2/5/- just middling …’, she said. Dawes’ husband gave her all of his wages
at the end of each week, as did her two employed children. ‘I took all his wages like my
children’s and put it in my purse and paid it out’ Dawes said. She gave the children
money for fares and her husband something for personal expenditure. 64

Because money is inextricably linked with power and status the working class practise
of men handing over their pay packets to their wives poses some challenges for feminist
theory. Married women who are perceived as financially ‘dependent’ are often
understood (theoretically) as powerless. The implication of that view is that power in

62 Mary Ryan, NSWBOHC, 2/2, pp. 9-10
63 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59 Vol 2, pp. 715-6, 725, Goodwin, op cit, 3/3 p. 53-8, Coal lumpers’
1905 case 2/64, vole, p. 752 – check
64 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60 Vol 4 pp. 1266, 1271, 1296
the household is conferred on men because they earn wages. This position is reflected in Ann Whitehead’s work. She asserts that the authority that seems to apply to women when men hand over their pay packets to them is misleading. She argues that such arrangements are necessarily inequitable because whilst men have an allocated sum for personal expenditure, women’s personal needs are by and large subsumed within the needs of the rest of the family.\(^6_5\)

There are difficulties with this position. In the first place there are simple practical reasons for women, on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront at least, having control of household finances. Women did most of the spending, literally from the front or back door of the house, and they had to have money if they were to run the household. Waterfront men were absent from home for employment and many other reasons at all kinds of odd and irregular hours, so it makes practical (non-power) sense for women to manage the household money. There is no evidence about whether or not, or how much, waterfront women may have spent on themselves, but there is evidence that some men forewent tobacco and alcohol because they couldn’t afford them, and walked to work to save money that would otherwise have to be spent on fares.\(^6_6\) Since these were the kinds of items the ‘pocket money’ usually covered it implies that men might also have subsumed their needs within those of the family.

The view that power in the household is dictated by wages is narrowly masculinist and belies the subtle complexity of human relationships. For instance, since women had the same kind of financial arrangements with their employed children as they did with their husbands, the allocation of small amounts for personal expenditure could be read as less a male privilege than a form of behavioural control exerted by women over men, with men’s agreement, as it was with their children.

The way that women allocated finances according to cultural or other preferences was indicative of a certain emotional, cultural or moral authority, one that was accepted all round as belonging to women. Indeed, they were expected to manage financially even with the loss of the male breadwinner. Ellie Byrnes remembered that families had to ‘go

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\(^{66}\) Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol. 2, p.768
without’ if the husband was a drinker, for instance, but added that ‘possibly some wives were not good managers’. Some women could live ‘in a canny sort of fashion’ and still manage to give their families plenty to eat, even in difficult circumstances, she said.67

Women were admired for their financial skill. Merle Gibson described her mother as a ‘good manager, that’s what women had to be, with their money, good managers’. Kathleen Berkley said her mother could make ‘two pounds go where ten pounds would go in some people’s pockets’. Berkley’s mother survived eleven months without an income after her husband’s industrial accident, which Berkley attributes to her having saved small amounts each week while he was working. Also dogged by her husband’s binge drinking, Berkley’s mother would say that if only she could be sure of getting two pounds a week ‘she would own a terrace of houses’.68 These observations imply that financial management was not just an imperative in lean times, but something that made capitalising on times of relative plenty a possibility. Long-term financial health for the family might result from the woman’s ability in this area.

The short and long-term benefits of sound financial management makes some of its meaning for women quite clear: it was about the economics of household survival. The meaning of the authority and responsibility financial management entailed is less clear however, because of the way in which it challenges masculinist assumptions about relationships between money and personal or private power. If women had cultural and social authority for the allocation of expenditure of male wages what did that mean for assumptions about the significance of male wages in the bourgeois model?

Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the meaning and significance of various forms of women’s work on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. Some meanings for different aspects of women’s work are relatively transparent. The economic purpose of waged work, self-employment and financial household management, whether this work is paid or unpaid, it is all about household survival in the financial sense. The

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67 Byrne, *op cit*, 1/2, p. 20
68 Merle Gibson, *op cit*, Berkley, *op cit*, 1/2, p. 7; 2/2 pp. 4-15
similarities of purpose between these different kinds of work are stronger than the
difference implied by perceived economic activity or passivity. In this respect most
women’s work also bears a close similarity to the primary financial purpose of men’s
waged work. The meaning of other aspects of women’s work is less clear. The meaning
of unpaid physical domestic work is particularly opaque because the nurturing and
caring that is ascribed to it comes from others and from the general ideological construct
of domesticity, but not from the women themselves. The authority and personal power
implied by responsibility for household financial management brings conventional
assumptions about the powerlessness of women in the home into question. In this case
the ideological link between men’s wages and male power in the household is
challenged by female control over household finances that includes a degree of control
over their husband’s behaviour, just as it does with their children’s behaviour.
CHAPTER 7

CHILDREN’S WORK: BILLY CARTS

This chapter is about children’s work on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. It demonstrates that waterfront children were economically active from a relatively early age. However, the chapter argues that in contrast to the economically derived definition of childhood of the bourgeois model it was not economic activity or passivity that determined the limits of childhood for waterfront children. Rather, work of all kinds, paid and unpaid, was an expression of the filial duties of the child toward the household. The chapter places its arguments within their historical context, critiques some relevant historiography, describes the work that waterfront children did and examines their work for its meaning.

Children’s relative invisibility in demographic sources, which generally categorise people according to perceptions of economic passivity or activity, is partly attributable to their status as the dependents of their wage-earning fathers. Chapter 3: Family Finances demonstrated the inaccuracy of that construction by revealing alternative evidence about the financial contribution that waterfront children made to their households. This chapter builds on those observations to discuss waterfront children’s work in greater detail and to use children’s work as a lens for viewing the filial relationships of the home. The chapter is concerned not only with children who were below school-leaving age, but also with young people who were old enough to join the formal workforce but continued to live as offspring with their parents under acknowledged parental authority.

As with evidence about the various contributions women made to their households, discussed in the preceding chapter, evidence about children’s work also draws attention to narrow perceptions of significance entailed in conventional labour history, including trade union histories such as my work on the WWF. Since most of this work understands relationships between work and home as occurring from the outside society in to the household through the medium of male wages, it necessarily excludes the ‘less important’ work done by children because not only did it have little (or no) measurable financial value, it often occurred within the private life of the home, an area of relatively
little interest to that convention. It is only by examining children’s work from the perspective of the household that an alternative account of their work and its meaning can emerge.

Like ‘motherhood’ or ‘manhood’, the concept of ‘childhood’ is a social construction entailing different meanings in different historical periods and societies. In western industrialised societies children began to be identified as a group with their own particular (non-adult) interests and needs in the early eighteenth century.¹ Within the bourgeois model of family life that accompanied these changes childhood was increasingly constructed as a lengthening period of dependence for which parents were required to take responsibility as an act of parental love. These concepts of childhood influenced the way that home, work, and relationships between the two were understood for children in early twentieth century Australia.

The lengthening period of what constituted childhood was reflected in debates about children’s work in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia, which revolved around state requirements for ever increasing periods of compulsory school attendance. State education in all Australian colonies was overhauled in the 1870s and 1880s and first steps towards compulsory full-time attendance were introduced.² Whilst significant numbers of children combined work and schooling in the 1860s and 1870s, in New South Wales the Public Instruction Act of 1880 set compulsory minimum attendance levels. The 1916 Public Instruction Amendment Act was more forceful. It lengthened hours of obligatory schooling and increased the distance within which school attendance was compulsory. Because it was based on the model of full-time all day schooling this Act concluded the ‘transition to modern practice’ in which schooling became ‘the paramount duty, and form of work, for children.’³

Stuart Macintyre writes that in this period the ‘school bell regulated the waking hours of children as closely as the factory hooter prescribed the routine of their fathers’. He estimates that by 1901, 750,000 students were enrolled in primary schools in Australia

¹ Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, _Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780 – 1850_, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 343
² Jan Kociumbas, _Australian Childhood: A History_, Allen and Unwin, 1997, p. 119
(although perhaps no more than 600,000 were in class on any given day). One in twenty of these went on to secondary school. By the time they reached their teens, most early twentieth century Australian children had an elementary education.4

State regulation of compulsory schooling was complemented by legislation that circumscribed and proscribed full-time employment for children. Factory Acts were passed in NSW and Victoria in 1896, tightening provisions allowing for the employment of children under fourteen years and regulating their working conditions. These changes were supported by labour organisations that sought to exclude cheap juvenile [and female] labour from the industrial field. The Children’s Protection Act was passed in 1892. It reflected the views held by various charities and government bodies to the effect that employment was generally undesirable for children, and ‘that children by virtue of their age, size and innocence, required a special, differentiated place in society’. Children were thought best taken care of within school and home, rather than in the workforce or on the streets.5

Although regulation was patchy, and areas such as outwork and sweating remained uncontrolled, the employment of children was increasingly stigmatised in the early twentieth century. By 1917 the use of children under the age of fourteen years was regarded as inappropriate to most employment situations, and the enforcement of education legislation meant that any work they did at home was also necessarily curtailed. Work at home had now to be fitted in around the five days per week devoted to attending school. This increasingly lengthy period of economic dependence deeply affected the economy of the family. Although nineteenth century children might have contributed to household income from the age of seven, by 1920 children were at least fourteen years of age [theoretically] before they could perform the same economic function.6

Many of the legislative changes regarding children’s work and schooling were aimed specifically at working class children. The competence of working class parents to train

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4 Stuart Macintyre, *The Oxford History of Australia: The Succeeding Age 1901-1942*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 60-1
5 Kociumbas, *op cit*, p.118; Murray, *op cit*, p.296
and control their offspring was questioned. Compulsory education ensured that children spent formative years under the guidance of trained teachers inside a disciplined environment. The focus on working class parental competence was prompted by increasing concern that education was essential for working class people to be able to perform at an intellectual level sufficient to be useful in industrialised economies. State intervention was often framed in terms of class, but class position also influenced household responses to the mass transition to schooling. Poor working class families were often in greater need of their children’s labour than others, and working class parents often relied on the wages of older children to help feed and educate younger siblings. As a result, many working class people blended children’s school attendance with work for longer than state initiatives preferred.7

Janet McCalman describes the Edwardian working class family as in ‘a state of transition from an older, harsher world where children were seen as workers in the family economic unit rather than as cherished dependents for whom their parents worked.’ Although many parents in McCalman’s study of working class Richmond in Victoria ‘still expected to retain control over their children’s time and activities which the State through compulsory education now claimed’ the Edwardian working class family was nevertheless ‘truly modern’, she says, because it relinquished ‘much of the intellectual, moral and physical training of its children to social institutions and professionals’.8

McCalman’s statements reflect a dichotomy that exists in much of the historiography about relationships for children between work, school and home. The dichotomy understands the definition of ‘childhood’ in terms of whether children are performing a perceived economic function or not. In this construction children in the ‘modern’ family remain economically dependent for much longer periods than did ‘pre-modern’ children. Modern children don’t go to work but do go to school, in contrast to children in pre-modern families who are understood to be economic actors from an early age.

7 Kociumbas, op cit, pp 112, 123-4, 119-21
Thus children who both worked for money and went to school must then have been in some state of ‘transition’ between the pre-modern and modern world.9

Both sides of this dichotomy construct childhood and children’s work in a way that is similar to masculinist constructions of women’s work that categorises it according to perceived economic activity or passivity. The dichotomy carries the (sometimes unintended) implication that the economically passive modern child is the cherished child, unlike the economically active working class child. For instance Jan Kociumbas says that a ‘lack of time to demonstrate parental affection was another factor of impoverished family life.’ The implication is that relatively poor economic circumstances somehow meant that working class parental attachment was different from a ‘norm’ that is essentially a middle class construction. Thus working class parents ‘expected their children to be as tough as they were themselves to survive the exigencies and injustices of their life.’10

This is a version of the pathologising of the working class child in the historiography, of which Caroline Steedman complains. The ‘children of the poor are only a measure of what they lack as children: they are a falling-short of a more complicated and richly endowed ‘real’ child’, Steedman writes.11 Like the question of whether or not working class mothers and wives ‘nurtured’ their husbands and children, which was discussed in Chapter 6, Women’s Work: Boarders and White Aprons, the notion of whether or not working class children were ‘cherished’ is inherently unprovable. Nevertheless much of the historiography assumes it to be demonstrable according to whether or not children worked for money from an early age.

