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

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CHAPTER 5

THE INDUSTRIAL CONCEPT OF SKILL AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT, 1840-1900

If labour and skill are "marketable commodities" then the possessors of such commodities are justified in selling their labour and skill in like manner as a butcher sells beef.

"What Is Ca'canny?", the International Federation of Ship, Dock and River Workers, 1896

Free competition prevailed over custom and regulation; and the reign of the cash nexus was established. It is under this system that our colonies have grown up; ... In the English colonies the relations between employer and wage earner are probably less-permanent, and more entirely limited to the cash-nexus than in any other countries in the world, with the sole exception of the United States.

Professor Walter Scott, Sydney, 1888.

I

In the decades between 1840 and 1900 the artisanal concept of skill remained the central framework within which work was understood and the labour movement organised in New South Wales. However, from the 1870s this dominance was contested and eroded, as critiques of the artisanal taxonomy and attitudes were disseminated within the labour movement. The starting point of these critiques was not so much the industrial concept of skill itself, but a positive appraisal of the transformations which were

occurring in the social and industrial life of New South Wales between 1870 and 1900. For, in contrast to the artisanal paradigm, with its rosy view of the pre-industrial past, the industrial understanding of skill inscribed with positive meaning the very processes which were occurring in the reorganisation of production in Australia between the 1870s and 1890s. While the artisanal paradigm pointed positively to the period of workshop production, with its simple division of labour, and its focus on hand work, the industrial perspective portrayed the extension of capitalist techniques of production and social relations as historically progressive. A saddler, Robert Hayes, summed up this viewpoint when he described ‘... this age of steam, electricity and complex machinery ...’ in which ‘... the wants of the world can be supplied in a much shorter time ...’ than ever before, and contrasted it with ‘... the so-called good old times, but to my mind, the times we never want to see again - of long hours and low pay.’.³

Such a representation of the impact of capitalist development was literally unthinkable from within the artisanal paradigm. Its powers of re-inscribing capitalist social and industrial practices with positive meanings were at best extremely limited - we might take as representative the resigned response of Mr T. Cole, whose membership of the Handsewn Bootmakers Association indicates that he was likely to have been imbued with artisanal sensibility. Participating in a dispute among the Sydney tobacco industry workers in 1890, Cole advised the skilled twisters that:

Not a man had worked more keenly than he against machinery. He had come to the conclusion that he could not fight against the world’s progress. If cake was made by machinery and twist by hand they could not help it.⁴

This stance in regard to mechanisation was a marked contrast with that of a socialist such as Charles Seymour, who embraced capitalism as a

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⁴ The Australian Workman, 15th November 1890, p. 4. "Cake" and "twist" were two different methods of processing and packing tobacco.
liberation from those very structures of artisanal production the passing of
which was lamented in artisanal discourse. In 1889 he intervened in a
debate at the Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress about the
need for the labour movement to defend apprenticeships by noting - with a
barely disguised relish - that the discussion was ‘... useless, because the
system of trade was now cut-up piecemeal; the old-fashioned mode was
becoming obsolete, and owing to the introduction of machinery many
trades would require to go.’. Here Seymour aggressively questioned all the
highly esteemed features of the artisanal paradigm: the organisation of
production around discrete occupational entities (“the system of trade”) was
an “old fashioned mode”, now made “obsolete” by division of labour
(“trade” “cut-up piecemeal”), and the introduction of machinery.

This was the kind of modern view within which the industrial
understanding of skill was borne, and it led to a complete re-evaluation of
the central artisanal reference points. Thus, as Seymour’s remarks suggest,
adherents to the industrial paradigm were inclined to give recognition to
abilities gained outside that central artisanal institution, apprenticeship.
Although artisans might rail against it, others within the labour movement
in the late nineteenth century could see no reason why those who had
gained their qualifications outside the formal apprenticeship system should
not be considered on the same basis as those who were artisanally “skilled”.
Sometimes this was evident in the recognition of classes of workers which
derived from outside the structures of artisanal apprenticeship, such as
“improvers”; or in recognition of qualifications and abilities derived from
technical education. Delegates at the 1891 Intercolonial Trades and Labour
Union Congress expressed this re-evaluative tendency when they passed a

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5 For Seymour see D.J. Murphy, ‘Queensland’, D.J. Murphy (ed.), Labor in Politics. The State Labor
Parties in Australia 1880-1920, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, 1975, pp.
132-3, p. 222. For his remark see Report of Proceedings, Sixth Intercolonial Trades and Labour
Union Congress, op. cit., p. 31.
motion which provided for 'The acceptance by Trades Unions of certificates of proficiency obtained in State technical colleges as equivalent to indentures of apprenticeship.' During the debate which was provoked by this measure one delegate argued that '... there were many men who had some knowledge of the trades who, by a course of study ... could perfect that knowledge.' Another delegate considered that:

It did not matter where a lad learned his trade as long as he was competent ... He [the speaker] had never served an apprenticeship, and he thought he was as good a workman as any man who had.

