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

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PART IV:

ARBITRATION, 1905-08

INTRODUCTION

Ultimately what we have observed in Part III is the development, not of the industrial concept of skill *per se*, but of specific fields - of ideas and of practices - which, because of their intrinsic antagonism to the artisanal concept of skill, provided the seed beds within which the industrial concept of skill was to take root. This is a line of development which we might continue to follow after 1900 in the same manner as was adopted for the period before that date. In doing so we would note the increasing development in the early twentieth century of industrial unionism, and the many instances of critical attitudes to the artisanal concept of skill within the discourse of such significant early twentieth century phenomenon as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the One Big Union (OBU) movement.¹ We would continue to record, for instance, attitudes within industrial unionism such as those expressed by W.G. Spence, who in answering a question at a conference in 1915 ‘... as to the difference between skilled and unskilled labour ...’, asserted in the typical fashion of industrial skill, that ‘... there was really no such thing as unskilled labour. It was merely a question of the degree of skill.’² We would likewise continue in

¹ The tension between artisanal and industrial understandings of skill, played out through the conflict within the labour movement between craft and industrial unionism is examined in I. Turner, *Industrial Labour, and Politics. The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900-1921*, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1965, passim. Also see V.G. Childe, *How Labour Governs: A Study of Workers Representation in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964, Chapters VI-XII.

these years to document the continuing concern with issues of classification and grading amongst employers in New South Wales. 3

And yet, having continued to proceed in this way, we would still be left with the problem of establishing the actual rather than notional connection between these practices and the industrial concept of skill, and the associated problem of how to assess the relative strengths of either paradigm. For to simply take the increasing numerical significance of the practice of industrial unionism in the early twentieth century as a reliable indicator of the spread of the industrial understanding of skill is to continue to rely on the elision between practice and meaning.

Fortunately, the records of the New South Wales Arbitration Court make it possible to go beyond such an inadequate procedure, by observing the displacement of the artisanal by the industrial concept of skill at the level of meaning. There is no complete survey of the question of skill in the New South Wales Arbitration Court, and such a study would form a major work in itself. 4 This Part, then, does not purport to be a comprehensive survey of the questions of arbitration and skill. Rather, it uses the evidence available in some of the important arbitration cases between 1905 and 1908 to explore the nature and content of the tensions between the artisanal and industrial concepts of skill. This narrow period represents the point of conjunction of two factors which together meant that in these years - and only these years - the processes of arbitration were at their most transparent. The start of the period coincides with the accession of Charles Heydon to the presidency of the Arbitration Court in July 1905. In these initial years Heydon turned his considerable systematising powers onto the hitherto unformalised arena of relations

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3 See below, Part V.
4 Although E. Ryan, *Two Thirds of a Man: Women and Arbitration in New South Wales 1902-08*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1984 goes some way towards such an overview, the issue of skill is subordinated to her discussion of gender relations in Arbitration.
between employers and employees. This gave rise to an arbitral practice in
which Heydon, in contrast to that of his reluctant predecessor, Judge Cohen,
sought to develop principles through which arbitration could be
conducted. This meant that in Heydon’s Court there was close scrutiny of
issues surrounding work and its value, and this necessarily generated usage
of both concepts of skill. The records of Arbitration between 1905 and 1908
thus form an unusually concentrated body of evidence about the artisanal
and industrial concepts of skill.

The detailed examination of work and workers which characterised
arbitration between 1905 and 1908 continued to be a feature of arbitration
after the considerable modifications to the system which were carried out in
1908 and 1912. But what makes 1905-08 of particular importance is that
throughout these years verbatim transcripts of the proceedings were kept; a
practice which was discontinued after 1908 under the wages board system
which was then established. These transcripts provide an unparalleled body
of evidence about the usages and meanings of skill current in early
twentieth century New South Wales. Although they are not unproblematic, it is the presence of these records in tandem with the
innovative Heydon presidency which makes the relations between the
artisanal and industrial concepts of skill visible in the years 1905-1908.

5 Heydon had achieved a reputation as a legal systematiser in the middle of the 1890s, when he had
carried out a rationalisation of the colony’s laws. For this, and in general on Heydon, see
Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 9. Also see N.G. Napper, ‘Mr Justice Heydon and the
Living Wage: Industrial Arbitration in N.S.W., 1905-1914’, B.Ed (Hons.) thesis, University of

6 For this characterisation of Cohen see Ryan, op. cit., pp. 30-1; P.G. Macarthy, ‘Wage Determination
as a pioneer of industrial principles see below Chapter 11, p. 000; and Napper, op. cit., pp. 43-8, pp.

7 When the 1901 Arbitration Act expired in 1908, it was replaced by the Industrial Disputes Act,
itself modified in 1912. See below Chapter 11, pp. 345-8.