If childhood is constructed in terms of this economic/non-economic dichotomy, then working class children, who theoretically had more material need to work for money than other children, must necessarily be understood as having less of a childhood than children who didn’t. This chapter proposes a contrary position. It argues that the definition of childhood that sets its limits according to whether or not a child is at

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9 Actually, they are situated between two models rather than two realities. The twenty first century middle class child who has a part-time job at MacDonald’s whilst attending school until eighteen years of age could hardly be understood as ‘pre-modern’.
10 Kociumbas, op cit, p.116; the point should be made that poor people are not necessarily short of time, particularly if they are unemployed.
school or in the workforce is a masculinist definition because it arises from the perspective of the market, not from the perspective of the household. Such a definition of childhood is demonstrably inapplicable to the children of early twentieth century waterfront Sydney.

What constituted childhood within these waterfront households was not determined by the school/work divide. Whilst it is true that waterfront children sometimes worked for money from a relatively early age for reasons of financial need, no argument can be made that they were any the less ‘children’ as a result. On the contrary, in this working class community filial relationships entailing obligations and responsibilities, sometimes financial and sometimes not, determined ‘childhood’. But this determination was in relationship to parenthood, not in relationship to the market. Market determined constructions of the school/work divide shorten childhood when the child is economically active from an early age, but if filial obligations to the household are the measure of childhood, rather than perceived economic activity or passivity, what constituted childhood is lengthened. Obligations to parents for these waterfront children were prolonged well beyond the end of schooling.

With some exceptions, evidence about waterfront children’s work in the early twentieth century comes primarily from the two main bodies of source material that have informed other chapters in this thesis. Testimony given to the wharf labourers’ and coal lumpers’ cases in the Court of Arbitration in 1905 provides contemporary evidence from parents about children’s work in the early twentieth century. Its primary focus is the contribution to household income that children’s paid work made, because that was the concern of the court. The oral history collections provide evidence in recollected form from people who were children in the early twentieth century. They show that waterfront children at this time were by and large attending school on a regular basis but that they also performed a range of different kinds of work outside school. These included routine domestic tasks, unpaid work that contributed to household income in kind, before and after school jobs, and post-school employment in the workforce. The type and kinds of work waterfront children did were sometimes dictated by gender.
Domestic work

Like working class children elsewhere, early twentieth century waterfront children performed a range of domestic tasks within and outside the home. Many of these tasks were allocated along gender lines but girls and boys also did certain tasks because of their status as children rather than because they belonged to one or other sex. For instance, work associated with washing was often a job for both girls and boys. Mrs Young recalled that hanging the washing out was usually a child’s job and Martin Brothers recalled that amongst his various chores were tasks associated with this activity. He purchased soap powder at the local grocer’s for his mother and on his return he lit the copper, heated the water and boiled the clothes. He also emptied the water from the copper into a nearby drain when the washing was finished. Setting the table was also a child’s job, as well as clearing it and washing up, the latter task being done inside or out depending on water supply and the size of the objects to be washed. Running messages was another task done by both boys and girls. Dutchy Young recalled that many local children did the shopping on behalf of their mothers and Mrs Young remembered walking down to George Street to make purchases for her mother, and that she was sometimes late for school as a result.12

Although there were general similarities between households in the domestic tasks that belonged to children, individual households allocated children’s domestic tasks according to individual factors such as age, gender and employment status. Dorothy Beckhouse recalls that her brothers had their specific tasks but that hers was to scrub the big board that was used as a ‘bath mat’. Another of her tasks was to walk her baby brother around the park to put him to sleep when she came home from school for lunch. Evelyn Goodwin recalls that her older siblings were not obliged to do domestic work once they were employed but that she rose early as a young child to light the fires and the fuel stove, before taking tea to her parents in bed. She was a good riser, she said, and ‘used to love doing those sorts of things’. She also assisted her mother with market

12 Mrs Young, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1, p.8; Martin Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/3, p.12; Mary Ryan, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.10; Dutchy Young, SPOHC, Tape 4 Side 1, p.5; Mrs Young, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1, p.1
shopping each Friday night, carrying home a sugar bag filled with vegetables and live chickens that she plucked after they were killed the next day.  

Fred Hughes cleaned the knives on Sunday mornings and says that although the boys in his household had lots of household chores, his father insisted on indulging the girls, who weren’t required to do ‘anything’ when they were small, and didn’t even have to wash or wipe up when they were older. Because his mother was a ‘maniac’ on cleanliness the boys had to scrub the kitchen table, the toilet seat and the sandstone step, as well as polish the floors. In Kathleen Berkley’s household it was her brother’s job to scrub the toilet seat each Saturday, until the boards were as white as the kitchen table.  
The allocation of these tasks is similar to that described by Anna Davin for the working class children of nineteenth century London. Each child of the household had allocated jobs: doing the potatoes, washing up and sweeping for instance, which they did when they came home for lunch and after school.  

Much of the routine domestic work done by waterfront children had no strict economic purpose, but it was a different case for wood collection, a task primarily done by boys. Wood was essential because it was used as fuel for coppers and kindling for coal fireplaces and fuel stoves. Coal and coke usually had to be paid for, but wood never was because in one form or another, it was available to be gathered. This activity had the clear financial benefit of obviating the cost of fuel and it blended well with childhood habits. The billy cart, a multi-purpose workaday apparatus used for work and play, was the essential tool for wood collection. Adult males in waterfront households were usually responsible for making the billy carts. They most often consisted of a box on two wheels, with two shafts at the front for pulling or pushing the load. Beer boxes were collected from hotels, and cast iron wheels purchased, for this purpose.  

Dorothy Beckhouse recalls her brothers regularly collected wood from warehouses on Saturday mornings. Martin Brothers also routinely collected wood each Saturday, summer and winter, along a regular route that offered a dependable supply of wood as

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13 Dorothy Beckhouse, NSWBOHC, 1/2, p.2; 2/2, p. 20; Evelyn Goodwin, NSWBOHC, 1/3, p.13  
14 Fred Hughes, SPOHC, Tape 1 Side 1, pp. 31, 32; Kathleen Berkley, NSWBOHC 1/2, pp. 15-17  
16 The name ‘billy cart’ presumably derived from the very similar carts pulled by ‘billy’ goats.  
17 Beckhouse, *op cit*, 1/2, p.2; Goodwin, *op cit*, 1/3 pp. 9-16; Jim Brothers, NSWBOHC 1/2, pp. 16-17.
well as various perks and arrangements in kind. He targeted particular sources because the timber was good quality, and easy to split for use as fuel. Italian fruiterers at Circular Quay provided fruit cases; and loose timber was collected at Holdsworth McPherson’s in a laneway behind The Bulletin office in Bridge Street, at Brown and Dureau in a laneway off Bond Street and at electrical suppliers Lawrence and Hauser’s in a lane behind Pitt Street. Brothers sometimes ran messages for men employed at Fauldings Chemist in O’Connor Street and was given case timber in return. Along the route, he passed a confectionary factory and the girls who worked there passed chocolates out to the boys on their wood-collecting rounds. If his load was especially big, Brothers put stakes in the cart so that more wood could be tied on. He tired of pulling the heavy load, so made a four-wheeled billy cart that he could sit on when it was going downhill. Wood collecting was sometimes a collective enterprise in which Brothers took two younger neighbourhood boys with him. They helped with the work, and the load was divided between them on their return.18

The complex arrangements and regularity of Martin Brothers’ routes shows that wood collecting had some of the routines and customs associated with formal work, but it also had strong elements of play. Billy carts could be ridden if two were interlaced through the shafts. The children would push them off a hill, jump on the rear one and use the front one to steer. Four-wheeled billy carts that were known as ‘four-bobs’ used small wooden wheels that came out as ballast on ships. They were steered by a rope around the two front wheels. The wooden wheels were an indicator that they were more suitable for play than work.19

Along with waste wood from wharves and industry, wood blocks, with which the streets of Sydney were then paved, were also a common source of supply and they made particularly good fuel. Woodblocks were often loosened by rainwater and the children who saw them first ‘would run and get a block and put it on a heap’, Evelyn Goodwin recalled. The plunder was sometimes large in scale. In one incident the local children dug up all the wood blocks along the Argyle Cut between George Street and Argyle Place and filled their back yards with them.20

18 Beckhouse, ibid, 1/2, p. 9; Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3, pp. 9-12
19 Jim Brothers, op cit, 1/2, pp. 17-18
20 Goodwin, op cit, 1/3, p.12
Assisting adults to earn income

Whilst wood collection offset household costs, other forms of children’s unpaid labour also directly assisted adults to bring in income. This was so in the labour required to maintain boarders, an area of unpaid work that was primarily done by girls. Evelyn Goodwin recalled that she and her siblings waited on the table for her mother’s boarders, and when they returned home from school for lunch they washed up the dishes. Goodwin’s older sister didn’t seek employment for some time after she finished school because she stayed in the house to assist her mother with the boarders. Marguerite O’Farrell worked in the mornings before school, scrubbing stairs and doing other cleaning tasks for her aunt who had several boarders, and with whom she lived after her mother died when she was five.

Children performed similar functions in other family enterprises. Dutchy Young made local deliveries on foot from his parents’ grocer shop on the weekends and also went to the wholesale merchants in Sussex Street on his parent’s behalf to organise payment for produce for the shop. He also helped the local baker deliver bread from his cart. McCalman reports that the most common child workers in Richmond were in family businesses such as these.21

Children were also involved in the task of keeping their employed fathers fed and able to work, by taking meals to them, as wives also did. Martin Brothers took meals stored in an enamel billycan to his wharf labourer father at Woolloomooloo. This was some distance, and if Brothers was able to get the meal to his father while it was still hot he was rewarded with half a cup of beer. One woman recalled that her sister took meals by ferry to their father, a coal lumper, who would work at Balls Head in Waverton for two or three days at a time. Another girl took a hot meal wrapped in two enamel plates to Pyrmont for her wharf labourer father. Mrs D Beckhouse took meals to her coal lumper father in a basket when he was working on land [his meals were pre-packed if he was down the harbour].22

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21 Goodwin, op cit, 1/3 p.9; 3/3 p. 34; O’Farrell, op cit, 1/1, pp. 4,8,11; Dutchy Young, op cit, Tape 1 side 1, pp. 6-9; McCalman, op cit, p. 70.
22 Martin Brothers, op cit, 1/3, p.69; Shirley Fitzgerald and Christopher Keating, Millers Point, the Urban
Martin Brothers also assisted his uncle, an almost blind former seaman who lived with the Brothers family, to make an income. The uncle made rope fenders for tugboats in the back yard of the Brothers’ house (reminiscent of pre-industrial cottage-based production), a procedure that required two people. The task involved running the rope from one hook to another, about four metres apart. The rope was spliced over wire and wrapped in strips of sturdy fabric, followed by a heavy tarred twine. Brothers’ jobs were to run the rope between the hooks, and to prevent the twine from tangling. When he was on school holidays Brothers also assisted his older brother Michael, a surveyor, by carrying the surveyor’s pegs around Warwick farm racecourse to mark out different starting points. All the Brothers children assisted their father to catch yellowtail for bait for his Sunday fishing expeditions.  