Equipped with a positive view of the historical significance of capitalist development, it was socialists in the labour movement who mounted the most direct assault on the artisanal paradigm. To illustrate the nature of these attacks it is necessary to draw into the argument contemporary comments from outside New South Wales, and to examine the debates which occurred at the Intercolonial Trades Union Congresses from 1879 to 1891. In this forum socialists (in particular), as well as others, strove to unify the labour movement. Their efforts were directed sometimes towards establishing policies which bridged divisions of colony; occasionally for those which transcended divisions based on race and gender; but principally for policies which abrogated divisions derived from the artisanal taxonomy of skill.

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6 Report of Proceedings, Seventh Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress; Ballarat, 1891, p. 104. The motion was passed by 55 to 33 votes; idem., p. 106.
7 Ibid., F.H. Bromley, p. 104.
8 Ibid., J. Miller, p. 106.
9 For the trans-colonial efforts see the comments of W.A. Robinson, who in introducing the proceedings of the Fourth Intercolonial Trade Union Congress in 1886 specifically drew attention to the Congresses' role in breaking-down inter-colonial prejudices and rivalry; Report of Proceedings, Fourth Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, op. cit., p. ix; also see the remarks of D. Clarke and D. Harcourt, who lamented that '... an artificial boundary line should be the cause of so much bitterness and jealousy between colonies of people who are kith and kin, speaking the same tongue ...'; see Report of Proceedings, Third Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, Sydney, 1885, p. 103. For transcendence of gender see, for example, the reception given to the women delegates from the Victorian Tailoresses' Union at the 1885 Intercolonial Trades Union Congress. They '... were congratulated by loud cheers ...', and the speech of welcome '... hoped that their noble example [would] be the means of giving birth [sic.] to female trade organisations ...' elsewhere; idem., pp. ix-x. See also the remarks of Trenwith on the scheme of Australasian Labour Federation, Report of Proceedings, Seventh Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress, op. cit., p. 72. For those of race see the comment of Mrs Muir who in 1891 said that '... she was sorry to see the [cont'd over]
Much of the early efforts in this regard were directed towards changing the language with which the labour movement addressed itself, so as to include the "unskilled" as part of the intended audience. At the 1885 Congress J. Cameron, a delegate from the Victorian Boilermakers, suggested that resolutions under discussion in regard to labour federation should have ‘... the word “labourers” incorporated …’ in them. Although today this seems to be an innocuous proposal, delegates of a century ago voted against it, and in doing so illustrated in striking fashion the importance skilled colonial workers gave to maintaining the terminological position of artisanal skill at the discursive centre of the labour movement. A proposal which was put forward as an alternative to the original motion emphasised this determination even more strikingly. One delegate suggested that if the delegates were not going to agree to adopt terms of address which included the unskilled alongside the skilled, the same effect could be produced by everyone agreeing 'That the word “trade” ... shall be taken to mean any Union or Society.'

That such a proposal existed at all indicates the lengths to which some in the artisanal community were prepared to go to preserve the terminology of artisanal skill. By extending "trade" to encompass the "unskilled" was to radically alter and degrade the meaning of "trade", and not surprisingly this proposal was defeated. The term was too saturated with meanings which excluded the "unskilled" to be widened to include them - but the incident reveals that a degree of instability was starting to surround central artisanal categories within the labour movement itself. When this incident occurred it was only a decade before the Webbs would

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words “white man” in the proposal [for wider union federation]. The stevedores had a large number of black men in their union, and they were just as good as many white men; idem., p. 97. Initially the ASU in New Zealand translated its rules into Maori, and had many Maori members; see W.G. Spence, *History of the A.W.U.,* The Worker Trustees, Sydney, Reprint, 1961, originally published 1911, p. 16; Merritt, *History of the AWU,* op. cit., p. 96.


11 Ibid., J. Bryce, p. 77.
ask, 'But what is a "trade" and how are its limits to be defined?', and in their answer describe - in a language redolent of that used by Coghlan in 1893-4, and anticipatory of that used in the Arbitration Court in 1905 - the concept of the "trade" as being based on '... the most palpable absurdities ...', producing '... incongruous results ...' and leading to '... a purely arbitrary distribution of work ...'. Cameron's comments in the mid-1880s point to the development within the labour movement of growing of scepticism about the meaning of basic artisanal categories.