8 Arbitration transcripts need to be approached with a sensitivity to the status of the information or
evidence which they contain. Employers and workers paid considerable attention to the selection
of witnesses whose evidence would best support the particular case being presented. Thus, to take
one example, the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders(USB), when preparing for
Arbitration in 1911, instructed its shop delegates to ‘... procure two members whom [cont’d over]
If the period 1905-08 is uniquely a window through which we can peer into the processes of arbitration, what we can observe through it is important on two counts. Firstly, looking backwards, the evidence from the Arbitration Court secures the argument developed in Part III, by allowing us with greater certainty to say that the development of a movement for classification and of industrial unionism from 1870 is evidence itself of the dissemination of the industrial concept of skill. For although in general meaning cannot reliably be read from practice, the evidence of arbitration shows that the industrial understanding of skill was inextricably inscribed within these very practices of classification and industrial unionism which were developing in the period 1870 to 1900.

These years of Arbitration are importantly secondly because they allow an assessment to be made of the relative strengths of the artisanal and industrial paradigms at the early twentieth century. Overall the cases examined here provide evidence that by the early twentieth century the artisanal paradigm was collapsing as a coherent way of representing work in New South Wales, and was being displaced by the industrial concept.

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they consider the best out of each shop, and that they be summoned ... to go through our claims and see what evidence they can give on them ...' (USB Minutes, 17th January 1911). Similarly, the Iron Trades Employers' Association (ITEA) called on its members in 1912 to '... attend the sittings of the [Engineers' Wages Board] and gain some knowledge as to how the men were putting their case as regards the skill and labour attached to each class of work.', and resolved that 'As soon as the claimants' [the ASE] case is closed a special meeting of members be called to prepare the case of the Employers, so far as selecting evidence.' (ITEA Minutes, 9th January, 1912). This they subsequently did, holding a meeting at which the central concern was '... the evidence required in answer to the claims [of the ASE]', and which concluded by stating that 'The following gentlemen were selected as special witnesses on various subjects.' - including machine-work, dirt money, overtime, blacksmiths and apprentices (Idem., 15th February 1912). Further complicating matters, legal participants in Arbitration were quite well aware of this selective aspect. For example, R.C. Broomfield, acting for Sydney ice-works owners in a 1907 case, commented that 'It is the same thing that always happens, the Union coming here with an exaggerated claim, and we have to do something the other way. We minimise the labour as much as they exaggerate it, and that middle road is the true one. ... Maybe we unduly cut down what the work is, but there is no doubt they unduly exaggerate it.' (Court of Arbitration: Shore Drivers and Firemen's Union v. Hillman and Co. Common Rule Application, 1907. Transcript. (hereinafter Shore Drivers Common Rule Application), NSWSA, Vol. 49, 2/102, pp. 254-5. See also the comments of Cecil Coghlan, Industrial Court of New South Wales: Appeal by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Australian Society of Engineers, the Amalgamated Coachmakers Society, United Society of Boilermakers, Iron Workers' Assistants against Award of Coachmakers Board, August 1910, Vol. 99, NSWSA 2/151, p. 573, that '... it is very unsatisfactory for this Court to have to decide on the evidence called by the Claimants [the employers] and by the Respondents [the unions]. The Claimants see everything with an eye blind to any skill on the part of the worker, whilst the worker is apt to exaggerate his skill.'
Part IV is organised around two cases brought by separate unions in mid-1905 - the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ) and the Sawmill and Timberyard Employees Union. The case of the former, with the addition of a case brought by the Wire Mattress Makers’ Union in 1906, forms the core of Chapter 7. Chapter 8 is based around the Sawmillers’ Case. In these cases the discourses of artisanal and industrial skill appeared and were mobilised in relatively distinct ways, and because of this each allows us to observe and to assess from different angles the operation and logic of each paradigm of skill; their connection to particular taxonomies; and their relative strengths at the start of the twentieth century. Evidence from subsidiary cases is used to augment the principal examples, and to argue that the displacement of the artisanal by the industrial concept of skill was widespread by the early twentieth century.
CHAPTER 7

THE ARTISANAL CONCEPT OF SKILL:
THE CARPENTERS’ CASE

... a certain craft skill ... is found ready to hand by capital in this preparatory or first period of capital.
(K.Marx, Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations)\(^1\)

I

In 1907 Frank Eland, a stove moulder who worked at Fred Metters’ Sydney stove works, and who was giving evidence in the New South Wales Court of Arbitration for the Stove and Piano Frame Makers Union in its case against Metters (hereinafter the Stovemakers’ Case), commented that ‘Ironmoulding works by no rule; it is judgement.’\(^2\) In expressing himself in this way Eland was drawing on an understanding of skill which, although still circulating in early twentieth century New South Wales, was no longer as widespread or as stable as it had been when it was by articulated by John West and his contemporaries several decades beforehand.\(^3\) By 1900 some of the central strands of the artisanal paradigm - in particular the ideas of “mystery”, the skilled worker as “artificer”, and his work as “art”; and the essential categories through which such concepts were articulated, such as “feeling” and “instinct” - were strikingly absent from the discourse of work and workers. Eland’s comment thus stands out from this discourse not as idiosyncratic, but as an example of a mode of expressing skill which was becoming increasingly rare.

