A history of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union

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INTRODUCTION
The Clothing and Allied Trades' Union (CATU) is an organisation of workers which was established under the Commonwealth Arbitration Act in 1907 by a number of craft societies of clothing workers. This is the first study of the Union's history, the first of a 'women's industrial union' in Australia. Union records begin in 1866 but are incomplete for some time after that. The most detailed period of explanation, from the 1880s to 1967, is nevertheless substantial - and rather longer than that of other doctoral theses on unionism. This 'Introduction' will explain how this period has been examined. It will look at the nature and purpose of this study in the context of labour historiography and critiques of it.

In the last twenty years or so, there has been a lively and often acrimonious debate within labour history. This is no bad thing insofar as it encourages labour historians to think clearly about the nature of their work. In so doing, it becomes possible to explain how and why a particular piece of work has been written. This is the main purpose of this Introduction. The debate about labour history will not be reviewed in full because this has been done recently and comprehensively. From a brief discussion of trade union historiography we move directly to an explanation of the nature of this thesis.

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1. The most recent published summary is J. Merritt's 'Labour History' in G. Osborne and W. Mandle (eds.), New History (Sydney, 1982). See also M. Sampson, 'Recent Criticisms of Labour History in Britain and Australia', Labour History, No.36, May 1979; and E. Fry, 'The Writing of Labour History in Australia', unpublished paper presented at University of Wollongong, 17 August 1983. The following summary draws heavily upon Fry and Merritt.
The writing of labour history in Australia began in the nineteenth-century. It was almost entirely the work of trade union officials; W.E. Murphy on the Victorian labour movement was followed by G.A. Black and W.G. Spence on the Labor Party and the Australian Workers' Union (AWU).2 Their work, it has been suggested, was 'of a somewhat celebratory nature'.3 This verdict is hardly unkind. From then, until the 1960s, little more was done. Three authors deserve mention: V.G. Childe, B. Fitzpatrick and R. Gollan. The last-named's Radical and Working Class Politics (Melbourne, 1960) set the scene for an expansion of labour history.4

In the mid-1960s, during Australia's first 'collective boom' in writing labour history it was believed that institutional history was the logical place to begin.5 The history of working-class institutions was more than a redressing of the balance in 'history proper' - although that aspect was important. It could provide a guide to action, reference points for further studies, and it could be

2. W.E. Murphy, 'Victoria', in J. Norton (ed.), History of Capital and Labour (Sydney, 1888); G.A. Black, The Labor Party in NSW, (Sydney, 1895); W.G. Spence, Australia’s Awakening (Sydney, 1909); The History of the AWU (Sydney, 1911).


the first step towards a history of the labour movement itself and of socialism. This initial emphasis on trade union history was not always explicitly defended. It was, rather, part of a generalised practice; a received tradition, consistent with British and American experience.

There were special difficulties for labour historians in Australia because many academics viewed the work as 'doubly damned'. They felt that Australian history was not a fit subject for university study. Labour history was definitely taboo - at worst value-laden propaganda; at best, an unwarranted specialism. Nevertheless, labour history grew - with trade union studies to the fore. Work on socialist and labour parties and biographies was undertaken. A thorough, Marxist, analysis of the relations between parties and unions was provided by I. Turner in his *Industrial Labour and Politics* (Canberra, 1965). All of these works remain helpful, some are still unsurpassed.6

These works, and their authors, attracted serious criticism. In general, conservatives tried to marginalise labour history, making its practitioners very defensive and extremely reliant on empiricism. The most telling assault came from members of the 'new left' in the late

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1960s and early 1970s. For them, the 'old left' had fallen into a number of traps, having empiricism but no theoretical clarity; no class analysis as a way forward, merely a radical nationalism, looking back. The emphasis upon institutions excluded many groups and many questions. Even the simple concepts in union histories were not made clear. The new left demanded that historians take up wider studies and examine them in new ways. Class relations, not class, society, not its parts, should be the concern of socialist historians.

In these arguments, trade union history was quickly passed over. It was, perhaps, seen as the least redeemable of the old left's work. Trade union histories were, indeed, inexplicit in theory and purpose. They were usually concerned with an 'economist' version of the past, implicitly informed, it seemed, by the Webbs' earliest — and narrowest — definition of a trade union as

a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment.7

This, it was subsequently argued, scarcely apprehended a union's nature and activities far less those of classes. Despite many years of debate, historians found it difficult to find ways ahead. Any work now written is — explicitly or not — informed by all these debates. This study does not pretend to provide an answer to them. It is hardly a solution because it has only been in the practice of writing it that the ideas discussed in this introduction have become fully formed.

7. S. and B. Webb, The History of Trades Unionism (London 1894; 1911 edition) p.1. In the revised edition of 1920 the definition ended '... the conditions of their working lives'.
Its writing may be understood in terms of the question: 'what does it mean to write a union history in the 1980s?'. To begin to answer this we shall look at the views put by one historian who commands the respect of both new and old left. When, in the 1960s, labour historians were securing a toe-hold in Australian universities, Eric Hobsbawm was reviewing a 'serious' tradition of British trade union history which was based on seventy years of work. When he looked to the future, he indirectly affirmed the 'institutional base'.

The structure has still largely to be built, but without the foundation of the past two decades, the task of building it would be far more remote than it appears at present.  

In the 'two decades' to which he referred, there had been an expansion in union history and a rise in its quality. Hobsbawm's article suggested, in 1964, some problems similar to those confronting Australian labour historians now. An examination of his suggestions helps in resolving questions about how, and why, trade union history might be written. The advances in historiography in the UK notwithstanding, Hobsbawm could see value in more histories of individual unions.