Cameron's attempt to force the linguistic inclusion of labourers was intended, he said, '... to remove any invidious distinction between them and tradesmen.' However unsettling this may have appeared to the skilled at the time, in reality his proposal left their position intact. Ultimately it was constructed within, and preserved the categories of, the artisanal paradigm. Other approaches, such as that adopted by Seymour at the 1888 and 1889 Congresses, had a much more aggressively anti-artisanal intention. Abandoning any of the protocols of Congress politeness, he put forward a proposal which he hoped '... would break down certain notions that existed with regard to tradesmen occupying a position superior to labourers ...', and '... pave the way for a thorough union of labour in which "Tenpenny Jack" and "Ninepenny Joe" may stand side by side as equals.'

This objective involved a much more radical attack on the artisanal paradigm than that of Cameron because it hinged on the eradication of the artisanal categories themselves. Seymour proposed a motion in 1888 'That in future the Congress be called the Labour Union Congress.', a move which had the categories "skilled" and "unskilled" disappearing altogether into the

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general category "labourer". It is no surprise that, in the context of the refusal by the Congress three years previously to alter its terms of address to include the "unskilled", Seymour's much more threatening proposal was also rejected. But in rejecting it, the skilled artisans who dominated the 1888 Congress were forced to adopt the terminology which they had rejected in 1885. For the motion was passed, but in an amended form which read 'That in future the title of the Congress shall be the Trades and Labour Union Congress'. On one hand this was something of a retreat for the artisans in the Congress, as it was a reversal of the stance they had adopted in 1885. But on the other hand, it was also a reassertion of the artisanal taxonomy, because it reinstated the dualistic classification of labour into "skilled" and "unskilled" sections, and thus completely undermined the radical intent of the original motion. It is important to notice in this regard that the motion emanated from socialists operating in a union (Seamans') and labour movement (Queensland) which had in many ways rejected the artisanal paradigm and its taxonomy. It is equally important to notice that Seymour's motion was defeated by the mobilisation of workers whose whole approach was suffused with the artisanal paradigm. The amendment which reintroduced "trades" into Seymour's motion was moved and seconded by delegates of the Operative Stonemasons' Society and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners respectively - both pre-eminent bastions of conservatism craftism.  

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15 For the Seamen's Union see below, p. 170. By 1891 the labour movement in Queensland titled itself "... the Queensland labour movement ..." - see comment of Mr Bowman, Report of Proceedings, Seventh Intercolonial Trades and Labour Unions Congress, op. cit., p. 22.

16 It is a relatively commonplace historiographical observation that it is principally the perspective of the "winners" of history whose legacy is preserved in the documents and evidence of historical records. The writing of labour history, at least from the traditional perspective, has not in general proceeded on the basis that the documents it draws its evidence from are at least in part political constructions. Only one instance of the impact of adopting such a credulous approach to sources and evidence can be given here. At the 1888 Intercolonial Trades Union Congress in Brisbane the motion was passed 'That in future the title of the Congress shall be the Trades and Labour Union Congress' - Report of Proceedings, Fifth Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, op. cit., p. 107. Writing the Introduction to the Report of the following year's Congress - the first to include "Labour" in its title - the Tasmanian labour leader Hugh Kirk interpreted the new name as a sign of progress. (Report of Proceedings, Sixth Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union (cont'd over)
Seymour's attempt to eradicate the categories of artisanal skill was the tip of a larger movement with the same aim. In 1896 Andrew Thompson, a Sydney stonemason and member of the Australian Socialist League, warned his colleagues on the Trades and Labour Council that '... the distinction between the skilled and unskilled was a dangerous one to make ...', and in doing so gave an urban voice to attitudes which were being disseminated much more widely in the rural areas of New South Wales. In 1892 a writer in the radical rural paper The Hummer advocated a general movement of amalgamation within the labour movement; he thought it would '... break down all the absurd distinctions now dividing the workers into skilled and unskilled.' In similar vain Hank Morgan, a pastoral union activist, justified the choice of the name 'The Australian Workers Union' (AWU) as the title of the proposed amalgamation of the Australian Shearers Union (ASU) with that of the general pastoral workforce, the General Labourers Union (GLU), by pointing out that '... the word "Workers" ... includes every class of Labor ...' and considered that it was '... really a good idea to drop the distinctive titles of both Unions in one act, and have one name to include both ...' on the grounds that '... we are all men and should drop those petty jealous differences which now tend to separate "skilled" from "unskilled" Labor, and shearers from Laborers'.