\(^3\) See above Chapter 1, and below Chapter 9, pp. 245-6.
If the resort to such a terminology was becoming increasingly unusual in the early twentieth century, other aspects of the artisanal paradigm and its logic persisted in a more robust fashion. The artisanal concept of skill operated by enforcing the alignment of categories of skill with socio-biological categories, principally age, gender and race. In artisanal discourse the "skilled" were respectable, adult males, and usually, if not Anglo-Saxon, then with strong affiliation to the Protestant north-western European quadrant. The "unskilled" were unrespectable adult males; boys; females of any age; and those outside the north-western European tradition. And it was here, in the continuing practice of aligning categories of skill with those of socio-biology, rather than in any directly definitional continuity, that the artisanal understanding of skill persisted most powerfully into the twentieth century. For the categories "women", "men", "boy" and "girl" continued to be, in some hands, the coded characters through which meaning was attached to the categories of skill.

The ciphered nature of the artisanal concept of skill recurved in other arbitration cases in this period, but perhaps in none was it so clearly expressed as in the Wire Mattress Maker’s Union versus a variety of Sydney mattress and furniture making companies, in 1906. In this case (hereinafter, the Mattress Makers Case) a variety of those involved mobilised the artisanal alignments of skill and biology. Judge Heydon’s court assistant, E. Riley, at one stage asked a witness whether wire mattress weaving was ‘... not so laborious, nor requires such skill as to be necessarily a man’s work?’. Later on he defined more precisely ‘... a man’s work ...’ as

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4 See above Chapter 1.
'... work that requires very close attention and some skill?'. Similarly J.A.
Sheldon, the manager of Anthony Hordern's mattress making works,
maintained that even the more complex weaving operations entailed
'... nothing ...' by way of skill. In order, as he said, '... to show what a simple
operation it is ...', he claimed that he had '... never heard of one instance in
America or England where a man has been doing the mattress weaving; it is
all girls ...'. There is no way of knowing if Sheldon here was using "girls"
as a synonym for women, but nevertheless his comments clearly
assimilated female categories to "unskilled". W.H. Brown, the manager of
Bills Brothers, was more overtly engaged in an exercise of alignment of
categories of skill with those of socio-biology. He described how in the
weaving department which he managed, '... one boy ...' was employed at the
distinctly "unskilled" rate of £1:17.6. 'Do you call him a boy?', queried the
union's advocate, Mr Beeby, a question which revealed that the "boy" was
really '... a lad ... he is 22 ...'. Brown consistently connected categories of skill
with categories of biology. He described varnishing as being '... practically
boys' work.'; and weaving as requiring '... no skill at all; we will say a good
bit of knack. Any child in a fortnight or a month could pick up the knack.'
William Fuller, also a superintendent at Bills Brothers, described the
assembly of mattress frames as '... only lads' work ...' requiring neither
strength nor ability - '... any boy at all could put them together if he had any
sense at all.', he claimed. Similarly, W.G Askew, an employee of Bills
Brothers, who compared his particular abilities to those of an engineer, and
who was imbued with the artisanal ethos, described the operations of
finishing off in mattress making as being '... work which a youth can do'.

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6 Mattress Makers Case, op. cit., p. 60 and p. 67 respectively.
7 Ibid., p. 60.
8 He probably was. As Ryan, op. cit., p. 14 notes, the practice was widespread, and perhaps
peculiarly Australian. Of many examples, see idem., Samuel Hordern, pp. 65-6, Judge Heydon, p. 100,
G.S. Beeby, p. 172.
9 Mattress Makers Case, op. cit., p. 118, p. 121a, p. 121 respectively.
10 Ibid., p. 123.
Those employed in this part of mattress making could ‘... hardly go wrong ...’ as it required ‘Not much’ in the way of skill.\textsuperscript{11} Heydon, the presiding judge, also used these alignments, when he commented that the division of labour in the industry meant that ‘... by having a skilled man who understands the machines, all that is left is only boys work ...’.\textsuperscript{12} The practice of interweaving categories of skill with those of age was also used by another mattress manufacturer, L. Joseph, who remarked that ‘Five skilled men are about ten times as fast as thirty boys ...’.\textsuperscript{13}

