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

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CHAPTER 6

EMPLOYERS AND THE INDUSTRIAL CONCEPT OF SKILL, 1870-1900

It is not easy to see by what means the different kinds of labour are to be saved from the same barren uniformity. If one mechanic may not by superior capability earn more than others less capable, why should one trade be paid more than another? Why should the carpenter, engineer or scientific miner be paid more ... than the agricultural labourer or street-sweeper? Why should men's work be better remunerated than women's? If all are to be paid alike ... the infant ... is entitled to an equal amount with the veteran labourer - the cripple or invalid ought to be placed on the same footing as to work and wages as the healthiest or soundest ... - the idle or dissolute with the diligent or industrious - nay even the idiot with the man of soundest intellect. ... The laws of supply and demand are more inexorable than any system, and from these laws neither labour nor working men's associations are exempt.

(Andrew Garran, Editor, Sydney Morning Herald, 1875)\(^1\)

I

At the same time that critiques of the artisanal concept of skill and its practices were appearing within the labour movement, a similar movement to displace the artisanal model was becoming manifest amongst employers in New South Wales. Although retrospectively the congruence between the industrial concept of skill and the direction of capitalist development is evident, for the most part contemporaries in the later nineteenth century remained oblivious to the shifts in understandings of skill and their connections to capitalist development. Thus, if employers in New South Wales displayed a preference for the industrial concept of skill over the artisanal, this did not arise out of a conscious process of weighing-up the relative merits of either concept of skill, and choosing one which seemed to them to best facilitate capitalist development.

\(^1\) SMH, 25th January 1875, p. 4.
To explain how it was that colonial employers in the decades between 1870 and 1900 were increasingly impelled towards the industrial concept of skill, it is necessary to state more precisely than is usually done the nature of employers' antipathy to trades unionism in this period. Labour historiography generally operates on the assumption that the antagonistic responses of employers to the development of colonial unions were derived from a natural response to the diminution of profit by the dual tendencies of unionism to increase wages and reduce the hours and intensity of work.2 As with any kind of analysis based on naturalisation, its central flaw is that it conceptualises its subject - employers - as containing within themselves pre-existing responses to particular situations, in this case the development of colonial unions. When expressed in this way, it is immediately evident that nineteenth century employers were not naturally equipped with particular critiques of unionism, or with strategies to combat it. For this reason it is necessary to resituate our understanding of employers' responses to trades unionism within such a framework, by recognising that the responses of employers in New South Wales to the collective organisation of workers did not arise "naturally", but were specifically produced by various strands of thought and ideology.3 While a full elucidation of these manifold strands would require a major historical work of its own, it is already clear from our discussion of the industrial concept of skill in Chapter 2 that the strand which comprised liberal political economy was certainly among the most significant.

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2 The most potent indicator of this assumption is the lack of attention given to employers in central works of trade union and labour history. T. Matthews, 'Business Associations and Politics. Chambers of Manufactures and Employers Federations in NSW, Victorian and Australian National Politics to 1939', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1971, provides a heavily institutional history of employers.

3 The complex character of those strands is adequately indicated by considering the interchange between Mr Trouton (an employer), and Rev. T. Roseby, in 1891: Trouton (discussing the issue of violence in strikes): 'If there was not a little disturbance, do you not think the British man would be a very milk-and-water sort of a being?'. Roseby: 'There is something to be said for that view.' Trouton: 'You do not think they would fight so well in actual warfare if they had not such little things as strikes to fight about occasionally?'. Roseby: 'It is part of the British man's national character, no doubt.'; Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes, op. cit., Minutes of Evidence, qq. 4512-3.
Although political economy impressed itself into the conscious (and perhaps unconscious) thought of colonial employers and the idealogues of capitalism in the last half of the nineteenth century, the decisive determinant of employers’ responses to trade unionism was not simply the amorphous entity “political economy”. Rather, colonial employers attached to themselves a very particular segment of political economy, one which focused their attention in a specific way on particular practices of the colony’s trade unions - and especially those practices which we can identify as originating in the artisanal paradigm. For whether they were aware of it or not, the perspective that New South Wales’ employers brought to bear on production and trade unions, and the strategies which they developed in regard to the latter, were based on an analysis of the division of labour which had come exclusively from the heartland of liberal political economy - the major work of one of Adam Smith’s direct theoretical successors, Charles Babbage. And it is here, in the adoption of Babbage’s analysis, that we can identify the point of connection between New South Wales’ employers and the industrial concept of skill. To accept the logic of Babbage’s analysis was to adopt some or all of the meanings, usages and logic of the industrial concept of skill.

In order to demonstrate how the adoption of this analysis impelled colonial employers towards an industrial understanding of skill, it is necessary in to analyse specific features of Babbage’s thought. In his major work, *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* (1835), Babbage reiterated and went beyond the several advantages deriving from division of labour which Adam Smith had identified. For while Babbage agreed with Smith’s analysis, he considered that ‘... the most important and influential ...’ advantage of division of labour to manufacturers had ‘... been altogether unnoticed ...’ by Smith and his followers. For Babbage, existing
accounts of the division of labour had overlooked the fact that:

the master manufacturer by dividing the work to be executed into different
processes each requiring different degrees of skill or of force, can purchase
exactly that precise quantity of both which is necessary for each process;\textsuperscript{4}

Babbage's work was important not simply because it identified the
central dynamic of the division of labour, but more importantly because in
doing so it provided those who read it with a tangible rationale for dividing
labour. In this \textit{The Economy} differed from \textit{The Wealth of Nations}. The
latter tended towards the theoretical, and as befitted a work designed to
explain the wealth of nations, remained at the level of broad, national,
generality.\textsuperscript{5} In it the advantages of the division of labour were represented
as securing a rather imprecise quantum of a nebulous entity, "greater
efficiency".\textsuperscript{6} In contrast, Babbage's work sought to explain the wealth of
individual manufacturers and to demonstrate that the application of his
analysis to production had real effects measurable in precise monetary
terms.\textsuperscript{7} This was the kind of calculation likely to attract the attention of
manufacturers, and encourage them to approach their labour processes with
it in mind. In this respect \textit{The Economy} - appearing in 1832 amidst an
English productive scene experimenting with a variety of routes out of pre-
industrial production - was as much prescriptive as it was descriptive.\textsuperscript{8} As
an argument it encouraged employers to organise labour processes to
maximise the efficiency with which labour power was consumed; in other
words, to secure an accurate alignment of different qualities of labour power

and specifically pp. 124-5. It is interesting to note - with Babbage - that the same point had been
made twenty years previously by the Italian political economist Gioja; ibid., footnote.