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18 Tom Stanton, The Hummer, 14th May 1892, p. 1.
19 The Worker, 1st November 1892, p. 3.
We should be wary of assimilating the views expressed in the radical rural press of the 1890s to those of the pastoral workforce at large. It is necessary to keep in mind the continuing tensions within the pastoral workforce, exemplified in the vitriolic correspondence between "Rouses" and "Choppers" (shedhands and shearers) in the columns of *The Australian Workman* in 1890.20 So intensively did one shedhand experience that tension that he advised "unskilled" pastoral labourers that it was '... best in the long run for a rouseabout to crawl to that God Almighty animal, the professional shearer ...' and that 'Taking it all round the shearer regards the "rouser" with contempt.'21 And the persistence of exclusive attitudes is further attested in the comments of a shearer who refused to join the amalgamated union in 1894 because he thought there were '... a lot in the AWU who are ... the "scruff" of the cities, and not worthy for decent men to associate with.'22 The labour leader W.G. Spence regretted in 1894 that such opinions '... still find supporters in existing organizations to much too great an extent ...'.23

Yet despite all these persistences and apparent continuities with the meanings and usages of artisanal skill, the development of an oppositional discourse was accompanied by a sense of scepticism about, and semantic revision of, the categories of artisanal skill. Morgan's inverted commas around the categories of skill denoted that; and a similar scepticism can be discerned elsewhere. The 1891 Report of the Executive of the General Labourers Union described its members as belonging to '... the ranks of the class called unskilled ...' (emphasis added), and explained that this class was created because 'employers select the best workmen only, [and] hence the inferior tradesman is driven out ...' to become the "unskilled".24 To be sure,

20 *The Australian Workman*, 29th November 1890, p. 3.
21 'A Protest from a Jackaroo', *The Worker*, 2nd December 1893, p. 3.
22 *The Worker*, 1st December 1894, p. 3.
23 Ibid. See also Merritt, op. cit., p. 216.
this description was constructed with partial reference to artisanal terminologies and meanings. Nevertheless its central feature was distinctly un-artisanal, in that it explained the bifurcation of the workforce into "skilled" and "unskilled" sections by reference to sociological rather than biological factors.

Arguments such as this both reflected and contributed to the 1890s dissolution into uncertainty of what had only decades before been the certainties of the artisanal paradigm and its categories. That dissolution was clearly in evidence when in 1891 a committee of the Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress added to its recommendation of '... the enforcement of the apprenticeship system ...' in skilled occupations throughout Australia, that '... each province was to decide which occupations were skilled.' This was recognition indeed that the categories of skill were human rather than natural entities, and thus open to contestation; and it is worth noting that it was passed by the delegates without comment.25

In some cases the dissolutions of artisanal fixities led directly to an inversion of the artisanal classifications itself. Spence in 1892 rebutted the artisanal representation of the "unskilled" as a natural category formed of the inherently shiftless and rootless, when he described them as '... an everincreasing mass ... who are forced out of steady and settled employment, and who frequently change both their place and occupation ...' because of '... our keenly competitive social system ...'. But Spence did not stop his deconstruction of the artisanal paradigm with this sociological explanation of the origin of the category "unskilled". He went on to overthrow the artisanal paradigm completely, drawing out what was increasingly being seen as the arbitrary nature of the labelling process, by

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referring to ‘... the great mass known as unskilled labor.’ which ‘... does not deserve the name, as it contains thousands of men superior in skill to many an artisan.’ (emphasis added).26

II

If Spence thus overturned the artisanal paradigm, his use of the noun “skill” locates his understanding within the industrial paradigm. This understanding of it as a term describing ability in general was becoming more common within and on the periphery of the labour movement during the 1880s and 1890s. We have already seen that as early as 1886 Coghlan had confounded artisanal alignments when he divided the “unskilled” labourers employed by the Sydney Corporation into ‘Skilled’ and ‘Unskilled’. Their wages rates of 8s and 7s respectively indicate that he was not referring in the first category to artisanally “skilled” workers.27 Coghlan extended this usage to other occupations, such as miners, classified as “unskilled” in the artisanal scheme.28 In 1892 The Worker used a similarly expansive and industrial understanding of skill in its vision of a time when reciprocal union membership schemes - known as exchange

26 The Hammer, 7th January, 1892, p. 2.
27 T.A. Coghlan, Wealth and Progress of New South Wales 1887-88, Government Printer, Sydney, 1888, p. 412; see above Chapter 3, p. 108. Coghlan should be seen as on the periphery of the labour movement. His father was a plasterer, and although himself a top public servant his sympathies lay with a moderate labour movement which would ameliorate the worst features of capitalism, as evinced throughout Labour and Industry, op. cit. He also wrote for The Bulletin, which was a distinctly working class publication in the late nineteenth century.
28 Coghlan, Labour and Industry, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 1437. This was an unusual classification, although one which was not confined to Coghlan at the time of writing Labour and Industry(1918). Around the same time the English labour historians, the Hammonds, classified miners as “skilled”. See J. L. Hammond and B. Hammond, The Skilled Labourer, 1760-1920, Longman, London and New York, 1979 (first published 1920), Chapters II and III. The Hammonds’ inclusion of miners and textile workers as “skilled” has been seen by subsequent historians as idiosyncratic, because miners ‘... were made up of people of a lower degree of skill ... who were conventionally not accorded “skilled” recognition ...’, J. Burnett (ed.), Useful Toil: Autobiographies of working people from the 1830s to the 1930s, Allen Lane, London, 1974, p. 253. Other writers have also commented on this “idiosyncratic” classification. See J. Rule, ‘General Introduction’, Hammond and Hammond, op. cit., pp. x-xii. This dialogue between the Hammonds and later twentieth century historians suggests that a study of the history of artisanal and industrial skill in labour/social historiography would be of considerable interest.
cards - would enable '... a man [sic.] to work union throughout Australia at any calling where he is skilled enough to earn the union wage.' This was to inscribe the category "skilled" with a typically industrial sense of ability in general. In doing so it was to attach a measure of "skill" to the "unskilled" occupations involved in the exchange card scheme - seamen, wharf labourers, iron workers' assistants.

