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

Ben Maddison
University of Wollongong


This paper is posted at Research Online.
http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/733
NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
PART V:
THE IRON TRADES, 1840-1915

INTRODUCTION

Parts II, III and IV delineate the general process and timing of the displacement of the artisanal by the industrial concept of skill in New South Wales. These parts of the thesis operate at a broad and synoptic level, drawing together evidence from an eclectic body of sources, and surveying a variety of sites to demonstrate the existence and historical character of the artisanal and industrial concepts of skill. While these methods are indispensable, they also have certain inadequacies. They leave open the question of the historian's role in shaping the material, especially in terms of selection of evidence; they make it difficult to assess the impact and nature of the displacement process in the more prosaic sites of the everyday relationships between workers and employers; and their emphasis on examining meaning, not just practice inevitably focuses attention on the Arbitration Court, whose transcripts make that emphasis possible. Although in this site perhaps a certain authoritativeness was attached to the utterances of individuals - especially powerful ones such as judges - it is important to guard against generating the all too easy assumption that the displacement of the artisanal by the industrial concept of skill was simply a function of arbitration.
It is to address these points of vulnerability that in Part V the history of skill is situated within the history of a particular industry and its internal relationships - the New South Wales engineering and shipbuilding industry between 1840 and 1915. This narrowing of focus has a number of intentions. It submits the argument presented in the preceding chapters to the discipline of operating coherently when restricted to a set of events and sources which are themselves connected in one continuous history - the outlines of which are already reasonably well-established in existing historiography. In doing so it also allows us to extend and to deepen our analysis, by showing that the displacement of the artisanal by the industrial concept of skill was not simply significant as an interesting semantic occurrence, but that it fundamentally altered the relations between "skilled" and "unskilled", and between those groups and their employers, in the engineering and shipbuilding industries. In short, the history of "skill" in the iron trades summarises at the detailed level of material reality the argument with which this thesis has been centrally concerned - the changing mental framework within which workers, employers and the state approached work in the decades between the middle of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth century.

It is important to recognise that the adherents to each understanding confronted each other not as fully-formed "representatives" of artisanal and industrial skill, but as historically constrained actors attempting to operate in particular social, political, economic and ideological circumstances. This meant that the adoption of industrial understandings by the "unskilled" and the iron trades employers - which we are about to observe in the following Chapters - was neither a mechanical nor an automatic reflection of the general process of displacement which has been outlined in Parts II and III. The "unskilled", the "skilled" and the employers in the iron trades were centrally concerned to manoeuvre within and attempt to shape
industrial and class relationships according to what each considered their own best interests. Many circumstance intervened between the process of displacement at a general level, and its articulation in this specific context. Thus although the history of the displacement of the artisanal by the industrial concept of skill in the iron trades ran closely parallel with the timing and features of the more general displacement, it also had its own specific contours. However, this being said, increasingly from 1900 the "unskilled" and the employers found that their interests were best pursued by following the possibilities opened up by the industrial concept of skill.
CHAPTER 9

THE NEW SOUTH WALES IRON TRADES, 1840-1900

... the recognition of the union [in Australia from the 1870s] connotes the victory of labour as an organised movement, and therefore seems like the culminating success of the fights of the preceding twenty-odd years; at the same time this victory is the beginning of the new phase of the labour movement ... characterised by the definite separation of the skilled workers from the great mass of workers, by the formation of a labour aristocratic trade union circle getting more and more out of contact with the rank and file and with the masses of unorganized and unskilled workers.

(J. Kuczyński, A Short History of Labour Conditions Under Industrial Capitalism.)

I

These chapters focus mainly on engineering and boilermaking occupations - a set of "trades" which were central to the generation of artisanal understandings in mid-colonial New South Wales. Thus it was hardly coincidental that the statement delineating the central features of artisanal skill was produced in the course of reflections by John West on the colony's engineering trades. And it is interesting to note that West's elision of mind and body placed him in line with that English "art and mystery" representational tradition which had earlier - but not by much - dubbed millwrights and engineers "conjurers". In any case the idea of skill as located in a non-mind, non-body zone of intangible, incomunicable, mystery-like instinct was still very much alive in the description offered in 1868 by a prominent Sydney engineer, D.C. Dalgleish, who observed that boilermaking and engineering abilities were founded on and expressed "... a

---

2 See above, Chapter 1, p. 27.
mode of acquiring knowledge which you cannot impart to another.'

Some commentators in the 1870s reflected the persistence of this understanding of skill in the iron trades by resorting to a descriptive vocabulary which preserved the aura of mystery through associating iron trades workers with mythological figures. Thus boilermakers were described as '... sturdy Titans ...', (from Greek mythology, 'Titans' were figures with '... superhuman size, strength and intellect ...'). Engineering smiths were similarly connected into the artisanal tradition, commonly being described - and describing themselves - as '... brawny sons of Vulcan ...' (Vulcan was the Roman god of fire).

And if that precise idiom was abandoned during the 1870s and 1880s,

---

4 Dalglish was giving evidence before a public inquiry which was attempting to establish a systematised test for gauging boiler safety on steamships. He claimed to be able to assess the condition of marine steam boilers by striking the boiler plates with a hammer, a method by which, he reckoned, he could detect a difference of the sixteenth of an inch by the sound and the blow. Dalglish went on to explain that it was not simply a matter of gauging those variables of sound and elasticity, but that there was another element - that to which he referred in the quote. Dalglish was not alone in this opinion. Francis Napier, a '... practical engineer ...', agreed with Dalglish's centring of the testing of boilers in the interior abilities of the artisan. He believed that rather than having '... a uniform test for all boilers ...', it was better to '... leave the proving and passing of them to the skill and experience ...' of an engineer or boilermaker, because in assessing its strength and condition '... no general rule can be applied to all boilers ...'. Select Committee into the Method of Testing Marine Steam Boilers, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1868/9, Vol. 3, Dalglish, qq. 116-8; Napier, qq. 406-19.

5 A journalist describing the boilermaking shop at the Atlas Ironworks in Sydney in 1878 noted '... its group of sturdy Titans in the shape of strikers, who are riveting the plates together ...'; The Illustrated Sydney News, 13th July 1878, p. 7. More fantastically, we find the iron working department of Hudson's rolling stock factory in the prosaic site of Granville, described in terms over-burdened with mysterious references: '... the furnaces in full blast, the red fires glowing, smoke curling overhead in lurid clouds, hammers clanging, heated iron sparkling, the vast murky interior a fitting temple for the brawny Sons of Vulcan'; loc. cit., 22nd March 1879, p. 19. The popular appeal of this language has evident affiliations with - although rather anticipating - later nineteenth century Gothic imagery in Australia, for which see J. Docker, The Nervous Nineties, Melbourne 1991, p. xvi, p. 21. It seems likely that its popular appeal is related to the development of discourse in opposition to the tendency to represent the development of capitalist industrialisation as the expression of Enlightenment rationality (i.e. "progress"). The use of Gothic modes of representation served to cast doubt on the legitimacy of that process. For an example of self-description see the letter by 'Vulcan', SMH, 13th August 1875, p. 3; also note the presence in England during the 1860s of a blacksmiths' society, the Sons of Vulcan; K. McClelland and A. Reid, 'Wood, Iron and Steel: Technology, labour and trade union organisation in the shipbuilding industry, 1840-1914', R. Harrison and J. Zeitlin (eds.), Divisions of Labour: skilled workers and technological change in nineteenth century Britain, Harvester Press, Brighton and University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1985, p. 183, fn. 36. For the mythology of Titan and Vulcan see The Oxford English Dictionary. Of course many representations of the colony's iron workers and ironworks were of a much more prosaic character in which little trace of a mystic ethos was present. For typical examples see the description of Taylor's Engineering Works at Goulburn, SMH, 22nd May, 1871; Denny's Foundry, Bathurst; loc. cit., 16th November 1874, p. 5; and T. Lyne, The Manufacturing Industries of New South Wales. Part I, Ironworks and Carriage Manufactories, Foster and Fairfax, Sydney, 1879.
its mind/body unity reappeared, albeit in much more prosaic guises, such as
the commitment of the United Society of Boilermakers in the late 1880s to
courses of instruction for apprentices which taught theory to augment the
'... Practical knowledge ...' held by boilermakers.6

If the engineering and boilermaking occupations were thus
important sites in which artisanal understandings of skill were reproduced,
the small scale of engineering and boilermaking "industries" in the colony
before the 1860s operated to disguise their significance.7 It is difficult to
determine the extent of occupational differentiation in the New South
Wales iron trades before 1870, but some evidence - such as the presence of
the occupation '... engine and boiler maker ...' in the 1830s - suggests that the
workshop character of production discouraged the crystallisation of iron-
working labour into distinct occupations.8 In addition, the character of the
trades organisations which were established among the colony's
"ironworkers" - itself a revealing contemporary category of description - in
the 1830s and 1840s also suggests a community of iron trades occupations
weakly differentiated from each other. For example in 1840 the Engineers',
Millwrights', Founders' and Smiths' Society was operating in Sydney,
combining workers from across the spectrum of iron trades occupations. It
had an ephemeral existence, and a more confined organisation grew up to
replace it, in the form of the Millwrights' and Engineers' Benevolent
Society, which existed between 1845 and 1850.9 And although it is difficult

6 J. Shields, 'Skill Reclaimed: Craft Work, Craft Unions, and the Survival of Apprenticeship in New South Wales, 1860-1914', PhD thesis, Sydney University, 1990, p. 144; B. Fletcher, Colonial Australia Before 1850, Nelson, West Melbourne, 1980, p. 168. See also G.F. Walsh, 'Factories and Factory Workers in New South Wales, 1788-1900', Labour History, No. 21, November 1971, pp. 1-3. While as Walsh points out, '... many of these steam engines [used in the colony's "factories" in the 1840s] were ... built by local engineering shops ...' (loc. cit., p. 3), these were not large concerns. Still in the late 1850s Sydney's engineering firms were paying to use the heavy engineering equipment at the government dockyard, Cockatoo Island. See Select Committee on Fitzroy Dry Dock, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1859/60, Vol. 4, pp. 1078-9.
to deduce much from these examples, it is important to notice the
congruence between this way of combining iron trades' occupations and the
workshop character of the colony's engineering industry in the 1830s, 1840s
and 1850s. The typical unit of production was a small workshop run by a
working master, employing several journeymen.\textsuperscript{10} The relatively low
degree of division of labour in these enterprises would have provided a
context in which the overlapping abilities of iron trades occupations was at a
premium.

