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

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PART I:

ESSENCES

INTRODUCTION

There are two objects to this part. The first is to demonstrate that two different understandings of skill existed in New South Wales between 1860 and 1900. The second is to delineate the essential features associated with each understanding - their meanings, their internal logics and their categories of articulation and expression. These essences are the identifying sets of characteristics which allow exploration of the position of the two concepts of skill in the process of historical change in New South Wales between 1840 and 1915.

The achievement of either of these objectives is attended with considerable difficulties, in that for the most part understandings of skill remained below the surface of everyday life and of consciousness. Occasionally each of the understandings surfaced, and appeared in an organised form as a coherent and consciously held understanding. Because of this the understandings of skill delineated in Chapters 1 and 2 should not be considered "ideal types"; the different understandings of skill were actual concepts circulating within New South Wales society. Such coherent conceptual instances were rare, however, and for the most part the concepts of
skill appeared in a fractured form, scattered throughout the texts generated within New South Wales. The problem, then, is how to identify the existence and features of mental phenomenon which only rarely presented themselves as consciously articulated unified concepts. The solution to this problem adopted in this part of the thesis is to read a variety of texts - principally although not solely those produced within New South Wales - with a sensibility to the meanings they contain; to the categories through which "skill" is described in them; and to the social and collective rather than individual dimensions of meaning, usage and vocabulary.\footnote{Arguments in regard to the practice and pitfalls of this method have become widespread. Those which have informed the writing of this Part (and the thesis more generally) are R. Darnton, \textit{The Great Cat Massacre and other episodes in French cultural history}, Penguin, 1988, Introduction and Conclusion, and especially his comment '... that individual expression takes place within a general idiom ...', p. 14. This Part is directed to drawing out such general idioms of skill. Also see P. Joyce, 'Introduction', P. Joyce (ed.), \textit{The historical meanings of work}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, especially pp. 14-17. For a more concentrated discussion of the exegetical method and the inextricably collective, social character of individual statements see P. Corfield, 'Introduction', P. Corfield (ed.), \textit{Language, History and Class}, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, pp. 19-24. For other influential discussions of these issues see W. H. Sewell, \textit{Work and Revolution in France}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 10-13; and P. Burke and R. Porter (eds.), \textit{The Social History of Language}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 1-20.}
CHAPTER 1

THE ARTISANAL CONCEPT OF SKILL

INQUISITOR: What is this power of God?
MEINOCCHIO: To operate through skilled workers.

(extract from the inquisition of Menocchio,
a miller of the Friuli, Northern Italy, 12th May 1584)

... skill is that part of knowledge which comes closest to the
individual, becoming as it were a part of his being; ... and is
also that which cannot be communicated from one to another.
(Henry George, The Science of Political Economy, 1897)

I

These epigrams mark the temporal limits and semantic character of
the artisanal concept of skill. It is not the purpose of this chapter to trace the
evolution of the artisanal concept of skill over three centuries, but rather, to
isolate and to reconstitute the essence of that concept as it was manifest in
New South Wales in the mid-to-late colonial period. Yet the epigrams
serve to emphasise the existence of a distinct semantic tradition - one which
by-and-large has been ignored by historians. Most historians seek to
establish the nature of skill in pre-industrial production by specifying
characteristic features of the content and context of artisans' work, often
noting for instance that it was characterised by a simple division of labour
in combination with an emphasis on hand work. But although these and

2 H. George, The Science of Political Economy (first published 1897), Reprint, The Robert
3 For a classic statement see I. Turner, In Union is Strength. A History of Trade Unions in Australia,
Third Edition, Revised and Updated by L. Sandercock, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1983, p. 1; also
see J. Hagan, Printers and Politics. A History of the Australian Printing Unions 1850-1950,
other aspects are important to an understanding of artisanal skill, they are not themselves direct evidence of the artisanal concept of skill. While they tell us much that we need to know about the practices of skilled workers, they do not directly tell us about the concept of skill itself.

That this elision of practice and meaning is a persistent feature of labour and social historiography is hardly surprising. Direct evidence about contemporary understandings of skill is rare, especially in the sources most frequently used by labour historians; and made inaccessible by labour history's devotion to the empiricist's method of writing history from the documents presented as facts. Undeterred by these considerations, labour and social historians have continued to make claims about artisans and their understanding of skill. They have been able to do so because, with some exceptions, they operate on the assumption that the nature of artisanal work had a direct and unmediated bearing on how artisans thought about their work. In doing so, they have filled in this evidential gap with their own assumptions about what skill meant, rather than any

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4 The historian hoping to find evidence about contemporary understandings of skill in nineteenth century trade union records will be disappointed at the almost complete absence of that term or its derivatives within trade union records. The records of the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders - one of the most complete series of any union in New South Wales - contains only three instances of the use of the term "skill" or its derivatives between 1876 and 1912. See United Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders, General Minutes, 2nd September 1877, 10th November 1879, 3rd November 1896.

5 See Introduction, fn. 23.

direct evidence from contemporaries about the meaning of skill. The examination of work practices provides no evidence of how "skill" was understood.

By taking as our starting point the comment of an influential participant in New South Wales society in the mid-colonial period, we can begin to recover the contemporary meaning of artisanal skill. In 1870 John West, the Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald, (hereinafter The Herald) described the skilled or '... better class of workmen ...' and their work in the following way:

In them we see the amazing faculty which operates as if by instinct and perfects a task partly by the direct and conscious evolutions of the brain, and partly by the hardly-noticed "cunning-of-the-hand" ... 7

This description might be taken as a typical but unexceptional confirmation of the claim made by many historians that skilled artisanal work was characterised by a combination of both physical and mental abilities. 8 Yet West's description does much more than simply confirm the pre-conceptions about the skill of artisans with which historians have usually approached the subject. By giving closer attention to the internal logic within this description, and by considering why it was likely to have been intelligible to West's contemporaries, it is possible to reveal the contemporary meaning attached to that understanding of skill, rather than the meaning which historians have attributed to it.

We can begin - drawing away from the established procedures of labour history - by noting that West's description was rooted in a particular conceptualisation of human beings, rather than in the details of the work of skilled workers. He prefaced his remarks on skilled work by noting that, 'There is no such absolute division between the hand and the head as is

7 SMH, 2nd August 1870, p. 4.
sometimes represented ...’.9 This conceptualisation of human beings was central to his description. Critically, it generated a particular positioning of the mental and the physical in relation to each other: skilled work was achieved “partly” by the activity of the brain, and “partly” by the activity of the hand. There is no suggestion that the mental and the physical were separate entities existing in a particular relationship “with” or “to” each other. Rather, these two together, in a symbiosis of mutual dependence, were portrayed as parallel moments of skilled work, intertwined as in a double helix. Skill was thus not portrayed as a combination of two separate and opposing mental and physical faculties which were brought into play with each other in the act of skilled work. Rather these two together constituted a single entity - and this “faculty” was artisanal skill.