Other evidence suggests a similar shift away from understanding the categories "skilled" and "unskilled" through the logic and explanations of the artisanal paradigm. We have already seen that Spence and Morgan attempted to displace the artisanal alignment of the "skilled" with a settled and respectable segment of the working class, and an insistent stream of argument similarly sought to negate the other normative inflections of the artisanal paradigm. The Worker was particularly effective at pointing out the anachronistic character of those artisanal alignments. It contrasted '... the Newer Unionism of mateship ...' with '... the old ideas of the aristocracy of labour ...' by noting that it was '... not occupation that makes one man better than another: it is purity of life, straightness of conduct.' Spence specified the qualities defining the new morality, when, looking back in 1909, he described how 'Unionism extended the idea, so a man's character was gauged by whether he stood true to Union rules or "scabbed" it on his fellows', rather than by the a priori ascription of moral worth of the artisanal paradigm. And that sense of setting aside the artisanal account of the unequal distribution of morality and its close connection to the categories of skill, was written by Spence into the rules of the AWU in 1894. The Preface asserted that the union set its face against the '... narrow selfishness ...' which had hitherto governed Old Unionism, and exhorted

29 The Worker, 1st November 1892.
30 For the occupations involved see The Australian Workman, 7th March 1891, p. 3, and 12th September 1891, p. 4.
31 The Worker, 24th February 1894, p. 3.
the AWU members to act in accordance with the recognition ‘... that all workers, no matter what their occupation or sex may be, have a common interest ...’.\textsuperscript{33}

As the AWU Preface indicates, it was not simply the artisanal alignment of respectability with skill which was under attack, but also those of socio-biology - and more particularly of gender. Here too the counterpoint was the archetypal personification of artisanal skill, “the aristocracy of labour”. In 1892 The Hummer explicitly advocated ‘... equality of the sexes, equal pay for equal work ...’, and the relationship of this commitment to an anti-artisanal stance was made clear later in the year when the Typographical Association excluded female compositors from membership. The paper (which had in the interim become The Worker) described the action of the Typographical Association as ‘... only another example of the conservative folly to which aristocrats of all kinds - even the “aristocracy of Labour” - are always prone.’\textsuperscript{34} This expressed the intrinsic antagonism invariably generated in the industrial concept of skill to the types of exclusions erected by the artisanal paradigm.

That antagonism can also be seen in the terms in which a conflict within Sydney’s tobacco industry was played out in the 1890s. The “skilled” men - the tobacco twisters - argued that it was:

> utterly impossible for the “twisters” composing the Tobacco Operatives Association to affiliate with the new Unions [of machine workers], for the “twist” tobacco was made by skilled labour and the “cake” tobacco was made by machinery, and then manipulated by boys and girls.\textsuperscript{35}

They also maintained that ‘Men employed at this branch [twisters] took years to learn their trade ...‘, while those employed making cake tobacco ‘... could pick up in a few days what knowledge they required ...‘ and if a

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., quoted on pp. 51-2.
\textsuperscript{34} For the actions of the Typographical Association in excluding women see Hagan, op. cit., p. 82; M. Sawyer and M. Simms, A Woman’s Place: Women and politics in Australia, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 1993, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{35} The Australian Workman, 25th October 1890, p. 6.
dispute occurred these workers could be replaced, they maintained ‘... in half an hour - it is all machine work’.36

This was characteristic artisanal discourse, with the “skilled” implicitly aligned with male, hand labour, and the “unskilled” explicitly aligned with non-male, non-adult, machine labour. It was characteristic of the period, however, that it was counteracted with a typically industrial argument. James Moroney, the Secretary of one of the excluded unions, mobilised the industrial understanding - of skill as a term describing degrees of ability, rather than delineating two poles - when he agreed that, ‘As to the relative merits of the degree of skill required in the respective branches of the trade the palm is freely conceded to the twisters.’ [emphasis added]. However, he continued, the twisters’ argument that the work of making cake tobacco was completely “unskilled” because it could ‘... be learnt in half an hour ... [was] completely disproved by the facts that some of the twisters have tried their hands at it for considerably more than thirty minutes ...’, without being able to ‘... earn a good wage ...’ from it.37 Here Moroney was exploiting the potential in the industrial understanding of skill, to colonise the intermediate space between “skilled” and “unskilled”.