To the same degree - and recalling Marx's observation that '... the
nature of handicraft industry ...' '... strictly excluded ...' the development of
'... a class of so called unskilled labourers ...'\textsuperscript{11} - the small scale of production
in the iron trades during the 1840s discouraged the separation of work in the
iron trades into the separate zones of "craft" and "labour". Rather, it is
likely that early colonial engineering and boilermaking conformed to
Landes' description of other pre-industrial occupations, in that '... the rough,
menial work ... was the responsibility of the beginners [apprentices] who
could not yet be relied upon for finer jobs.' Here the artisanal alignment of
biological categories (age) with those of skill was evident.\textsuperscript{12}

Any latent possibilities contained within the occupational
constellation which had developed amongst New South Wales in the 1830s
and 1840s for a non-sectional combination of "ironworkers", were truncated
during the 1850s by the establishment of two iron trades societies - one for
engineers and one for boilermakers. No information has survived about
the latter apart from the date of its establishment in 1855, and it was in all
likelihood an accompaniment to the importation of boilermakers from

\textsuperscript{10} For this characterisation of the industry, see Shields, op. cit., pp. 147-50; K. Buckley, The
Amalgamated Engineers in Australia, 1852-1920, Australian National University, Canberra, 1970,
p. 16.
\textsuperscript{12} D.S. Landes, Revolution in Time. Clocks and the Making of the Modern World, Belknap
England by the Australasian Steam Navigation Co (ASN) in 1855. Its existence as a formal organisation was probably short, as boilermaker's unionism passes out of the historical record in New South Wales until the early 1870s. More significant was the branch of the English union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) - itself only recently formed - which was established in Sydney in 1852. In some respects the ASE was the incarnation of the artisanal paradigm and its logic. It arrived in the colony equipped with a set of rules devised in opposition to the unifying tendencies of British Owenite unionism in the 1830s and 1840s. Thus although it was an amalgamation, the ASE was positioned against the type of broad occupational combination which had been developing in New South Wales in the 1840s. Although the ASE languished during the dislocations of the 'fifties, it was nonetheless able to assert itself as a "craft" union by separating out "engineers" from the aggregate of other iron working occupations, the "ironworkers". Moreover, its rules - devised to meet the characteristics of the English engineering industry - specified the

---

13 See Report of Proceedings, Second Intercolonial Trades Union Congress, Melbourne, 1884. J. McGowan, p. 107. McGowan mentioned '... the twenty-nine years of the Boilermakers' Association in Sydney ...'. As Secretary of the USB, McGowan was an authoritative source. For the ASN boilermakers, see Shields, op. cit., p. 175.


15 For the context in which the ASE was formed, see P.W. Kingsford, Engineers, Inventors and Workers, Edward Arnold, London, 1964. Kingsford draws attention to the participation of some iron trades in the 1830s unionism, particularly in the National Association for the Protection of Labour, where the presence of mechanics, blacksmiths and moulders alongside miners, woollen workers and potters, contradicted the exclusivity associated with the metal trades. See loc. cit., pp. 92-3. Similarly, Kirby and Musson record the presence of millwrights, machine-makers and engineers in the National Association. See R.G. Kirby and A.E. Musson, The Voice of the People: John Docherty 1798-1854. Trade unionist, radical and factory reformer, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1975, p. 29, p. 77, p. 155, p. 167. Even though as an occupation their participation in this type of unionism was never marked (ibid., p. 297; Webb and Webb, History of Trade Unionism, op. cit., p. 165), it nevertheless was the immediate context in which the ASE was formed.

16 K. Buckley, 'The Role of Labour: The Amalgamated Society of Engineers', Labour History, No. 4, May 1963, p. 3. Buckley comments that of the twenty-six ASE members who arrived from England in 1852, '... twelve ... including the branch secretary ... soon went off to the gold diggings'. Nevertheless, at the ASN, which appears to have been a centre of iron trades unionism in Sydney in the 1850s, engineers began the process of differentiating themselves from other iron trades workers, when they won for themselves the 8 hour day in 1856; see Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, op. cit., p. 43; J. Niland, 'In Search of Shorter Hours. The 1861 and 1874 Iron Trades Disputes', Labour History, No. 12, May 1967, p. 3, and fn. 1. This point of differentiation was noted by Angus Cameron in 1873, when he listed the "Eight-hours trades" as 'Carpenters, joiners, stonemasons, bricklayers, plasterers, painters, plumbers, shipwrights, and [engineers] at the ASN Co's works ...', SMH, 5th April 1873, p. 7.
clear separation of engineering work into skilled and unskilled zones.\textsuperscript{17}

Those rules began to have some significance as the colony's engineering industry developed in the 1860s. The ASE began to expand its influence, firmly differentiating "engineers" from the other iron working occupations, while the latter continued the practice of organising themselves as an occupational aggregate - represented in the early 1860s by the Australian Iron Trades Protective Association (AITPA).\textsuperscript{18} At the same time, the first signs of a separation out of engineering into "skilled" and "unskilled" zones appeared, significantly enough at, the colony's largest 1860s engineering and ironworking establishment - P.N. Russell's Engineering works.\textsuperscript{19} Conversely, where craft unionism was weak so too was the differentiation of work into "skilled" and "unskilled" zones. This was the case in boilermaking, in which "skilled" and "unskilled" were only weakly separated into distinct zones during the 1860s.\textsuperscript{20}

\section*{II}

The presence of a weak differentiation between iron working occupations themselves (with the exception of the engineers) during the

\textsuperscript{17} Critically, the first activity of the ASE on the English industrial scene in 1845 was over the employment of unskilled labourers on engineering machinery. The enforcement of a rigid distinction between skilled and unskilled was central to its subsequent history. See S. Webb and B. Webb, \textit{The History of Trade Unionism}, Longman, Green and Co, London, 1911, pp. 190-9. The lockout of 1852 - the dispute which led directly to the emigration of ASE members to Sydney - was in part about the establishment of a rigid skilled/unskilled distinction in the engineering industry. See H. Pelling, \textit{A History of British Trade Unionism}, 1963, p. 51, and K. Burgess, "Trade Union Policy and the 1852 Lock-out in the British Engineering Industry", \textit{International Review of Social History}, Vol. 17, 1972, pp. 651-5; Kingsford, op. cit., p. 152; Buckley, op. cit., p. 13; Shields, op. cit., p. 156.

\textsuperscript{18} Buckley, op. cit., p. 45. Two unsuccessful attempts were made to establish moulders' unions in the 1860s, see Shields, op. cit., p. 169. For the AITPA also see Niland, op. cit., pp. 5-7. Niland comments that "The A.I.T.P.A. faded out after 1862, and in the years to 1870 organisation among ironworkers was all but non-existent."

\textsuperscript{19} Select Committee on the Committee of the Working Classes of the Metropolis, \textit{New South Wales Parliamentary Papers}, 1859/60, Vol. 4. Russell distinguished a class of iron trades labourers in the list of those he employed. See comments p. 1407 and the list of "... average wages paid to Workmen and Labourers ...", p. 1408. For Russell's dominant position in the 1850s and 1860s see Buckley, \textit{The Amalgamated Engineers}, op. cit., p. 17.

\textsuperscript{20} See below, p. 252.
1860s, as well as that between "skilled" and "unskilled", throws into sharp relief the organising functions which were performed by the artisanal concept of skill. During the 1870s the artisanal paradigm was set in place as a template over the colony’s engineering and shipbuilding work, and on its basis the characteristic artisanal separation of workers into "skilled" and "unskilled" was emphasised to a degree which had not hitherto been apparent in the iron trades. The establishment of distinct "skilled" and "unskilled" zones was accompanied by the eradication of porous boundaries between occupations, and the attempt to establish distinct lines of separation between the "skilled" themselves. In all these respects the central mechanism was the formation of craft unions throughout the colony's iron-working occupations. Between 1870 and 1873 occupations which had in the preceding decade been grouped together in the AITPA formed separate societies: in 1872 iron moulders, iron trades labourers and tinsmiths each formed separate societies. After an apparently unsuccessful attempt to form a society in 1870-1, a society for boilermakers and iron shipbuilders was finally revived in 1873.21

From their inception the iron working occupations among these societies paid particular attention to creating clearly separated zones of skilled and unskilled work. The founding rules of the Friendly Trade Society of Ironmoulders (FTSI) prohibited, in typical craft style, "labourers" from using trade tools. That such regulations were not simply devices for protecting the exclusivity of the journeymen's skill can be seen by noting the inclusion of a rule forbidding FTSI members from crossing the

21 For the formation of the Friendly Trade Society of Ironmoulders, see W.D. Hargreaves, History of the Federated Moulders' (Metals) Union of Australia 1858-1958, Worker Print, Sydney, (n.d.), pp. 8-12. For iron trades labourers see below, pp. 253-4. The date of formation of the United Society of Boilermakers and Ironshipbuilders is traditionally given as 1873 (see, for example, Shields, op. cit., p. 178). However, movement was underway well before this, as Niland, op. cit., p. 7, records the existence of a Boilermakers Society in August 1870, and Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, op. cit., p. 51, records the existence of a boilermakers' society in 1871. Niland, op. cit., p. 7, records the existence of a Tinsmiths' Society.
boundary in the other direction by doing foundry labourers' work.\textsuperscript{22} The rules of the United Society of Boilermakers and Ironshipbuilders were likewise designed to produce separate domains of "skilled" and "unskilled" workers, replacing the porosity of the 1860s with the rigidity of the artisanal dichotomy. Taken together, these rules were the institutional mechanism used by the USB to enforce a degree of separation between "tradesman" and "labourer" which had not hitherto pertained. This was neither an incidental nor accidental part of the union's activities, but central to its whole purpose. A member whose experience of boilermaking in Sydney went back into the 1860s reminded the other members of this when he commented in 1887 that '... he was old enough to remember the time when labourers did half the boilermaker's work ...' (i.e. the 1860s and early 1870s), but that with the formation of the union '... this had been put a stop to.'\textsuperscript{23} The combined effect of these differentiating and maintaining activities was to secure and to reproduce a clear distinction between "skilled" and "unskilled" in boilermaking. To be a trade was necessarily to produce and reproduce the distinction between "skilled" and "unskilled".