On the basis of this conceptualisation of the human essence, West’s view of “skill” attributed the capacity for intentional human productive activity to parts of the body which were not the mind, specifically the hand and the fingers. Thus for West the intentionality and conscious activity of the skilled worker was not simply the result of ‘... direct and conscious evolutions of the brain ...’, but of what he describes as the ‘... “cunning-of-the-hand”...’ - as though the skilled hand itself was a site of knowing and reason.

In 1870 West’s mode of representing the work of artisans by using a weakly separated or non-existent distinction between “mind” and “body” was neither completely anachronistic, nor idiosyncratic. West, as a Wesleyan minister, belonged to a Dissenting religious tradition in which the categories “mind”, “body” and “soul” were weakly differentiated.10

9 SMH, 2nd August 1870, p. 4.
Moreover, as E.P. Thompson has shown, the rejection of Cartesian dualism was integral to the understandings of such late eighteenth century Dissenting sects as the Muggletonians, the leader and membership of which were part of London's artisan community. The extent to which this conceptualisation was common amongst eighteenth century London artisans, let alone artisans and others in mid-nineteenth century New South Wales, remains unclear. Nevertheless, West's description cannot have been mobilised in isolation, and The Herald in 1877 carried the observations of an English commentator about the success of the artisanal-based production which persisted in parts of Europe. In the article, tellingly titled 'Artisan Culture', the commentator described that in European craft-based production 'The workman's fingers are full of brains...'. This nonsensical physiology strikingly conveys the foundation of the artisanal concept of skill in a mental world which confounded the dualism of mind and body.

The strength of the artisanal mode of representing skilled work was demonstrated by its continued importance even where human beings were ostensibly conceptualised through the categories of Cartesian dualism. Cartesian dualism generated the distinction in the vocabulary of work between "mental" and "physical" labour, a distinction which had implications for the artisanal understanding of skilled work. But the example of Thomas Bavister, the Secretary of the strongly artisanal

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11 Muggleton was '... a working tailor ...', and Thompson characterised his followers as '... in the main, ... tradesmen, artisans and persons of humble circumstances', ibid., p. 87.
12 SMH, 17th November, 1877, p. 5.
Bricklayers' Society in 1891, shows how it was possible to continue to operate within the artisanal tradition, while using Cartesian categories. Thus he firmly resisted all attempts in 1891 to portray the work in his occupation as divisible into discrete mental and physical spheres. Against the suggestion that bricklaying apprentices ‘... could ... take up the practical portion before they went into the theoretical ...’ or conversely, that education in the theoretical aspects was ‘... a good introduction to the practical ...’, Bavister responded that ‘... they should rather combine the two ...’, and that ‘... the two ought to go hand-in-hand together.’. His central point was that ‘... thoroughly good workmen would be turned out ...’ only where ‘... theoretical and practical instruction would proceed together ...’. The same understanding was expressed by another trade unionist in 1889, when he commented that ‘... they must unite theory and practice to make good workmen.’. Further examples within the colonial context are difficult to find. However, looking more widely, we find an English wheelwright in the late 1880s describing in his occupation that ‘... a stage was reached when eye and hand were left to their own cleverness ...’, and how a good wheelwright ‘... knew, not by theory, but more delicately in his eyes and fingers ...’. Something of that same understanding can also be found in contemporary English writings. Underlying John Ruskin’s critique of industrial society

15 Report of Proceedings, Sixth Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress, Hobart, 1889, Mr. Aram, p. 31. Although not impossible. It can be discerned in the terms of the question posed by Andrew Garran in 1890 as to whether there was ‘... anything so mysterious about coal-mining that a man of ordinary common-sense cannot be made to understand it?’, and in the reply of J. Thompson of the Amalgamated Miners Association, that ‘There is nothing very mysterious about it, ...’. See Royal Commission on Strikes, op. cit., Minutes of Evidence, q. 10083. For some examples within the metal trades see below, Chapter Nine, p. 000.
17 Ibid., p. 326.
was the disappearance of just such a concept of skill. In *The Stones of Venice* he wrote that ‘... the great civilized invention of the division of labour ...’ was founded on two ‘... mistaken suppositions ...’, one of which was ‘... that one man’s thoughts can be, or ought to be, executed by another man’s hands ...’. Similar conceptions of lost artisanal skill were expressed in the writings of Ruskin’s disciple, William Morris.

II

With weak or non-existent separation between the categories “mind” and “body”, or their equal status in the accomplishment of skilled work, skill in the artisanal understanding could neither be explained nor analysed in terms of clear “causes” giving rise to clear “effects”. In this sense the presence of the medieval terminology “art and mystery” in the description of skilled occupations in mid-colonial New South Wales was not simply a quaint reminder of its medieval origins, but a reflection of the persistently artisanal meaning of skill. In different ways both the terms “art” and


20 See, for example, W. Morris, ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’: ‘... a man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body. Memory and imagination help him as he works. Not only his own thoughts but the thoughts of the past figure in his hands and, as a part of the human race, he creates... thus worthy work carries with it the hope of pleasure... in our daily creative skill.’ Similarly in ‘Art Under Phutocracy’ he wrote of ‘... the unreasoning seneuous pleasure in handiwork... [which]... lies at the bottom of the production of all art,...’: Both can be found in A.L. Morton, (ed.), *The Political Writings of William Morris*, Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., London, 1973, p. 88 and p. 68 respectively. See also W. Morris, ‘Medieval Arts and Crafts’, A.H.R. Ball (ed.), *Selections From the Prose Works of William Morris*, Cambridge University Press, 1931, pp. 76-81.

21 For this presence see the comment of Hagan, op. cit., p. 58, that even after the technical changes of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, ‘... the Australian printing industry of the eighties merely represented the trade of Caxton pushed to its final and exhausted limit.’ - a trade which he earlier describes in a section entitled ‘The Art and Mystery of Printing’, *loc. cit.*, pp. 1-5. For the “art and mystery” tradition in tailoring, see B. L. Ellen, ‘A History of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union’, PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 1986, p. 39, where he describes the tailoring trade in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and comments that for cutters ‘Pride in the skill of the trade was essential. The “art of cutting” as it was referred to, was the most technical of the old crafts. Pamphlets and books on its “secrets” abounded...’. The 1844 Apprenticeship Act referred to those engaged in any ‘... art, mystery, or manual occupation...’ quoted in J. Shields, ‘Skill Reclaimed: Craft Work, Craft Unions, and the Survival of Apprenticeship in New South Wales, 1860-1914’, PhD thesis, Sydney University, 1990, p. 30. E. Fry, ‘The Condition of the Urban Wage Earning Class in Australia in the 1880s’, PhD thesis, The Australian National University, 1956, p. 372, also pick-up the presence of the artisanal idiom in the 1880s, noting that ‘In the most skilled occupations, ... an “art and mystery”... had to be acquired...’. Burnett, op. cit., p. 249, notes that a skilled worker ‘... was regarded as synonymous with the craftsman, and in earlier times it was sufficient to [cont’d over]
"mystery" reflected the continued existence of an understanding of skill separate from mind/body dualism, and the physiological connections between them. Thus we find skill being described in terms of "art" rather than the more rationalist categories of mental and physical work. Reflecting this, we find cabinet making being described as '... art ...' in 1862; and The Herald in 1872 advising the house painters of Sydney that they would '... find the improvement of their own skill through art culture ...'. Similarly the English wheelwright described how in his occupation '... the work was more of an art ... than a science ... A good wheelwright knew by art not by reasoning the proportion to keep ...' in positioning spokes or in fitting metal rims to wheels.