Paid work whilst still at school

Some waterfront children also worked for payment whilst still at school and this money was often contributed to the family coffers. Fred Hughes did odd jobs at the Australia Hotel for payment and had a paper run in order to give money to his impoverished mother. Hughes recalled that because things ‘weren’t real good’ at home he also worked at the local grocery shop whilst still at school. He had permission from the school to work every Friday morning until 11 a.m. for which he was paid the ‘fair’ sum of 5s. He made deliveries to customers, weighed up the butter and sugar, and was delegated to pay for the Colonial Sugar order and helped unload it into the cellar. Hughes sometimes also served in the shop.

As ‘a young fellow’ Dutchy Young pumped the organ and rang the bell at Trinity church on Sunday mornings and evenings and was paid 2 guineas a quarter for this work. He also worked during his school Christmas holidays from the age of eleven. Ellie Byrnes recalls that a young girl might be sent to help neighbours if they were sick or had a new baby, and would be paid a small amount in return. Both these kinds of work are similar to that done by working class children elsewhere, but it is not clear if

\[ \text{Village, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1991p. 93; Beckhouse, op cit, 1/2, p.2} \]
\[ \text{Martin Brothers, ibid, 1/3, pp. 2-3, 8; Jim Brothers, op cit, 1/2, p.10} \]
\[ \text{Hughes, op cit, Tape 1 Side 1, pp. 12,13,40} \]
\[ \text{Dutchy Young, op cit, Tape 4 Side 1, pp. 3-5; Byrne, op cit, 1/2, p. 26} \]
boys did more of this paid work than girls. Anna Davin makes the point that paid work done by boys was more visible than that done by girls and for them the distinction between paid and unpaid work, such as work done within the house and minding babies, is much less clear.26

Just as financial circumstances were a factor in children earning money whilst still at school, they also influenced the reasons for children leaving school altogether. Because of his family’s difficult circumstances, Fred Hughes gained permission to leave school at the age of thirteen to go to work. Mrs Young recalls she left school at the same age to go into the printing trade. Evelyn Goodwin’s older sister, however, didn’t seek employment for some time after she finished school because she stayed in the house to assist her mother with the boarders. Dorothy Beckhouse attended Fort Street School until she was fourteen, the legal school leaving age, and then left because ‘Mum thought she wanted me at home.’ She did not go into employment. This implies that her removal from school was purely gender-related and based on the perception that a woman’s place, even if she was young and single, was at home rather than in the outside world. 27

**Formal employment**

When early twentieth century Sydney waterfront children left school to go into formal employment, the evidence about their financial contribution to their households reveals that their parents, in effect, ‘owned’ what they earned. The employed children gave all of their wages to their mothers, who returned to them a small amount for fares or other essential expenditure. The financial aspects of this arrangement have been discussed in *Chapter 3: Family Finances*. Most of this directly financial evidence came from the Court of Arbitration cases of 1905 and both the Court and witnesses accepted unquestioningly that the children of these households contributed their wages to their families. The amounts involved were significant and the arrangement was virtually obligatory. The obligation to contribute wages to the household applied to both boys and girls but there were gender differences in the ways that the arrangement played out. Girls could be withdrawn from the workforce to assist their mothers, as Sarah Dawes’

26 Davin, *op cit*, p. 173
27 Hughes, *op cit*, Tape 1 Side 1, p. 12; Mrs Young, *op cit*, Tape 1 Side 1 p.2; Goodwin, *op cit*, 1/3, pp. 9-16; 2/3, p. 11; 3/3 p. 34; Beckhouse, *op cit*, 2/2 p. 14
daughter was when her mother had a baby. Dorothy Beckhouse’s recollection that she was kept home simply because her mother wanted her there (cited above) implies that for some households, the obligations of gender outweighed financial need.

Pocket money

The ‘diminished’ childhoods of working class children who worked for money from an early age are generally assumed to be a function of material poverty, as determined by the inadequacy of parental wages. This is another version of the idea that the market determines the social relationships of the home. However, there are indications that poverty was not always the reason for early twentieth century Sydney waterfront children working, for money or not, from an early age.

Anna Davin has observed that amongst the London working classes even the children of relatively prosperous artisans were expected to share domestic work: older children helped with young, girls and boys had set domestic tasks and were sent on errands, and children helped in their parents’ workshops. Indeed, Davin reports that it was the children of the relatively better off, rather than those of the very poor, who were encouraged to work before or after school and on Saturdays, to teach industry and keep them from roaming the streets.28

This proposition that working class children’s work was not necessarily prompted by poverty is supported by evidence about children’s ‘pocket money’ on the Sydney waterfront. As was the case for the children of McCalman’s Richmond money for personal expenditure was rarely simply given to children by adults, but it was often earned through work. Sydney waterfront children used their billy carts to collect horse manure, ubiquitous around the waterfront, for which there was strong demand from people with gardens. They were paid threepence a load and this money was kept by the children for personal expenditure. It often funded excursions to the theatre in the city. In spite of his Catholicism Martin Brothers earned 1d a time for pumping the organ at the local Anglican Church and Jim Brothers recalled that he did additional household chores for extra money. His father sometimes gave him 3d for polishing his shoes, most

28 ibid, p. 164
usually on Saturday because it was payday. Mary Ryan sometimes earned the same amount for the same task from her father. Catching and selling yellowtail as fish bait also sometimes earned pocket money.\textsuperscript{29}

This ability to earn money for personal use implies a higher standard of living for the Sydney waterfront children than some of those from Davin’s London, who had to queue at butcher shops for scraps, collect surplus dripping from hospitals and cuttings from fishmongers, and acquire any other kind of commercially unsaleable food. Davin’s London children also thieved, scavenged and filched: for food, floorboards, lumps of coal, and skerricks of rope, anything that might be of some material use.\textsuperscript{30}

The Sydney waterfront children were not compelled to these extremes by their circumstances. Indeed, when the evidence about pocket money is combined with evidence about the way in which they also worked for money to contribute to their households a non-economic interpretation of the meaning of their work is encouraged. The implication is that children’s work for money was not inspired exclusively by economic circumstances although these were clearly a factor, but that there were also cultural reasons for working class children to work for money whilst they were still at school. Such reasons emanated not from the outside economic world of the market, but from the internal cultural world of the working class household.

Schooling

In the model of ‘desirable’ relationships between work and home for children, schooling is a full-time occupation until official school leaving age, when paid employment takes over. In this model the notion of the ‘cherished’ child is linked to the notion that loving and dutiful parents are committed to school attendance on the part of their children. In view of the financial hardship suggested by the varying financial contributions that children made to their households it is likely that school attendance by waterfront

\textsuperscript{29} McCalman, \textit{op cit}, p. 70; Jim Brothers, \textit{op cit}, \textit{1/2} p. 35; Ryan, \textit{op cit}, 1/2, p. 11; Martin Brothers, \textit{op cit}, 1/3 pp. 21-2; Fitzgerald and Keating, \textit{op cit}, p. 95.

\textsuperscript{30} Davin, \textit{op cit}, pp. 187, 175-97
children was sometimes less regular than the state required. Contemporary observers sometimes felt that this was the case.

The extant records of a local state school, the Fort Street Model School, reveal that some educators took a strong moral position on the necessity for the benefits of schooling for the children from waterfront households. A Mr Dawson, for instance, described the local area as ‘the part of Sydney where poverty, vice and squalor abound’ and thought it was generally a good idea to keep young children ‘away from their evil surroundings and bestow on them some care and training of which they are defrauded by the negligence of their parents’. Infants’ Mistress Elizabeth McNamara complained similarly that many local parents had ‘shown their apathy and indifference in the cause of Education, by the irregularity in attendance, and above all, their failure in the home training of their children.’

But the records also show the degree to which waterfront people valued and sought to maintain access to education for their children. In 1902 the Sydney Labor Council complained that a large number of local children weren’t able to gain entry to the Fort Street Public School, and in 1903 a petition from parents, guardians and other residents sought the establishment of an evening school in Lower Fort Street for a group of young people including clerks, typists, messengers and printers, mainly aged between 15 and 18 years.

In 1905 a petition from parents tried to prevent the imminent closure of the Lower Fort Street School, which was a consequence of declining enrolments. But in fact the Department of Public Instruction’s action in closing the school had been prompted by the actions of parents who had moved their children to the Model Fort Street School nearby, not because they were avoiding education, but because they thought their children would be better taught there. In 1910 the acting secretary of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union, representing residents, sought the reopening of the Lower Fort Street School.

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31 Correspondence from Mr A. Dawson to the Minister for Education, 25/10/1904; and from Elizabeth McNamara, 20 October 1905, SRO Department of Education, Fort Street School Files, 5/15929
School and parents also complained individually if their (local child) was refused entry to the school whilst others from further afield had places.\textsuperscript{32}

There are other indications of the value that waterfront parents placed on education. The household budgets tendered to the Court of Arbitration in 1905 show the portions of income that were dedicated to various school fees and costs. Wharf labourer John Leary, for instance, paid 9d, 6d and 3d weekly for each of his three children.\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Chapter 5: Babies} has discussed in more detail the way in which commitment to education revealed the aspirational nature of waterfront families.

The aspirational factor in education was perhaps particularly true of Catholic families. Urban Irish Catholic communities are noted for their involvement in parish education. Catholic neighbourhoods, of which the Gipps subdivision was one, ‘formed dense, ‘ethnic’ communities around the parish church. The church was the centre of social and cultural life and parents and teachers sought to cultivate superior discipline and talent in young Catholics, Jan Kociumbas has observed. The commitment of Catholic educators to Catholic children extended beyond the period of schooling. Ellie Byrnes, who went to the local Catholic schools St Brigid’s and St Patrick’s, recalled that the nuns helped the girls to get employment when they were ready to leave school.\textsuperscript{34} If parental commitment to education is the mark of the cherished or ‘modern’ child then waterfront working class children were also cherished and modern, irrespective of whether they also sometimes worked for money.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This chapter has argued that the market-derived definition of childhood that assesses its limits according to the school/work divide is inapplicable to the working class children of the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. The conventional division between

\textsuperscript{32} Correspondence from Labour Council to the Minister for Public Instruction, 7 March 1902; and petition for evening school; petition to prevent closure of Lower Fort St School, 23 November 1905, SRO, Department of Education, Fort Street School Files, 5/15929; and correspondence from Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union Secretary 23 May 1910, SRO, Department of Education, Fort Street School Files, 5/15930

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Wharf labourers’ 1905 case}, 2/59, vol 2, p. 748

\textsuperscript{34} Kociumbas, \textit{op cit}, p. 117; Byrne, \textit{op cit}, 1/2, p.10
work and school, or independence and dependence, is a masculinist construction of childhood that understands it in terms of economic rather than social or cultural relationships. The early twentieth century was a period of deep change in the way in which schooling and work for children was understood. The school-attending economically inactive child was understood as the cherished child. Because waterfront working class children performed a range of different kinds of work, including paid work, from an early age they can be understood as having a less than ideal, and shortened, childhood.

However, when the work that waterfront children did is interrogated for meaning a cultural and non-economic definition of childhood emerges. In this definition the duration of childhood is determined by filial obligation to the household rather than the school/work divide. Childhood is prolonged as a result, irrespective of whether the child was economically active from an early age. Two other areas of evidence support this conclusion. Waterfront children often earned pocket money for personal expenditure implying that work for money from an early age was not simply inspired by the financial need of their households but had cultural components. Waterfront parents’ commitment to schooling for their children also suggests they actively welcomed the deep social change of the early twentieth century, whilst still expecting their children to work from a relatively early age.
CHAPTER 8

MEN’S WORK: FINDING THE FEMININITY

In dealing with women’s and children’s work the previous two chapters have mounted arguments to the effect that differences in the meaning and significance of work emerge when it is interrogated from the perspective of the household, rather than from the masculinist ranking of the market. This chapter applies a similar approach to men’s work. It seeks a non-masculinist account of meaning and significance in the various kinds of work that men did. Other chapters have touched on some of this chapter’s themes. Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage and Chapter 3: Family Finances argued that a reliance on positivist interpretations of demographic evidence led to masculinist constructions of men’s waterfront work that were misleading both as to the kinds of work they were engaged in, and as to how much of it they actually did.