The establishment and reproduction of the artisanal taxonomy in the iron trades was not secured simply by forming craft unions with sets of rules separating "skilled" from "unskilled". Equally important was the establishment of a union for the "unskilled". For, not by, because the first iron trades labourers' union, the was established in 1872 under the guiding influence of the ASE.\textsuperscript{24} From this point on - and contradicting the

\textsuperscript{22} Shields, op. cit., p. 169.
\textsuperscript{23} USB Minutes, Special Meeting, 19th July, 1887, remarks of Brother Fell. See also Shields, op. cit., p. 179.
\textsuperscript{24} J. Merritt, 'History of the Federated Ironworkers of Australia', PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1969, p. 25; R. Murray and K. White, The Ironworkers: A History of the Federated Ironworkers Association of Australia, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1982, p. 2, comment that the AIPA was formed with the '... help ...' of the Sydney Trades and Labour Council. The labourers' union was organised as a necessary pre-condition for the prosecution of the 8-hours campaign by the craft unions, especially the ASE. See Niland, op. cit., pp. 7-8. The organisation through which that campaign was organised was the Eight Hour Conference in the Iron Trade, which apart from its important task, was also significant in that it was hoped that it would '... unite tradesmen and unskilled workers into a movement of all ironworkers.' loc. cit., p. 8.
impression of sporadic ephemerality which is given in established historiography25 - there was to be a continuous presence of unionism among the “unskilled” iron trades labourers, sometimes waxing and sometimes waning, but nevertheless always present. Indeed, that presence was premised in the whole artisanal taxonomy and craft structure; the establishment of a union for “unskilled” labourers in the iron trades was the logical and necessary accompaniment to the establishment of craft union among the “skilled”. From this point on the salience of the “skilled” and “unskilled” distinction was continuously emphasised, such as in mid-1874 when a crucial vote on the outcome of the strike for the 8 hour day in the iron trades was organised around the division, not into individual trades, but into “tradesmen” and “labourers”. 26

Unskilled iron trades unionism appeared in a number of guises in the early-to-mid-1870s, and although little can be recovered of the nature, intentions or rules of these unions, it is clear that they continued to be enmeshed within the relations of subordination and patronage with which they had been saddled by their origins.27 In 1875 the labourers’ union, which had now changed its name to the Australian Iron Workers Association(AIWA), affiliated to the Sydney Trades and Labour Council (TLC), and initially its position appeared far from subordinate. One of its delegates, Mr Leeson, was elected as the Vice President of the Council, and he used this position during 1875 to mount an influential attack on the TLC-sponsored parliamentarian, the carpenter Angus Cameron.28 Yet even

25 Murray and White, op. cit., pp. 6-7; Merritt, op. cit., pp. 25-6.
26 See the report SMH, 26th February 1874, p. 6.
27 A fitting mark of this subordination was contained in the terms of the agreement reached between employers and workers in the iron trades over the 8-hour system in 1874. The final resolution of the hours question was an agreement which allowed a degree of flexibility in working hours as between different workshops, so long as the central principle of working one break in summer and two in winter was adhered to. But significantly, the actual hours worked in each individual shop was to be decided ‘At the request of any employer, and with the concurrence of the majority of mechanics in the shop ...' (emphasis added). See conference report, SMH, 4th March 1874, p. 5.
here the dominance of the “skilled” was reasserted. Delegates from the “skilled” unions considered that Leeson had shown himself to be lacking in responsibility by revealing to the press details of the inner workings of the Council during his attack on Cameron, and we can discern in the vituperations which fell on Leeson within the TLC the echoes of the artisanal alignment of categories of skill and “respectability”.29

The subordination of the “unskilled” to the “skilled” was critically important as a mechanism by which the incorporation of the iron trades labourers into the project of creating the artisanal taxonomy was secured. This was demonstrated most clearly in the inequalities of power which were revealed in the efforts made by the Boilermakers’ Society to establish the clear distinction between “skilled” and “unskilled” in the mid-1870s. It was testament to the weak degree of distinction between skilled and unskilled in the 1860s and early-1870s that the rules of the USB forbidding labourers and tradesmen from doing each other’s work were inadequate by themselves to bring about that separation. Two years after the USB’s formation the practice of what was by now being represented by the Boilermakers’ society as “labourers” doing “our work” continued, and in mid-1875 the dispute over the respective work of “boilermakers” and “labourers” found its way into the TLC, where both the Boilermakers and the iron trades labourers’ Association were represented. The labourers’ delegate, Mr. Leeson, addressed the Council, ‘... characterising the Action of the [Boilermakers Association] as Unjust ...’. The Boilermakers ‘... defended the course taken by their Association, contending that they had a perfect right to protect their trade from any Inroad thereon, and they considered this was most certainly an encroachment on their rights.’. To resolve the dispute a committee was formed comprising the Council’s stonemason-President, Dixson, and a delegate from the ASE, White. It was perhaps not surprising given this

29 Ibid., 4th May 1876.
artisanally-oriented committee that its report supported the Boilermakers' actions, and described the attitude of the iron trades labourers' Association as '... a wanton insult to the Council ...'.

Although the labourers' Association could protest - Leeson resigned his position as Vice President - its involvement in an institution which was dominated by the skilled, left it utterly powerless to garner the necessary support to overturn the Council's decision. And in being unable to resist, as a member of the TLC, it too appeared to give de facto consent to the "right" of the USB to the contested work. Once again there is little evidence in this incident of the harmony and mutual support between the skilled and unskilled which Nairn has asserted.

The support given by the TLC to the differentiating activities of the Boilermakers Society provided a springboard for the enforcement of the artisanal dichotomy in boilermaking during the 1870s. The union was prepared to use its funds in order to press work into the zones of the artisanal dichotomy, such as when a member was instructed to continue to '... go to work as usual and if a Labour[-er] be sent to work with him ...' on a job which required two boilermakers, as had been the practice in this particular workshop, he was to '... come upon the funds of the Society.'

The provision of financial support was accompanied by a range of other measures. These included motions of censure, such as that passed on Brother Laird in September 1878 for '... allowing Labourers to infringe on the society by doing Boilermakering ...' (sic), and fining members who worked alongside labourers doing boilermakers' work, or more usually, the

---

30 The dispute can be traced in ibid., 16th May, 17th June, 15th July, and 12th August 1875.
31 For the withdrawal of the iron trades labourers from the TLC see ibid., 10th August 1876. For Nairn's view, see B. Nairn, 'The Role of the Trades and Labour Council in New South Wales, 1871-91', Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand. Selected articles. Second Series, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967, p. 152. A similar objection to Nairn's assertion has been made by Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, op. cit., p. 99.
32 USB Minutes, 2nd September 1877.
33 Ibid., 7th September 1878.
union shop delegates who allowed such practices to continue unreported.34 Attention was also given to ensuring that members did not cross over into labourers’ work, such as when a member working on the building of the Wagga Wagga bridge in 1880 wrote to the Society drawing its attention to the presence of ‘... several boilermakers ... working as labourers on the Bridge ... and asking what to do ...’.35

These measures were important as techniques through which the Boilermakers’ Society policed the artisanal taxonomy. They were powerfully augmented by the presence of Society members as foremen. While on one hand foremen were the organisers of labour processes on behalf of their employers, on the other hand they had usually come very recently from a trade background, and were often still themselves working, rather than simply supervisory, foremen. This may or may not have made foremen more inclined to organise labour processes according to the coordinates of the artisanal taxonomy. But where - as was frequently the case with “working foremen” - foremen continued to be union members - and as such bound to operate within union rules on pain of discipline - this provided the USB with a valuable point of entry from which the artisanal dichotomy could be policed at the detailed level of individual labour processes.36 Not surprisingly, the USB fostered this connection by allowing foremen to maintain their membership, and ensuring that they were kept informed of USB rules. To this end, when the boilermakers revised their

34 See for example the case in which the union decided that ‘... Brother Johnstone be fined 2s 6d and that the non-Society man immediately leave off and the Labourer desist’; ibid., 22nd February 1878. For the USB’s actions in regard to fining members and shop delegates see the instance loc. cit., 7th September, 1878.
35 Ibid., 13th April 1880.
36 The union passed a rule requiring working foremen to be members (see the attempt to get it rescinded ibid., 26th June 1877). In Brown’s engineering works in the Hunter Valley, Brother Gill was ‘... a working foreman ... still working in the shop.’ (ibid., 25th November 1879). Another member, Brother J. Fearnley, was also a foreman (loc. cit., 18th December 1883). The union always took trouble to ascertain whether a foreman was “working” or not. See the case in which “Questions were asked as to whether the foreman at Fletcher Brothers’ boilershop was a working foreman or not.” Having ascertained that he was, the union wrote to him ‘... informing him of the rules and requesting him to join ... at once, or the men working in the shop to be withdrawn.’ (loc. cit., 17th August 1880). Also see Shields, op. cit., p. 179.
rules in 1877 they voted to ensure ‘... that each foremen in the Boiler shops be furnished with a copy ...’. 37 Some idea of the importance of this connection can be gained by observing a minor dispute in 1878. The USB voted to take action to eradicate the practice at one small shop where ‘... a Labourer [had] been sent [to] work at riveting in the absence of one of our society men.’. The method it chose was to form a deputation ‘... to inquire from the Foreman of [the] shop the Particklers of the case.’ (sic.). 38