This expressed the real "mystery" of artisanal skill. By processes which remained obscure, skilled workers arrived at solutions to problems associated with transforming natural materials into useful objects. The very form that these objects took - the fact that they worked, and that they were frequently imbued with aesthetic quality - demonstrated the presence in skilled workers of a capacity for reasoned and intentional activity which originated outside the primary organ of reason - the brain. As the wheelwright commented, in making a wheel it was necessary to give it '... a certain convexity ...' without which it would '... fall to pieces ...'. The "mystery" of this, and other operations of the wheelwright, was that a species of "knowledge" was being used which was not the "knowledge" of an identifiable logic or formula. As the wheelwright explained, despite

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22 For cabinet making see Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture in the Colony, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1862, Vol. 5, q. 1716. For painters see SMH, 7th June 1870, p. 4.
23 Sturt, op. cit., p. 322. The presence of that conceptualisation can also be found in foundation texts of labour history. See for example, the Hammond's description of the abilities of skilled workers as '... art or skill.'; J.L. Hammond and B. Hammond, The Skilled Labourer, 1760-1832, Longmans, London and New York, 1979, p. 3.
24 Sturt described that making '... square tongued wheels ... [was] ... a mystery I still think of with some awe.'; op. cit., p. 323.
the skilled wheelwright’s paying close attention to matters such as convexity and the distance between spokes, ‘... none of them ... could have explained why it had to be so.’. This was not just the observations of an outsider to the occupation, as he went on to describe how his ‘... own eyes know because my own hands have felt, but I cannot teach an outsider the difference between ash that is “tough as whipcord” and ash that is “frow as a carrot” ’.25

Although these comments were not made in the context of mid-colonial New South Wales, they can be taken as typical of the artisanal concept of skill. It was in a similar vain that a correspondent to The Herald in 1874 wrote to protest that the name given to the new ‘... “School of Design” ...’ was nonsensical and inappropriate because ‘... you cannot teach a person to design although you may to draw; you cannot give inventive faculties to those who have them not, no more than you can make a poet!’.’26

From this understanding of human abilities the “mysterious” character of artisanal skill arose. For if “skill” was not the “body” being set in motion by the “mind”, how could it be explained? And if “skill” was not a species of learned rationality applied to production, what were “skilled workers”? And although it was true that the “skill” and the “skilled” went together, what was the relationship between the two? It is with these questions in mind that we can return to West’s description of artisanal skill.

Although for West the “artisan” and the “skill” manifestly went together, they did not do so in a relationship of direct, or even of intentional, causality. Rather, “skill” was present in the disposition of

25 Ibid. This is found elsewhere in English writings. Samuel Smiles, for example, described the manufacturing potter Josiah Wedgwood as being the personification of ‘... English skill and energy ...’, which was depicted artistically as combining ‘... the crucible of the chemist, the knowledge of the antiquary and the skill of the artist.’. See S. Smiles, Self Help, John Murray London 1859, p. 108.
26 J.H. Thomas, SMH, 6th August 1874, p. 2.
artisanal workers. West's description began by noting that whatever skill was it existed 'In them ...', and it did so as a power which was manifest almost regardless of the will, direction, or consciousness of the worker. Skill was thus not a "thing" to be brought into action when needed; rather, standing independent of the worker's intention, skill '... operates [but is not operated] as if by instinct ...' and not by any instrumental mind/body connections.27

It was probably not through a casual approach to word usage that West arrived at the use of the word "instinct" to explain how the faculty of skill worked. "Instinct" means 'Innate propensity ... to certain seemingly rational acts performed without conscious design ...', and was thus an appropriate word to express the non-mind/non-body rationality that described the "mystery" of artisanal skill.28 In using "instinct" to explain where "skill" originated, West identified "skill" as an internal disposition or power which was neither physical nor mental, nor a combination of the two. In doing so he was only using one of a number of terms with similar connotations which were used by his contemporaries. For instance, Samuel Smiles, writing in 1860, described George Stephenson's skill as an engineer as being founded on his '... shrewd insight together with his practical acquaintance with ... mechanism'. These two elements, however, did not constitute Stephenson's skill. Rather, together they '... enabled him to apprehend, as if by intuition ...' the nub of mechanical problems.29 An

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27 See above p. 27.
28 This is a modern definition, given in the Oxford English Dictionary. Consistent with this argument, its subsidiary meaning is '... unconscious skill ...'. The 1872 Chambers English Dictionary defined "instinct" as 'That which instigates or incites; impulse: the natural impulse by which animals are guided, apparently independent of reason or experience, to any action.' J. Ogilvie's 1851 Imperial Dictionary; Engineering, Technical and Scientific, defined "instinct" as 'A certain power or disposition of mind by which, independent of all instruction or experience, ... animals are unerringly directed to do spontaneously whatever is necessary for the preservation of ... the kind. ... [I]n the human species ..., even when arrived at maturity, there are innumerable occasions on which, because reason cannot guide us, we must be guided by instinct'. Chambers' and Ogilvie's also contained artisanal definitions of "skill" or its derivatives. The latter defined "skilful" as 'Knowing; well versed in any art; ...'; and Chambers' defined "skillless" as 'Wanting skill, artless.'
English stonemason working in the 1840s and 1850s made a similar reference to an internal quality. He described how, on being set the task of working a block of stone into a hexagon, he found that ‘... how to obtain eight equal sides was utterly beyond my comprehension ...’. On having the method described to him by another mason, he was amazed that, as he put it, ‘... I had not intuitively discovered the simple process for myself ...’.30 Here again the connection between the mental and the physical is mystified, and skill is explained by that vague internal quality, intuition. A similar sense was contained in the description of the work of fitting a rim to a wooden wheel. The wheelwright “knew” how tightly it should fit, but this was not the “knowing” of “knowledge”, but an internal and non-mental, non-physical knowing: ‘He felt it ... in his bones ...’.31 And again, in the same occupation, the best use of the available timber was not made through the application of reasoned and conscious knowledge, but through the wheelwright’s ‘... skill and knowledge - not thought but felt.’.32

III

The impact of this conceptualisation was profound. The explanation of skill as a capacity inherent to “skilled workers” contained within it the implication that those who were “unskilled” were not endowed with the internal capacity that constituted artisanal skill. And as skill in artisanal discourse was described by reference to “instinct”, which is wholly a category of biology, this implied an explanation for the unequal distribution of skill which was ultimately rooted in biology. In this way the artisanal concept of skill was constructed within the framework of prevailing understandings about the differences between humans as biological types, most evidently in

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30 H. Broadhurst, quoted in Burnett, op. cit., p. 312.
31 Sturt, op. cit., p. 322.
32 Ibid., p. 325.
the dimensions of sex and age, and at a deeper level, of race. This meant that the categories of artisanal skill were tied to these biological perceptions.