My work on the WWF constructed waterfront men’s work in terms of various kinds of masculinity around themes such as industrial organisation, political courage, physical strength and arduous working conditions. This chapter is concerned with differing interpretations that emerge when a wider body of evidence about waterfront men’s work is interrogated for alternative meanings. If men’s work is understood within narrow market-derived definitions, that is as the waged work by which they are described in demographic categories and most labour historiography, then they can only be constructed in a masculinist way. They are understood as economistic figures whose relationship with home, as breadwinners, is determined by the market.

This chapter argues that when the entire spectrum of men’s work is taken into account, unpaid as well as paid, its meaning can be understood as arising more from within the personal relationships of the household than it does from the public world of waged work. The chapter is concerned with the ways in which men’s work can be understood as resembling women’s work, and with the impact of the personal relationships of the home on men’s work, rather than with more visible relationships between men in the public world of waged work. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that in their work, men straddle public and private life, psychically and materially, just as women and children do.
The weight of historiography relating to working class men’s paid work, particularly within ‘old’ labour history, has examined it in terms of wage rates, union organisation, industrial conflict and the labour movement. This approach has been criticised for its nationalism, institutional focus and simplistic Marxism, as well as its masculinist and Eurocentric preoccupations and exclusions. In response to such criticisms, labour history has broadened its concerns in more recent decades to include such subjects as women, race and community. For the purposes of this chapter, the significant area of challenge has come from feminist historiography, which has argued for the application of concepts and constructions of gender as central categories of historical analysis.

One achievement of the application of feminist theory to historical practice has been to show, in Jill Matthews’ words, that the centrality of the boundary between public (masculine) and private (feminine) territory in traditionally conceived history is ‘so permeable as to be fantasy’. As a result of such perceptions aspects of the history of working class women have been recovered to some (albeit limited) degree. As historical subjects, working class women have begun to be understood as more fully fleshed human beings who had lives that were not simply private, domestic, subjective and ‘hidden’, but which straddled the questionable division of public and private life implicit in much conventional historiography.

However, the legitimate preoccupation of feminist historiography, to recover and explain the history of women, has left the implications for men of this work relatively unexplored, although its potential usefulness has not gone unobserved. Since feminist insights challenge the entire organisational basis of conventional history they imply that

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2 For example, Marilyn Lake ‘Women, Gender and History’ in Australian Feminist Studies, Summer 1988; and Jill Matthews ‘Feminist History’ in Labour History May 1986; Joan W Scott ‘Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis’ in American Historical Review Vol 91, no. 5
3 Matthews, ibid, p.152
5 In, for example, Marilyn Lake ‘The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context’ in Historical Studies, Vol 22, No 86, April 1986
new questions can be asked about men as much as women. For the purposes of this chapter such questions are concerned with deconstructing the dubious division of life and work into ‘public’ (away from the household) or ‘private’ (within the household) and the implications that this has for perceptions of the meaning of men’s work.

Concepts of class make these issues more complex. American historian Joan Wallach Scott’s work, which draws feminist attention to epistemological problems with notions of class, has been discussed in the Introduction. Class is overwhelmingly associated with the politics of male workers Scott argues, and ‘in its origin and expression, constructed as a masculine identity, even when not all the actors are male’. Scott is concerned with the literal and symbolic exclusion of women from definitions of what constitutes ‘working class’, but a converse (unaddressed) implication of her argument is that perceptions of class as a shared masculine identity also exclude more ‘feminine’ constructs for men.

Masculinist constructs don’t allow that working class men’s behaviour, class-conscious or otherwise, might stem from sources which are usually understood as symbolically feminine, that is to say sources that are individual, private, or home-centred. Most historiography consigns private life to little more than an historical aside by privileging public, collective, symbolically masculine activity. Private life is perceived as the physical territory of women, and its symbolically feminine construction has ensured that little historical attention has been directed towards the private life of men. As a result, apart from the patently economic relationship entailed in the notion of breadwinning, connections between the household and men’s work remain underdeveloped.

What follows is an examination of the working lives of waterfront men in early twentieth century Sydney that will be used to argue that whilst waterfront men readily lend themselves to conventional masculinist accounts of the way relationships between work and home played out, a more complex picture emerges if evidence is scrutinised in different ways and different questions asked of it. When the spectrum of working class men’s work and work-related behaviour is examined, explanations that resemble

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6 Joan Wallach Scott, ‘Women in The Making of the British Working Class’ in Gender and the Politics of History pp 75,74,72
symbolically feminine narratives emerge to augment, compete or coincide with conventional masculinist accounts.

The focus of this chapter developed out of the common sense proposition that men, like women, have private lives, personal relationships and emotional connections to the household even if they don’t spend as much time there as women do, and that this must be evident in some way in the work that they did, as it is evident for women. It has proved difficult, however, to unearth ‘hard’ evidence to this effect about the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront. Whilst the weight of several decades of feminist historiography makes it relatively simple to argue that women’s work can be understood as being ‘like’ men’s in many ways (for instance that domestic work has an economic function even if it is unpaid), arguing the alternative case for men remains problematic. Men are rigidly constructed in the records in terms of waged work and are almost entirely defined by their nominated occupations. This is particularly true, unsurprisingly, for records related to the industrial relations system, some of which are a major source for this thesis. Symptomatic reading, deduction and inference are required if alternative accounts of men’s experiences are to be written.

**Radical nationalism on the waterfront**

Because of the existence of industrial relations records, the historical framework that lends itself most readily to accounting for the history of waterfront workers is that of the radical nationalist school, which has been discussed in the Introduction. For reasons canvassed there, the radical nationalist school is less influential than it once was, especially in academic circles. However, its influence lives on in sections of the community that are favourably disposed to the role that the organised working class has played in shaping Australian history. This was so in my own case and I wrote the

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7 The kinds of ‘evidence and silence’ problems raised by Judith Allen and others with regard to women as historical subjects, has echoes in the history of men, even within that much-documented area, the world of working class men’s work. For instance, most sources on working class men, even those that are ideologically opposed to trade unions, give existential primacy to unionised men. Non-union and unemployed men were a constant on the Sydney waterfront but their lives are little recorded. There is a similar dearth relating to unpaid, irregular and informal work done by working class men because it is rarely examined in records systematically devoted to formal waged labour. In recent years, the use of oral history has partly redressed this problem.
history of the WWF more-or-less unwittingly within the narrative themes of this convention.

The broad-brush narrative of waterfront workers in general, including the wharf labourers who were members of the WWF, slots easily into that school’s outline. There was a strong union presence on the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century and apart from unions covering the wharf labourers and coal lumpers who are the subject of this chapter, there were others covering ships’ painters and dockers, seamen, and carters and draymen. Wharf labourers and coal lumpers were unskilled, organised and periodically militant. They also exhibited classic Australian mateship because their work was organised into gangs whose members relied for their safety on one another. Thus they can be perceived as archetypal Australian working class males of the radical nationalist kind. This masculine picture is enriched by the extraordinary physical strength required by their work, discussed in Chapter 2: Waterfront Working Conditions, which weeded out those men who were too ‘weak’ to perform it.

Many unionised wharf labourers and coal lumpers also exhibited the class-consciousness that is part of the radical nationalist picture. Their links with the politics of the labour movement can be symbolised by their close association with Labor MLA Billy Hughes (who was president of both the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union and the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union, amongst others, and later Prime Minister of Australia) and numerous other politicians and political movements. Waterfront workers assisted the struggles of other Australian unionists at various times including times of peak class conflict such as the Maritime Strike of 1890; the miners’ strikes of 1909/10, and the General Strike of 1917.

Positivist examples of class-consciousness amongst waterfront workers appear in the records relating to the early twentieth century. For instance coal lumper James Christiansen said during the 1905 coal lumpers’ case in the Court of Arbitration that he thought workers should own ‘all the wealth of the country’ because it was they who produced it. An avowed socialist, Christiansen added that he thought this wealth should be shared equally and that all should benefit from equal levels of opportunity. During

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8 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case 2/64 vol 8, p. 936
the 1917 general strike, Tom McCristal, president of the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union and a returned soldier, addressed a crowd with these words: ‘All kings, governors, bosses and parliamentarians’ [were] ‘parasites fattening off the back of the workers’. Of the 1917 strike’s failure, McCristal said:

As a matter of principal we stood by our fellow unionists … but we discovered to our sorrow that they were so weak and disorganised that they either ran back, or, in some cases, offered to take the place of wharf labourers who had come out in sympathy with them.⁹

Evidence such as this, which is sought through questions framed in terms of the radical nationalist school’s concerns, is easy to find. Otherwise voluminous and relatively shapeless information is given a narrative structure that determines which bits of evidence are ‘relevant’ to the story and which bits are not. But when the approach to the evidence is less selective there is a wealth of other much more formless information about waterfront men’s work in early twentieth century Sydney that doesn’t fit with the radical nationalist narrative.

When the manifold evidence about the working life of wharf labourers and coal lumpers is scrutinised in terms of men’s actual daily activity, rather than in terms of a pre-determined teleological structure, several alternative, non-masculinist, pictures emerge. For instance, men were often economically ‘passive’ in ways that the occupational demographic categories don’t allow. It is possible to also see that the range and kinds of work that men and women did were similar, rather than inherently different as gendered constructions of paid and unpaid imply. Waterfront men can also be understood as using economic activity in ways understood in the historiography as being the province of women. And in their intense individual competition for waged work waterfront can be understood as valuing the relationships of the household more than they did their relationships with other men.

⁹ SMH 13 August, 1 September, 8 October 1917
Unpaid work

The implication of demographic evidence that categorises men in terms of a single nominated occupation, discussed in Chapter 1: Demographic Camouflage, implies that this remunerated activity was the primary focus of men’s lives for most of the time. But in fact many waterfront men averaged only about 20-25 hours’ work per week in their nominated occupations and this figure was often achieved in a single shift, that is, across and beyond a single twenty-four hour day.10 As a result, a great deal of waterfront men’s time was not financially productive and they were not the fully-fledged economic actors that occupational categories imply.

For instance, waterfront men did non-remunerated domestic work, just as their wives did. With a few exceptions domestic work is symbolically feminine because it is performed within the private relationships of the home.11 The domestic work that waterfront men did is often masked in the formal records and historiography because of the centrality given to waged work. However, evidence from the oral histories, and to a lesser extent the Court of Arbitration, shows that waterfront men did do various kinds of unremunerated domestic work. Most of it was fairly strictly gendered and conducted outside, rather than indoors. It included keeping fowls to eat or for their eggs, growing vegetables such as spinach, chokoes, beans, mint and parsley, and collecting firewood. Chooks were fattened for Christmas, and one waterfront man, at least, kept a pig. Men were also responsible for making the wheelbarrows and billy carts that accompanied children everywhere, and with which children earned income. Martin and Jim Brothers’ uncle made theirs from old Guinness Stout cases retrieved from local publicans and fitted out with two wheels and shafts.12

With the exception of some traditionally male activities such as boot and shoe repair, cooking hams in the copper, making furniture, painting, and making home brew, waterfront men seem to have performed few domestic tasks indoors. Since the Sydney Harbour Trust was responsible for the upkeep of most Rocks and Millers Point houses,

10 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/59, vol 2, evidence of James Horsenell p. 593a
11 In the contemporary sense such exceptions might include mowing the lawn or putting out the rubbish.
12 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case 2/59 Vol 2 1905, pp 726-7; Patricia Thomas, SPOHC, p.22; Dorothy Beckhouse, NSWBOHC, 1/2 p.8; Evelyn Goodwin, NSWBOHC, 1/3 p.13; and Martin Brothers, NSWBOHC, 1/3 p.11
tenants did little house maintenance, but it seems it was mainly men who performed the
disinfecting of interiors and the whitewashing of external walls that may have been a
legacy of public health responses to the plague outbreak of 1900. However, although
specific domestic tasks were different for women and men, in its humility, home-
centredness and non-remunerative nature men’s domestic work resembles women’s
domestic work more closely than it does waged work. Indeed, women sometimes did
the outdoor domestic work that was also done by men, such as raising fowls and
growing vegetables.