In acting to produce and reproduce the artisanal taxonomy during the 1870s, the Boilermakers’ Society went some way towards constructing itself as a “craft” in the artisanal mode. In other respects, especially in the difficulties it faced in shaping itself as a community of the equally-skilled, the “craft” character of the Society remained ambiguous. Early in its life the USB had attempted to establish itself as a community of the equally-skilled, such as when in 1876 it claimed that all its members were, and should be, paid at the standard wage rate of 10s 8d a day. 39 In practice, however, during the 1870s the workers enrolled in the USB were heterogeneous rather than homogeneous in their abilities. Whilst many were “all-round” boilermakers, able to do a wide variety of tasks, such as rivetting, caulking and plating, others (especially those employed on building the railway bridges which were increasingly appearing throughout the 1870s) were specialists, typically “rivetters”. 40 Where other unions of skilled iron trades

37 Ibid., 18th October 1877.
38 Ibid., 26th November 1878. Other instances abound. The union relied on foremen as judges of degrees of skill (loc. cit., 27th June 1876, 5th September 1876, 6th March and 3rd April 1877, 29th April and 13th May 1879, 7th February 1880), and to uphold “demarcations” between skilled and unskilled and between skilled and trained (loc. cit., 8th August 1876, 26th November 1878, 10th May 1881). Shields, op. cit., pp. 177-8 comments that ‘The decision as to which boys were permitted to progress [from unskilled junior assistants to become boilermakers] fell largely to trade foremen.’
39 Coghlan, Labour and Industry in Australia, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1969, Vol III, p. 1431. Coghlan notes that in the iron trades in 1876 ‘... the practice of maximum and minimum wages prevailed, and in some branches the range was very considerable.’, making the boilermakers’ unitary standard recorded for that year a significant exception.
workers typically required a period of apprenticeship as a qualification for membership, there was no formal apprenticeship system for boilermakers in New South Wales. This meant that it was quite feasible for "improvers" - who were usually specialists of one sort or another - to gain entry to the union, and during the 1870s the USB had actively sought to enrol such workers. In adopting this policy of broad inclusion in the 1870s the infant-USB joined with many mid-nineteenth century Australian trade unions.

Thus as the union developed, its membership came to encompass workers with a wide range of abilities, a situation recognised in the extremely wide range of wages within which members were permitted to work during the later 1870s. The upper limit of 18s per day placed the most experienced "all-round" boilermakers on a par with the most skilled in other occupations. And while those who were employed at or near to the lower limit of 10s per day were not to be confused with the labourers, receiving in 1876 from 5s to 7s a day, their wage level placed them on the margins of the category "skilled".

Although in the mid-1870s there was little discernible concern within

---

41 This view is to some degree at variance with the only other established account of the USB, that in Shields, op. cit. Shields argues that the USB insisted in this period on indentured apprenticeship as a qualification for membership. However, my reading of the union's minutes does not support this contention. See for example, the case of McIvor, employed at Mort's Dock, and originally not permitted to join the union (USB Minutes, 15th October 1878). However, he and another in the same position were eventually "... allowed to work 14 days in any shop as Boilermakers and then if they do their work as such to the satisfaction of the Foremen and delegates they become members ..." (loc. cit., 29th April 1879). McIvor was admitted two weeks later (loc. cit., 13th May 1879). The greatest evidence for the variegated character of the USB which developed in the 1870s lies in the tensions within the union in the late 1870s and early 1880s, for which see below, p. 262. Remarks such as that made by Brother Porteous in 1882, "... that many of the younger members ... as soon as they could use a riveting-hammer ... seemed to think that their trade was learned," give some idea of the presence of specialist riveters in the union (USB Minutes, 27th July 1882). Shields, op. cit., p. 179 agrees that enforcement of apprenticeship "... proved extremely problematical and invariably took second preference ..." to other USB aims of the closed shop and a standard rate.


43 USB Minutes, 10th August 1878 give the upper and lower limits. For iron trades labourers' wages in the late-1870s, see T. A. Coghlan, Labour and Industry in Australia, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 1431. Coghlan also notes that in the same period, in manufacturing industries '... where skill and training were required, the wages paid ranged from 7s 6d to 9s a day.' - thus allowing us to locate lower-paid USB members on the occupational spectrum(loc. cit., p. 1431). In 1882 Brother Gallagher commented that 'The labourers in some of the building trades were as well paid as some of the mechanics in ours.' (USB Minutes, 20th June 1882), a comment which says as much about the scale of wages permitted by the USB as it does about the wages of building trades labourers.
the union about the range of wage rates allowed, towards the end of the
decade the first signs appeared that this issue was generating tension within
the union. It is difficult to quantify, but perhaps one in three
"boilermakers" in the late 1870s was a specialist in one aspect of
boilermaking. In 1878 the union decided to more thoroughly investigate
the ‘... working abilities ...’ of those applying for membership, it being
commented that ‘... there is been such a lot of trouble lately through not
invest[igat]ing other cases propely.’ (sic). In the discussion leading up to
that decision, one member made the observation that the graduated wage
scale could be resolved into an ‘... average [rate] per Hour ... ’ (of 1s 11/2d),
and in doing so prefigured the development within the union of a
perspective which sought to resolve into homogeneity the variegated
character of the union’s membership.

While the Boilermakers’ Society was grappling with the tensions
induced between the craft model of unionism and the variegated character
of its membership, the same dynamic was being manifest in a different form
within the ASE. While the union attempted to portray “engineers” as an
artisanal community of the equally-skilled, in reality the occupations which
were amalgamated within the ASE were not so much branches of the one
“engineering” trade, but separate trades in themselves. In this respect there
was always a tension within the ASE between its amalgamated character,
and the imperatives of creating the union as an artisanal community of the
equally-skilled. These tensions were manifest in the mid-1870s, when the
various trades amalgamated in the ASE began to assert their independence
as artisanal trades by separating themselves off from the Amalgamated.

Between 1874 and 1876 separate societies of Patternmakers, Blacksmiths,

44 This figure is deduced from comments of McGowan, who in considering a proposal (below p.263)
for recognition of a two-tiered wage scale by the USB, considered that the higher rate would apply
to ‘... about two-thirds of the members ...’, leaving one-third as specialists. See ibid., 27th July 1882.
46 Ibid., 10th August 1878.
and Engine Fitters and Turners existed alongside the ASE.\textsuperscript{47} Little has survived of their activities and aims, but far from being a rejection of artisanal logic, the presence of these societies reflected the continuing dominance of the artisanal ideal, and its partial denial by the practice of amalgamation. It was no accident that in 1890 W.G. Spence - an implacable antagonist to the practices of artisanal skill - took the ASE as his example of how artisanal "sectionalism" could be effaced through amalgamation.\textsuperscript{48}

Although the fracturing of the ASE along the lines of craft in the 1870s was relatively short-lived, its existence was testament, not to the breakdown of artisanal skill, but to its continued centrality within the engineering trades. Indeed so deep-rooted was that understanding within the engineering trade, that it was the ASE which led the defence of central artisanal alignments between categories of age and categories of skill when they were under attack. Sir Alfred Stephen's proposed amendment to the Apprenticeship Act in 1876 was first raised in the TLC by an ASE delegate, and he framed his comments on it in decidedly artisanal terms, noting that the Bill would '... cause the parents to maintain his [sic.] children if apprenticed till an age that it would almost [be] impossible for him to do and the Sons to be dependant on their Fathers when they ought to be a help ...'.\textsuperscript{49} Similarly, it was an engineering apprentice ("Prentice Boy") who pointed out that the provisions of the Bill necessarily involved inter-cutting of categories of biology with those of skill in distinctly non-artisanal ways.\textsuperscript{50} The artisanal taxonomy and understanding was central to the ASE and the USB throughout the 1870s.

\textsuperscript{47} Buckley, \textit{The Amalgamated Engineers}, op. cit., pp. 98-9; TLC General Minutes, 13th May 1874.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{The Hunner}, 3rd November, 1892, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{49} See above, Chapter 4, p. 600 for Stephen's proposals. For the ASE in the TLC see TLC, General Minutes, 15th June and 11th July 1876.
\textsuperscript{50} See above Chapter 4, p. 144.
III

During the 1880s the continuing salience of the artisanal paradigm as a framework for action within the iron trades was decisively reiterated. At the start of the decade its centrality was manifested in the manner in which the Boilermakers' Society resolved the tensions arising from the variegated character of its members' abilities. The decade began with a series of disputes over the wage rates paid to specialist non-union riveters on the building of the Parramatta and Iron Cove bridges. 51 Seeking to reassert the union scale of wages, the reflex of the USB was to continue to draw such members into the union, as had been the practice in the 1870s. But whereas previously that strategic practice had been by-and-large accepted within the union, the disputes in the early 1880s catalysed the undercurrent of artisanal dissatisfaction which had been developing in the late 1870s.

Initially this dissatisfaction was expressed in the closer attention which these disputes provoked to the question of the abilities which were necessary to admit an applicant into the union. One strand of opinion within the union argued that one of the low-paid non-union riveters, named Keefe, who was employed on the Parramatta Bridge, should be admitted to membership because he '... was fit to become a member', and because from a strategic viewpoint '... if he could snap a rivet he was better in the Society than out of it, because if he was not in the society he might harm it ...'. 52 The latter was an argument which had been widely accepted in the 1870s, but now it was opposed by a growing current of opinion which argued that Keefe was '... not qualified to become a member ...' because '... he was only an improver ...'; '... he could not use the tools properly ...' and '... he could only snap a rivet'. 53 These raft of objections were made

51 For these disputes see USB Minutes, 19th August and 25th November, 1879; 6th and 20th January, 2nd, 7th and 17th February 1880.
52 USB Minutes, 7th February and 17th February 1880.
53 Comments of Brother Pettit, ibid., 7th February.
from an unalloyed artisanal perspective, with their emphasis on apprenticed journeymen with a full complement of "all-round" abilities.