Undoubtedly the practice of aligning categories of skill with those of biology was buttressed by (as it also simultaneously buttressed) patriarchal ideologies.\textsuperscript{14} But it also continued to come out of an artisanal tradition of skill: that practice itself was invariably entwined within standard artisanal points of reference. For example, the employers’ use of biological categories occurred alongside a definition of a mattress weaver which incorporated that essential artisanal criterion, all-round ability. For them a weaver was:

\begin{quote}
a man who knows how many wires should be woven together, who knows the different patterns of mattress, and who knows how many wires there should be for three-ply, and how to make the bands, and to direct weaving.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Here too the biological categorisation intruded. This “all-round” worker was contrasted with what was taken to be the typical employee doing mattress weaving in factories - ‘The boy who has to take instructions, and simply move a lever ...’.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[Ibid., p. 128.]
\item[Ibid., p. 137.]
\item[Ibid., p. 164.]
\item[For example, Heydon argued that the employment of girls and women in the machine mattress-making occupations was less problematic than the employment of boys. Ruminating on the employment of boys in the mattress making industry, Heydon remarked that, ‘It may be boys’ work, but for an industry to chew up boys, as it were, and live upon them, may be very inadvisable.’ In contrast, he commented that ‘In employing girls [in mattress making] there would be this recommendation; it does not so much matter whether the girl learns a trade; a great many of them get married when they grow up; that is their industry;’ \textit{idem.}, p. 110 and p. 120 respectively. For further examples see Ryan, op. cit., pp. 132-3, pp. 161-2, p. 173.]
\item[Mattress Makers Case, op. cit., p. 106.]
\item[Ibid.]
\end{footnotes}
The existence of this distinctly artisanal discourse is evidence of the persistence of the artisanal paradigm at the start of the twentieth century. But at the same time the signs were beginning to appear - even within a case such as that of the Mattress Makers' - that its position as a framework for understanding and classifying work was no longer as secure as it had been. Even this most resilient aspect - the normative inflections attaching to the alignment of biological categories with those of skill - was no longer unassailable. In the Mattress Makers' case, for example, the union's argument in part was an attempt to redefine the meaning and application of the term "mattress weaver" to mean those who operated mattress-weaving machines. The employers' advocate - A.J. Kelvynack - argued against this definition, commenting that '... very often old terms are applied to people which are not strictly applicable. A boy attending a machine cannot strictly be called a weaver.'\textsuperscript{17}

This was to attempt to return the term "weaver" to its artisanal home, with its biological alignments. But it was also an argument which relied on a highly normative judgement about the appropriateness or propriety of such an alignment. Thus during the Case it was argued by employers and Court assistants that the union's application of the term, by allowing men to do work which was "properly" the province of boys and of females generally, would mean that men were doing work which it was "improper" for them to do.

These were normative assessments typical of artisanal discourse, but now they themselves were greeted, not - as they had once been - as the truths of natural biology, but as mutable judgements. Thus the employee's advocate, Beeby, was able to begin his attack on the employers' case at this

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 108-9.
point by adverting to the element of arbitrariness involved in the use of such highly normative terms as "proper work". 'The whole thing ...', he commented, '... centres around the definition of "proper work".' On this basis he went on to argue that because of '... the steady increase in the use of machinery, ... what might in the old days have been improper work for a man the Court may, under the new circumstances, consider proper work.' 18

Beeby's efforts to undermine the hitherto unassailable logic which had fused together categories of skill and biology, and attached normative inflections to them, suggests something of the disruption which was at this point occurring to the established logic of the artisanal paradigm. But it indicates nothing of the dominant trend which was emerging through this disruption, the displacement of the artisanal by the industrial concept of skill. Part of that emergence was reflected in a growing inability of many of the central features of the artisanal paradigm to stand as self-explanatory or self-evident. The shadow of this uncertainty can be found in the comments of contemporaries which, sometimes unconsciously, reveal them caught between old and new classificatory systems. The manager of Bills Brothers, for example, used the classifications of industrial skill while also retaining allegiance to those of artisanal skill. One of the more complex of the mechanised mattress-weaving occupations was, he said, 'A semi-skilled trade. It does not require a man ..., but one possessing more skill than a boy has.' 19 This juxtaposition neatly encapsulates the transitional nature of the period, with the new, industrial terminology - "the semi-skilled trade" - being explained by the biological reference points of the older artisanal paradigm.

The resort to typically industrial terms such as "semi-skilled" by those such as Bills whose interest was primarily in reproducing the features and taxonomy of the artisanal paradigm, indicates the increasing

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18 Ibid., p. 112.
19 Ibid., p. 121.
dominance of the industrial concept of skill. Something of the nature of this hegemony can be observed also in the Mattress Makers’ Case, in which, against the logic of the artisanal paradigm, the union deployed a distinctly industrial understanding of skill. It was fundamental to this that the categories of skill, and “skill” itself, appeared stripped of the biological alignments of artisanal discourse. To be sure, the main witness for the union, its Secretary, R. Kattee, did at one point express himself in these biological terms, in his comment that “tacking-on” was ‘... a long way from boy’s work.’. However, it should be noticed that Kattee’s comment was a reply to a question from the employer’s side which was framed in terms which precluded or made unlikely a response in any other terms: ‘Take tacking-on, do you say that is a man’s work?’, Kelynack asked Kattee. Kattee’s response was an almost inescapable consequence of the framing of the question in biological terms.20