\textsuperscript{5} A. Smith, \textit{An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations} (hereinafter \textit{The Wealth of
Nations}), E. Cannan (ed.), Methuen, London, 1961. This distinction between Smith and Babbage is
noted by M. Berg, 'Economics and Statistics', 'General Introduction', Campbell-Kelly, op. cit., Vol 1,
p. 28.

\textsuperscript{6} See, for example the very general terms in which Smith couched his discussion of division of labour;
Smith, op. cit., Chapters I and II.

\textsuperscript{7} See the calculations, Babbage, op. cit., pp. 125-34.

\textsuperscript{8} C. Sabel and J. Zeitlin, 'Historical alternatives to mass production', \textit{Past and Present}, 108 (August
1985).
('... different degrees of skill or force ...') with the different character of the tasks in any given labour process.

Although "Babbage's Principle", as it has become known, presented capitalists with a formula for increasing the amount of surplus value extracted by minimising the amount of un consum ed labour power which they purchased, it was not immediately seized upon by employers in New South Wales. At first it was adopted by the colonial ideologues of capitalist development, whose specific contribution was to translate it into a more accessible form. In this work the editors of The Sydney Morning Herald during the late 1860s and 1870s were important - first John West and after him Andrew Garran were advocates and influential disseminators of Babbage's ideas. West, describing Babbage as '... a remarkable man.' quoted at length from the Economy in an editorial because he suspected that '... there may not be many copies of the book in the colony ...'.

Like Babbage, West and Garran too were writing in an economy and society moving from a pre-industrial to an industrial form of capitalism. Also like Babbage, their approaches to economic questions were a similar mixture of description and prescription, in which they attempted to shift the understandings of their contemporaries towards the perspectives of Smithian and Babbage-ite political economy. West considered that '... until the people were taught the principles of Political Economy it was in vain to

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9 It is becoming increasingly common amongst historians of Australian labour to note the importance of "Babbage's principle". See, for example R. Frances, The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880-1939, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p. 26; Fox, Working Australia, op. cit., p. 56. However, these works use it as a device to illustrate the dynamics of subdivision within colonial production, rather than an instance of a particular approach to production and work which exerted an ideological effect during the nineteenth century. The argument presented in this Chapter takes the latter approach. The concept and techniques of "division of labour" did not simply or self-evidently suggest themselves to employers, as the comments of West and Garran on the subject suggest (see below p. 176). Rather, they themselves became important in historically contingent circumstances. A detailed historical exploration of the concept "division of labour" would be of considerable interest.

10 West was editor 1856-73, Garran 1873-86. See G. Souter, Company of Heralds, Fairfax, Sydney, 1980, p. 49, p. 63 and p. 62 and p. 93 respectively.

11 SMH, 29th January 1872, p. 4.
expect them to work steadily.'\textsuperscript{12} It was thus as part of that educative process, and as a contribution to an argument in favour of a contested point of view rather than a reiteration of an established fact, that West referred with some deliberateness in 1870 to the importance in economic development of '... the principle of the division of labour ...' and felt it necessary to illustrate this importance by adding that it was for '... the purpose of labouring with greater economy.'\textsuperscript{13}

West's prescriptive and educative efforts did not end here, as it was by no means universally accepted that labour either was or should be thought of in these instrumental terms. As the discourse of artisanal skill attested, a significant strand of thought in colonial society rejected the idea that labour was a commodity. That idea was of such contemporary salience that West framed his comments on the subject of '... estimating the value of men in pounds, shillings and pence.' with an eye to the contested nature of that procedure. The calculation of the '... average value of a workman ...', he argued in 1870, was the basis of '... a hundred calculations of the highest utility ...' to which '... we entertain no aversion ...', in contrast to those whose '... sentimental repugnance ...' of the idea was just '... one of the absurdities ...' arising out of '... the affectation of a transcendent philosophy ...'. His final comment seems on one hand designed to outrage those opposed to this instrumental attitude to labour; on the other, it was a logical extension of the concept to finally ask 'What are our children worth as a labour power?'.\textsuperscript{14} As part of disseminating this perspective West also pointed out in 1871 that 'It is not "labour" that the employer buys, but the labourer's "work" (opus as distinguished from labour) ...', and in doing so made clear the essential distinction within political economy between effort (opus) and potential effort (labour power).\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{12} Ibid., 4th October 1872, p. 4.
\bibitem{13} Ibid., 4th April 1870, p. 4.
\bibitem{14} Ibid., 29th March 1870, p. 4.
\bibitem{15} Ibid., 24th October 1871, p. 4.
\end{thebibliography}
Garran continued West’s prescriptive and didactic approach in regard to the twin concepts, the division of labour and labour power as a commodity. Like West he too was concerned to displace older attitudes to labour. But where West had been more concerned with widely disseminating the general principles of political economy, Garran adopted a more finely-honed and precisely-focused approach, in which Babbage’s arguments were central.

In 1873 Garran urged his readers to buy or borrow *The Economy* in order to ‘... follow the inquiry [Babbage] pursued, and glance at the deductions he drew.’. But he did not leave the dissemination of Babbage’s main lesson precariously dependent on such a vague injunction to his readership. Instead, he went on to draw their attention to the potential contained in the application of Babbage’s Principle to production. He did so by taking as his example the American clothing industry, which he pointed out had ‘... risen to gigantic proportions mainly by virtue of dividing the labour of the workpeople in such a degree as to get the highest perfection of skill at the least cost.’. This was a cogent industrial conceptualisation, proposing that the effect of division of labour was to produce, rather than to eradicate, skill.