III

The presence of anti-artisanal attitudes within the labour movement is one indication of disruption to the semantic and taxonomic dominance of the artisanal paradigm. A further indication lies in the development of forms of worker organisation which operated outside the structures and classifications of craft unionism. Although the craft model continued to dominate the labour movement before 1900, the development of industrial

36 Ibid., 15th November 1890, p. 6.
37 James Moroney, ‘The Tobacco Twisters and Tobacco Coverers’; ibid., 22nd November 1890, p. 5.
unionism was an important departure from the craft model. In contrast to the artisanal bifurcation of labour into "skilled" and "unskilled", industrial unionism was necessarily a denial of such a polarity. It expressed in practical form an escape from the artisanal dichotomy, and the possibilities of classifying and combining labour differently.

The ideas of industrial unionism had existed in New South Wales since before the 1840s, probably imported with immigrants in the 1830s and 1840s who had experience of the proto-industrial unionism of Robert Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union.\textsuperscript{38} In the 1840s the Mutual Protection Association in Sydney expressed something of its ideals, and although the Association collapsed in 1845, its support for working class unity was continued in the newspaper \textit{The Star and Workingman's Guardian} which was founded soon afterwards.\textsuperscript{39} Its editorials went some way to resisting the divisions of the artisanal paradigm by stressing, as Hume puts it, that there was '... a community of interest between agricultural employees and members of the skilled crafts ...'.\textsuperscript{40} In 1849 an unsuccessful attempt was made to form an '... association of the working classes ...'.\textsuperscript{41} After this, however, any signs of an embryonic industrial unionism disappear in New South Wales. It was not until the 1870s that the idea re-emerged that it was viable to create a union which enrolled workers in all occupations regardless of their "degree" of skill. From this point on unions of this type began to appear. An early example occurred in 1871 when a union which aimed to enrol '... mechanics and labourers ...


\textsuperscript{39} Hume, op. cit., p. 47.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 39.
an unspecified industry emerged in Sydney.\textsuperscript{42} Like many unions in this period, its life was probably short, since it disappeared subsequently from the historical record. At around the same time early experiments in industrial unionism were being made in the New South Wales Government Railways, where distinctions of skill were to some extent being eliminated. Perhaps reflecting this movement, the annual picnic of the Locomotive section in 1875 comprised the diverse group '... engineers, drivers and workmen'.\textsuperscript{43}

The instances of industrial or even anti-artisanal combination in the 1870s could hardly be called widespread. Unionism had barely spread from the ranks of the artisanal trades, Coghlan noting that although by the middle of the decade 'Manufacturing was beginning to have some importance ...', there was '... want of combination amongst the persons employed ...' in it.\textsuperscript{44} Yet it is important to note the existence of these fleeting manifestations of a spirit of industrial unionism because they suggest that as early as the 1870s some sections of the colony's working class were practicing, if not theorising, a critique of the artisanal paradigm and its structures. And although the early attempts at industrial unionism failed, they left as their legacy a tradition of enthusiasm for industrial unionism, especially, but not only, in the railways. But even here the artisanal model retained a veracity, and the early history of railway's unionism was largely that of small and isolated craft unions being snuffed out by a powerful management. It was not until 1886 that an enduring industrial union was created in the railways, when at a mass meeting the railway workers resolved '... to make their [union's] basis as broad as possible, and open their ranks to every grade of both railway and tramway employes'. Thus the new

\textsuperscript{42} SMH, 23rd May 1871, p. 4.
union - the New South Wales Government Railway Union (NSWGRU) - grouped together the diversely-skilled occupations of guards, blacksmiths, station porters, and signalmen.45

The establishment of the NSWGRU in 1886 was important because it was an explicit rejection of the craft model, and this significance was not lost on contemporaries. John Norton, the editor of the 1888 publication *The History of Capital and Labour* considered it an important enough development to devote a separate chapter to it. And in that chapter, published shortly after the event, one of the participants, W.F. Schey, used a revealing choice of words when he attributed the failure of early attempts to form unions in the railways to the craft form of unionism. His comment that ‘... being sectional societies their success was only very partial ...’, was itself a reflection of the ground that was by now shifting under the artisanal paradigm. Indeed, the union that was formed in the railways was, as Schey put it, ‘... a new order of things ...’.46