In this instance, as with several others which occurred at around the same time, the strategic considerations of the previous decade continued to dominate, with Keefe and other "snap"-riveters being admitted to the union. However, far from signalling a retreat from the artisanal understanding of skill and its co-ordinates, this series of admissions was the last stand of the pragmatic policies of the 1870s. When similar wage-cutting practices began to be adopted in sites of boilermaking employment more important than bridge work, the union began to seriously consider how best to deal with the questions which had been raised on the bridges in 1879 and 1880. By early 1881 the union was becoming concerned at the development of a tendency for such significant employers as Mort's Dock and the Atlas Works to employ boilermakers at the lowest rates of pay within the recognised range. In this context - a context, it should be noticed, in which a certain degree of commodification of boilermaker's abilities was threatening to become established - the call arose within the Boilermakers' Society for the adoption of the typical artisanal strategy to resist the commodification of skill - the introduction of a standard wage, and its concomitant unitary classification of the union's members.

However straightforward the issue of establishing a standard rate of wages appears to be in historical hindsight, from inside a union such as the Boilermakers', which was transforming itself into a craft union, that process involved considerations of great complexity. Thus when a USB delegate from Mort's Dock gave notice in March 1881 that he was soon to introduce

---

54 The motion that 'Keefe become a member...' was passed, ibid., 17th February 1880.
55 The minutes record that 'Brother Boyd said that there had been several complaints lately from some of the men employed at Mort's Dock that after having been discharged they were re-employed at a lower rate of wages... Some discussion on this subject took place and reference to having a standard scale of wages, was made...'; (ibid., 15th March 1881). Boyd was one of the USB delegates at Mort's Dock. See 'Shop Delegates Elected', ibid., 4th January 1881.
the motion ‘... that there be a standard scale of wages for members of the Society with a minimum (say) of 14d.’, he was well aware of the contentious nature of the issue, appending to the motion the unusual condition that ‘Voting on this subject be by Ballot’ (original emphasis).\textsuperscript{56} When that discussion finally took place, it did so around a new motion which approached the issue of a standard rate of wages much more directly. Where the first motion had allowed for ‘... a standard scale of wages ...’ (emphasis added), this equivocation was removed in the formulation adopted by Brother Crystal in July 1881 when he moved the motion ‘... that the time has now arrived for this Society to have a fixed rate of wages.’ (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{57}

Crystal’s motion finally brought to the surface the simmering tensions arising from the variegated character of the union’s membership. A significant section of those who spoke to the motion deplored the idea of a standard rate, and supported the continuation of the system of setting wages according to the flexibility allowed by the broad scale of wage rates. One speaker argued that ‘... it was not right to fix a rate of wages as some of the older men might not be able to get employed at the required rate.’ Another asked what was to happen to those members ‘... who might be thrown out of employment by this resolution on account of his employer not thinking them worth the wages.’, and opposed the motion because ‘... he considered it an injustice to inferior men of whom there were several in the society.’. Significantly enough, and giving contemporary recognition to the connection between the standard wage and taxonomy, the advocates of these perspectives argued that instead of a fixed rate, the motion should be amended to establish ‘... two rates of wages ... [.] for First and Second class rivetters [.] the men to classify themselves ...’\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 29th March 1881.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 18th July 1882.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.,
These arguments - and especially the amendment, with its proposal for a classification of boilermakers into two grades - were ineffective in diluting the much stronger level of support within the union for the principle of a standard minimum rate of wage. A variety of arguments were used. One member argued the classically artisanal position, that a standard rate would operate to equalise the differences in abilities between the members by stimulating the acquisition of full, all round trade skill by ‘... many of the younger members ... [who] ... as soon as they could use a rivetting-hammer ... seemed to think that their trade was learned.’. A perhaps stronger current of opinion fully accepted the existence of such specialists, and argued that their presence in the membership did not imply different levels of skill amongst the members. This was a particularly important perspective in rebutting the suggested classification of riveters into two grades, First class being those for whom riveting was only one among a number of abilities, and Second class being those for whom riveting was their sole specialty. But as one member pointed out in response to this proposal, ‘... a great many men were not First class rivetters, ...’, and yet could claim to be equally skilled as the latter. Under the proposed scheme of classification these men would be classed as Second class and would consequently ‘... get lower pay than their equals.’, despite the fact that they ‘... could do other work equally well or better perhaps ...’ than “First Class” riveters.59

Although a variety of arguments were thus used by those who spoke in support of the principle of the standard wage, they were all variations on the fundamental artisanal theme, the equality in skill shared by members of a “trade”. The importance of this understanding within the union can be gauged by the response to the motion and its proposed amendment. The classification amendment fell and the motion in regard to establishing a

---

59 Ibid., 27th July 1882. Note the similarity between the sentiments expressed in the last quote, and those expressed in 1905 by the Secretary of the Stonemasons’ Union; see above Chapter 7, p. 216.
standard minimum wage rate (of 14d per hour) was carried by a '... very large majority'. The seriousness with which this was considered is indicated by the further motion which provided for an extremely heavy punishment of £5 for a first infringement and expulsion for the second in the case of '... any member proved to be working at a less rate of wages than the minimum ...'.

The decision to establish a standard rate of wage, rather than a graduated scale of wages based on "grading", was a powerful assertion of the central artisanal tenet - the equality in ability of members of the trade. It is important to notice that it occurred at the point in the evolution of boilermaking where the occupations' morphology was becoming increasingly variegated, and where those variegations were becoming increasingly used by large employers intent on paying wages for particular types of work, rather than for particular types of workmen. In this context it was absolutely critical for the subsequent development and character of the USB that the outcome of the discussion over the standard wage stopped the tendency to create a classificatory space between "skilled" and "unskilled" for an intermediate category of worker (the "Second Class rivetter"). From this point on the Boilermaker's Society became much more discriminating about the entry qualifications of applicants, the 1880s being characterised by a sharpening of focus on these issues. Whereas in the previous decade, with its expansive membership policies, there were strikingly few instances of pejorative terminology, after 1881 the full range of discriminating terms available within the artisanal idiom were used, as the logic of the artisanal taxonomy closed around boilermaking. To the typical artisanal bogey, the "handyman", was added more specifically boilermaking terms of discrimination - those who were "snap rivetters", '... only a holder up ...', general yard labourers and engine drivers were weeded out from the core of

---

60 USB Minutes, 27th July, 1882.
"genuine" applicants throughout the decade and into the next.61

As union strategy came to pivot on the ability of the union to project itself as a community of equally-skilled branches of the boilermaking trade, new points of vulnerability began to open up. Their nature was indicated in the equivocations and fears expressed by one member in a discussion in 1882 over whether two young men should be admitted. Uncertain as to their levels of ability, he commented that ‘... he would not take upon himself the responsibility of proposing ...’ them as members because although if they were accepted into the union ‘... it might be the means of getting them journeymen’s wages; ...’, he had ‘... some doubt as to whether [they] would get the Minimum [i.e. standard] rate ...’. If this was the case, he continued, and ‘... the money was refused ...’ to the men by their employers, ‘... the Society would be placed in an awkward position.’, by revealing to the employers that its membership was heterogeneous in ability.62 This was a prescient anticipation of a central vulnerability which was as yet a quarter of a century away - the union’s claim to be a community of the equally-skilled.

While the USB was creating itself as an artisanal craft, artisanal logic continued in the 1880s to dominate developments within the ASE. Incidents such as that in which the Balmain Branch of the ASE referred ‘... the case of the Hammer man [i.e. blacksmiths’ assistant or labourer] ... being placed on Smiths jobs ...’ for action of the Local District Committee, indicate the continuing importance given within the ASE to reproducing

---

61 For instances of the use of these terms see ‘... Engine Driver and Lumper’, (ibid., 15th August 1882). Nat Bain was rejected because he was ‘... only a holder-up...’ (loc. cit., 12th and 26th September 1882), another because ‘... he was only a holder-up and fireman, and could neither rivet nor caulk.’ (loc. cit., 22nd April 1884). One applicant was rejected, being only ‘... a sort of handy-man’ (loc. cit., 9th September 1884), another because ‘... he was not able to snap a rivet ...’, and was ‘... only a blacksmith’s striker ...’ (loc. cit., 26th July 1887). Symptomatic of the tenor of the 1880s within the union was the proposal for a new rule imposing a fine on ‘... any member proposing a man whom he knows to be incompetent.’ (loc. cit., 19th June 1888). The process of discriminating was not always a clear demonstration of unified purpose. A discussion over the admission of one ironworker in 1882 ‘... soon led to such a disorderly meeting that the President was compelled to adjourn the business.’ (loc. cit., 5th December 1882). Another discussion over a similar issue ‘... provoked a great deal of useless discussion as well as interruptions, Brother Irving for interrupting ... was ordered to be fined; also Brother J. Harkness for Making a Noise was fined ...’ (loc. cit., 8th April 1884).