It should be noted that Garran’s description attributes the development of this industry not to the application of machinery, but to the application of Babbage’s Principle. By explaining the development of the American clothing industry in this way, Garran was perhaps hoping to impress his readers that the application of Babbage’s Principle opened up an alternative technique of economic development for a society such as New South Wales where low levels of mechanisation seemed likely to persist.18

16 Ibid., 10th October 1873, p. 4.
17 Ibid.
18 For the low levels of mechanisation in New South Wales in the 1870s see Butlin, op. cit., pp. 206-10. For the importance of division of labour in industrial development in New South Wales see R. Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1880-1900*, op. cit., pp. 49-51.
This was a typical Babbage-ite point, but Garran’s choice of terms exposed a difference between the two. Babbage’s description had revolved around a labour process which was devoid of human beings (apart from the “master manufacturer”). In it the division of labour was enacted on ‘... the work to be executed ...’ (emphasis added). But in Garran’s description the division of labour was to operate not simply on “the work” but on ‘... the labour of the workpeople ...’ (emphasis added). This was a subtle but central distinction.

Although Babbage recognised the existence of “combinations” among workers, his arguments revolved around workers as individualised units of labour power.\textsuperscript{19} This was the theoretical terrain within which Babbage - as well as Smith - explained their ideas about the division of labour, and it contrasted with the practical circumstances within which Garran deployed his. For although, like Smith and Babbage, Garran was strongly inclined to consider labour a commodity, he recognised (as he was to put it some years later) that labour differed from all other commodities:

\begin{quote}
... in being inseparably associated with human life, human needs, and human aspirations ... it is a live commodity, capable of social and political action, which bales of wool are not, ... It is a commodity that can think, that can talk, ... read, ... attend meetings, ... be fired with class-enthusiasm, ... can link itself hand in hand with other like commodities, ... can form Trades Unions, that can strike, ... raise barricades, ... can vote, ... can get into Parliament. ... A very remarkable commodity indeed.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

For Garran, it was this context - the existence of the “collective labourer”\textsuperscript{21} - within which any effort to divide the commodity labour along the lines that Babbage recommended, would have to be situated.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} See Babbage, op. cit., p. 180, p. 209 and p. 211.
\textsuperscript{20} A. Garran, ‘Trade Unions: A Criticism’, \textit{The Australian Economist}, 24th August 1891 (No. 17 Vol 2, p. 145). Garran’s paper was a criticism not of trade unions, but of the perspective which was brought to bear on them in a paper entitled ‘Trade Unions’ given by J. Hurst, at an Economic Association meeting, and reproduced ibid., 23rd June 1891 (No. 15 Vol 2, pp. 130-1). Garran’s comments in his 1891 paper were a development of his comments in 1875 that, ‘If man is the finest product of creation, he is also the most troublesome animal to tame. George Stephenson used to say that he never had any trouble in engineering matter; his trouble was always in engineering men. Those who have tried this style of engineering will sympathise ... Of all the forces of nature that have to be dealt with the will of man is about the most perverse; ...’, SMII, 22nd June 1875, p. 4.
\end{flushleft}
II

Conceptually, the shifts compressed in the substitution by Garran of "the labour of the workpeople" for Babbage's "work", had been anticipated although not articulated by West from at least 1868. Both writers sought to use "Babbage's Principle" as a basis for the analysis of the world of employment and profit in New South Wales. Underneath the general criticisms they made of strikes and other trade union activities, lay a concern to point out to their readers the varieties of ways in which the colony's unions operated to restrict the efficient purchase of labour power by employers. By pointing out the ways that unions denied the application of "Babbage's Principle" both writers were identifying unionism as an important inhibiting effect on the division of labour, and by extension, on the economic development of New South Wales. In examining the arguments they developed we are tracing the route by which the analysis and logic contained within "Babbage's Principle" was transposed into the form of a problematic by West and Garran - a crucial problematic because on its basis strategies to combat unionism were developed by significant sections of employers in New South Wales. And herein lies the importance of an intellectual fraction of the colony's middle class. If, as is likely, the colony's employers did not engage with "Babbage's Principle" through a widespread reading of The Economy, it was the role of influential commentators and idealogues of capitalist development, such as West and Garran, to provide a translation of it into terms which more forcibly impressed on employers the logic of Babbage's argument. In the end it was probably not "Babbage's Principle" which lodged in the minds of colonial employers, but the translation of its logic and corollaries into practical terms by commentators such as West and Garran.
The arguments used by West in an editorial of 1868 illustrate the nature of this transposition of Babbage into terms which were useful in developing a critique of the colony's unions. The characteristic critique used by West was to counterpose, on one hand, the general trend he discerned within the colony's unions to foster and to enforce standardisation or uniformity among members over a variety of issues, with, on the other hand, the existence of actual differences between a union's members. Thus he referred to the operation in the colony's unions of '... regulations for making the performance of a second-rate workman the standard of a fair day's work ...', or to the existence of trade union policies which led to employers '... providing the same wages for good and bad workmen ...'.

These observations were perhaps Babbage at several removes, but they were nonetheless a reflection of the influence of Babbage's analysis on West. West was essentially using "Babbage's Principle" as a point of entry for assessing the effect of union standardising practices. But West's remarks were also an adaptation of Babbage to the real conditions encountered in New South Wales, because they implicitly identified the particular union policies which stood in the way of employers reaping the benefits of division of labour as identified in "Babbage's Principle". And the critical aspect of trade union policies was not simply the payment of a standard rate of pay, but underlying this the classically artisanal enforcement within unions of a homogeneous classification of its members. Thus West warned against the extension of '... the Eight Hours Principle ...' because he reckoned it was based on '... the false principle that eight hours work whether good or bad is worth the same money.' And he sought to provide evidence that it was not just in New South Wales that such standardising practices were becoming anachronistic, by drawing on developments elsewhere. He used