A structural difference between men’s and women’s domestic work was that whilst
women’s tasks were directed fairly rigidly by the patterns of the household day, there
were elements of flexibility and self-direction in the kinds of domestic tasks that men
did. This ‘discretionary’ component may have allowed for the vagaries of men’s paid
work and the time it took to access it, which was another major unremunerated
consumer of male time. There was a great deal of what might be termed ‘waiting’,
‘looking’ or ‘anticipating’ time associated with paid waterfront work.

For instance, men could be engaged for work ahead of time, and wait for it, only to find
it had evaporated. In 1905 an official of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union said his
members were often engaged for work forty eight hours in advance, only to find that
they were not required at all, or required for only a few hours. This had been the case
during the Boer War, when Sydney Harbour was chaotic and forty or fifty men could be
sent from one location to another, carrying bags of food in preparation for long shifts,
often only to be sent home again, and all without being paid. Patterns were similar
during ‘normal’ periods. Coal lumpер Alfred Hutchinson told the Court of Arbitration in
1905:

We used to be dragged over to Woolloomooloo day and night, and getting
nothing for it. In one case we went over to Woolloomooloo, started at 4,
knocked off at 6, then they sent us home at 7, on account of rain. Back to work

13 Ann Caward, GKOHC; Kathleen Berkley, NSWBOHC, ibid 1/2 pp. 15-16
14 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, pp. 36-7
at 12, and finished at 3, and they said to come back at 6, and we said we would not come until 9. I was there 18 hours and made 9 hours’ pay.\textsuperscript{15}

Wharf labourers’ patterns were similar. They assembled at various wharves along Sussex Street and around the western end of Circular Quay once or twice daily to wait for work to be distributed. If they were unsuccessful they tramped between wharves, to wait again. Coal lumpers were sometimes called to work at odd hours from home but they also gathered under the so-called ‘Tree of Knowledge’ in Millers Point on Sunday nights to get their work orders, or assembled at other points such as the Prince’s Street Bridge or the Millers Point shelter shed for the same reasons. The so-called ‘Louse House’ in Millers Point, which housed the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union, performed a similar function. Men played cards ‘and that sort of thing’ when they gathered there to wait for employment, a daughter remembered.\textsuperscript{16}

The numerous waterfront hotels performed a similar service. Public drinking was an exclusively male activity that has the appearance of being ‘social’ but it was also work-related. Information about shipping movements, work opportunities and agents could be gathered and informal networking could all be undertaken whilst drinking. Some publicans were also stevedoring agents, so frequenting the pub could be an essential rather than discretionary work-related strategy for waterfront workers.\textsuperscript{17}

Just as there were large amounts of unpaid time associated with seeking paid work, there were also large amounts of unpaid time related to having paid work. Saturday was payday and men who lived some distance from the wharves had to travel in to collect whatever amount was owed to them. Wharf labourer H. J. Hill lived at Rockdale and complained that collecting his pay took all of Saturday and prevented him from doing other work at home.\textsuperscript{18} Even those men who lived around the waterfront had to devote time to collecting their pay and also often had to go some distance to work, to Woolloomooloo from the Rocks or Millers Point for instance, on foot. Public transport was limited at this time but the men complained that in any event they were too dirty to be in close proximity to other people. Although coal lumpers were sometimes paid for

\textsuperscript{15} ibid, 2/64 Vol 8, p. 572  
\textsuperscript{16} Goodwin, \textit{op cit}, 1/3 p.24; 2/3 p.6  
\textsuperscript{17} Coal lumpers’ 1905 case 2/63 vol 7, pp. 33-6  
\textsuperscript{18} Wharf labourers’ 1905 case 2/59, Vol 2, pp. 726-7
the time it took to travel across the water to the collier they were working on, stevedores often returned them to wharves a long distance from their homes as a cost-cutting measure. In this case they tramped home on their own time.\textsuperscript{19}

There were other unpaid time usage consequences of paid work. Wharf labouring and coal lumping work was extraordinarily physically taxing, as \textit{Chapter 2: Waterfront Working Conditions} has discussed. Continuous twenty-hour shifts were common, but forty-hour shifts also occurred, necessarily entailing long periods for physical recovery. Martin Brothers recalls his coal lumper father would come home after such shifts, get into an outdoor bath, put a candle at one end, and fall asleep, exhausted, whilst still in the cold water.\textsuperscript{20} Men needed not only sleep, but also long periods of rest to recover sufficiently to keep up with the physical demands of their work. Work-related illness and injury were also common, necessitating long periods of unpaid time until a return to work was possible.

When men’s unpaid domestic work and unpaid time usage is scrutinised, it can be seen that waterfront men were actually engaged in non-remunerated activity a great deal of the time, just like their wives. In many other respects they were also not the economic actors that demographic categories imply.

\textbf{Economy of makeshift}

\textit{Chapter 2: Family Finances} discussed the wide range of paid non-waterfront work that waterfront men did in addition, or as an alternative, to their waterfront work. They included various forms of self-employment in such occupations as fishing, hawking, and family businesses. Waterfront men also undertook other forms of waged work such as cane cutting, shearing, labouring, and working on the railways and seafaring. Occupational adaptability and flexibility don’t fit comfortably with the masculinist constructions of the radical nationalist school or demographic occupational categories, which tend to understand men in terms of a single paid occupation that gave rise to ongoing work-based relationships with other men. In my own earlier work wharf labourers were understood as only wharf labourers and not in terms of the occupational

\textsuperscript{19} Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7. pp 117-118, 572
\textsuperscript{20} Martin Brothers, \textit{op cit}, 1/3 p. 14
reality of their daily lives in which they may also have been shopkeepers, drivers of carts, fishermen, shearers or coal lumpers, simultaneously and/or sequentially.

Paula Byrne has discussed the ‘economy of makeshift’ as it applied to free women in early colonial New South Wales. The use of this concept provides another way of interpreting the multiple occupations of waterfront men and further weakens masculinist constructions of their work. Byrne’s women ‘watched out for all manner of tasks which could be done … for money or barter’. This ‘switching about was done quickly and easily, washing, selling chickens, sewing, taking in lodgers, since this was the way the economy of makeshift worked.’ Byrne sees the adaptability and flexibility entailed in the economy of makeshift as an essentially female strategy, which she contrasts with male work patterns ‘where tools and crafts dominated, old skills were learned, and new ones learned by those quick enough to see change coming’.21

As Chapter 6: Boarders and White Aprons discloses, early twentieth century waterfront women could also be understood as engaged with a version of the economy of makeshift, although they were more home-centred than Byrne’s early colonial women. For the purposes of this chapter, however, the concept can also be applied to early twentieth century waterfront men. Their engagement with multiple forms of paid work, along with the unpaid domestic work of raising chickens and growing vegetables that also contributed to the maintenance of their households, does not suggest a masculine world dominated by tools, crafts and old skills. Rather it is a world where ‘switching about’ was a strategy employed by men, perhaps to a greater extent by them than women.22 In that case the economy of makeshift might be understood as more a manifestation of the class position of both genders, rather than a strategy that belonged to one or the other. Although more of waterfront men’s work was ‘public’ than women’s, there were many similarities in the adaptive way that both genders responded to economic circumstances. Both waterfront men and waterfront women were committed to a range of work activities, paid, unpaid, at home and away.

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22 Perhaps because of the structural limitations on women’s paid employment in early twentieth century Australia.
Daily competition for waterfront work

The financial need suggested by the economy of makeshift was also reflected in the way that men competed with each other for waterfront work. Competition for this work was intense and an account of its permutations reveals the day-to-day story of individuals that is masked by a focus on the collective and larger scale actions of trade unions. The voluminous weight of evidence in the sources about daily competition for work begs for a symptomatic reading, one that takes all men seeking waterfront work into account rather than only the unionised men who are the privileged focus of much labour history.

Whilst it is clear that competition for work was an inevitable consequence of the financial shortfall entailed in too many men seeking too little waterfront work, deeper psychological complexity is suggested by the men’s actions than the market-driven category of ‘breadwinner’ allows. When the degree of energy that waterfront men devoted to competing for work on an individual level is combined with the contradictory consequences of relative success, the relationships of the household emerges as a stronger motivating force for men than their relationships with one another.

Competition for waterfront work occurred in a variety of ways: through the use of union membership, preference, personal strength, industrial action and scabbing, amongst other things. All waterfront men availed themselves of whatever advantages were theirs in the fight for work. Competition between union and non-union men was fierce; but it was also fierce between members of the same union.

Union membership was a good way, perhaps the best way, of increasing a man’s chances for waterfront work. It offered a distinct advantage to men seeking casual waterfront work because most industry awards gave preference to union members. Union men enhanced their employment advantages by restricting membership through bureaucratic, financial and social methods. However, to gain membership of a union a man had already to be in a relatively privileged position. He had to be both accepted socially by unions that restricted their membership numbers, and to be able to afford the union’s membership fee.
Such was the case with the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union, formed in 1882. In the 1880s the membership fee had been a not inconsiderable £2/2/- Prospective members had not only to be proposed and seconded by two financial members, but the proposer had to provide half the membership fee and the new member had to have been residing in Sydney for at least 6 months. These rules effectively restricted membership to relatives and close acquaintances, which meant that the occupation of ‘coal lumper’ was less relevant to gaining membership of their union than were personal connections. A similar situation applied to the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union.

The personal connections that provided an entrée into waterfront unions often sprang from the personal life of the home. Chapter 5: Babies demonstrated that many men from other places married into the Sydney waterfront community. This would have enhanced their chances of joining a union because, as secretary of the Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union George Herbert said of his membership, it was ‘generally the way that a young fellow coming from sea falls in love with a coal lumper’s daughter. That’s where we get our union from’. Some historians of the waterfront have noted the pattern of female familial networks underpinning the waterfront community; and many members of the coal lumpers’ union were men who had ‘been brought up to the trade, whose parents [meaning fathers] have been coal lumpers’, according to Billy Hughes.

Once men became members of a waterfront union they maintained their advantage while they worked at other callings. In 1901 Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union secretary George Herbert reported that members who left coal lumping to work on the wharves or to go to sea didn’t pay union subscriptions while they were absent, but they remained on the books and were readmitted on their return. Membership of multiple unions was also utilised by waterfront workers who could afford to pay more than one entrance fee. Some members of the wharf labourers’ and seamen’s unions also belonged to the Ironworkers’ Assistants and Ships Painters and Dockers Unions in order to be in a position to pursue all those callings if need arose.