If it is difficult to demonstrate these linkages this is not because they did not exist, but on the contrary, because their existence was so fundamental to the understanding of skill in the artisanal paradigm that they were incorporated into the meaning of skill as part of its essential architecture. Artisanal skill was constructed within a complex of perceptions and beliefs about the inherent capacities and suitable behaviour of members of biologically-based groups. It was organised around securing an alignment between categories of biology and those of work. It was not constructed separately and independently from those perceptions, but incorporated them within its whole meaning, and the structures which were erected on that foundation.

In the artisanal paradigm the dichotomy skilled/unskilled corresponded to the dichotomies male/female and men/women, child/adult and also to racial categories. To observers in mid-nineteenth century New South Wales the alignment between categories of skill and those of biology may have seemed self-evident, especially in their sexual manifestation. The organisation of their society produced a sexual division of labour which was unusually free of ambiguities.33 This was something of a contrast to the situation in Britain, where, to take one example, both men and women worked in paid employment as “domestics”. The sexual division of labour in the colonies, however, appears to have contained no such ambiguities, as an English commentator on colonial life in the 1880s observed. It was, he thought, a colonial characteristic that ‘The Australian does not employ indoor men-servants ...’ because ‘Having himself a full consciousness of manhood, it gives him discomfort to be domestically

waited on by one who in the act seems to be resigning something of his manhood.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus when women and girls in mid-colonial New South Wales worked in paid employment they did so in the context of a society that was rigidly segregated by sex. Typically women worked in occupations such as domestic service and factory work which had little status within the artisanal paradigm. This was also the case for the unpaid house and childcare work they did.\textsuperscript{35} In short, the very form of the sexual division of labour displayed to those who lived within it the reality of the correspondence between categories of skill and categories of sex.

If this reality seemed to those in mid-colonial society to be a reflection of a natural difference in the endowment of skill between men and women, such an interpretation of the unequal distribution of skill was secured only by the collective amnesia of a not too distant past. It had, after all, only been in the 1830s that the London tailors organised a rigid sexual division of labour in that trade, by combining to drive the tailoresses out of the "bespoke" branch of the trade and into the "slop" branches.\textsuperscript{36} This enforcement of sexual segmentation and the arrogation of the term "skilled" to the male section of the occupation had itself come only fifteen years after the widespread employment of women in "skilled" male occupations which accompanied the Napoleonic wars. This event had to some extent broken down the association between men and skill and women and what was not skill, which had developed during the last third


of the eighteenth century. During this period, according to Maxine Berg, ‘... women were increasingly excluded from the organisations if not from the trades ...’ in the large number of occupations which were sexually mixed earlier in the century. In such trades, which included handloom weaving, silk weaving, cotton spinning, hatting, and bookbinding, male workers acted to introduce and enforce a rigid sexual division of labour. This was a significant departure from the practices of the previous one hundred years, when ‘... the term “journeyman” frequently covered both sexes ...’ and when in sexually-mixed trades, ‘Artisan organisations ... had generally included women workers ...’, one example being a smallware weavers’ society in Manchester in 1743. Thus from about 1770, ‘... combinations that had once been sexually integrated were being replaced by sex-segregated ones.’\textsuperscript{37}

The exclusion of women from artisans’ organisations was accompanied by their exclusion from the “skilled” sections of trades. In silk-weaving and tailoring, for example, women came, in the last third of the eighteenth century in England, to occupy and be associated with those sections of the trade which had been transformed by the division of labour and introduction of machinery away from the artisanal organisation of work. This association was pronounced, and Berg has argued that ‘... in many industries the term “deskilling” meant the introduction of women workers ...’ and ‘... the perceptions of skill itself became increasingly identified with masculinity.’\textsuperscript{38}

The association of women with “unskilled” labour was not simply a function of the alignments enforced within the nascent labour movement. It was equally important that the household was a site of both sexual and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[38] Ibid., p. 196 and p. 160 respectively.
\end{footnotes}
technical divisions of labour in eighteenth century Britain. The dual character of the "proto-industrial" household meant that the attributes women brought to production were seen as a function of female biology. In that system of production, where men and women worked together within a household, the sexual division of household labour meant that women combined both house/child and industrial work, while men's work had no such separation. Thus in the system of domestic industrial production in eighteenth century England, women's role in '... industrial production ... became intertwined with ... housework.'\(^{39}\)

The cornerstone of this was the supposedly inherent biological suitability of women to childrearing. It was "women's nature" which justified the sexual division of labour, and the consequent childrearing and housework. This reference to biology was crucial to the definition of women's other work as skill-less, because it was the basis on which all women's work was considered a product of biologically-derived attributes. This had a profound impact on the valuation of women's work. Whilst in hindsight it is evident that the work women did in the "proto-industrial" family was predicated on the attainment of a range of:

special attributes and abilities, through the long but totally unacknowledged training in household arts and needlework ... [that] ... formed the background to the acquisition of the knacks, the deftness and the special application with which women worked,

at the time women's "nimble fingers" were seen as natural and biological, rather than produced.\(^{40}\) Significantly these attributes were '... never regarded as skilled in their own right ...', despite the fact that employers in a variety of industries actively sought out women in order to make use of their attributes. This was the case in the pottery industry of the eighteenth century, where employers such as Wedgwood employed women on finely detailed painting, paying them two thirds the rate of male painters; and in

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39 Ibid., p. 158.
the calico-printing industry, where women were employed on “picotage” inserting the thousands of metal needles in the wooden blocks used in printing; and in the variety of needlework occupations.41

Although an important part of the artisanal concept of skill was the connection made between abilities and biology, this was more than simply a reflection of the unacknowledged period of training which resulted from the imbrication of women’s house and paid work within the domestic industrial context. Underlying that context were the ideas of the inherent biological suitability of women to the tasks of childrearing and housework. But this itself was a subset of more general ideas about the different characteristics of men and women, with women being associated with all that was “natural” and men being associated with all that was “cultural”, or all that transformed nature. At the heart of this division was the belief that men were the bearers of the quality of reason, which was the capacity for unlocking the secrets of nature in order to transform it, and women were the antithesis of this capacity.42

IV

Although the analysis of Berg and others refers to eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain, it is relevant to the understanding of artisanal skill in mid-nineteenth century New South Wales for a number of reasons. Firstly, the eighteenth century was particularly important in the construction of artisanal skill, especially in relation to the gendering process. In this period many of the crucial connections were forged which tied “skill” to “maleness” in nineteenth century New South Wales.