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22 SMH, 23rd May 1868, p. 4 and 25th October 1870, p. 4 respectively.
23 Ibid., 25th April 1870, p. 4.
evidence from New York, where, he reported, employers had recently resolved to resist the developments of workers making '... unreasonable and arbitrary demands ... by forming combinations to secure the same rate of compensation for inferior as for superior workmen ...'.24 And similarly he noticed that the practice of standardising wages operated to inhibit the gains to modernising employers who introduced machinery. He explained that one of the attractions for employers of the introduction of machinery was that it allowed them to reduce the cost of labour power they purchased by reducing the amount of skill that they bought, retaining only '... a few skilled hands at higher wages.' But, he went on, in practice one of the effects of trades unions' standardisation policies was that '... the men [employed to operate machinery] endeavour to make the masters employ them on the same terms as first-class workmen ...'.25 In effect West was arguing that such policies operated by stifling the recognition of the variation in levels of skill or ability among members of one union or occupation within a union, where machinery introduced a new class of work. Similarly, he argued that union policies inhibited the matching of labour power to work where specialisation had been introduced. Thus, to take one example, he argued that union policies had the effect of '... refusing to women and children light work which they could do as well as men.' 26

West's arguments initiated an analysis which was an important historical precondition for an employers' assault on the artisanal concept of skill and the practices it generated; and from now on it was to have a continuous presence in New South Wales society. His contribution was to have applied the logic of "Babbage's Principle" to the real situation, by suggesting that what lay underneath union policies of standardisation was the issue of occupational classification. As West was hinting at, the pursuit

24 Ibid., 4th October 1872, p. 4.
25 Ibid., 20th June 1872, p. 4.
26 Ibid., 23rd May 1868, p. 4.
of the former was reliant on the continued ability of unions to maintain control over the latter.

This line of argument was continued, in a heightened form, by Garran when he took over as Editor in 1873. He too referred his readers to Babbage’s *Economy*, and urged his readers to seek out that work in order to appreciate ‘... how fully justified he was by the evidence on attaching the importance he did to the division of labour.’. Although after his 1873 comments Garran appears to have never specifically mentioned the influence of “Babbage’s Principle” on his thought, in fact his editorial analysis of the colony’s trade unions was an original and sophisticated application of insights derived from deep consideration of the “Principle”. By 1875 he had expanded greatly on the cogent summary of 1873, to the point where he had used Babbage’s insights in ways which had made them distinctly his own. The indebtedness of Garran’s analysis on trade unionism to the ideas of Babbage can best be illustrated by an examination of an important editorial Garran wrote in 1875.

It is a measure of the degree of importance which Babbage’s insights held for Garran by 1875, that he felt confident enough about their analytical strength to use them as the basis of an attack on the most notable achievement of the skilled section of the colony’s working class, the Eight Hour Day. He consciously avoided replicating the usual arguments that were mounted in these years against the Eight Hours Movement: that it was an unwarranted shortening of the working day, and that it amounted to an

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27 Ibid., 10th November 1873, p. 4.
28 See, for example, his survey of economic thought, ‘Three Systems of Political Economy’, *Proceedings of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science, Sixth Meeting*, Brisbane, 1895, pp. 695-698, in which Bastiat, Smith and Marx - but not Babbage - are mentioned.
29 At the time of writing Garran was positioned amidst what appeared to be a general push by the working class to extend the eight hour day into and beyond the skilled trades, such as the building trades and the iron trades. Given that the latter had gained the eight hour day after the most prolonged and extensive labour dispute in the colony’s history, the timing of Garran’s attack was hardly coincidental. For the history of that dispute see J. Niland, ‘In Search of Shorter Hours. The 1861 and 1874 Iron Trades Disputes’, *Labour History*, No. 12, May 1967.
increase in wage rates when its institution was not accompanied by a corresponding reduction in the rates of pay. Instead, he argued against the general extension of the Eight Hour Day to all occupations on the basis of the logic within "Babbage’s Principle".

Garran began with an argument which echoed that made by West in 1872. He stressed that the aim of making the eight hour day the uniform, standard length of the working day for all occupations would in effect operate to suppress the differences in the quality of labour power which he saw as existing between individuals. In this respect he asserted that:

The eight hours movement means that no workman shall work more than a certain fixed number of hours in the day, no matter what may be his superior skill, strength or opportunities, ... The strongest must not work longer than the weakest, the most skilful and the least skilful must be limited to an equal time,

This, however, only set the scene for the centrepiece of the argument. His main point in stressing what a system of “uniform hours” would mean was to draw out what he saw as being the more important accompaniment - uniform wages. For, as he argued, although:

The movement contemplates in the first instance only uniformity of hours, but time is money, as every workman is well aware. ...Uniform rates of wages are accordingly part and parcel of a system of uniform hours, and are known to be insisted on in practice by Trades Unions and working men’s societies [emphasis added]

It was thus not so much the extension of a shorter working day that Garran argued against, but what he saw as the necessary accompaniment to it, an increasing uniformity in wages. Thus, he argued, a system of uniform wages would disadvantage the employer because ‘... the labour, in each case respectively, must be equally remunerated, no matter what difference in the amount and quality.’ They key to this was the homogeneous occupational taxonomy imposed by the artisanal rules which dominated the policies of the colony’s trade unions.

30 For examples of these objections to the Eight Hour Day see ibid.
31 SMH, 25th January 1875, p. 4.
While the filiation of Garran's argument to "Babbage's Principle" is unstated, its influence on Garran's thought was nevertheless evident in the concern to establish conditions enhancing the efficiency with which employers consumed the labour power they purchased. Thus it is no surprise that Garran continued on to argue that the '... tendency towards an ideal uniformity explains the antipathy always exhibited by Trades Unions, and other associated bodies of workmen, for contract or piecework.'\textsuperscript{32} Of all the systems of payment possible, piecework was specifically advocated by Babbage as being most conducive to the efficient purchase of labour power.\textsuperscript{33}

III

Garran's analysis was an original and sophisticated attempt to extend the logic of "Babbage's Principle" into the practical world of employment in New South Wales. It was an analysis which, in its underlying emphasis on the variation in the quality of labour power within individuals, was conducive to a sceptical attitude to the homogeneity within the categories "skilled" and "unskilled" which was presupposed in the taxonomy of the artisanal concept of skill. Already this was starting to come through in Garran's approach to the "skilled", such as when in 1874 he claimed that there was '... no doubt a good deal of what is called "skilled labour" that can be performed by persons of quite ordinary capacity ...'.\textsuperscript{34} Such public expressions of scepticism about the salience of the category "skilled" were rare at this time, anticipating by two decades those within the labour movement, but its presence in Garran's commentary reflects the solvent effect of the logic of Babbage's Principle on the artisanal usages of the categories of skill. If such scepticism about the salience of the artisanal