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23 Coal lumpers 1905 case, 2/63 vol 7 p. 17
24 Report of the New South Wales Royal Commission on Strikes 1890-91, Minutes of Evidence, p.12
26 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, pp. 597-8, 604-5
Indeed, as the records of one union show, occupation within a calling was not a prerequisite for membership of unions of unskilled labourers. On the contrary, it was union membership that conferred the occupational category, not the other way around as is conventionally accepted.27 One woman remembered, for instance, that when her stepfather seaman decided to stay on shore at his wife’s behest he did not so much become a wharf labourer, but rather ‘he joined the wharf labourers’ union’.28

To protect members’ access to work unions strongly resisted pressure to open their membership books. The Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union had joined the 1890 maritime strike and suffered through the rest of that depressed decade, but at the turn of the century the Boer War brought increased work opportunities for coal lumpers in coaling troop ships in Sydney Harbour. Employer group the Southern Coal Owners’ Union claimed there were too few men to perform the work and pressured the union to admit more than a hundred new members, but the union kept effective membership to around six hundred by increasing its membership fee to an extraordinary £5/5/-.. After an employer-sponsored lockout, defeated union members returned to work under a new agreement that included reducing the membership fee to £1/1/- and opening its books to ‘unrestricted’ membership.29

However, restrictive membership of the coal lumpers’ union continued to be an issue. In 1905 the union denied there was insufficient labour to perform coal lumping work, arguing that it had tolerated non-union coal lumping labour since its introduction during the 1890 strike.30 In varying numbers non-union men were coal lumping at the Gas Company, the Sugar Company, Morts Dock, Byrnes Ltd, Warburton’s, Locksley Bros, Jones Bros and the North Coast Company. Union members sometimes worked side-by-side with non-union men, an arrangement tolerated because it protected the access of

27 For instance, none of the applicants for membership of the Ships Painters and Dockers’ Union between 1905 and 1907 were actually ships painters and dockers. Rather, the list included many ‘labourers’ and some seamen, as well as a dairyman, a painter, a moulder, a pastry cook, a boilermaker, a fireman, a shearer, an ironworker’s assistant, a tramway cleaner, a blacksmith, a miner, a tailor, a saw sharpenner, a box maker, a groom, a printer, a wire worker and a sawyer. Almost all applicants lived in Balmain or Rozelle, implying that proximity to ship painting and docking work (at Mort’s Dock) was the reason for applying to join this union, not occupation. Federated Ships Painters and Dockers, New South Wales Branch, Further records 1902-1990 ML MSS 3309; Add on 2079 1/14; Nomination forms 1905-7.
28 Lena Powell, NSWBOHC, 91, 1/2 p.23
29 This meant all white British subjects of a desirable character, with electoral rights. ‘Foreigners’ had to show evidence of the right to vote, which related to the links between unions and their local Labor Party members. Coal lumpers’ 1905 case 2/63 Vol 7 pp. 29-34; SMH 18 March and 3 April 1901
30 Coal lumpers 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, pp. 19-21
union members to a certain sections of the work. Such an arrangement was tolerated even after a bitter fourteen-week coal lumping dispute in 1907, although work was arranged so that the two groups didn’t work side by side.31 A level of tolerance for formalised non-union labour on the part of the union was a strategy that effectively enabled the restriction of membership, and the opportunities for casual work it provided, to a relative few. Employer arguments that there were too few men for the work could be countered, but exclusive access to sections of the work remained the prerogative of union members.32

Incalculable numbers of other men seeking waterfront work who did not have the personal contacts, financial wherewithal or legal status that union membership required, were excluded from accessing work through this method, but competition for work did not only divide along the union/non-union line. Members of the same waterfront union also competed constantly with each other for work. This competition was more intense than that with non-union men. It is a story of individual action that competes with the collectivity implicit in narratives based around trade union organisation.

Some union members enhanced their access because they had ‘preference’ with certain employers and agents, a different arrangement to that of the preference clauses within union awards. For instance, employers could rely on ‘preferred’ wharf labourers to work more or less exclusively for them, and to be prepared to wait around to work for them rather than moving on to seek work elsewhere. In coal lumping there were at least three classes of casual labour categorised by relative preference: ‘preference men’, ‘constant hoodlums’ and ‘casual hoodlums’.33 Gangs of preference men and constant hoodlums accessed more hours of work than casual hoodlums, sometimes working excessively long hours (often under threat of dismissal) whilst others had too little work.

Coal lumper Herman Nielsen said in 1905 that about half his union’s membership were preference men who would work for one or another particular stevedore. Such men were ‘preferred’ for a particular vessel or collier and when they knew it was coming in

31 ibid pp. 3, 21,23, 483-4; SMH 22 July 1907
32 Such arrangements did not always entirely satisfy employers because union men were likely to be experienced, and thus more cost effective employees, than non-union men.
33 The term ‘hoodlum’, generally meaning a street hooligan or young thug, probably came to Australia with American sailors.
they appeared at one of the usual places to get their work orders. Constant hoodlums
had preference for work with particular firms, rather than colliers, but casual hoodlums,
the lowest in the hierarchy, were picked up for work only after the other two categories
had been exhausted. Casual hoodlums were often willing to work excessively long
hours because they never knew when or if there would be another job, and such a
strategy also enhanced their chances of becoming a preference man. In this way they
maintained access to some of the work in spite of their lowly position in the preferential
ladder.34

Wharf labourers worked under similar preferential arrangements and used terms such as
‘heavyweight’ or ‘privileged’ or ‘star’ men to describe their relative status. One wharf
superintendent said of the preference wharf labourers he employed: ‘They never work at
any other wharf, they come wet or fine, hot or cold, they are always at my beck and
call.’35 George Cole earned little when he first became a wharf labourer, but had
become a preference man for the Union Company. The stevedore who chose men from
the crowd had got to know Cole. Cole said:

If you would class that as preference …I am a preference man … you may call
me a heavyweight; I know what that means – a man who gets a little show to
any other. That is what the men term it. I get a good show at the Union
Company.36

Some wharf labourers were also termed ‘first and second show’ after the ‘privileged’
men, implying a hierarchical employment practise even amongst non-preference men,
who were sometimes also termed ‘outsiders’ (for obvious reasons). Non-preference men
might be taken on for a few hours and then put off to allow a preference man to take
their place and the work until the job ended. Preference men could also take advantage
of the desperate need of others for work. Coal lumper Alfred Hutchinson would
sometimes put a man in his place to do half or a whole ‘trip’. Hutchinson collected the

34 Coal lumpers 1905 case, 2/63, vol 7, pp. 42, 343-6; 2/64, vol 8 p. 960
35 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, vol. 4, p.1320
36 ibid, p.610
wages for the lot and then paid the other man [presumably at something lower than the going rate] for the hours he had done.37

Preference men also got first access to better paid overtime and to particular cargoes such as sugar, bullion, or coke. Preference applied to the work on banana boats from Queensland for instance, although this could amount to only two hours for each of the fifty or sixty relevant preference men.38 When deep-sea work at Circular Quay fell off in the winter months, some of those men would invade the Sussex Street wharves to compete for the interstate work with the men who usually had preference for it.39

Leaving the waterfront meant losing one’s place in the preference hierarchy. Wharf labourer Emanuel Scully said the stevedore effectively forgot you if you didn’t present yourself to him regularly: ‘there are so many men facing the master that he absolutely overlooks you, he loses the run of your face in a great many cases’ he said.40 When wharf labourer R. D. Smith took a job for six months with the Railway Commissioners others took his spot in the wharf labouring hierarchy and he was unable to regain it on his return.41

Advocate and union president Billy Hughes reported that ‘generally speaking … a preference man is a man who makes himself agreeable to the boss – he doesn’t open his mouth too wide … nearly every man in the [coal lumpers’] union has been a preference man at one time or another’.42 In such a climate bribery of stevedoring agents was common and coal lumpers and wharf labourers could be seen brandishing fowls or big bunches of flowers to influence the agent’s choice of men for work.43 The demeaning, humiliating, individual and daily nature of preference arrangements doesn’t belong in a heroic and collectively masculine story. On the contrary, a willingness to engage with preference can be understood as compelled by symbolically feminine personal obligations to the household, rather than by any masculine allegiance.

37 Coal lumper’ 1905 case 2/63 Vol 7 pp. 104, 42-7, 84, 199, 343-6, 374-86; 2/64 Vol 8 p. 697
38 ibid, 2/63, vol 7, pp. 527-8, 539, 543-4, 548-6; 2/64 vol 8, p. 585
39 Wharf labourers’ 1905 case, 2/60, vol 4, p.1311
40 ibid, 2/59, vol 2, p.527
41 ibid, p.684
42 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63 Vol 7 p. 67
43 Mary Ryan, NSWBOHC, 1/2 p. 11
The way that men used the natural advantage of physical strength to enhance their access to both wharf labouring and coal lumping work can also be understood as arising from a complex individual psychology containing symbolically feminine elements. Selection for wharf labouring, for instance, was conducted within the ‘bull’ system, wherein the strongest men, those who could carry the greatest weights and work for the longest periods, were most likely to be chosen for work. The weight of many cargoes was extreme: bags of potatoes, blood manure and bone dust, for instance, could weigh between 180 and 336 lbs [76-152 kilos]. Bagged wheat was especially arduous, both because of weights, and the continuous hours that men worked to facilitate the quick turnaround of ships. Early in the twentieth century the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union attempted to limit the maximum (and crippling) allowable weight of individual grain sacks to no more than 150 lbs [68 kilos]. Some bulls in the union, however, actually argued for the weights to be increased, so that they had an even greater quantity of the wheat work.44

Coal lumpers’ work was similarly extreme. Union secretary George Herbert complained to the Sydney Collier Owners’ Association that it really required ‘physical giants’ for the kind of work it wanted done and he said ‘there are not ten men out of every hundred in the State that could do sufficient work to satisfy you’.45 Coal lumping was ‘not a place for weaklings’, Billy Hughes argued and only the ‘exceptionally strong’ could remain at the work for any period.46 The most extreme coal lumping conditions were experienced at the Mortlake gas works and according to Alfred Hutchinson fewer than fifty men in the Coal Lumpers’ union could tolerate the work there. They handled huge tubs holding 2-3 tons of coal. Each tub was swung on a crane and grabbed by the men as it came down and then the men had ‘to run the tub right into the coal’ Hutchinson said. Coal lumping at Mortlake was ‘not work but slaughter,’ Hutchinson said. ‘You never think of straightening your back, all you think of is getting the coal into the tub’ he said.47

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45 Letter to C J Byrnes, Chairman of the Sydney Collier Owners’ Association, Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/63, Vol 7, p. 36
46 Ibid, pp. 58, 50
47 Ibid, 2/64 Vol 8 pp. 591-4
Strength, however, was a double-edged sword. It provided greater access to areas of the work that other men couldn’t handle (some of which has been canvassed in Chapter 2: Waterfront Working Conditions) but it also entailed greater personal risk and, ultimately, shorter working lives. It was a strategy whose consequences were contradictory. Sydney Coal Lumpers’ Union secretary George Herbert wrote in 1901 that the forty per cent of his members who earned ‘big’ wages did so ‘to the detriment of their health; they will be wrecks by the time they are 45 years of age, if they live so long,’ he said.\textsuperscript{48} Christian Poulsen judged coal lumping to be ‘the most detrimental of all kinds of work to a man’\textsuperscript{49} and in Billy Hughes’s opinion coal lumping found ‘the weak places in a man such as his heart, lungs or back, and when that happened coal lumpers could no longer do the work.\textsuperscript{50} Alfred Hutchinson said of the Mortlake tubs: ‘If you don’t look out you get an arm or a leg broken. You are liable to get smashed up any minute’.\textsuperscript{51}

Secretary of the Sydney wharf labourers’ union S. T. Harrison said that men who refused to work in dreadful conditions simply weren’t called for the next job. He said:

Most of the men are married and have families depending on them, and … they think of something more than their own welfare and health … They know that if they refused to work, and tell the boss that they are tired, and want to go off, they will be left out when another vessel is loaded.

One wharf labourer described working on the wheat as ‘compulsion’ because he had a wife and eight children to keep and the wheat-carrying season offered ten to twelve weeks of continuous work. Other kinds of wharf work were only intermittent, with consequences for pay.\textsuperscript{52} Another union official put it this way:

\textsuperscript{48} Coal lumpers’ 1905 case 2/63 Vol 7, p.47
\textsuperscript{49} ibid, 2/64 Vol 8 p.991
\textsuperscript{50} ibid, 2/63 Vol 7 p.58
\textsuperscript{51} ibid, 2/64 Vol 8 pp. 627, 594, 878-80, 961, 633-4, 842
\textsuperscript{52} Report of Enquiry into Grain Sacks Regulation Bill, NSWLA, V & P, 1906, pp. 3, 36
Men have to do lots of things if they are forced to do it. Take the men working in the Broken Hill Mines; they know that in a few years they will be done – they have to do it for a living.

