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# Skill and the commodification of labour in New South Wales 1840-1915

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**SKILL AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF LABOUR  
IN NEW SOUTH WALES 1840-1915**

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

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**from**

**UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

**by**

**BEN (Richard George) MADDISON MA (Middlesex Polytechnic)**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND POLITICS**

**July 1995**

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

*R. Maddison*

Richard Maddison

## ABSTRACT

This thesis historicises the concept of skill. It does so firstly by developing a typology of skill, identifying and distinguishing the “artisanal” from the “industrial” concept. The artisanal concept of skill existed as part of the cluster of pre-industrial European attitudes to society and labour, the principal emphasis of which was their existence outside the market relations of capitalism. In contrast, the industrial concept of skill meshed absolutely with the characteristic features of capitalist social and productive relations. Not only did it inscribe specialised and mechanised labour with skill, but it also positively embraced the notion of labour, and skill in particular, as a commodity.

This typology is the central *motif* of the thesis, which traces the relationship of both concepts to the history of industrial capitalism in New South Wales between 1840 and 1915. It argues that up to 1900, the artisanal concept dominated the understanding of work and its classification in New South Wales. However, from 1870 this dominance was increasingly contested, and by the early twentieth century the artisanal concept had been displaced by the industrial.

The thesis examines this process as it occurred in a variety of social locations - the New South Wales censuses, 1841-1911; the colony’s general history of capital and labour, 1840-1900; in the early twentieth century New South Wales Arbitration Court; and in the more specific site of the iron trades, the history of which between 1840 and 1915 is viewed through the typology of skill. The central explanation for this displacement lies in an increasing acceptance of the commodification of labour power by a variety of actors in New South Wales. The distribution of artisanal and industrial approaches to skill thus did not readily fall into alignments of class, race or gender. Rather, the displacement of the former by the latter represented not so much the

victory of industrial capitalism over the working class it spawned, but a re-configuration of the relationships between classes in New South Wales. A new social order was born, and with it a new way of conceptualising human ability became dominant.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	vii
Note on referencing	vii
 <b>INTRODUCTION</b>	 1
 <b>PART I:           ESSENCES</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	23
<b>Chapter One</b> The Artisanal Concept of Skill	25
<b>Chapter Two</b> The Industrial Concept of Skill	57
<b>Conclusion</b>	79
 <b>PART II:           THE NEW SOUTH WALES CENSUS</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	81
<b>Chapter Three</b> Skill in the New South Wales Census, 1840-1911	83
<b>Conclusion</b>	114
 <b>PART III:          LABOUR, CAPITAL AND SKILL IN NEW SOUTH WALES, 1840-1900</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	115
<b>Chapter Four</b> The meaning and practice of artisanal skill, 1840-1900	116
<b>Chapter Five</b> The industrial concept of skill and the labour movement, 1840-1900	149
<b>Chapter Six</b> Employers and industrial skill, 1840-1900	171
<b>Conclusion</b>	198

<b>PART IV:</b>	<b>ARBITRATION, 1905-08</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>		200
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	The artisanal concept of skill: The Carpenters Case	205
<b>Chapter Eight</b>	The industrial concept of skill: The Sawmillers Case	223
<b>Conclusion</b>		240
<b>PART V:</b>	<b>THE IRON TRADES</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>		242
<b>Chapter Nine</b>	The New South Wales iron trades, 1840-1900	245
<b>Chapter Ten</b>	The Ironworkers' Assistants' Strike	282
<b>Chapter Eleven</b>	Skill, classification and the iron trades, 1900-1915	310
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	Skill and the commodification of labour	362
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>		375



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## NOTE ON REFERENCING

In this thesis the Introduction, each of the five Parts, and the Conclusion, - rather than individual Chapters - are taken as cognate units of referencing.