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} See the discussion Babbage, op. cit., pp. 128-9, pp. 177-88.
\textsuperscript{34} SMH, 13th January 1874, p. 4.
categories remained muted, it was nevertheless implicit in the general analysis made by Garran. For instance, when in mid-1875 he commented that ‘Trades Unionism ... in some of its aspects ... would ... draw down the superior workman to the level of the inferior, and deny to skill ...’ its freest operation, Garran was suggesting that the effect of union rules was to mask the presence within unions of different levels of “skill” - of “superior” and “inferior” workmen. Just below the surface of his critique was a constant scepticism of the artisanal occupational taxonomy: union rules were designed to create the impression of a uniform level of skill or strength that was merely “ideal” rather than “real” (he had referred earlier to union policies of securing an ‘... ideal uniformity ...’ 36); the masking of the differences of ability between individuals hinged on a chimerical and notional figure, ‘... the average manual labourer ...’. 37

It was not long before Garran had the opportunity to use this analysis as the framework on which to mount a critique of specific trade union activity, when the Sydney wharf labourers struck work in September 1875. Garran pointed out to his readers that the policy of the wharfies’ union was to ‘... require that employers shall pay an unskilful man as a skilful one ...’ - a comment noteworthy, apart from any other significance, as an example of Garran drawing on the industrial usage of skill as meaning ability in general. 38 Several days later he again reiterated the substance of his analysis of the conflict between Babbage’s Principle and unionism. He noted that

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35 Ibid., 17th May 1875, p. 4.
36 Ibid., 25th January 1875, p. 4. The detail of the quote is of interest: ‘The dream of certain extreme enthusiasts in relation to what is called the eight-hours movement seems to be a procrustean uniformity of system from which no trade, industry, or occupation, no kind, quality or degree of labour shall be entitled to hold itself exempt. ... Uniform rates of wages are ... a part and parcel of a system of uniform hours, and are known to be insisted on in practice by Trades Unions and working men’s societies. It would obviously disturb the harmony of the co-operative principle and might induce a dangerous competition among associated workmen ... to allow any individual workman, or any class of workmen to negotiate for different rates of wages. This tendency towards an ideal uniformity explains the antipathy always exhibited by Trades’ Unions, and other associated bodies of workmen, for contract or piece work.’
37 SMH, 17th May 1875, p. 4.
38 Ibid., 30th September, 1875, p. 4.
one of the most important ‘... principles ...’ on which ‘... modern manufacturing industry ...’ rested was ‘... the principle of economy ...’. The methods of this, he claimed, ‘... employers now-a-days study more intensely than ever ...’ and they led towards ‘... the constant tendency towards the prevention of waste ...’. This meant efficient use of power, materials and so on, but also ‘... of that valuable commodity, labour ...’. The latter was secured by employers paying attention to ‘... the organization of work.’, achieved by the use of machinery in a sequentially organised labour process, and also by ‘... the more perfect organization of service ...’ - meaning by this, securing by the division of labour an accurate alignment of labour power with the nature of the task to be done.39

As against this attempt by employers to promote “efficiency” and to maximise productivity, were - in Garran’s analysis - the trade unions and their policies, which, he reckoned were ‘... adopted deliberately to establish a waste of power, and thereby purposely to keep back the productiveness of labour.’. He gave as examples of these policies the opposition in respect to the introduction of machinery, but also those standardising tendencies and their connection to occupational classification which he had identified as so inimical to the development of industry:

the plan of establishing as a standard of a day’s work the capacity of the weakest instead of the strongest man; the plan of deliberately dawdling ...; the objection to unskilled men doing unskilled work; the prejudice against the labour of women and lads; ... these are all against the economy of production. 40

In these comments Garran was attempting to illustrate how one particular union operated by maintaining control over the taxonomy of work, and the distribution of socio-biological types amongst those categories.

It is difficult to assess how widespread either this argument or an appreciation of it was in the 1870s. It is a suggestive conjunction that the

39 Ibid., 5th October 1875, p. 4.
40 Ibid.
one occupation in the 1870s which appears to have been subjected to the process of classification which followed from the Garran argument, was the typographers. Thus as Garran was busy in 1875 adapting Babbage to a form suited to the circumstances of the colony, the typographers on The Herald were being attacked by their employers on the basis of ideas the dissemination of which their very labour had made possible.41 Other evidence, though, indicates that Garran's was not a lone voice in mounting these arguments. For instance, one correspondent whose letter was signed with the predictable nom de plume "Progress", wrote to The Herald during the 1875 wharf labourers' strike, in terms which echoed the argument put forward by Garran. "Progress" believed that the men had struck work principally against the employers' use of boys to stencil the name of the ship-of-consignment on bales of wool. Such action, he argued, indicated that the Union wanted '... to insist upon Union men only being employed to do child's work.' He went on to argue that the effect of the union's policies in regard to who should do what work at what rate of pay meant that '... the lazy man, or the unskilled man, should receive as much as the hard-working and industrious man ...'.42 Elsewhere we find occasional glimpses of employer antagonism to the characteristically artisanal normative basis for wages. As early as 1860 a farmer who was asked: 'Should not the rate of remuneration to a married man be sufficient to enable him to provide for his family - is not that the natural condition?', responded that 'The natural condition is, that if I am going to employ, I should look at the labour he is going to do for me, it is not the natural condition that I should look to what is to keep his family.'43 Similarly, we find in 1879 a building employer commenting that '... a bad mechanic expects the same wages as a good one.'44 At the same time a pastoralist drew attention to the presence

41 See above, Chapter 4, pp 135-6.
42 SMH, 23rd September 1875, p. 6.
43 Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes, op. cit., James Fye, q. 2828.
44 Select Committee on Assisted Immigration, op. cit., J. Farr, q. 1182.
of '... a most arbitrary rule amongst mechanics ... that the most able and skilled mechanic shall earn no more than the least skilled.', a practice which he described as placing '... an artificial value upon labour ...'. He capped his remarks off with the distinctly anti-artisanal view that, 'The price of labour must rise and fall ... like the price of any other commodity.'  