41 Berg, op. cit., pp. 146-7 and p. 152.
Secondly, as historians of Australia have frequently stressed, many of the values, concepts and ideas circulating in colonial society were imported with immigrants. Ideas about work and skill were no exception. As Fox notes, the ‘... domestic ideology ...’ which imprisoned colonial women in the family ‘... did not have to develop here, for it arrived in Australia ready made from England.’

This was only one aspect of the marked continuities in the character of and understandings about work between the colonies and Britain. Indeed as Conlon and Ryan have argued, the Australian colonies:

accepted British concepts about women and their work to the extent that it is difficult to point to a single new Australian idea on the role of working women.

Of particular importance was the ‘... copying ...’ of the ‘Hallowed traditions of the division of labour into men’s work and women’s work.’

The third reason for the emphasis on the British antecedents of the artisanal concept of skill is to identify the mechanisms through which the attributes that women brought to production were devalued. For many of the institutional factors found in eighteenth century Britain existed in mid-colonial New South Wales. Although the “proto-industrial” family was not significant in New South Wales, the condition of women’s employment - especially in the clothing and domestic trades - often imposed a similar integration of house/child work with paid employment.

The perception of the origin of the “nimble fingers” of colonial women, as well as their other productive attributes, was thus similarly constrained by a biological outlook on women’s abilities.

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44 Conlon and Ryan, op. cit., p. 17.
46 For a discussion of this see below, Chapter Two, p.p. 61-3.
It is not only the similar material context which makes the continuity in a gendered skill seem likely. There are also some indications of the presence of similar ideas about women which made the abilities of deftness and delicacy, which were taken to be so characteristic of women’s abilities, appear to be a natural product of biology. For example in 1870 the large landowner Sir William Macarthur thought that the only impediment to the establishment of a successful colonial olive oil industry was ‘... the costly process of hand gathering the crop ...’. Capers, he also thought, was ‘... another product of considerable value, like the olive, requiring the labour of women and children, rather than men, to make it available’. And although this comment may have reflected the higher rates of pay for men, it was also a comment about the biological suitability of women and children for the task. Macarthur went on to describe the process of production of capers, with the caper trees bearing an ‘... immense number of beautiful flowers ...’ the buds of which:

when quite small constitute the “capers” of commerce. Every morning the ... women and children pick the young buds ... It is usual to sort them into sizes, and for the smallest sizes to bear a greatly higher price than the large.\footnote{Quoted in H. Reed (ed.), The Industrial Progress of New South Wales: being a Report of the Intercolonial Exhibition of 1870, At Sydney, Government Printer, Sydney, 1871, pp. 337-9.}

The emphasis in this description is on ability to do the dexterous work, and the inverse relationship between size and selling price of capers. A similar imputation of the gender-specific abilities - this time between girls and boys - can be found in the descriptions of their work in Sydney tobacco factories. They were, according to one commentator, ‘... mostly engaged in sorting the tobacco from the hogshead, or in covering the lumps ... of tobacco ...’ after they had been made. At these tasks, it was noted, girls were ‘... as good workers as boys ...’, but ‘... quicker at sorting leaf’.\footnote{Select Committee on the Employment of Children, op. cit., p. 889 and q. 330 respectively.} Less specific, but equally as reflective of the artisanal attitude, were the 1894 remarks of
Richard Teece, an actuary, who considered that the difference in price between a dress made by a (male) tailor and that made by a (female) dressmaker was ‘... because you know that [the former] is a better thing, better workmanship, a better article - more style about it’. In a similar vain Teece asserted that the poor performance of women in the arts in America provided ‘... strong evidence of the superior skill and capacity of men ...’ not just in those activities but as general gender-ascribed characteristics.49 Similarly, a Miss Badham believed that women and men might have parity in technical mastery of a particular activity, but that they were sharply differentiated along the central artisanal feature of innovation. Women were, Badham maintained, ‘... incapable of originating; they have not the creative faculty ...’.50 The alignment between categories of sex and those of skill were also captured in the comment of an observer of the bootmaking industry in 1878, who noted that in the ‘... parts of the finishing work ... [which] ... require but little skill, ... the workman can be assisted ... by his wife or his children’.51

The genderised nature of the artisanal concept of skill was not the only connection between biological categories and the categories of skill. Age was a less obvious facet of the connection between artisanal skill and biological categories. This dimension can be most clearly seen in an examination of the structure of the artisanal trades.

The internal structures of the “skilled” trades were articulated around the categories “journeyman” and “apprentice”. It had been the long-established practice in Britain for apprenticeships to run for seven years,

51 SMH, 8th October 1878, p. 7.
and this practice was perpetuated in some colonial trades. If this duration accurately represented the period of time necessary to become "skilled" in any technical sense, it was a remarkable coincidence that it applied equally to the technical requirements of an enormous variety of "skilled" occupations. It was less of a coincidence that the period of apprenticeship - the seven years from the ages of fourteen to twenty-one - spanned a notional onset of puberty and the attainment of manhood. The Sydney shoe and boot manufacturer William Alderson expressed a belief about this period of life that was both longstanding and widespread, when he remarked in 1866 that "... between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one is the making or the losing of a man ...", and in doing so expressed something of the connections between categories of age and those of skill. Similarly, he commented that "It is necessary to take a boy ... at thirteen or fourteen ... , and to keep him under surveillance until he is twenty, and then you make a man of him".

If the period of apprenticeship provided a structure within which the passage from boyhood to manhood was negotiated, it was one in which the most significant point was the age of attainment of adulthood. This can be seen inscribed in the changing practices regarding the duration of apprenticeship. In trades such as cabinet making, compositing and tailoring, the period had been reduced in mid-colonial society, from seven to four or five years. While this shortened apprenticeship potentially reduced the age of accession to journeyman status, in practice trade unions

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52 Fry, 'The Urban Wage Earning Class', op. cit., p. 373, notes that in glass and pottery trades, bellows-making, and organ-making, apprenticeship was '"... usually four to five years, sometimes up to seven years, ...', and that in the metal trades '"... the seven year term of apprenticeship sometimes applied.'; ibid., pp. 378-9. For the currying trade note the remarks of J.E. Begg in 1859 that 'To learn this trade it is necessary that an apprenticeship of seven years should be served ...'; Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1859/60, Vol. 4, p. 1341.

53 Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture, op. cit., p. 1066.