Emphasising the innovatory nature of railways unionism to quite that extent was something of an exaggeration. By 1886 that form of organisation had already been adopted elsewhere in New South Wales. It was typically workers in the newest and most industrialised sectors of the developing New South Wales economy who organised themselves along industrial rather than artisanal lines. One of the earliest and best documented was the Gas Stokers Protective Association. Formed in mid-1885, it sought to enrol ‘... any number of Gas and Other employees in the employment of Gas Companies ...’, and this simple description is noteworthy for its use of a vocabulary quite clearly devoid of any of the standard artisanal points of reference. Its membership thus encompassed a

45 This account of railways unionism is drawn from J. Norton (ed.), *The History of Capital and Labour in All Lands and Ages*, Oceanic Publishing, Sydney and Melbourne, 1888, Ch. XVIII; and Docherty, op. cit., pp. 36-7, pp. 47-51, pp. 57-61.
variety of variously-skilled occupations: engine-drivers, stokers, boilermen, firemen, "machine-men", coke-trimmers, coal-trimmers, crane-men, tippers, shunters, points-men, locomotive drivers, "yard-men" or labourers. The union was not content to simply enrol those who were "semi-skilled" and "unskilled" but also sought to include the "skilled" themselves, and to this end its rules specifically stipulated that "All fitters or Fitters labourers ... must become members ... providing they do not belong to any Fitters or Engineers' Society in New South Wales". But this list of occupations only partially renders the industrial character of the union, and we need to observe two additional features.

Firstly, these occupations were positioned in regard to each other on the basis of a carefully graduated and skill-based scale of wages, which was calculated, as its rules stated, to represent '... a fair equivalent for their labour ...' - a mode of expression which indicated the penetration of a commodified understanding of labour. At the Mortlake Gasworks, for example, a clear gradation of skill was represented in the wage rates for each "grade" of "employee": firemen, 9s 6d per day; engine drivers, machine men and boilermen, 9s; coke-trimmers, 8s 6d; coal trimmers, 7s 6d; and "yard-men", 10 1/2d per day. Secondly, this constellation of wages and occupations was supported by a complex series of rules based on both membership of and "seniority" within, the union. The significance of these rules, from our point of view, lies in the fact that they allowed individuals to move through this occupational structure in a controlled way. Employment in the gas industry in New South Wales shared, although to a lesser degree, its British counterpart's highly seasonal character, which meant that the demand for employment peaked in winter and fell-off in summer. The union's rules operated to allow flexibility within this

47 Gas Stokers Protective Association of New South Wales. NSWSA, file 32, 10/42120, Rules, 1885.
seasonal demand for labour, so that an individual who worked as a "stoker" in the winter peak, could be employed as a "yard-labourer" when employment dropped off in the summer. Similarly, those who worked as "yard-labourers" could find themselves working in peak periods in the retort house as "stokers".49 This was a far more flexible approach to abilities and job classifications than that which devolved from the artisanal paradigm.

These rules are important as practical examples of the workforce structures encouraged by the industrial concept of skill. In them can be discerned the separation effected in the industrial concept of skill between work and the worker and between occupation and identity. It is also noteworthy that in them distinctions of skill or occupational difference were submerged under the overall category of "employee" - which in its precision clearly focussed attention on the factor which unified gas workers regardless of their "grade" - their position as wage labour. Consistent with this, in 1888 the union de-emphasised the importance of "stokers" both in the union and in the labour process, when it changed its name to the far more inclusive and industrial Gas Employees Union.50

Other unions, less well documented but probably similar in kind to the gas workers', were also formed during the 1880s in the developing manufacturing industries. The Sawyers' and Sawmill Employees' Union, and the Millers' and Mill Employees' Union are examples of unions of this type formed in the latter half of the 1880s.51 If these could hardly be considered a flood, their number is augmented by the proliferation of unions in the 1880s and 1890s which challenged the traditional artisanal structures by enrolling both "skilled" and "unskilled" workers. The

49 Gas Stokers Protective Association of New South Wales. op. cit., Revised Rules and By-Laws, 1892; Revised Rules and By Laws, 1896.
50 Sutcliffe, op. cit., p. 49.
51 For the Sawmillers' Union see NSWMA, file 199, 10/42128; for the Millers' and Mill Employees' Union see Sutcliffe, op. cit., p. 49. See also Philipp, op. cit., p. 79.
Gardeners’ and Gardeners’ Assistants’ Union in Sydney in 1891, successively modifying its rules to encompass ever wider occupational groups, was a minor urban example of a phenomenon which was more widespread away from the metropolis. Similar configurations were especially prominent in rural areas, to such an extent that a geography of skill emerged during the 1880s, the pulsations of artisanal skill becoming weaker and weaker with increasing distance from Sydney. In the Hunter River collieries we find in 1883 the “mechanics and enginemen” combining, albeit in a short lived association. Elsewhere similarly anti-artisanal groupings of occupations were also occurring. In the late 1880s the Mildura Land and Labour League had a membership encompassing the unlikely combination (from the artisanal perspective) of engineering workers, shearing shedhands, and the most “unskilled” of rural workers, those who worked on “grubbing gangs”. Nor was this just a notional grouping, as in 1889 engineering workers combined with grubbers in striking to support local shedhands’ claims for increased wage rates.