IV

We might continue to trace the presence of these issues in the thought of colonial ideologues of capitalist development through the remainder of the 1870s and the 1880s, and in doing so we would notice that they were not marked by any significant evolution. We would also have to note that employers in general did not immediately seize on this critique of unionism. The silence from them in these years about the value of Babbage’s Principle was undoubtedly a reflection of the general period of prosperity in New South Wales, coinciding as it did with the peak period of economic growth.46 However incisive were commentaries about the “principles of modern industry”, and their contradiction by the principles of trades unionism, it was not until the rate of profit began to decline towards the end of the 1880s that employers began to draw on these ideas in their relations with their employees. When they did so, it demonstrated the extent to which employers had abandoned, or were prepared to challenge, the existing scheme of classification and the understandings on which it was based - the artisanal concept of skill.

Perhaps predictably, it was the building industry which provided one of the most thorough demonstrations of the clash between the understandings of artisanal skill and that derived from the commodified

46 Butlin, op. cit., pp. 9-14.
understanding of labour at the end of the 1880s. The craft unions in the building industry had been among the first and most successful in the colony to re-establish standard minimum wage rates for all union members as economic activity gathered pace in the mid-1870s.\textsuperscript{47} The building unions remained industrially strong during the period of economic growth, and in this context building industry employers had not been able - and were perhaps also unwilling - to attack the unions. However, towards the end of the 1880s, when the building boom began to taper into collapse; building employers finally attacked the unions.\textsuperscript{48} When they did so in October 1888, it was with an awareness of the utility of arguments which the colony's ideologues had been making for two decades.

The antecedents of the strike are of some importance, because when the building industry slumped in 1886 the carpenters' unions had agreed to a temporary reduction of the standard wage rate from 10s to 9s.\textsuperscript{49} In 1888, when they men attempted to regain 10s as the standard rate, the employers' opposition took the form, not of a rejection of the increase \textit{per se}, but of the idea that it should apply uniformly across the unions' members - that is, a rejection of the concept of a standard wage rate itself. Their arguments were framed within a perspective which became more widespread over the next two decades, and which revealed the increasingly vulnerable position of the logic of the artisanal paradigm. One employer, P. Dow, put his finger on the nub of that vulnerability when he described the unions' standardising policies as producing wage rates which were '{... very arbitrary ...}'.\textsuperscript{50} The terminology used by another employer, J. White, crystallized a similar sense of collapsing artisanal logic, when he counterposed the "real" wage rates set by '{... the law of supply and demand ...' with the '{... fictitious ...'
value which the unions placed on the men's labour through its policy of the standard wage.\textsuperscript{51}

As opposed to the union's "arbitrary" basis, the building employers advocated a nuanced scheme of wage rates. Dow commented that he '... could not exactly understand the term "standard rate of wages"...', and asserted that '... wages must be regulated on a sliding scale, but never on a standard.'\textsuperscript{52} White agreed. Wage rates, he thought, should '... be settled by the law of supply and demand. Ultimately a thoroughly good man would be considered worth 10s, but an ordinary man would receive less.'\textsuperscript{53} John Jagger made a similar point when he considered that 'For ordinary men ... 10s might very properly be recognised as a standard rate; ... but some men were not worth so much, while there were some who might be worth more.'\textsuperscript{54} Similarly, J. Try said that he '... was in favour of paying a man what he was worth.'\textsuperscript{55}, and other building employers maintained that '... they intended paying the men according to their merit ...'.\textsuperscript{56}

These arguments were not confined to employers in the building trades. Midway through the strike - and probably drawing on the arguments presented by building employers - a rope manufacturer, Archibald Forsyth, criticised in general terms the adoption by trade unions of '... standard rates of wages ...', a practice which did '... not allow employers to engage slow workmen at less than the standard rate ...'. He urged unions to admit that not all their members were of the same capacity in skill or strength, and to recognise that a union's membership always comprised one group who were '... fast workmen ...' and '... the best hands ...' and another who were '... slow or inferior workmen.' Admitting this, the monolithic approach to

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 22nd October 1888, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 18th October 1888, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 12th October 1888, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 13th October 1888, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 18th October 1888, p. 5.
classification should be abandoned, and in place of unitary occupational classification and wages, unions should agree to ‘... wages being graded ...’, and its implied accompaniment, the recognition of new categories of workers.\(^{57}\) In the same vain, in 1889 a Mr Byrne (occupation unknown), reckoned that wages ‘... to the labourer [should] be more fairly apportioned to the merit of his service.’\(^{58}\) Stripped of its obfuscation, this comment expressed the tendency among employers in the late 1880s to look for an increasingly accurate alignment between wages spent and quality of labour power purchased.

Although by 1888 there was thus undoubtedly an interest amongst employers outside the building industry in breaking-down monolithic occupational classifications as the key part in creating conditions of profitability, the strike in the building industry may have operated to focus employers’ attention more precisely on the issues which were involved in that strategy. As the strike meandered on, one of the leaders of the building employers’ associations, D. McIntyre, drew attention to the wider significance of the strike, which he thought had gone beyond ‘... a few contractors only ...’ and now ‘... involved trade and labour interests generally, and the relations existing between employer and employee ...’ throughout the colony.\(^{59}\) Although the strike had begun as a dispute over the concept of the standard wage, it had necessarily evolved into a dispute over where control lay in determining conditions of employment. The inescapable corollary of attempting to break down the monolithic classification of carpenters into a scheme of classification based on level of ability was an assertion of the employer’s rights to decide on the level of ability of each individual employee. Dow expressed well the connection between the two issues, when he stated that in his opinion the masters were

\(^{57}\) The Australian Economist, November 1888 (No. 3 Vol. 1, p. 101).

\(^{58}\) Ibid., September 1889 (No. 23 Vol. 1, p. 181).