62 Ibid., 12th September 1882.
the artisanal distinction between "skilled" and "unskilled" work. At the same time the centrality of the artisanal framework continued to be manifest in tensions between amalgamation and the artisanal idea of the trade as a community of the equally-skilled, with engineering occupations at times during the 1880s being reduced to a set of warring trades, rather than an amalgamated society. Although the evidence is oblique, there seems to be some relationship between the 1882 description in the press of the ASE as ‘... the turners society...’, and the occurrence around the same time in the Balmain Branch of the ASE of an issue in regard to ‘... the exclusion of patternmakers.’ In this context it was hardly surprising that in July 1884 the patternmakers again broke away from the main body and formed their own society, ‘... for the purposes of promoting their interests and protecting their trade...’, as their rules put it. In pursuit of this aim membership of the Australian Patternmakers Society was to ‘... consist of BONA FIDE pattern makers...’ (original emphasis), a group defined with reference to the typical artisanal criterion of "all-roundness", as being those ‘... duly qualified to hold the position of journeyman patternmaker in any shop.’ (emphasis added). Although only a small section of the trade, and despite the efforts of the ASE (one member described the Australian Patternmakers as ‘... only a nominal society...' - the society became established within the New South Wales labour movement during the mid-1880s, only to

---

63 ASE, Balmain Branch, Minutes, 8th May 1882.
64 For the description of the ASE as a ‘... turners society...’ see SMH, August 6th, 1882, p. 7; J. M. Philipp, ‘Trade Union Organisation in New South Wales and Victoria, 1870-1890’, MA thesis, Melbourne University, 1954, Appendix V, p. 10A, also records the existence of a ‘turners society’ in 1882. For the exclusion of patternmakers see ASE, Balmain Branch, Minutes, 28th September 1882.
65 Rules, Australasian Pattern Makers Society, 1884. NSWSA, 10/42120, Rule 1, Clauses 2 and 3, and Rule 17. For the date of formation, see ‘Form of application for Registration’; loc. cit.
66 Some idea of their size in proportion to the other iron trades can be gained from Mort's Dock, where in July 1893 10 patternmakers were employed, in an iron trades workforce comprising 70 engineers, 37 moulders, 21 blacksmiths, 44 boilermakers and 15 coppersmiths. See Letter J.P. Franke to E.M. Eddy, Chief Commissioner for Railways; 13th July 1893, Mort's Dock and Engineering Co, Out Letter Book, ML MSS 434, item 2, folio 70-2. There were still only 10 patternmakers employed at Mort's Dock even when business had begun to improve in mid-1896, and the numbers of other tradesmen had grown somewhat - 82 engineers, 76 boilermakers, 13 blacksmiths, 20 moulders. See loc. cit., letter, J.P. Franke to J. Darling, Public Service Board, 18th June 1896, folio 143-50.
67 ASE, Balmain Branch, Minutes, 8th August 1887.
disappear in the 1890s.\textsuperscript{68} Unsurprisingly, in 1888 when the Patternmakers marched in the 8 Hour Demonstration they did so entirely, and pointedly, separate from the ASE.\textsuperscript{69}

Other examples also illustrate the vitality of the artisanal paradigm as a frame of reference in the engineering trades during the 1880s. The Patternmakers' Society was formed at a time when, as in the Boilermakers' Society, there was a movement within the ASE to give recognition to intermediate categories of engineering workers. Signs of dissent against the rigidity of the artisanal taxonomy were starting to appear within the ASE, and by the mid-1880s sections within the union were demanding a reconsideration of the union's position in regard to categories of worker who were considered neither "skilled" nor "unskilled". In 1886 a Balmain member of the ASE argued '... that Drillers and Borers should be admitted members of the Society.', and thus initiated a concerted campaign, within the Balmain Branch at least, for the admission of intermediate categories of engineering workers.\textsuperscript{70} In 1888 the branch instructed its secretary to write to the governing body of the Australian branches of the ASE, asking it '... to take into consideration the advisability of allowing planers and drillers into the Society.'\textsuperscript{71} Later that year a member of the branch was requesting the Sydney District Committee of the ASE to alter the rules in regard to the wage rates of those eligible for membership:

\begin{quote}
with a view of enabling us to draw into our ranks many persons such as machine borers, planers, slotters, Drillers, and others whose wage rate at present is somewhat under the average paid to our members.\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

The development of these attitudes to intermediate categories of workers in the engineering occupations was indication that even here - in
the heartland of artisanality - the artisanal taxonomy and its logic were subject to questioning. But further development of this discordance within the ASE was snuffed out at the end of the decade with the formation of the Australian Society of Engineers in 1890. The core of the Australian Society was precisely the blacksmiths and machinists from whom demands for admission of intermediate categories of workers was emanating.\(^{73}\) Although the ASE fought hard, with the support of the craft dominated TLC, to eradicate the union, it gained acceptance among other iron trades unions such as the Boilermakers Society.\(^{74}\) Critically, however, although the Australian Society had been formed from groups within the ASE which were technically semi-skilled, it reproduced in its constitution an essentially craft form of unionism, and generated a rather different estimation of its members' abilities to that purveyed by the ASE.\(^{75}\)

While the contestation of the artisanal paradigm and its logic within both the ASE and the USB during the 1880s was relatively easily muffled, this was not the case amongst "unskilled" iron trades workers. When unionism amongst them reappears in the historical record with the establishment of the New South Wales Associated Labourers' Union at Balmain in May 1883, it does so on a basis which qualitatively marks it as different from that of the 1870s.\(^{76}\) Despite the pan-colonial aspirations of its name, as it developed the Associated Labourers became an organisation representing labourers in the shipbuilding and engineering firms of

---


\(^{74}\) See Report of Proceedings, Seventh Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress, Ballarat, 1891, pp. 2-4. Shortly after the formation of the Australian Engineers the USB decided that the new society should be invited on a joint iron trades deputation to the Premier, and also that it '... be allowed to walk with the Members [of the USB ] ...' in the 1890 8 Hours procession; see USB Minutes, 5th August 1890.

\(^{75}\) Buckley, op. cit., p. 85 characterises the Australian Engineers as less exclusive than the ASE, but the union definitely considered itself to be composed of "craftsmen". An idea of the divergence between the representations of the work of Australian Engineers' members provided by themselves, and those by the ASE, can be seen in New South Wales Court of Arbitration: Amalgamated Engineers Award - Application for Common Rule, (hereinafter ASE Common Rule Application) NSWSA, 2/117. See generally, pp. 26-52, noting especially such comments that engineering machinists were '... exceptionally skilled ...' and should be paid at '... even higher rates than turners or fitters ...' (loc. cit., p. 37, p. 49).

\(^{76}\) New South Wales Associated Labourers Union, NSWSA, file 17, 10/42119.
Balmain. For three and a half years the Associated Labourers operated alone among the "unskilled" in the iron trade, until in January 1887 the Slip and Dock General Labourers' Union was established in neighbouring Pyrmont to organise the general labourers on the wharves, in the sawmills, and in the engineering and shipbuilding yards; at its inception a branch was also established in Balmain.

The approach adopted by these unions was distinctly different to that generated in the artisanal paradigm. Their starting point was to depart from the sectionalism which underlay the craft model of union. Thus the overall objective of the Associated Labourers was 'To unite labourers together ...', a statement which - all its apparent simplicity notwithstanding - reflected the new mood of assertion that was being expressed amongst the "unskilled" in New South Wales by this time. Similarly, and more explicitly, the constitution of the SDGLU allowed that it would be "... composed of any number of labourers ...", the logic of its formation being that by union:

individual selfishness, and disloyalty to one another, and to their common interests, which have unfortunately existed for so long among Labourers, will be greatly obviated ...

IV

The appearance in 1887 of the SDGLU alongside the Associated or "Balmain" Labourers as the union had become known, indicated that the latter had developed into a sectional society enrolling those iron trades labourers who were specialists in the work of "assisting" boilermakers and

---

77 By 1895, at least, it had officially changed its name to the Balmain Labourers. See ibid., Rules, 1895.
78 Slip, Dock and General Labourers Union, NSWSA, file 52, 10/42121; loc. cit., Balmain Branch, file 53.
79 Balmain Associated Labourers, op. cit., Rules, 1883, p. 5. Such optimistic expressions of aims were not simply pro forma statements. An excellent example illustrating the contingent nature of such statements comes somewhat later, with the resurgent Patternmakers. The preamble of their re-formed union of 1918 stated no such aims, instead going out of its way to adopt highly exclusive language, describing the society's aims as to create '... a united trade, jealous of its rights and privileges, and quick to defend them ... and above all to defend and conserve those principles of self-government which form the keynote of our constitution.'. Rules. Commonwealth Patternmakers Association, 1919, NSWSA, 11/42140, file 573, p. 7.
80 SDGLU, op. cit., Rules, 1887, Rule 1.
engineers in the ship and engineering yards of Balmain.  

Several years later the Balmain Labourers explained that only some of its members had attended the 1895 8 Hours Demonstration because the rest of them ‘... were at work on the repairs to the [iron steam ship] Warrimoo at Mort’s Dock.’

At the same time other sectional unions were developing. Early in 1890 a sectional union - the Iron Dressers’ Association - appeared among those workers who specialised in “assisting” ironmoulders. Also in early 1890 another union was formed among assistants - the Iron Workers Assistants Association - its Leichhardt address perhaps indicating that it was centred in the engineering works in inner western Sydney. Its constitution emphasised that the union was to ‘... consist of Ironworkers Assistants only ...’, an occupational specification which denied the representation of “ironworkers’ assistants” as a sub-set of the undifferentiated category “unskilled labour”.

Thus by 1890 at least three and possibly four unions enrolled “unskilled” iron trades workers. The Balmain Labourers continued to be important, with a membership of around 300. Although the Iron Dressers remained small, with only about forty-five members, the IWA grew quickly during 1890 to have about 500 members, making its self-description in 1890

---

81 Buckley's identification of the Balmain Labourers as the fore-runner of the Ship Painters and Dockers Union (K. Buckley and T. Wheelwright, *No Paradise for Workers: Capitalism and the Common People in Australia 1788-1914*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 199) seems to be in error here. The Balmain Labourer's evolved into the Iron Workers' Assistants Union in 1900. It seems more likely that the Painters and Dockers evolved from an amalgamation of the Slip and Dock General Labourers Union and the early twentieth century Nautical Labourers' and Yardmen's Union of NSW, a union which covered ‘... laborers, known as nautical laborers and yardmen, ... engaged in ... lifting and transporting machinery, mooring and shifting vessels, ... wire and other rope splicing , erecting shear legs, tackle and general yard work, trucking and lightering coal, coke, and departmental stores.’. Apart from the first, none of these tasks was the work of the genuine ironworker's assistant. See Nautical Labourers' and Yardmen's Union of NSW, Rules, NSWWA, 10/42131, file 250.

82 *The Australian Workman*, 12th October 1895, p. 2.

83 For the formation of the Iron Dressers see *Report of Royal Commission on Strikes*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1891, Literary Appendix, p. 139. The registration of the Ironworkers Assistants Association of New South Wales (IWAA) with the Industrial Registrar identifies its formation on 30th May 1890. Its address was c/o Turon Hotel, Leichhardt. See NSWWA, 10/42125, file 100.