When not drawn into the terms of artisanal discourse, the union used a terminology of skill in which socio-biological categories were markedly absent, and which, significantly enough, breached important tenets of the artisanal definition of skill. The union’s arguments were in part an attempt to combat the representations contained in the artisanal canon of machine operators’ work as necessarily skill-less. For the employers argued from a typically artisanal perspective, that the weaving of mattresses was now so dominated by machinery that the work of the “weaver” was simply that of an ‘... attendant ... reduced to pulling the lever and snipping the wire. He does very little work, ... ‘, commented W.H. Brown.21

Against this portrait the union placed an entirely different picture. Kattee agreed with the employers that ‘... all ... ’ ‘The work of a wire mattress

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20 Ibid., p. 25.
21 Ibid., p. 114.
weaver is done by a machine ... ’, and that therefore it was correct to describe
the person who did that work as being ‘... only a machine attendant ...’. But
this did not mean, from the union’s point of view, that mattress weavers
should be considered unskilled. Kattee went on to identify the abilities and
knowledge necessary for a weaver - operations of ‘... feeding the wire into
the machine ...’; ‘... starting one [wire] thread inside another ...’ and knowing
different types of weave. ‘As far as I can see ...’, he concluded, ‘... weaving
does want skill.’. 22

This was the understanding of skill which generated the tripartite
classificatory scheme of the industrial paradigm. For to argue as Kattee had
done was not to argue that those employed in weaving operations were
“skilled workers”. Rather, for him mattress weavers were intermediate
between “skilled” and “unskilled” ; they were not “skilled”, but had ‘... a
certain amount of skill.’. 23 It was this understanding of skill which formed
the basis of the typical aim of industrial unions - that of colonising the
intermediate space between “skilled” and “unskilled”. Thus the union
sought to argue that those employed in varnishing the wooden frames
which the wire mattresses were attached to, occupied a similarly
intermediate position. In contrast to the employers’ description of the
activity as skill-less, Cottee argued that varnishing took up to twelve
months to learn, noting that although ‘... it may not take long to learn to
put it on, ... to get a proper gloss and work it properly, it does take a certain
time.’. 24 Used in these ways, “skill” was a neutral index or term with which
to describe the work of a particular occupation, regardless of the social or
biological character of the human beings engaged in it.

22 Ibid., p.181.
23 Ibid., p. 21.
24 Ibid., pp. 182-3.
III

The Mattress Makers' Case allows us to observe both the persistence of the artisanal understanding, as well as the undermining of it as a credible framework for the understanding and classification of work. Examination of the interplay of artisanal and industrial discourse in other cases suggests that by the start of the twentieth century there was a crisis of credibility surrounding the artisanal understanding of skill and its logic. In contrast, the industrial concept of skill was becoming increasingly plausible.

One of the prominent aspects of the artisanal concept of skill which began to appear implausible was the equalising and standardising basis which informed the idea of the equalitarian artisanal community, "the trade". It was this sense of implausibility which J. Byrne, a wood turner, ran up against in the course of giving evidence in the Court in 1905.25 Heydon asked him, 'Is there a difference in skill between them [wood turners as an occupational group] ... ?'. Byrne's answer - that he had '... not noticed much difference in skill.' - did not satisfy Heydon, who badgered him into reiterating the same view in less equivocal language: 'I always had a man with me who had as much skill as myself ...' Byrne said. However, Heydon did not let the issue drop until he had got Byrne to agree that there was some difference between woodturners in regard to speed. Although it is clear from the context that Byrne did not consider this to constitute a difference in skill, Heydon asserted that '... the quicker man was in that way the more skilful man of the two.' 26

Byrne could have avoided such treatment simply by adopting the stance of another wood turner, F. Forrester. When Heydon opined to him

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25 Court of Arbitration: N.S.W. Sawmills and Timber Yard Employees' Association v. the Sydney and Suburban Timber Merchants' Association, 1905 (hereinafter, Sawmillers' Case). Transcript, NSWSA.
26 Ibid., p. 164.
that 'I should have thought that turning was a trade which would give room for considerable variety of skill in the men working on it?'. Forrester promptly agreed that 'So it does.', and thereby avoided the experience of Byrne.\textsuperscript{27} The differences between the two interchanges provides a glimpse of the deteriorating power of one of the typical features of artisanal skill to offer a plausible representation of the labour of a skilled trade. Yet those who adhered to the artisanal paradigm were caught within the webs of their own discourse, which rendered them powerless to escape from the logic of the artisanal paradigm without fatally undermining their own position. Such was the situation in which the members of two important craft unions in the building industry, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ) and the Progressive Carpenters, found themselves in 1905 when they appeared before the court in their case with the Master Builders Association (MBA). \textsuperscript{28}