\(^{59}\) SMH, 22nd October 1888, p. 3.
'... qualified to judge of the competency of their men, and that the matter should not be left to a society of men whose sole mission seemed to be to get the wages higher and higher, no matter whether a man was worth it or not.'\textsuperscript{60} As the strike moved towards a negotiated settlement, the employers maintained that "right". McIntyre summed up the employers' position, remarking that '... it was their duty to maintain their own position as employers. While they wished to act fairly, they desired also to be allowed to manage their own affairs.'\textsuperscript{61} Another employers' representative, A. Dean, reiterated this view. He stated that while the employers agreed to the restoration of the 10s, they did not agree to the restoration of it as a standard rate. Rather, they maintained that '... it was only right that [the employers] say who was to receive the 10s ... They thought that they or their foremen should be able to decide as to the competency of their employees ...'.\textsuperscript{62}

Given that the strike involved the issues of power in employment, there was considerable substance to McIntyre's claim that the strike had an importance outside the building industry. By the end of the 1880s the extended period of hyper-profitability which had been centred on the pastoral industry was in the process of collapsing into a crisis of over-production.\textsuperscript{63} Employers in general, but more particularly in the maritime and pastoral industries where the decline in profitability was both most rapid and most marked, were also beginning to display an interest in strategies through which a more efficient consumption of labour power could be secured.\textsuperscript{64} And as the strike in the building industry demonstrated, in order to do that employers had to break open monolithic occupational classifications, by confronting the unions which had developed in the pastoral and maritime industries.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 14th November 1888, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 100.
It was eighteen months from the end of the 1888 strike in the building trades until that confrontation began.\textsuperscript{65} But in August 1890 the Maritime strike initiated a prolonged period of industrial and social turmoil, centred principally on the pastoral, maritime and mining industries.\textsuperscript{66} Although the strikes revolved around two opposed principles - the unions' principle of "the union shop", and the employers' "freedom of contract" - beneath the slogans lay a struggle for control over the labour processes in those industries.\textsuperscript{67} And although the assertion of Babbage's Principle cannot be seen as a conscious organising principle of employers' approach to this struggle, nevertheless its two decade presence in New South Wales left an imprint on the critiques which they mobilised against "the union shop". For instance, the comments made by the leader of the Steam Ship Owners' Association, W.C. Willis, clearly bore the marks of that analysis. He asserted that the union or "closed" shop amounted to an '... attempt to coerce the employers into employing any particular description of men ...', and objected to it because it also imposed on employers a standard rate of wages to be paid to wharf labourers, no matter what '... description of men ...' they happened to be. Moreover, he rejected the argument put by the unions that in the payment of a standard rate of wages to all wharf labourers, an "average" consumption of labour power was achieved because the "over-payment" of some workers was cancelled out by the "under-payment" of others. 'I do not see why the good man should make up for the bad.', he commented; 'Sometimes you will get a

\textsuperscript{65} See SMH, 14th November, 1888, p. 7. Coolican, op. cit., p. 254.
\textsuperscript{66} Collan, op. cit., Chapter 8, provides a general overview of the Maritime strike. The essays by Svensen, Moss, Scates, Macintyre, Burgmann and Love in J. Hagan and A. Wells (eds.),\textit{The Maritime Strike: A Centennial Retrospective}, University of Wollongong Labour History Research Group/Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 1992 contain useful articles on specific aspects of the Maritime strike. The Maritime strike, as well as its extension into the mining and pastoral industries up to 1894 is covered in Fitzpatrick, op. cit., Chapters 7 and 8 respectively; and also in I. Turner, \textit{In Union is Strength}, op. cit., Chapter 3. Merritt, op. cit., pp. 163-249 gives a detailed account of the wave of strikes in the pastoral industry between 1890 and 1894.
\textsuperscript{67} For an explicit acknowledgment of this dimension see M. Rimmer and P. Sheldon, ' "Union control" against management power: labourers' unions in New South Wales before the Maritime Strike', \textit{Australian Historical Studies}, Vol. 27 No. 92 April 1989, p. 277.
man worth half as much again as another.', and it was that difference, he implied, which employers wanted to tap into, and not have their consumption of labour power confined by any notional "average". For Willis, wage rates should accurately reflect the variations in the productivity of different individuals' labour power, and with this aim in mind, he argued, 'There is no doubt that labour requires classifying; but with the unions you have to pay them [the members] all the same.' And in the face of the determination of unions to enforce a taxonomic unity, he concluded that '... the time has come when we must insist on ... freedom of contract ..., we must insist on our right to employ whom we like.'

The arguments of other maritime employers displayed a similar concern to attack the inhibiting effect of unionism on the efficient consumption of labour power. Garn, another stevedoring employer, asserted that '... the Union brings a good man down to the level of a bad and useless one ...', it puts '... a poor worker on the same footing as a good one.' In the same vain T. Napier, a leading stevedore employer, agreed with the wholly Babbage-ite suggestion which was made to him by another employer who questioned him at the Royal Commission into Strikes, that there was '... considerable variety in the value of men ...'. Napier went on to give his opinion that some union men were not worth even '... half a day's wage ...', and recounted that the Wharf Labourers' Union had intervened when he had attempted to replace '... one of the bad ones, and put on a good man, who was not a Union man, ...'. To obviate this situation, Napier thought, '... classification [of Union members] is wanted very much.' In making this suggestion Napier was not proposing a minor or ancillary part of a broader strategy, but one which was central to the solution of his difficulties. Thus

68 Report of Royal Commission on Strikes, op. cit., Minutes of Evidence, q. 5939.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., Mr. Garn, qq. 1242-5.
71 Ibid., Beaton to Napier, q. 2260.
although he considered that conciliation and arbitration might have had some merit in preventing strikes - 'You could give it a trial, and it might do good.' - this was equivocation indeed compared to his enthusiasm for the taxonomic solution. He did not '... see any other way.' to resolve the conflict between waterfront employers and their employees '... only ... by classifying them ...'. He reiterated this centrality: 'Classify the men.'; 'My own opinion of the best thing to do is to treat the men with kindness, and classify them.' 72

Although the above examples seem to suggest that the issues of occupational classification were concerns which had lodged mainly amongst waterfront employers, other evidence suggests that they were dispersed more widely amongst employers. In the course of questioning W.G. Spence, H.J. Trouton, himself a large employer of maritime labour, asked him whether in order to '... come to friendly terms between labour and capital, is there no means in the Unions by which they can classify their men ... ?'. The very generality of the terms in which Trouton framed his question implied that the concern with classification as a strategy was widespread amongst the colony's employers. He went on to point out the employers' main difficulty with unions' policies of standard wages, noting that there '... are some men naturally better than others, and why can you not classify them? ... one man may be stronger than another, and better be able to do the work; - why should not the employer have the benefit of such a man?'. 73