Another witness said he was lucky enough to be able to avoid some of the hazards of waterfront work because he had no wife and family. ‘Unfortunately’, coal lumper H. McDermott said, ‘many of my mates have, and they are compelled to work long hours day and night as the stevedore asks them’.53

Scabs

Daily competition for waterfront work was intensified by the constant presence of non-union labour around the waterfront that willingly weakened the industrial action and conditions of organised waterfront men. In the radical nationalist school, my own work on the WWF, and much conventional labour history, industrial action is steeped in various levels of ideological desirability. Whether mass, in vain, heroic or inadequate, industrial action is an indication that the organised working class was fighting for itself, that it understood its potential power and was not merely the acquiescing victim of capitalism’s excesses. Whilst employers or the state are the usual opponents in these actions, it is other members of the working class, the so-called ‘scabs’ who weakened or aided in the defeat of organised actions, who are the more reviled enemy.

The Sydney waterfront is known, historically and contemporaneously, as the site of a great deal of industrial disputation. Whilst a majority of early twentieth century disputes were related to increasing wage rates in one way or another, there was a frequent overlap within disputes with issues about alternative and scab labour. This was another reflection of the intense competition for waterfront work in the early twentieth century.

Wharf labourers’ disputes were commonplace and tended to be small and local in scale for several reasons. The 1901 Arbitration Act and other agreements forbade strikes and unions could be fined; the drop in income associated with cessation of work was a strong disincentive; and withdrawal of labour was not an especially effective weapon.

53 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/64 Vol 8, pp. 603, 648, 955, 956
when alternative labour was always on offer. Nevertheless, conditions and pay were such that industrial action occurred frequently, irrespective of the disincentives.

On the spot industrial action was sometimes used by wharf labourers to increase immediately hourly rates for particular short-term jobs but its effectiveness was frequently challenged by the availability of alternative labour. In 1901, for instance, wharf labourers withdrew their labour at Pyrmont in an attempt to get a higher rate for loading shale, but were immediately replaced with non-union labour, whom the wharf labourers then physically attacked.54

A more prolonged dispute occurred in January 1906 when wharf labourers at Darling Harbour struck for about two weeks for increased rates because a new grain elevator forced them to work faster. The union disassociated itself from the men’s actions, implying that pressure on their incomes compelled men to take action against the union’s wishes. Whilst the dispute was nominally about working conditions, it was more accurately about maintaining income levels that had shrunk because of reduced hours owing to technological change. Whatever its cause however, this dispute was prolonged to a significant degree because non-union labour was available to work the grain.55

In 1907 a group of wharf labourers engaged on shifting bullion and ore cargoes from interstate to deep-sea vessels struck for four weeks. The men were engaged as coastal wharf labourers but struck to gain the higher deep-sea rate earned by wharf labourers working on international vessels on the grounds that the work was the same.56 In January 1908 a similar, smaller, strike about the difference between interstate and deep-sea rates in Sydney and Newcastle developed into a more widespread wharf labouring strike against the coastal shipping companies’ use of non-union labour. A handful of wharf labourers who had been agitating on this issue hadn’t succeeded, so other members of the Sydney Wharf Labourers’ Union ceased work in support. Non-union labour was brought in to work the wharves. Sections of the union struck for a few days,

54 SMH 6 January 1901
55 SMH 3, 10, 13 and 18 January 1906
56 SMH 30 October 1911; The People 9 February 1907; Beasley, Wharfies, op cit, p. 32
others for perhaps a month, and some cargoes were black banned. The dispute continued in a faltering way for about four months.\textsuperscript{57}

Unionised coal lumpers were involved in fewer industrial disputes than wharf labourers in the early twentieth century, but those disputes which occurred were prompted mainly by the same basic causes: demands for increased wage rates and objections to non-union labour. Coal lumpers struck in April 1912 because naval ratings were coaling vessels; in December 1913 for wage increases at AGL; and again in 1913 because of a demarcation dispute regarding the coaling of Japanese warships.\textsuperscript{58}

The piecemeal, spasmodic and sometimes drawn-out nature of many early twentieth century waterfront disputes was a result of the workers’ contradictory aims of having to cease work to make demands, whilst simultaneously maintaining access to the work. There was a constant tension between taking action to increase income for the future and sacrificing needed income now. This tension was intensified by the presence of alternative labour.

Because the records foreground men who were a party to the industrial relations system, there is little direct evidence to explain the actions of men who were prepared to weaken the justifiable claims of others by ‘scabbing’ but the term is an indication of the way in which it is most usually interpreted from the perspective of the organised labour movement. But if a symptomatic reading is undertaken as to the causes of scabs’ actions the inference is that they did what they did for individual financial reasons, that is for reasons associated with the household, rather than for reasons associated with relationships to other men.

Men who belonged to the labour movement can be seen as part of a more-or-less ‘progressive’ force and scabs were and are derided. But if the ideological ranking of waterfront men’s actions is removed, then both groups can be seen to have acted for the same household-centred motives. One group weakened the activities of another but they did so for the same individual motives that other men who were members of the labour

\textsuperscript{57} SMH 16 January, 12, 13, and 27 March 1908; Daily Telegraph 14 March 1908; Sydney Mail 18 March 1908; The People 14 and 21 March; 5 and 18 April 1908

\textsuperscript{58} NSW Industrial Gazette February 1914 pp 1151, 1159, 1220-22
movement competed for a disproportionate share of the work: the private relationships of the home.

The categorisation of male working class actions into more or less ideologically desirable versions of masculine activity obscures the home-centred and symbolically feminine explanation for all their actions: breaking industrial action as well as taking it. Scabs behave in a symbolically feminine way by being loyal to their individual families, rather than to the collective symbolically masculine loyalty of unionised men. Theirs is a feminised loyalty because they put their individual attachment to the private life of the household ahead of the collective masculine loyalty of organised men.59

The relative rarity of supportive and mass industrial action implies that men’s personal (symbolically feminine) considerations usually came before their class (symbolically masculine) interests but both wharf labourers and coal lumpers did take part in such actions from time to time. Some examples: during the protracted 1907 coal lumpers’ lockout, coal trimmers in collieries at Newcastle and Wollongong supported the locked out lumpers by refusing to load coal for Sydney; coal lumpers ceased work in support of the significant miners’ strikes of 1909 and 1910, as did the Sydney wharf labourers.60 Wharf labourers also refused to handle Queensland sugar and pig iron in support of other unions in 1911 and they engaged in localised industrial actions of various kinds in support of other members of their own union throughout the early twentieth century.

But the narrow range and extent of this kind of activity indicates its relative unimportance compared to ‘self-interested’ action. The peak incident of relevance to this issue was the General Strike of 1917, some details of which have already been discussed in Chapter 3: Family Finances. Unionised wharf labourers and coal lumpers were both involved in this strike. Ian Turner, amongst many others, has ascribed the origins of the 1917 strike to mass working class unrest and described the picture as ‘one of union after union moving into action, not because the leaders so ordered, but because the members so demanded.’ 61

59 This should not be read as an anti-union argument. I want to draw attention to the way in which the symbolic gendering of this debate obscures the similarity of motive.
60 SMH 9 December 1909; 22, 24, 25 January 1910
But this ‘mass’ action was effectively defeated by another collective (if not strictly ‘organised’ in the labour movement sense) working class action, strikebreaking. The ideological privileging of strikers over strikebreakers has to be regarded as problematic when it is allowed that it was often the same people who did both. By ranking behaviour according to masculinist ideological standards (the collective class interest over the individual private interest) the personal and symbolically feminine motives of the household that compelled men to do both are obscured. If men’s familial relationships are accepted as a stronger motivating force in industrial action than their relationships with other men, then behaviour that had all the hallmarks of public, collective and symbolic masculinity can actually be understood in private, individual and symbolically feminine terms.

Given the extreme nature of waterfront men’s working conditions and their periodically impoverished circumstances there is a question about why industrial action didn’t occur more often. The answer to this question also lies in the symbolically feminine territory of the home. There are occasional glimpses to this effect in the records. In 1905, for instance, there was widespread dissatisfaction amongst Sydney wharf labourers with a Court of Arbitration award, which had been arrived at after an expensive case and a very long waiting period. At a large meeting there was agitation for a strike. But the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that those agitating for industrial action were mainly either unmarried men, or wharf labourers who had simultaneous membership of the Seamen’s Union who would be able to find alternative employment. It was family men, the newspaper said, who resisted calls for cessation of work and who warned that they could not abandon their livelihoods without some other form of support for their families.62 Those men who declined to take industrial action were putting the symbolically feminine territory of the household ahead of their relationships with other men.

These arguments about waterfront men’s symbolically feminine home-centredness should not be interpreted as meaning that they were merely ‘economistic’ because they sought to improve the material circumstances of their households. On the contrary, the

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62 *SMH*, 16 and 23 November 1905
argument is rather that men sought financial improvement because they put the needs of their households ahead of their relationships with other men; that they were more psychologically complex and ‘feminine’ than masculinist constructions in labour history allow. And indeed there is evidence to the effect that men chose to forgo income for the same kinds of personal and home-centred motives that they also sought to increase it. For instance, George Herbert, secretary of the coal lumpers’ union explained why seamen left the sea to take up coal lumping. It was not because they made a better living at coal lumping and nor did they improve their position in life, Herbert said. They did it simply because they were ‘at home a bit oftener’. Former seaman John Anderson also explained that he preferred staying on shore because ‘I do not think the sea life is very good. I settled down and got married, and after I got married, I would not leave the wife and children.’ In 1905, coal lumper Frederick Hales and his family had had charity all winter from the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. As a seaman Hales had earned £8/10/- a month, enough to keep a family, but he left the sea to ‘go on the coals’ because, he said, ‘I was a married man, and I like to be with my wife and family … I like to be with my wife and children. I do not like to be away all the time, what is the use of being married?’

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to apply a feminist analysis to the world of waterfront men’s work in early twentieth century Sydney to argue against the radical nationalist outline that has been reflected in my own earlier work on the WWF. The similarities in the work done by waterfront men and women show that perceptions of gendered differences arise from constructions of work that are misleadingly masculinist. Waterfront men spent a great deal of time in unremunerated activity, just as waterfront women did, and they were not the fully-fledged economic actors that masculinist constructions imply. When men’s unpaid domestic work is combined with the many forms of paid work they did, the pattern of their work bears a close resemblance to the ‘economy of makeshift’ that is usually understood as a female economic strategy. The chapter has also argued

63 Royal Commission on Strikes, op cit, p. 14
64 Coal lumpers’ 1905 case, 2/64 Vol 8, pp 1004-6
that if the intense daily and individual competition for waterfront work is foregrounded, rather than the bigger picture collectivity of organised labour narratives, waterfront men can be seen to be valuing the private and symbolically feminine relationships of the household more highly than they did their relationships with other men. Occasional direct testimony to this effect, and the personal risks that men took, supports this proposition. This household-based interpretation of men’s motives accounts for the actions of scabs as well as the actions of unionised men. This is an argument that foregrounds the household as the chief motivator in working class men’s public lives, and implicitly argues that men’s private, familial, relationships were more significant for them than their relationships with other men.
CONCLUSION

The questions addressed in this thesis, which is primarily about the life of the household on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront, arose because of the contrast I experienced between the relatively simplistic connections between work and home that I painted in my history of the Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia, and my own complex personal circumstances whilst I was writing it. The evident meaning and significance of actions from the gendered and generational ‘private’ perspective of my own household were quite different from the more-or-less obligatory meaning and significance entailed in the structured historical conventions of an all-male ‘public’ institution. The purpose of the thesis was to determine what was missing from that historical picture and its main focus became the life of the household. A household-based approach offers a feminist alternative to masculinist accounts of waterfront life that privilege relationships between men in the external world of the market. Fundamentally, the thesis mounts a cultural, as opposed to economic or market-driven, account of meaning and significance in waterfront life.