The case was a continuation of a dispute over the standard wage, which had re-emerged as an issue in the building trades in 1898. Although officially a strike over the issue in 1900 had terminated when agreement was reached between carpenters and their employers to re-establish the 10s standard, the issue continued to dominate their industrial relations because '... the unions and the builders continued to hold different notions of "the standard wage".'\textsuperscript{29} Still in 1905 the carpenters’ unions considered themselves to be on strike over the central issue of the strike - the principle of the standard wage. As Heydon put it, the strike was still in existence, although it was '... not visible to the naked eye ...', because all the union members '... won’t work for less than 10s a day ...'.\textsuperscript{30} Unsurprisingly given these antecedents, the object of the case which was brought to court by the

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 158.
\textsuperscript{29} Coolican, op. cit., p. 259.
\textsuperscript{30} Carpenters Case, op. cit., p. 44.
unions was ‘... to fix a standard wage.’, as the unions’ advocate (Beeby) put it, for carpenters and joiners in Sydney’s building industry.\(^\text{31}\) In pursuit of this aim the unions built a case which relied heavily on the credibility of the artisanal-equalitarian view of skill. The argument which Beeby set out, by ‘... taking the men as a body ...’, started from a basic artisanal premise - that the men were indeed “a body”. Pursuing this premise, Beeby argued the classically-artisanal position, that the men were:

all round, a competent and qualified body of men, between the individual members of which there is very little distinction, and not sufficient to justify any gradation of wages.\(^\text{32}\)

In short, he summarised, the union’s contention was that ‘... there should be no gradation between individual members of the trade, that as a body they are entitled to the fixed standard or minimum wage.’\(^\text{33}\)

In order to combat this argument the employers devoted considerable energy to drawing out the changing face of employment in the building industry, especially noting the development of distinct specialisations. The division of labour had resulted in an increasingly complex occupational profile in the industry. Specialisation meant that work such as that of the “outside” occupations of floor-laying and ceiling-work now existed alongside the “inside” work of the joinery workshop. And this variegated occupational profile was reflected in the presence inside the craft unions of these newer specialists alongside the traditional “craftsmen” such as joiners.\(^\text{34}\)

The employers worked at getting the unions to admit that the presence of these specialists in the unions meant that there were differences in the degree of skill amongst members, and that therefore there was justification in making a distinction in rates of pay between the grades.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 6.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 23.
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., evidence of Davidson, p. 129, questions of Campbell, p. 165C; also see Coolican, op. cit., p. 262 for the “inside”/“outside” differentiation.
Indeed they went so far, drawing on the developing taxonomy of industrial skill, to denominate them '... semi-skilled ...'. But try as he might, the employer's advocate (Campbell) could not shift the union's witnesses from their determination to adhere to the idea of the homogeneity in skill of their members. One union witness, J.V. Davidson, readily agreed with the suggestion that he was '... an all round man ...', and emphasised this by adding that 'I do not consider myself a specialist in any shape or form.' He was, from these descriptions, evidently an "artisan" *qua* artisan, and as such likely to be heavily imbued with the artisanal ethos. Yet even working on such promisingly artisanal material, with his hint of contempt for the "specialist", Campbell could not induce an admission of the logic of the employer's argument. He suggested to Davidson that 'Floor laying and ceiling work is not particularly attractive to the finished tradesman ... ?'; at another point he attempted to draw from Davidson '... an admission ... that there is a dislike on the part of the capable tradesmen ...' to floor and ceiling work, which had led to those tasks becoming concentrated in the hands of less-skilled specialists. But Davidson steadfastly resisted all such attempts - 'I will not admit that.', he said; and this was his consistent response to all suggestions that differences in skill existed between members of the union. Another witness, Charles Fenton, agreed with Davidson, commenting that '... the training and skill required for inside work as for outside work ...' was '... much the same ...'.

Perhaps in the attempt to dispel the appearance that such attitudes were idiosyncratic to the ASCJ, the union enlisted the aid of another important craft union in the building industry, the Stonemasons. The choice of this union was no coincidence. After all, these two unions had

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35 The employers claim in regard to "specialist" and "outside" carpenters - as distinct from "all-round" and "inside" joiners - was that they were '... a numerous class of men who earn their living as semi-skilled workmen.', Carpenters Case, op. cit., p. 30.
36 Ibid., p. 47.
38 Ibid., p. 165.
acted together in the past to protect the artisanal paradigm, when at the 1888
Intercolonial Trades Union Congress they organised to defeat the attempt to
replace the term "Trades" with "Labour" as the general adjective to describe
colonial unionism.\textsuperscript{39} And the evidence that the Secretary of the
Stonemasons' gave before the Arbitration Court showed that his
membership had lost none of its commitment to the artisanal paradigm.\textsuperscript{40}
The Secretary explained to the Court that in his union they did not
recognise any difference in the level of skill of the members, because '... we
are all as good as each other ..., one man can do anything another man can
do.' He agreed without demur to the synopsis of the union's view
presented by the MBA's advocate, that:

The aim of the union is to preserve that surface uniformity, to allow no
preference of one man over another in the matter of skill ... one man is not to
be entitled to get a higher wage on the ground of superior skill.\textsuperscript{41}

This crystallised perfectly the logic of the artisanal ethos; and both
Heydon's and Campbell's responses to it demonstrate how strong was the
tide of industrial skill against which that logic now had to contend. For
Heydon, this view of skill had little credibility. While recognising that'
... there are very good reasons for that rule ...' in skilled workers' unions, he
was incensed that unions tried to pass off as fact what was to him clearly a
fiction. Earlier Heydon had asserted that '... there always is a difference
between the skill of different men ...', and now he gave full vent to this
view.\textsuperscript{42} He thought that for the union Secretary '... to stand up [here] and
say as a matter of fact that amongst 250 men there are no inferiorities and
superiorities, is simply nonsense.'. \textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} See above, Chapter 5, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{40} It should be noted, however, that even within the membership of a union with such a strongly
artisanal character as the Stonemasons, the attitudes to skill were not uniform or monolithic. In the
1890s it was Andrew Thompson, one of the Stonemasons' delegates to the New South Wales TLC,
and also a member of the Australian Socialist League, who warned against the skilled/unskilled
distinction. See Chapter 5, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{41} Carpenters Case, p. 228.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 24.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 228.
Although this appears simply as Heydon’s private invective, it becomes less so when set alongside the longstanding concern within employer and professional circles about the unwillingness of colonial unions to admit that different levels of skill existed within their memberships. But where Garran thirty years previously had sought to persuade, Heydon now asserted. And what was more to the point, his assertion rang true. For the logic of the industrial paradigm conceptualised “skill” as a measure of the quality of individual labour power, and it was this individuated approach to skill which informed Heydon’s response to the collectivist claims of the building trades unions.

Heydon’s scorn for the arguments about the homogeneous level of skill of all members of the building trades unions was symptomatic of the inroads being made by the industrial understanding of skill. It is a measure of the extent to which the artisanal concept of skill had declined, that those who wanted to use its characteristic motifs to support artisanal practices found themselves bereft of all cogent arguments which might justify the validity of it and its practices. It paved the way for attacks such as those used by the advocate for the building employers on the very credibility of the artisanal concept. For Campbell concluded his argument by pointing out that the craft unions’ assertion of the homogeneity in skill of their members ‘... as a proposition depends on an entirely arbitrary basis, and cannot have any foundation in fact.’

This was perhaps the most devastating point of attack on a concept with its roots embedded in the assumption that the categories “skilled” and “unskilled” were manifestations of differences in biology, and the realness of which inerded in their supposedly natural origin. We have previously observed this destabilisation developing in the later decades of the

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44 See above, Chapter 6, pp. 187-97.
nineteenth century, but at that point, as far as the evidence allowed us to ascertain, there was no extension of the logic into an overall scepticism about the meaning of those categories themselves. By 1905, in the New South Wales Arbitration Court, that logic had developed, and was used where it was deemed appropriate. For example, in the Sawmillers’ Case we find the employers’ advocate with no points of reference in attempting to justify to the Court the artisanal definition of a First Class sawyer which the employers had adopted: ‘What we say is this - there is no doubt it is an arbitrary definition, and probably any definition which can be evolved will be arbitrary.’ As an assessment, that was undoubtedly the case by 1905 - but only for definitions based in the artisanal logic and categories. The development of this sense of the arbitrariness and mutability surrounding the concepts of skill is a powerful indicator of the radically reduced hegemony of the artisanal concept of skill over the classification and description of work in New South Wales.

IV

In this context, a further symptom of the declining position of the artisanal paradigm was the lengths to which it was now necessary to go in order to maintain the basic artisanal taxonomy. So central was the maintenance of the artisanal taxonomy to the Pressers’ Union of New South Wales, that its members voted to accept the conditions offered in the Court’s 1903 Award, even though they involved a derisory wage rate. For they saw it as being more important that the Court had determined in Rule 4 that ‘... No person (other than pressers and apprentices) shall be permitted to press any of the ... garments on this log ’ - a condition which satisfied

46 Ibid., p. 220.
47 B. L. Ellem, ‘A History of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union’, PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 1986, p. 95. The rate in the Award was £2 10s a week, ‘... no more than the union rate had been for some years ...’; loc. cit.
their main aim in drawing up their claim. These responses by the most "aristocratic" of all the craft unions in the clothing industry, show the Pressers' Union navigating a course between the desire to maintain wage levels and the desire to re-claim its exclusive niche in the labour market. For, as the union's historian has commented, one result of a policy of vigorous enforcement of the conditions of the Award and especially of Rule 4, was that the pressers '... won back lost ground.' However, the "lost ground" reclaimed was not simply that of an exclusive labour market position, but also the social order presupposed in the artisanal paradigm. The effect of the Presser's action was to forego an increase in wages, in favour of measures which reasserted the artisanal alignments between socio-biological categories and the categories of skill. In the succeeding years, '... the characteristics of sex division and internal hierarchy ... became even more pronounced ...' in the Sydney clothing trade.