84 Ibid., Rules, 1890, Rule 1, p. 6.

85 This membership estimate is based on the figures given in *The Australian Workman*, 12th October 1895, p. 2.
as ‘... one of the largest unions in the colony... ’ not entirely exaggeration.86 Part of its rapid expansion may have been due to absorption of iron trades workers who had previously been enrolled by the SDGLU, as the latter disappears from the historical record for the duration of the 1890s. This was impressive coverage indeed, in a Sydney unskilled ironworking population of around 1400, and it demonstrated to a hitherto unrealised extent the potential for unionism amongst the “unskilled” in the iron trades.87

This proliferation of unionism among “unskilled” iron workers was accompanied by distinctly un-artisanal attitudes to their own labour. The Rules of the SDGLU enjoined its members to demonstrate their worth to their employers ‘... by ability and strict attention to their duties, ...’; to reconceive in this way “unskilled” labour as requiring ability, departed significantly from the derogatory representations of iron trades labourers contained in the artisanal tradition.88 The very title of the Iron Dressers Union (rather than, as it could have been, “the Iron Moulders’ Assistants’ Union”) also constituted a departure from precedent, in that it signalled the intention to abandon its dependent linkage to the “skilled” occupation, as well as its subservient linkage to the group of general “unskilled” labourers.89 And this same sense of independence was also present in the IWA: its rules specified that members who proposed another assistant for membership were to ensure that he was ‘... qualified to become a member.’,


87 This is a necessarily rough estimate, based on Shields’ figures of 2700 in engineering and 900 in boilermaking in 1891. See Shields, op. cit., p. 149 and p. 175 respectively. The proportion of “unskilled” is difficult to estimate due to the definitional problems associated with that category. Nevertheless, based on Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, op. cit., pp. 22-3, who reckoned that about two-thirds were “skilled”, and one-third “unskilled”, the total “unskilled” in the engineering and boilermaking trades was around 1300-1400 men.

88 SDGLU, op. cit., file 82, Rule 1.

89 Although in common with many of the unions of unskilled workers of the era, the Iron Dressers may have modelled some of its features on the craft union model, it certainly should not be grouped with the craft unions in existence in 1890, as it is in Philipp’s survey of New South Wales unions in 1890 (see Philipp, op. cit., Appendix VI). The Iron Dressers Union was decidedly un-craft; shortly after its formation in 1890 it sought to amalgamate with other iron trades labourers’ unions. See the Australian Workman, 14th November 1891, p. 2; 28th November 1891, p. 3; 12th December 1891, p. 3.
that is, someone '... capable of obtaining his living as an Assistant ...'.

These were radically different from the typical artisanal representation - which was to render the work of iron workers' assistants invisible or characterless. On occasion this reassessment was carried through into a profoundly sceptical attitude to the degree of differences in ability between "skilled" and "unskilled". In 1892 the delegate of the Balmain Labourers to the TLC, Mr Macfarlane, expressed something of this scepticism when he '... made some disparaging remarks ... to the effect that on night Shifts the Boilermakers fitted up the Brace and Drill and set the Laborer to do the Boilermakers work while the Boilermakers went to sleep.'

While the unionism of the unskilled in the late 1880s and 1890s thus expressed a moving away from the artisanal paradigm, in other respects the "unskilled" iron workers remained enmeshed within relations of subordination and domination to the "skilled". Although the Iron Dressers Union sought to establish a reciprocal membership between itself and other unions of the "unskilled", both inside and outside the iron trades (the Clearance Card system), and ultimately subsumed itself into the IWA, it is noteworthy that both it and the Balmain Labourers reproduced in their self-conscious sectionalism a central feature of craft unionism. This was testament to the continuing hegemony of the artisanal logic of organisation. Also reflecting that dominance, the "unskilled" continued to operate on the basis of craft union patronage, and to adopt the tone towards the latter of

---

91 USB Minutes, 12th April 1892.
92 The 'Clearance Card' system sought to establish reciprocal membership amongst "unskilled" unions - including the Wharf Labourers, Navvies and General Labourers, United Labourers, Balmain Labourers, Coal Lumpers, Ironworkers Assistants, Seamen, Fellmongers, Brewery Employees, Tanners and Curriers and Gas Stokers. See The Australian Workman; 7th March 1891, p. 3 and loc. cit., 12th September 1891, p. 4. The subsumption of the Iron Dressers is suggested by their disappearance from the historical record at the end of 1891, after a meeting of the IWAA at which the Secretary of the Iron Dressers '... spoke in favour of amalgamation ...'; loc. cit., 12th December 1891, p. 3.
petitioners to their superiors. They were more inclined to 'Appeal to the Skilled Workers of the Iron Trade', as one ironworkers assistant titled his letter to them, rather than to demand their support by right as equals.93

The deference of the "unskilled" unions among the iron trades was also reflected in their continuation of the practice of operating in contexts dominated by the "skilled". Thus when the membership of the IWA began to dwindle rapidly after the defeat of the Maritime strike at the end of 1890, the IWA's response was '... that it would only require the help of the skilled workers to get the Union up to its old standard.'94 This level of dependence characterised the relations of the "skilled" with the "unskilled", and also permeated the development of independent relationship between the "unskilled" unions and their employers. In 1891 and 1892, for example, the Balmain Labourers were accompanied by delegates from the USB and the Iron Trades Council of the TLC when they approached Mort's Dock for recognition of the union, and for an increase in wage rates.95 And to the extent that patronage relied on and expressed a lack of industrial organisation among the "unskilled", to some degree the "skilled" operated to subvert the further development of unionism amongst "their" assistants. Thus we find an ironworkers' assistant incredulous in 1891 that although 'The skilled workers must know that there is an association for their assistants ...', yet they actively undermined it in that they did not '... try to induce their assistants to join it ...'.96 And this was not an isolated example, other iron trades unions operating in a similar way. Given the important role that foremen could play in reproducing the artisanal taxonomy, the

93 'An Appeal to the Skilled Workers of the Iron Trade' by 'One of Them', The Australian Workman, 10th October 1891, p. 1.
94 Ibid.
95 For the assistance of the USB in gaining the recognition by employers of the Balmain Labourers, see USB Minutes, 8th and 27th July, 5th August, 19th August 1891. For the labourers' request for assistance in regard to wages see loc. cit, 13th October 1891, 12th April 1892. Also see 'Report of the Trades and Labour Council of NSW for the half year to June 30 1892', NSWSA, 10/42121, file 89.
96 'An Appeal to the Skilled Workers of the Iron Trade', op. cit.
Secretary of the Irondressers, William Brennan, was probably not
exaggerating when he commented in 1891 that the Ironmoulders' Society
had '... almost crushed them out of existence ...' by allowing its foremen
members to employ non-union iron dressers.\textsuperscript{97}

Unsurprisingly considering these practices, the typically disdainful
attitude of the "skilled" to the "unskilled" also persisted. Despite the
contention of Nairn and others that most craft unions in New South Wales
during this period '... had no aristocratic notions with regard to labouring
unions.', this was not the case in the iron trades. Although an ironworker's
assistant could write in 1891 that '... the barrier which used to exist with
reference to the idea that skilled workers were superior to the unskilled is
dying from the fact that they all send their representatives to the one
[Trades and Labour] Council ...', his point was to draw attention precisely to
the anachronistic character of the skilled workers in the iron trades, where
that "barrier" persisted.\textsuperscript{98} In 1882 the Iron Trades Conference - a body on
which both skilled and unskilled iron trades unions participated - was
disbanded due to the inability of the skilled to work with the unskilled.\textsuperscript{99} In
1888 the motion within the USB that '... the Secretary write to the various
shop delegates inviting the boiler-makers assistants to join in the procession
with the boilermakers on 8 hours day.' was lost.\textsuperscript{100} The strength of the
underlying hostility to the unskilled by the skilled can also be gauged by the
remarks of J.E. Elphinstone, a former President of the Iron Trades
Employers' Association, who in addressing the annual dinner of the
Redfern Branch of the ASE in 1891 found it necessary to remind the
members of the union, '... while feeling proud of their own union, not to
forget the unskilled wage earners.'\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{97} The Australian Workman, letter, William Brennan, 24th October 1891, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{98} 'An Appeal to the Skilled Workers of the Iron Trade', op. cit.
\textsuperscript{100} USB Minutes, 18th September 1888.
\textsuperscript{101} The Australian Workman, 6th June 1891, p. 4. Elphinstone was President of the ITEA in the 1870s;
see Sydney TLC Minutes, 20th September 1873, and Niland, op. cit., p. 11.
Any further developments in this early-1890s mixed pattern of
continuation and contestation of the artisanal paradigm and the relations
between the “skilled” and “unskilled” in the iron trades, were truncated by
the onset of the depression of the mid-1890s. Although unemployment
levels among the skilled iron trades workers were moderate relative to
other occupations, the depression had a heavy impact on the unskilled. For
them, the depression meant short-time working and unemployment, and
in this context, the membership of their unions dwindled throughout the
decade.\footnote{102} The SLDGU was probably the first to disappear, incorporated into
the IWA in 1890. The Iron Dressers continued an independent existence
until 1892, when it also disappeared, probably amalgamating with the
IWA.\footnote{103} The latter was still in existence in the mid 1890s, although its small
contingent of 55 members who marched in the 8 Hours Demonstration in
1895 suggested that its existence was precarious.\footnote{104} Yet it was not until April
1897 that the union was formally dissolved, when ten of its members passed
a motion moved by the Secretary F.H. Drake that ‘... we the members of the
Ironworkers Assistants on account of the few belonging to the said Society
demn it advisable that the same be wound up.’\footnote{105} Of all the unions of the
“unskilled” the Balmain Labourers held up best under the pressures of
depression. In 1895 it was still an active society, participating in the colony’s
labour movement (in 1895 it was in correspondence with the Australian
Labour Federation), and continued to have a membership of around 300.\footnote{106}
Yet it too finally succumbed and formally dissolved itself in January 1898.\footnote{107}
Nonetheless, it continued to exist as a functioning but informal body after