Broken Hill - almost operating on a separate set of standards to those in the metropolis - was a nodal point for the development of alternative occupational configurations. For example, the 1890 by-laws of the Umberumberka Branch of the Amalgamated Miners Association show it enrolling twelve categories of workers, from the most “skilled” metal and building tradesmen, through all grades of skill down to the most “unskilled”: ‘Surface Men’, ‘Truckers’ and ‘Plat Men’. It was a significant indication of the industrial character of the Branch that in the Rules the list which set out the rates of pay of these occupations was not organised

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52 See the reference to its existence as named in The Australian Workman, 17th January 1891, p. 3. A month later the union ‘... resolved by a large majority to admit grooms and coachmen that assist in gardens,...’, idem., 7th February, 1891, p. 3.
53 Hunter River Mechanics and Enginemen’s Society, NSWSA, file 16, 10/42119. The union was defunct by 1886.
54 Merritt, op. cit., p. 155.
hierarchically by skill. The Barrier Ranges Smelters, Concentrators and Surface Hands Union represented a similarly anti-artisanal configuration of Broken Hill’s occupations, enrolling all grades of labour, from engineers through to surface hands. So antithetical were its activities to the rigidities of the artisanal taxonomy that in 1890 the union was in dispute with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers over the former’s willingness to allow blacksmiths to work on a graded scale of wages, rather than the standard wage rates insisted on by the ASE. As both unions were affiliated to it, the Sydney Trades and Labour Council became involved in the dispute. Although the Council declined to take any action against the Smelters’ Union, the levels of conflict on the Barrier between rival types of unions and their accompanying logics, were reflected in the comment of TLC president, T.J. Houghton, that the Council ‘... deeply deplores the apparent lack of harmony which prevails among the unions on the Barrier’. It was hardly surprising given this attitude that when, in 1891, another of the anti-artisanal configurations generated on the Barrier - the Barrier Ranges Mechanics and Mechanics Assistants Union - applied to join the Sydney Trades and Labour Council its application was rejected, on the grounds that ‘... the rules of the Society were antagonistic to other societies on the Barrier, in as much as its members were allowed to engage at a lower rate of wages than that fixed by other societies for similar work.’

Industrial unions also appeared in other sectors of the economy. The AWU, in its amalgamation of the ASU and the GLU in 1894, thereafter covered both “skilled” and “unskilled” sections of the pastoral workforce.

55 By-Laws of the Umberumberka Branch of the Amalgamated Miners’ Association, Barrier Colonial District No. 3. Revised and adopted, April 15, 1890. Silverton, N.S.W., 1890. Reproduced in Ebbels, op. cit., p. 106.
56 A Sydney/TLC perspective can be gained in ‘Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales, Secretary’s Report for Half Year ended 31st December 1890’, The Australian Workman, 31st January 1891.
57 Ibid.
58 Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales, Secretary’s Report for Half Year ending 30th June 1891; ibid., 18th July 1891, p. 3.
The name of the Machine Shearers and Shedhands Union indicates something of its similarly industrial outlook, and its 1902 Rules specified that ‘All shearing employees shall be eligible for membership ...’. The history and nature of the Seamans’ Union remains relatively unexplored, but it is likely that its New South Wales branch, established in the mid-1870s, was as industrial as was the Port Adelaide branch which during then 1880s comprised forty-five seamen, fifteen firemen, four engine-drivers, one publican and one boilermaker.

Especially before 1890 industrial unionism in New South Wales remained relatively insignificant as a form of organisation. The unions which put it into practice were few, and the labour movement remained dominated not simply by craft unions, but more broadly by the artisanal ethos. But although they were few in number the industrial unions in New South Wales were significant because they breached the logic and rules of the artisanal paradigm. Their presence provided examples which demonstrated that it was possible for workers of different “levels” of “skill” to combine together. And in stepping outside those rules, they necessarily presupposed the adoption of an alternative framework within which to understand their labour. Already glimpses of this were starting to appear in the railways, where the existence of a series of graduated stages of promotion from labourer to engineer had replaced the unbridgeable artisanal gulf between “unskilled” and “skilled”. Although not consciously articulated, industrial unions were the practice of industrial skill. They replaced the bifurcation of labour into “skilled” and “unskilled” with a continuum of labour. This was fertile ground for the industrial concept of skill to take root in.

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