The craft unions in the building industry were similarly motivated by a determination to stifle the development of a more complex taxonomy of work. They were particularly concerned to use the Arbitration process as a vehicle for buttressing artisanal structures within the industry. Their main aim was to stifle recognition of an intermediate group of workers between the "tradesman" and the "labourer", by arguing that the Court should include in the Award a clause (Clause 14 of the unions' claims) which provided that '... none but journeymen and apprentices to be recognised in the trade.' This provision was designed to snuff out the legal recognition of an intermediate category, which was denominated by the employers "Improvers". Although there was a disagreement between union and employers about the meaning and usage of this term, all parties agreed that the issue was about the existence and nature of a group of

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48 Ibid., p. 96.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., p. 27.
workers in the industry who were neither craftsmen nor labourers. While the employers argued that the group formed ‘... a very numerous class in this trade ...’, the union argued that they were insignificant.

Behind the disagreement lay the fact that over the years, as the unions attempted to maintain control over the rapidly fragmenting building workforce, some members had been admitted who were not ‘tradesmen’ in the proper artisanal sense of having served an apprenticeship. But in arguing for Clause 14 - the preservation of two categories of worker in the industry, “apprentice” and “journeyman” - it became clear that the union would need to somehow include this large group of what the employers termed ‘... semi-skilled ...’ workers, within the provisions of clause 14. The route they adopted is preserved in the exchange between Heydon and Beeby, the union’s advocate. In starting to consider clause 14, Heydon searched for clarification from Beeby on the terms employed by the union: ‘I want to understand what this means. Does a journeyman mean a man who has served an apprenticeship?’.

Gathering momentum, he continued probing the unions’ argument:

you ask that only journeymen and apprentices be recognised. If a journeyman means a man who has served an apprenticeship, he has come into the trade through the front door, in the proper way; then all the men who have come into the trade by the back door are not to be recognised.

‘What we say ...’, replied Beeby, ‘... is this - that there shall be two classes of labour recognised, the adult labour which should receive the minimum wage, and the boy labour which is properly apprenticed.’. It was left up to Heydon to draw out the explicit conclusion of this argument. ‘By

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51 The union’s position was that “Improvers” were ‘... lads serving in the interregnum between the finishing of the apprenticeship and the age of 21.’; ibid., p. 182. Also see p. 93(Beeby) and p. 379(White). The employers defined an “Improver” to be ‘... a young lad who had never been apprenticed and had never become a proper tradesman.’; idem., p. 183-4. As Heydon put it, ‘So long as we know what is meant, the word does not matter; you [referring to the union] mean a boy out of his time but not yet 21.’

52 For the employers’ comment see ibid., p. 30, also p. 94. The union claimed that they were ‘... an insignificant group in the trade, and therefore [the Court was] not justified in making a specific condition for them.’; idem., pp. 184-5. Also see p. 35.

53 This was implicit in the union’s argument that “journeyman” meant “adult”. Ibid., p. 182.
"journeymen" you mean adults?", he queried, to which Beeby replied 'Adults.'.\textsuperscript{54}

This is a startlingly incandescent instance of the collapse of the artisanal paradigm. Here, at the start of the twentieth century, this "craft" union was forced into adopting a definition of "journeyman" in which one of the basic artisanal points of reference - apprenticeship - had been abandoned. And although this formulation preserved the artisanal alignment of categories of skill with categories of age, it only served as the occasion to once more open up artisanal practices to charges of arbitrariness. The employer's advocate, Campbell, drew out this vulnerability of the union's argument when he stated that the transformation of the definition of "journeyman" from one based in apprenticeship to one defined by the age of twenty-one years had the arbitrary and illogical consequence that a boy ... whatever may be his degree of efficiency in his trade, immediately he passes the age of 21 he becomes a journeyman, \textit{ipso facto} [by that very fact].\textsuperscript{55}

This was only the most dramatic example of the ways in which those who attempted to preserve the artisanal taxonomy at the start of the twentieth century were forced to distort artisanal categories. Few examples are quite as clear as that provided by the owner of a Sydney freezing plant, who argued against the claims of the Shore Drivers and Firemen's Union that the "drivers" of stationary steam engines should get 10s a day. In doing so, he could not credibly argue that engine driving was completely unskilled, but on the other hand neither was it skilled, for ... a driver of an engine is not a mechanic ...'. It was, he said, bizarrely distorting the artisanal meanings of the terms, not skilled labour itself, but '... skilled labouring.'\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., pp. 181-2.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 182.
\textsuperscript{56} Court of Arbitration: Shore Drivers Common Rule Application, op. cit., p. 64.