The thesis project was initially based on a dichotomous perception of gender and gendered activities. US historian Carol Turbin has observed that dichotomous categories applied to men and women such as ‘dependent/independent, active/passive, are concrete versions of dualism that inform conceptualizations of western society.’¹ Through this conceptual framework men and women are defined in opposition to one another, irrespective of the more complex material and social reality of their daily lives. For historical reasons, oppositional definitions have particular application for working class people. Turbin argues, for instance, that the ideology of the family wage ‘fundamentally shaped thinking about working class women and families’ and this ideology became the framework for understanding both gender relationships and work.² In these constructs working class women were primarily perceived as passive, dependent and family centred, and men primarily as active, independent and work centred.³

² ibid, p. 297
³ ibid, p. 296
The insights that I developed as I researched material for the thesis bore a resemblance to these scholarly observations because it became clear that the ranking and privileging entailed in phallocentric history didn’t only exclude the household, and women and children by implication, but it also excluded whole groups of men and aspects of men’s lives that were discordant with dominant phallocentric narratives. Whilst the focus of the thesis remained primarily on the household, it was recast to apply equal scrutiny to *all* members of the household, and to also include hitherto unrecorded elements of men’s waterfront labour history.

Through this approach masculinity and femininity were increasingly revealed as little more than symbolic constructions that allowed for a fundamentally gendered perception of the world that didn’t accord with lived reality. The meaning and significance entailed in the symbolism failed to describe or account for the motives and actions of real waterfront women and real waterfront men when their private lives were scrutinised. A major task of the thesis became to draw out the difference between day-to-day lived reality, and the many appearances and constructs that purport to explain it.

**Section I** dealt with two processes that influence the structuring of historical significance both forwards and backwards, with respect to the Sydney waterfront in the early twentieth century, and with the absences and presences that these processes entail. Historical records created along masculinist principles rank and describe human activity according to gendered perceptions of economic activity and passivity, but the political and historical process also influences and constructs contemporary perceptions of past significance. Although these two processes occur from opposite directions, they both entail exclusions and inclusions. Whilst the life of the household and the complex interaction between its many members and the outside world is absent or elusive in most historical records because of the principles on which they are constructed, paradoxically, contemporary perceptions of past significance can be challenged by evidence contained within the same records.

Demographic evidence about the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront was analysed to show how its categories reflected masculinist economic principles that perceive the world in terms of gendered dichotomies. But when occupation, as opposed to paid work, was the measure of what characterised a community, then the early
twentieth century Sydney waterfront was a place characterised by the less visible life of the household rather than by the more visible market-driven world of industry. Changing economic, political and historic circumstances also shape absence and presence in contemporary perceptions of the past. The coal lumpers emerged, for Sydney at least, as a masculine challenge to the wharf labourers’ ownership of the dominant contemporary narrative of waterfront labour history.

Section II drew attention to ways in which the day-to-day lived reality of waterfront households challenges past and contemporary ideological notions, sometimes reflected in the historiography, about working class life. It examined three practical aspects of life in the waterfront household: finances, housing and biological reproduction. The breadwinner/dependent spouse dichotomy contained in the bourgeois ideology of the family was not reflected in the real financial conditions of waterfront households in early twentieth century Sydney. Material household welfare was determined by a dynamic and fluctuating two-way relationship that involved all family members. Irrespective of their home-centredness, many waterfront women were economically active in ways that were similar to their husbands and rather than being a gendered response to male financial inadequacy this activity was related, like men’s, to the opportunities of the market.

An examination of waterfront housing showed there was no direct relationship between its relatively high standard and improved welfare for the households that dwelled within. On the contrary, housing remained an acute and very expensive practical problem for waterfront people in early twentieth century Sydney resulting in class-based social and gendered living arrangements. Whilst waterfront women’s relationships with their houses were direct, and relatively visible and explicable, men’s relationships with houses were much less clear. Many waterfront men had more than one home, loosening notions of a direct economic and social link between a single male breadwinner and a single household.

The birth rate on the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront was atypically high. When complex social factors were examined a cultural account, arguably relating to feminine agency, emerged to challenge economistic and feminist explanations for declining fertility.
Section III dealt with the meaning and significance of various forms of unpaid and paid work done by waterfront women, children and men in the early twentieth century from the perspective of the household. Together, its chapters mounted a cultural account of the purpose of work for working class waterfront households. Whilst work sometimes involved money and sometimes didn’t, in all its forms it was primarily motivated by the parental, spousal and filial relationships of the home. Because of this meaning, what emerged were the similarities in the various kinds of work that women, children and men did, rather than the differences implied by gendered and generational economistic constructions of the purpose of work.

An examination of waterfront children’s work revealed that for class-based cultural reasons waterfront childhood was prolonged by filial obligations to the household. This conclusion contrasts with the shortened duration implied by economistic and masculinist constructions based on the school/work divide. Analysing men’s work and work-related activity from the perspective of the household also allowed a non-market interpretation of its meaning and significance to emerge. Men’s work, unpaid and paid, was understood as resembling women’s work in many practical respects. Waterfront men were represented as being ‘like’ women because the personal relationships of the household motivated the various forms of work that they did more than their relationships with other men. Whilst the meaning of many aspects and kinds of women’s work was relatively clear, because of its shrouding in ideological and emotional constructs, the meaning for women themselves of their unpaid domestic work remained obscure. Aspects their of domestic work, however, suggested that gender-based power relationships within these working class households differed substantially from conventional models.

This thesis is linked throughout by the theme that an examination of the private life of the household challenges the ordering, ranking and narrative outlines that exist in most phallocentric history. It does not suggest a structured alternative to the well-defined outlines of phallocentric history; rather, it suggests that a relatively ‘loose’ interrogative approach is necessary to allow new questions to surface and different conclusions to be drawn. This approach has raised material that suggests some avenues for future historical research. These avenues could include such issues as an examination of the
contrast between working class material standards of living and lived experience; feminist, household-based accounts of the development of Australian trade unions; and new approaches to fertility that seek to understand women’s control or expression of their reproductive capabilities less in terms of economistic or feminist constructs and more in terms of personal meaning.

Because history’s main project seeks dynamic explanations for historical change it largely avoids the kinds of questions that evidence which is personal, individual and small in scale prompts. The latter approach raises epistemological issues about what it is possible to know or deduce about ‘private’ life in the absence of the solidity implied by historical ‘facts’. But as the discussion of statistical evidence contained in Chapter 1 Demographic Camouflage illustrates, factual evidence may be useful to a greater or lesser degree, but its construction is always dependent on the social values of the period from which it emanates, its solidity is somewhat illusory and its reliability always questionable. The notion that factual evidence contains demonstrably ‘objective’ truth necessarily impoverishes historical inquiry because it not only inhibits interrogation of more difficult, less well-travelled, territory; it rejects as unknowable that which is not, in some sense, already ‘known’.

The interior or emotional life of the (working-class) individual developed strongly as possible territory that historical inquiry into the ‘unknowable’ might pursue because of a particular observation that occurred and recurred throughout the research and writing of the thesis. That was the extent to which it was evident that the actions of working class people are measured in response to middle class ideological constructs that are reflected both in the records, and in the historiography. The pervasive presence of middle class ideology has ensured that the actions of working class people are often measured against what is in effect an arbitrary standard, and one which necessarily obscures their lived experiences. An account of genuine differences in class responses, including gendered differences, can only be attempted if the meaning and significance of working class actions is understood in terms of what it meant for working class people themselves.

For both women and men a study of emotional and personal life means that they can be approached less from the misleading external constructs of contemporary and historical
ideology than from the point of view of subjective meaning. This opens the way to more complex and genuine accounts of the meaning of working class activity in both private and public life. Why do people do what they do, and why are their actions often seemingly inexplicable? For men, the implication of such an approach is that they can be understood less in the external terms of their work and their class, i.e. that which is readily visible, and more in terms of the ideological constructs that shape thinking about women – links with home, emotional ‘softness’, domesticity. For women, the implication is that they can be understood less in terms of those externally created ideological constructs than they can in terms of their personal motives, however much they might share them with other women of their class at any given historical moment.

Whilst the dearth of historical records may be cited as a reason for not approaching this topic it is not actually true that the private, personal and emotional life of working class people leaves no evidence for the inquiring historian. Traces of private and emotional life do exist in the records to some degree, and traces also remain in the emotional lives and imaginations of subsequent generations. Combined with rigorous and rational argument the dearth of records matters less to the final result than does the lack of an interrogative spark. Caroline Steedman’s work in Landscape for a Good Woman is an excellent exemplar of a constructive approach to writing history that depends little on formal records. Writing as both historian and daughter, biographer and autobiographer, Steedman challenges ideological constructs about the meaning of the interior life of working class women with a vigorous examination of her mother’s complex, contradictory and ambivalent class-based psyche. Steedman’s mother did not remotely resemble the stereotyped working class woman with which we are all familiar; and her father, less significant within the book, was drawn as equally emotionally complex.4

The private relationship between Steedman’s mother and father was marked out in the household by the mother’s presence and the father’s absence, but in the life of the emotions it remained an ongoing personal and gendered relationship none-the-less. As female and male, neither of Steedman’s parents could have been wife or husband, mother or father, without the existence of the other. Whilst this observation points most directly to an examination of private spousal relationships for the purposes of

4 Caroline Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives, Virago, 1986, pp. 48-61
understanding the interior life of both men and women, it also implicates parental relationships as similarly potentially revelatory territory. Whilst a great deal is known about ideological constructions of motherhood, much less is known historically about women’s private experience of mothering and even less about men’s private experience of fathering. What might an examination of parental practises from the twin perspectives of adult and child reveal about the interior experience of gender and class? How much might that show about the contrast between individual perceptions of significance and meaning, and external accounts of the same issues?

It is in this combined, household, territory that an examination of the emotions of working class people might proceed to reveal new insights about gendered life that could challenge conventional assumptions. Carole Turbin argues this case for adult men and women when she says the assumption ‘that men have power over women, [and] that while men have power, women have none’ is ‘embedded in dichotomies’.5 This observation implies questions about the history of both men and women, questions that can only be asked within the framework of their relationships with one another. A similar observation might be applied to generational dichotomies.

The personal and professional journey that prompted this thesis arose partly from my own experience of the household, which encouraged me to think about the past in ways that were alternative to phallocentric institutional accounts. Questions about the past are inevitably framed in terms of present concerns but historians are strongly counselled against assumptions that the past is ‘like’ the present because historical circumstances are always specific. However, what began as an exercise in difference evolved to become a kind of demonstration of similarity as I often felt a familiarity about aspects of the life of the early twentieth century Sydney waterfront household. Whilst the past can never be ‘the same’ as the present, surely one task of writing history is to draw out the ways in which aspects of the past are comprehensible precisely because we recognise elements of our present within them.

In my own case this applied not only across the decades, but also across the classes and the genders. With the exception of material standards, Sarah Dawes’ life within her

5 ibid, p. 295
household did not appear to be so very different from my own. Both of us did unpaid domestic work and various forms of home-centred remunerated work. Both our husbands spent more time away from the house and in the company of other men than we did, and they both did waged work and various forms of unpaid masculine domestic work. Sarah’s children and my own were all expected to work, to make financial and non-financial contributions to the household. But the familiarity I felt wasn’t just confined to women. When Frederick Hales said that the whole point of being married was to be with his wife and family, rather than simply provide for them as the breadwinner of the bourgeois model is obliged to do, I not only recognised the loving and emotional man that is my husband, but I recognised myself as well. As real men and women, rather than symbolic constructions, the Dawes’ family and my own all shared an attachment to the household because it is that which was and is the central purpose of our lives. Whilst revolutions, wars, depressions and natural catastrophes cause deep shifts in historical circumstances, an examination of the household can offer an avenue towards understanding what endures in human relationships.
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