54 Select Committee on the Unemployed, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1866, Vol. 5, p. 670.

55 For tailoring see Ellem, op. cit., p. 39; for compositing see Hagan op. cit., p. 45; and generally Fry, 'The Condition of the Urban Wage Earning Class', op. cit., pp. 372-84.
opted to reproduce the correspondence between “skill” and adulthood. The Apprenticeship Committee of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council expressed the general commitment of the colonial trades to maintaining the link between categories of “skill” and those of “age” when it reported on apprenticeship to the Sixth Intercolonial Trades Union Conference. One of the measures it recommended was:

That the minimum age at commencement of apprenticeship be fifteen years where the term of apprentice-ship is five years, and fourteen where the term is over five years.\(^{56}\)

The malleable nature of the age at which apprenticeship could be started contrasts sharply with the rigid boundary of the age at which it ended, and emphasises the importance attached in the artisanal paradigm to aligning categories of skill with those of age.

While the dimensions of age and sex figured as relatively prominent components of nineteenth century artisanal discourse, the dimension of “race” lay more deeply buried. However, there are some indications that it was not entirely absent. It was evident, for instance, in the report carried by The Herald in 1873, which read in its entirety:

A Maori Draughtsman - An Arawa named Aporo is employed in the Survey Office at Tauranghi, and he is said to be an “accomplished draughtsman.”\(^{57}\)

That this was the exception which proved the artisanal rule, is evident from the nature of the report. The brevity and self-contained nature of the piece indicates that its newsworthiness required no further explanation to make it intelligible to the readers. The report assumes precisely that draughting - which in the 1870s was still considered a skilled working class occupation - was intrinsically the preserve of Europeans, and that thus the presence of a Maori in the occupation was cause for comment. The eye-catching nature of the item’s headline lay in the contemporary surprise of juxtaposing categories of race and skilled occupation - “Maori”

\(^{56}\) Report of Proceedings, Sixth Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress, op. cit., p. 29.

\(^{57}\) SMH, 18th July 1873, p. 4.
and "draughtsman" - and the unlikely nature of that pairing is indicated by the "he is said to be" of his abilities - a far cry from an assertion that he is "accomplished".

The racial dimension to skill was also reflected in the alignments between the categories of skill and nation. We find in the 1870s that it is usually nationalities from the north-western European quadrant which are seen as the repositories of skill at a national level. Thus, for instance, a correspondent to The Herald in 1876 wrote that 'The Swede, the Dane and more especially the Norwegians ... are skilful artisans, ...'.58 This was in contrast to the portrayal of Chinese' abilities, who in the same year were described as '... expert in all that requires dextrous [sic.] manipulation of the fingers; they are imitative and quick to learn ...'.59 The persistence of this representational pattern can be gauged by noting its occurrence two decades later, such as in the categories and alignments through which Pember Reeves described 'The despised cheap branch of the [cabinet making] trade ...' in the 1890s. He commented that the '... White artisans ...' shunned this line of the trade, and that this '... was their [the Chinese'] opening. [Although they were] Without any skill, [yet] they could imitate; ...'.60 Similar opinions were expressed in Collier's paean of praise to Australian pastoralism, The Pastoral Age in Australasia, which was suffused with artisanal vocabulary and concepts. After describing bullock-driving as a ' ... craft ... [which] would have been called by the medievalls a "mystery" ...', and

58 Ibid., 28th November 1876, Louis Browne, letter, p. 3.
59 Ibid., 18th December 1876, C.T. Jones, letter, p. 6.
60 W. Pember Reeves, State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand, Macmillan of Australia, Melbourne, 1969, Vol. II, p. 10. It seems likely, in addition that the racial/national dimension would be supported by a systematic survey of the discourse of colonialism, with the world's "races"/nations divided into "skilled" and "unskilled". Resonances of this internationalisation of the artisanal dichotomy can be found, for example, in M. Dobb, Wages, Nisbet and Co. London, and Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1943, p. 165, where he comments that 'Just as inside a country ... a particular grade of labour may possess a privileged position and constitute a sort of "aristocracy of labour", so the wage earners of a country that is particularly rich ... may share some of the differential prosperity of their masters and constitute a kind of "aristocracy of labour" with regard to the rest of the world.' For a fascinating discussion of the history of the relationship between nationality and productive ability see M. Adas, Machines as the Measure of Mens Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989.
as an occupation in which "The bullock-driver must be born to his trade...", Collier goes on to observe that although "Australian blacks [sic.] acquire some proficiency in the craft..." they were only "... employed as offsiders...", offering by way of explanation the opinion that "... aliens of the white, yellow, or brown races never rise above being "finished bunglers"." 61

These examples must be taken as evidence suggestive of rather than conclusively establishing a connection between race and artisanal skill. It is nonetheless interesting to note that such beliefs about the racial determinants of human capacities had distinct resonances with beliefs about gender and skill. In the artisanal framework both women and non-Europeans were similarly devoid of creative potentialities, their abilities only extending to imitation of European adult male skilled production and techniques. As much as the artisanal concept of skill was gendered, it was never only gendered. It is likely that it also operated to align the categories of skill with those of race and age.

V

The construction of the difference between the "skilled" and "unskilled" as an inherent difference of distinct biological types was one consequence of the tracing of skill into the interior of the skilled worker. But equally important was the difference between "skilled" and "unskilled" as a manifestation of the inherent difference of two quite distinct social types. This was reflected in the emphasis within contemporary discourse on the factors which distinguished the "skilled" from the "unskilled" as social beings.

A fundamental line of distinction was between those in the working

class who were "respectable" and those who were "unrespectable". The association between the "skilled" and "respectability" had developed in England in the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{62} It had been imported into and reproduced within the colony, and in general, these two categories corresponded to the categories "skilled" and "unskilled" in mid-colonial New South Wales. Nowhere was it so evident as in the relationship between that paradigmatic index of bourgeois values, the rate of crime, and the categories of skill. The skilled trades were especially concerned to elaborate these connections. Shoemakers claimed it was rare for members of their trade to be '... taken up ...' for crime\textsuperscript{63}; a carriage maker claimed that he '... never knew but one [carriage maker] ... that had served his regular time in the trade and afterwards became a criminal.'\textsuperscript{64} Similarly, an old shoemaker who had been brought up in the artisanal tradition agreed that '... lads put to a trade and fully occupied, very rarely fall into criminal practices ...'\textsuperscript{65}, and this perception was echoed by the owner of a woollen mill, who thought that '... those that have been brought up to the habit of industry are rarely criminally convicted.'\textsuperscript{66}

The antithesis of this was the belief that without being bound to a trade, and hence without being "skilled", youths in Sydney '... should probably become robbers and vagabonds ...'\textsuperscript{67}, and that '... men employed in casual work ...' were more prone to '... fall into crime ...' than '... trained mechanics ...'.\textsuperscript{68} A Sydney pawnbroker was so struck by the apparent regularity of this occupational patterning that he described criminals as 'A class ...'.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{63} Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture, op. cit., J. Vickery, q. 1540.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., E. Arthur, q. 1898-1901.
\textsuperscript{65} Select Committee on the Unemployed, op. cit., P. Quealy, p. 666.
\textsuperscript{66} Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture, op. cit., J. Byrnes, q. 181.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., R. Cooke, q. 1078.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., J. Vickery, q. 1351.
\textsuperscript{69} Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes, op. cit., J. Speerin, p. 1454.
The connection between crime and skill shaded imperceptibly into more general behavioural distinctions between "skilled" and "unskilled". We hear of skilled workers such as wheelwrights and blacksmiths described as '... steady men ...', and one '... of the best mechanics ...' in the Sydney building trades described as '... a most steady man, and an excellent workman ...'.