A consciousness of the issues outlined by Trouton also informed the comments of a pastoralist, H. Lowcock. He thought that '... employers and employees should come together and agree upon a rate ...' of wages, in order to reduce conflict in the pastoral industry. In the course of clarifying what

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., q.q. 1936-7.
he meant by this, Lowcock emphasised that he did not mean to propose ‘... a standard rate.’ of wages, because ‘All men are not equal, as I am well aware.’. It was the lack of a similar awareness, he added, which was ‘... the mistake I find with the [Shearers] Union.’, which did not allow the payment of members on differential rates.74 Another pastoralist, A. Wilson, described his opposition to the claim which the shedhands’ Union had made that the wage rate of their members should be raised to 25/- a week. There was, he said ‘... a great difference in the quality of woolshed labourers. ... you cannot say there is any dead level ... The men are uneven.’. Given this variation in woolshed labourers, he agreed with the suggestion that ‘... if you raised the price to 25s some of them would be paid more than they are worth ...’. 75

Although Garran, as President of the Commission, does not appear to have overtly pushed into that forum the analysis whose dissemination in New South Wales he had greatly contributed to, he continued elsewhere to express his convictions about the importance of the classification of labour. In February 1891, while the Commission was still taking evidence, he intervened in a discussion at the Australian Economic Association by remarking that trades unionism ‘... had rather aggravated matters for the worst ...’ by creating a strata of the working class ‘... who would not take employment at less rate of wages.’. He went on to describe to the largely employer audience he addressed that:

We bought labour for what we could make out of it, and if a section of labourers were not worth more than half the standard wages, the capitalist ... was offering a fair rate when holding out the lower rate of pay. 76

This analysis was supported in another debate at the Association. Mr. Duckworth, an accountant, commented that ‘... the Trade Unions require

74 Ibid., q. 3783 and q. 3788 respectively.
75 Ibid., q. 2596 and q. 2598 respectively.
that the bad workman shall receive the same wage as the good one - that the skilful artizan shall be allowed to do no more work in a day than the muddler ...’, and reckoned that the effect of this was ‘... to reduce all labour to one dull level of excellence or want of excellence.’. Another speaker referred to rates of wages in unspecified occupations being ‘... fixed by the Unions, entirely irrespective of the individual’s capacity of earning that wage.’.77 Henry Hudson concurred. As President of the New South Wales Employers’ Association he summed up the outlook of the New South Wales employers in the 1890s by taking as his example that determinedly artisanal group, the stonemasons. Amongst them, he said ‘... some men can earn twice as much as others, and great difficulty must necessarily arise by having any standard rate of wages, where one man would be overpaid and the other not paid enough.’.78

V

This collection of statements does not constitute a comprehensive survey of the attitudes and strategies of New South Wales’ employers in the late 1880s and 1890s. However, the prominence of the industries involved - building, pastoral and maritime - and the consistency of the views which are displayed gives a strong indication of the general perspectives uppermost in the minds of the colony’s employers. They suggest that from the late 1880s and into the 1890s there was a general rejection of the dichotomous artisanal taxonomy by employers in New South Wales. Although as we shall see in the next chapter employers from time to time found it expedient to draw on aspects of the artisanal taxonomy and

understanding, in general by the 1890s the idea that occupations could be rigidly classed under two rubrics, each of which provided a basis for the setting of rates of pay, was giving way. In its place was being put an alternative understanding in which labour was conceptualised as a continuum of categories of ability shading into each other, rather than a polarity of “skilled” and “unskilled” occupations.

The contributions of West and of Garran to this process were to have disseminated in an accessible form the principles of liberal political economy within New South Wales. In this Babbage’s ideas were central, because they showed how the commodification of labour was intimately connected to the division of labour. It was the particular contribution of Garran to firstly, translate those ideas into the practical world of class relations in New South Wales in the 1870s; secondly to point out the strategy employers would need to pursue in order to achieve the considerable advantages which were to be derived from the division of labour - the strategy of occupational classification; and thirdly to demonstrate that the central blockage to the enactment of this strategy was the dominance of an ethos of monolithic occupational classification within colony’s labour movement - an ethos which we have described as the artisanal concept of skill. These contributions did not amount to the setting in place of the industrial understanding of skill. They did however, constitute a very material challenge to the taxonomy - and necessarily thereby, to the meanings - of artisanal skill.

**PART III: CONCLUSION**

In this Part the artisanal and industrial concepts of skill identified in Part I have been inserted into the history of capitalism in New South Wales between 1850 and 1900. The historical relationship of the artisanal concept
of skill to the development of capitalism in New South Wales was specified
in Chapter 4, and it was argued that the artisanal concept provided the
principal set of co-ordinates by which workers oriented themselves to
capitalism as it developed in New South Wales during the latter half of the
nineteenth century. However, between 1870 and 1900 there appeared in
New South Wales a way of understanding skill which was diametrically
opposed to the artisanal concept. The dimensions and presence in New
South Wales of this "industrial" concept of skill, as we have denominated
it, were specified in Chapter 2. But many concepts circulate within societies
without ever having any particular social impact; Chapter 5 and Chapter 6
have each attempted to chart the development of the conditions in New
South Wales under which the industrial concept of skill began to have a
social effect. In this, the adoption by sections of the working and bourgeois
classes of an outlook derived from the assumptions of political economy
were central.

But it is necessary to be clear about the terrain which has been
traversed in this Part. We have principally observed the development
among sections of the employing and the working classes of practices which
are congruent with the industrial concept of skill. This is not the same as
observing the development of the industrial concept of skill itself, because
meaning cannot be deduced from practice. Although we may surmise that
underneath the developments in unionism and classification lay the
industrial understanding of skill, this cannot be established simply by
noting the development of practices coherent with it. Undoubtedly the
industrial concept of skill was connected to the developments examined in
this chapter between 1870 and 1900, because those connections are found
already fully-formed in the early twentieth century. But the existence and
nature of these connections needs to be demonstrated, not simply deduced.
This, in part, forms the subject matter of the next section.