\footnotesize
102 Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, op. cit., p. 132; Buckley and Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 199;
Merritt, op. cit., p. 26
103 See above, p. 000.
104 ‘The 8-Hour Demonstration’, The Australian Workman, 12th October 1895, p. 3.
106 For its contact with the ALF see The Australian Workman, 22nd June 1895, p. 3. Its mid-1890s
membership numbers are calculated from the numbers given by the union in explanation for the small
contingent of Balmain Labourers which marched in the 1895 8 Hours procession. See loc. cit., 12th
October 1895, p. 3.
107 Balmain Associated Labourers, op. cit., letter to Industrial Registrar, 17th January 1898.
this, as in 1899 the Balmain Branch of the ASE decided to refer a matter to ‘... the district committee of unskilled labour.’.\textsuperscript{108}

V

Iron trades employers during the period remained separated from the interplay and tension between the artisanal and industrial concepts of skill. A combination of factors meant that most iron trades employers were prepared to accept both the artisanal taxonomy and the framework of craft unionism within which it was set. Several imperatives placed material limits on the extent of division of labour within the engineering and shipbuilding industries before 1900. In particular the needs of employers for the “all-round” skill of the “craftsman” coincided with the division of labour which was preserved within craft unionism. This need derived principally from the a-rhythmic nature of demand in both engineering and shipbuilding. Although from the 1870s employers attempted to generate constant business activity, adopting such manoeuvres as lobbying the New South Wales Government to fill contracts for railway locomotives, rolling stock, and iron vessels by local rather than imported manufacture, the results of this were only partially successful, and demand for their manufactured products remained unpredictable. A similar pattern of unpredictability characterised repair work - a considerable portion of the work of engineering works and (in particular) of ship-yards.\textsuperscript{109}

In this context of unpredictability the division of labour remained relatively simple, and “all round” skill was at a premium. While waiting for periods of glut, iron trades employers employed workers on a variety of manufacturing work, building engines and their boilers to be put into stock and sold when demand increased. This was necessarily production undertaken on a small scale, so that equipment, workshop space and

\textsuperscript{108} ASE, Third Balmain Branch, Minute Book 3, 26th June 1899.
\textsuperscript{109} Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, op. cit., pp. 16-9; Shields, op. cit., pp. 147-8, p. 150, p. 175.
workers could easily be made available when need arose. In this environment "all-round" abilities rather than those of specialists were important, and it was typically these "better" workers who formed a core of more-or-less permanently employed journeymen, retained in employment throughout the fluctuations in the volume of employment in the iron trades.\footnote{Some idea of this was given by Franki in 1908, when he commented that Mort's Dock had undertaken a contract to make marine engines and boilers, '... not with the idea of making anything [i.e. profit] but with a view to keeping our hands together ... it is absolutely essential to keep a large number of skilled mechanics always at work ... so as to have them when necessity requires.' See New South Wales Court of Arbitration: Amalgamated Society of Engineers v. Iron Trades Employers Association (hereinafter Engineers Case), Vol. 87, NSWSA, 2/110, p. 320. He also described how in iron trades recessions 'The good men are always kept going ...' and the men who are not "good" '... have to stand by.' (loc. cit., p. 458). For the importance of all-round skill see Buckley, The Amalgamated Engineers, op. cit., p. 29; Shields, op. cit., p. 148, pp. 150-1, p. 176.} If this system meant that from time-to-time employers were paying for more skill than they needed, other features of employment relations operated to offset this. In particular, the system of daily, or even hourly hiring of workmen, allowed employers to alter the amount and quality of skill they purchased according to the needs of production.\footnote{Although the daily rate of pay was common, the New South Wales Statistical Register 1883, p. 12, records hourly rates of pay for boilermakers and their assistants.}

If the artisanal division of labour meshed with the needs of engineering and shipbuilding employers before 1900, this did not necessarily mean that they quiescently accepted the conditions of employment which evolved. As early as 1860 iron trades employers were attempting to enforce time discipline on their employees; P.N. Russell fined employees for lateness, and the practice was unlikely to have been confined to his firm alone.\footnote{Niland, op. cit., p. 4.} Evidence of the employers' degree of success in taking control of the labour time of their employees is sparse, but it can only have ever been partial in the nineteenth century - still in 1910 J.P. Franki, the manager of the most important site of iron trades employment in nineteenth and early twentieth century New South Wales - Mort's Dock - was complaining of the '... habit Boilermakers have of ceasing work in connection with the funerals of members of the union and relatives.', commenting that '... a whole body
of workmen, on the shortest notice, stating that they were not going to work ... was calculated to disorganise the whole workshop ...'.

In other matters too iron trades employers before 1890 were only partially able to exert their will on their employees. The most significant iron trade dispute of the nineteenth century - the 1874 iron trades' strike - arose from the employers' assertion that they had the sole right to organise production and employment conditions in ways which suited their needs. Although played out as a struggle over the eight hour system, which had been established in 1872, the compromise between employers and employees which ended the strike was both a reiteration of the eight hour system, but also a recognition by employers that '... the worker had a right to participate in work rule changes.'

This was a central feature of the context in which the engineering and shipbuilding industry developed between the mid-1870s and 1890, from a minor to an important part of the colony's industrial structure. Although industrial relations in the industry were relatively tranquil during this period of rapid growth, high profits, technological stability, relative wage prosperity, and consistent although fluctuating levels of employment, employers were always constrained to act with an awareness of the central place occupied by workers and their trade unions in their enterprises. This was not so much to recognise as legitimate the "rights" of trade unions, but recognition of the fact of the strong position which iron trades unions had developed before the 1890s.

In thus recognising the place of trade unions, iron trade employers were also recognising many of the central features of the artisanal practice

---

115 For that development see Butlin, op. cit., p. 23, pp. 204-5. According to Butlin, the metal manufacturing industry was the only manufacturing sector in New South Wales to "... enlarge [its] share of total employment, growing from 20% to 25% between 1877 and 1891."; loc. cit., p. 205.
which accompanied craft unionism. Most importantly, the employers
confined their demands within the parameters of craft unionism, giving
assent during the 1880s to such central artisanal conditions as the standard
wages which were established as policy in the engineering and boilermaking
unions.\textsuperscript{116} Although large employers such as Mort’s Dock payed a variety of
wages, they did so in the framework of craft union policies in regard to a
uniform rate of pay and classification of skilled workers. Significantly, it
was only in notoriously non-union shops, such as Hudsons’ Engineering
works, that breaches of the artisanal dichotomy became more significant. It
was indication of the taxonomic effects of craft unionism, that here, and
here alone during the 1880s and 1890s, the artisanal dichotomy was replaced
with a tripartite system of classification.\textsuperscript{117}

But whilst iron trades employers were thus prepared to work within
the confines of the craft system, they did so with an awareness of the
limitations imposed by it. Some individual employers, especially Franki,
displayed an awareness of the constructed rather than natural basis of the
craft organisation of production. Rejecting the attempt by craft unions to
portray themselves as naturally independent islands forming an
archipelago of skilled metal workers, Franki commented in 1886 that ‘The
departments of boilermakers, shipwrights, blacksmiths, plumbers,
patternmakers, etc, all “dovetailed” into each other.’. This was to become
the recurrent theme within his analysis of work and occupational
differentiation in the iron trades.\textsuperscript{118} Other iron trades employers expressed a

\textsuperscript{116} Shortly after deciding to establish the standard wage in 1882, the USB received letters from the
ITEA, Australasian Steam Navigation Co(ASN), and the Railways ‘... promising that the
requirements with regard to the “Minimum Rate of Wages” would be complied with.’; USB Minutes,
15th August 1882.

\textsuperscript{117} See the details of the strike in 1895, in which Hudson reduced the wages of his employees according
to a three-fold typology: those receiving 36s and under to be reduced by 7.5%; those between 37s and
48s to be reduced by 10% and those 18s and over by 12.5%. See The Australian Workman, 27th
April 1895, p. 3. For Hudson’s as a notoriously non-union shop, see Buckley, The Amalgamated
Engineers, op. cit, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{118} SMH, 7th October 1886, p. 6. Franki continued to reiterate this analysis of the labour processes he
managed. In 1908, for example, he remarked to the Arbitration Court that the iron trades were ‘... knitted up together ...’; Engineers Case, op. cit, pp. 320-1. He also commented that in ship building all
‘... these trades so dovetail in that they work together ...’; loc. cit, p. 356.
latent critique of the operation of craft unionism as a blockage to their
capacity to purchase precise quantities of a particular quality of labour
power, through their persistent efforts to set in place Babbage's central
solution to this problem - piece work. The issue of piecework had been
involved in the 1861 dispute between the largest engineering employer in
the colony, P.N. Russell, and iron trades workers\textsuperscript{119}, and it was introduced
again in 1870 by T.S. Mort. He proposed a scheme to sell shares in the
engineering and dock works to his employees, because he considered that
among other advantages it would '... enable [him] to enforce piecework,
which latter is the only way of breaking down wages.'\textsuperscript{120} A decade later, the
most important iron trades dispute in the 1880s also involved the issue,
with the Iron Trades Employers' Association (ITEA) attempting to gain the
in-principle agreement from the iron trades unions on piecework.\textsuperscript{121}

The recurrent nature of the attempts to establish piecework was
testament both to the effectiveness of the iron trades unions' resistance, as
well as to the importance employers placed on establishing a more
individuated basis for the payment of wages. In the disturbed conditions of
the 1890s, employers' calls for the establishment of piecework fell away. But
at the same time, the intention which underlay that project was manifest in
other forms, and in particular, as we shall see in the following Chapters, in
the development of an interest in the classificatory route to profitability.

\textsuperscript{119} Niland, op. cit., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{120} Quoted in A. Barnard, Visions and Profits: Studies in the Business Career of T.S. Mort, Melbourne
\textsuperscript{121} See report of the ITEA's approach to the USB for '... a 10% reduction [in wages] and piecework.';
USB Minutes, 17th May 1887.