"Steady men" were those '... who never lose an hour's work ...', and who were '... also saving men ...', men of '... sober habits and reputable character ...'. In general they were '... the superior class of working men ...', and were seen as being '... exceedingly correct in their manners; and what is perhaps as good a sign of their conduct as anything, ... they generally pay their bills pretty punctually.' As a group, tradesmen were characterised by their '... industry and frugality ...', characteristics which meant that '... they have been able to save sufficient either to rent a decent house or to build one for themselves.' It is the '... provident mechanics ...' who '... purchased freeholds ...', or if not able to do so, lived in rented rooms '... that for cleanliness and comfort might be looked upon as models of domestic neatness.'

These details of the social condition of the "skilled" were in sharp contrast to that of the "unskilled". Where the "skilled" were represented as having an established place in colonial society, as suggested by their residential characteristics, the "unskilled" presented no such ordered connection to society. They were frequently alluded to as the '... migratory population ...', or as '... that floating part ...' - a distinct contrast to the

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70 Ibid., J. Clayton, p. 1296.
71 Ibid., W. Robertson, p. 1410.
72 Select Committee on the Unemployed, op. cit., A. Lenihan, q. 576.
73 Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes, op. cit., J.G. White, q. 854.
74 Ibid., Dr. I. Aaron, q. 654.
75 Ibid., q. 653.
76 Ibid., q. 89.
77 Ibid., J. McLerie, q. 96.
78 Ibid., q. 114.
'... respectable settled portion ...'. The connections perceived between skill and low levels of criminal behaviour had as an often unspoken accompaniment the criminality of the "unskilled". This was often traced to personal failings of character. Thus unemployed wharf labourers were described as '... idle characters, not dishonest, but idle ...'. The "unskilled" in general were described as '... existing no-one knows how ...'. This group were described as living in boarding houses, or '... in all manner of holes and corners, in most dilapidated places ...', and in '... habitations generally very inferior to what they ought to be'. This situation was frequently attributed to the '... good deal of intemperance ... among this group'.

In a similar way intelligence was used to describe the difference between the "skilled" and "unskilled". The politician John Robertson argued in 1860 that '... mechanics ...' were more intelligent than labourers, and that this could be seen in the convict era when the best farmer was a mechanic because '... he brought so much more intelligence to bear upon everything he did ...'. This was not just the perception of a middle class politician. J.G. White, himself a '... mechanic ...', described Sydney's '... mechanics and skilled artisans ...' as endowed with '... intelligence fully equal to that of the mechanics ...' in England. This was in contrast to the '... many illiterate ... and ignorant men ....' among the labourers. A similar belief in the correlation of intelligence with the categories of skill was displayed in the comment of a soap and candle manufacturer, who described a '... tradesman ...' as '... a type of his own class, ... that is of intelligent men, who are more fitted to manage a business than to drive a bullock ...' - considered one of the most "unskilled" of occupations in

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79 Ibid., S. Gledall, q. 1380.
80 Ibid., C.E. Harrison, p. 1300.
81 Ibid., Dr. L. Aaron, q. 653.
82 Ibid., J. Robertson, q. 2752.
83 Ibid., J.G. White, q. 653.
colonial society. And in a similar vain *The Herald* printed a letter from a correspondent which wrote of the "skilled" as almost an hereditary caste. They were, he said, 'Born of parents of a higher intellectual type, ... they are brain-fitted and home-fostered in a more intellectual atmosphere'.

Scattered references to the operation of the same distinction abound. Thus we hear of the skilled workers in the building trade described as '... men of considerable intelligence and intellectual achievements'; of the success of skilled immigrants due to their '... intelligence and industry ...'; and that the '... mechanics...' of Sydney were not '... inferior...' to those in England, as they were '... more than equal as regards intelligence and sobriety...' to the latter. Of the "unskilled" we hear little, but when we do it is to reiterate their lack of intelligence. Ninian Melville, a skilled tradesman who headed the unemployed movement in Sydney in 1866 was surely referring to the "unskilled" in describing the bulk of those unemployed as '... uneducated ...', and of such limited intelligence that they were capable of being '... led to any excess ...'.

It is possible to interpret the differences in social and behavioural characteristics between "skilled" and "unskilled" as purely the way

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84 Ibid., W.B. Allen, p. 1334. As this comment suggests, land transport occupations were given a derisory status in colonial society. They were consistently represented as occupations of last resort. Thus it was considered sufficient illustration of the severity of unemployment in 1866 that a wood turner should be reported as '... trying to get his living driving a horse and van ...'; see Select Committee on the Unemployed, op. cit., p. 644. One aggrieved tradesmen asked his questioners, with a self-evident implication for the status of transport occupations, '... how you would like to see your son to be a 'bus boy?'; Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture, op. cit., q. 21. So degraded were transport occupations reckoned to be that it was hardly seen as worthwhile employment. One commentator reckoned that carrying was 'One of the most degrading occupations to the morals of children ... the chief thing inculcated into them besides swearing is to broach the loading and make away with it ...'; Select Committee on the Employment of Children, op. cit., p. 915. It was not until the early twentieth century that more positive representations of some land transport occupations became available. See, for example, the descriptions of "bullockies" as craftsmen, above, p. 46. Typically, this re-inscription occurred only after the heyday of bullock drays had passed. The derisory status of land transport occupations carried over into the representations of their modern equivalents - the long-distance truck driver. For this transition see B. Bowden, 'The Origins and History of the Transport Workers' Union of Australia 1883-1975', PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 1991, pp. 22-166.

85 'Education and Strikes' by 'S.G.O', SMH, 2nd January 1865, p. 6.
86 Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes, op. cit., S. Gledall, q. 1381.
87 Ibid., q. 94.
88 Ibid., E. James, q. 1183.
89 Select Committee on the Unemployed, op. cit., N. Melville, p. 634.
differences in economic circumstance were translated into social circumstance. However accurate that interpretation may be, the emphasis here is on what this pattern of representation reveals about the meanings of artisanal skill. Although the varieties of terms which contemporaries used to describe “skilled” and “unskilled” referred to different areas of social behaviour, the combined effect of their usage was to arrange two “sides” to the description of workers, so that a host of positive terms and associations were attributed to “skilled” workers, and a host of negative terms were attributed to “unskilled” workers. This is not to say that all these terms were synonyms, but that all the terms congregated on either “side” circulated together and had an “exchange value” with each other. It was this feature of the artisanal concept of skill that allowed John West, in an editorial in The Herald in 1870, to distinguish between two groups of workers in the following way. The first were those favoured by employers, and were ‘... the best men ... men known to be skilful, orderly and energetic ...’. They stood sharply differentiated from the other group, who were perpetually unemployed because of their ‘... indolence and intractability ...’.

They were ‘... the unsteady and unskilful ...’, a total contrast to ‘The steady, dependable, intelligent workmen ...’.90

Of particular importance here is the use made of the categories of skill in presenting the points of distinction between workers. The “skilful” and “unskilful” were not simply used as polar opposites, carrying their own meaning within that dichotomy. Rather the categories of skill were here combined with other terms to render the difference between the two groups. Thus the “skilful” were not simply the bearers of “skill” but were also ‘... orderly and energetic ...’. Textually they were not counterposed to the “unskilful”, but to those characterised by ‘... indolence and intractability ...’. In a similar way the “unskilful” were not simply this, but

90 SMH, 25th October 1870, p. 4.
were also ‘... unsteady ...’; and like the “skilful”, the “unskilful” were not
counterposed to their dichotomous opposite but to the ‘... steady,
dependable, intelligent workman ...’.

Within West’s description, then, “skilled” and “unskilled” were
differentiated from each other as much by their association with normative
categories as by any reference to their abilities at work. In this construction
“skill” was just one of a number of positively-valued qualities which were
inherent to a distinct human type, whose whole behaviour, demeanour,
character and social existence seemed to mark them off from the
“unskilled”. This meant that when contemporaries used the categories
“skilled” and “unskilled” within the artisanal paradigm, they were not
using them as simple categories of work. Rather those terms were infused
with the highly normative meanings accompanying their use as categories
denoting particular social and human types.

VI

The conceptualisation of skill as a capacity or disposition inherent in
skilled workers was central to the artisanal paradigm. Its importance was to
place at the centre of production the skilled worker conceived - not as the
bearer of highly developed and abstract “labour power”, but - as a
representative of the social and biological type which his “skill” denoted
him to be. This was to imply that the difference between “skilled” and
“unskilled” was a difference between two social and human types. In
understanding this distinctively artisanal construction of skill it is helpful
to observe that it was markedly different from conceiving the difference
between “skilled” and “unskilled” as that between the same human types
who happen to possess different qualities of labour power.
These categories of articulation were critical to the artisanal understanding of skill, because they ultimately rooted "skill" firmly within the person of the "skilled" worker. For "skill" was not the product of an interaction between "mind" and "body", but came from that entirely other region denoted variously as "instinct", "intuition" or "feeling". Critically, it followed from this understanding that "skill" did not have an existence outside the "skilled worker" from whom it was indissociable. It was thus not possible, from this conceptual base, to separate out "something" that was "skill" from the person of the "skilled worker". And as the expression of internal capacity or disposition of the "skilled worker", which was deposited biologically, rather than a description of a particular level of technique or body of knowledge, artisanal skill was something which could not be taught or learnt.

One important consequence of this was in the attitudes to their own labour which it generated amongst artisanally-skilled workers. Hobsbawm has perhaps best translated the artisanal understanding of labour into the idiom of the late twentieth century. Nineteenth century English skilled workers, he writes, viewed their particular occupation as:

not so much a way of making money, but rather the income it provided was the recognition by society ... of the value of decent work decently done by bodies of respectable men properly skilled in the tasks which society needed.91

This captures the self-conception of the artisanally-skilled of their own labour as having an intrinsic social value. Hobsbawm as well as others have argued that this conception led directly to the practice of claiming wage rates on the basis of normative assumptions about the value of skilled work, rather than by market considerations.92

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We can, however, go further than this, and observe that the characteristically artisanal non-market understanding of labour was also connected to the tracing of skill into the interior of the skilled worker. From this perspective, productive activity expressed the essential characteristics of skilled workers as a particular human type. It was thus difficult for artisanally-skilled workers to think of, and act towards, "skill" as a term simply describing a level of ability - that is, as an abstraction separate from their human essence. The discourse generated by the artisanal paradigm was suffused with the idea of skilled work as a personal expression of interior qualities which were biologically-given and transmitted. So powerfully did "skilled" artisanal work penetrate the genuine artisan that it was impossible to separate the moral from the work abilities. Thus - to take one example - an old artisan, who described himself as "... one of those old-fashioned individuals who believe in being honest.\textquotedbl", in 1876 entitled his letter to \textit{The Herald} 'Dishonest Boots'. In it he protested against non-artisanal, factory or "... ready-made ...' boots, which he maintained would "... sooner-or-later prove to have projecting wooden pegs or iron nails inside the sole ...'\textquotedbl. He thus took as his touchstone the quality of boots made-to-order under artisanal conditions, and asked the rhetorical questions that linked the nature of the product to the morality of the artisan: 'Is it tradesmanlike? Is it honest or just?'.

Other comments refer back to the importance of the personal connection to work which was taken to be a feature of artisanal production. \textit{The Herald} praised the 1872 Sydney exhibition because it offered prizes to "... bona fide artisans ...' and thus provided a mechanism by which the skilled worker would be reunited with his work - as in artisanal production. Under modern conditions, it was remarked, "... his personality is lost in that

\footnote{Z', SMH, 5th June 1876, p. 5.}
of the master for whom he works ...', but in the Exhibition '... the artisan will stand identified with his work ...' 94

If the interiority of artisanal skill positioned the skilled workers who were its bearers against market determinations of wages, it did so not simply as the function of individual identity. Rather, that same interiority necessarily contained a collective dimension, because in the artisanal paradigm skill was connected to the internal disposition of a particular human type, rather than simply to particular individuals. This was most succinctly articulated in the idea and institution of the “trade”, which was conceived in the artisanal understanding as a community of the equally-skilled. 95 In this respect the normative basis of wage rates for particular “trades” was not simply related to the conceptions members of an occupation held about the social value of their abilities, but also to the considerations of the equality in skill of all members of a trade. Importantly, as the nineteenth century proceeded in New South Wales the latter, rather than the former was the main co-ordinate through which the colony’s skilled workers oriented themselves to the economic and social changes amongst which they were positioned. It is to this artisanal conception of the “trade” as a community of the equally-skilled which we shall frequently return in the chapters which follow.

94 SMH, 4th April 1872, p. 4.
95 See Burnett, op. cit., p. 251, where he comments that ‘... the medieval idea of the “fraternity” still lingered ... in the competitive conditions of Victorian industry, where the workshop could form a miniature community protected from the harsh outside world by its own inherited lore and custom.’