For Australian labour historians, there is further significance in an article of Hobsbawm's, written in 1974. This article, it should be noted, was written after Hobsbawm had become the hero of many new left (and other) historians, with the publication of his Daedalus article 'From Social History to the History of Society'. His ringing call for

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a new kind of history was followed by an application of new techniques to more traditional forms of work. He believed that there was still scope for older methods of history. For our discussion, a central claim then followed:

In countries without a serious tradition of labour history, or where the subject has been largely mythologized, the scope for even the most old-fashioned straight historian is still enormous.9

May this 'licence' be granted to Australian labour historians? Is labour history still in its infancy? To the second part of Hobsbawm's condition, that labour history has been 'mythologized', the answer is surely 'yes'. Indeed, this was precisely the ground upon which much of the new left's and some conservative attacks on labour history stood. If it was a somewhat harsh judgment on work done in the 1960s, it was an apposite criticism of the earlier works of Murphy, Black and Spence, as well as subsequent 'participant histories'. No more needs to be said on this point, for it has been well made by the critics of old left union history.

To the first part, 'a serious tradition', an answer has been suggested in responding to the matter of mythology. A good proportion of Australian trade union history has been written by officials. As such, it is particularly prone to a general tendency to write history which glorifies a purified version of the past. Although there are a couple of useful accounts, most have no place in a 'serious tradition'. For the historian, these works are closer to primary source material than to secondary.

There are, even now, less than two dozen published Australian union histories - about the same number of works that Hobsbawm described as 'important' in the U.K. some twenty years ago. As suggested, many are celebratory tracts or highly personalised narratives. These usually tell us more, one way or another, about the author than the subjects. Some recent, more 'academic' treatments are disappointing. Fitzpatrick and Cahill's *The Seamen's Union of Australia* is disjointed and rather impressionistic, while Murray and White's *The Ironworkers* neither fully comprehends nor explains that Union. None of these would receive Hobsbawm's 'serious tradition' imprimatur.

This leaves but seven, of which two each are about miners (and one is close to participant's special pleading), printers, and engineers and one deals with teachers. If this were a tradition of some standing, it would not be a wide one.10 The occupational and industrial lacunae


are so obvious that no comment is needed, except that it should be mentioned that only one covers women workers. None deals with women's blue-collar work. There are other sorts of, very considerable, interstices in union historiography because, in the published works, there is a great chronological and geographic distortion. Three of the seven are based in just one State each, whilst most of the others are concentrated on southeastern Australia. Few deal with the Split of the 1950s in any detail.

Trade union history has made few advances in Australia in the last twenty years. If the actual practice of other countries were followed, there would, unquestionably, be a place for it at the centre of labour history. Indeed, it is the very attacks on the old left that show up the lack of depth and width in the area. We may now consider how else union history could be written and how this history has been written.

Having come this far with Hobsbawm, we might note what else he has to say about writing union history. His short article from 1964 is a remarkable essay because, in calling for more union history to be written, he prefigured much of the call for a wider view of labour history. Unions could, and should, be seen in a more comprehensive framework both in terms of the nature of unionism itself and in relation to the labour movement and the working-class.

If this hinted at a wide definition of a union's activities or of its nature, then the point was emphasised in another paragraph. Hobsbawm reminded his readers that unions were not mere interest groups
analogous to employers' associations. 'The Union is an aspect of working-class life ... and a reflection of that life'. Looking at union history in this way might help historians to move away from merely economist accounts. It might be understood that 'ostensibly 'economic' movements' involved more than expressed economic demands; it might be possible to work with more fluid definitions of unionism than was usually the case.11

By 1974, Hobsbawm could re-phrase this to suggest that labour history must be seen as 'part of the history of society', that is, he had come to see unions not merely as an aspect of the working class but of class relations. There is, then, something of a tension between this view and his blessing for what he called 'old-fashioned' history. That this tension is discernible in the work of so respected a historian is salutary, because it warns us of the difficulty of resolving the dilemma. In the one article, in 1974, he found a role for institutional labour history and also argued that labour historians 'must use new methods and techniques'.12 These techniques were, by now, a familiar list (in discussion if not in practice): quantitative data, oral history, attention to the work of other disciplines and, more generally and most importantly, theoretical clarity and explicit handling of ideas and hypotheses.

Which of these claims for labour history should be taken up in

Australia? Writing about Australian labour history in 1982, John Merritt summarised much of the domestic and international debate. The same internal contradictions were evident here. Union historians should not look at their subject as 'an entity separate from its total social formation'.

If this amounted to a sympathetic summary of the new left's critique, it should be set alongside Merritt's other observation that new left historians had not produced 'a viable alternative to the methodology they condemned'. This underpinned the substantial resistance to change in labour history.

Merritt suggested, by implication, that this was a particular problem for postgraduate researchers. He showed a commendable (and, in print, all but unique) appreciation of these difficulties and of the reality of what might be called the means of production of texts. Whatever intentions there might be, he noted that 'constraints of time, words and tradition' debilitated the movement towards newer forms of history. At this level, there are problems associated with other constraints. Jim Hagan noted, in 1968, that union history would be 'predominantly institutional ... for some time to come', because union officials, in making records available would tend to have in mind accounts being written of the structure and policy development of their organisation. The concern has shifted from access to

14. ibid., p.147.
15. ibid., p.138.
funding. Many unions' records are now housed in University archives and access is usually easy. When union officials undertake to fund a history they may well have similar (if implicit) expectations to those of a generation ago.

The answer to questions about why and how to write union histories—and the concomitant complexities—may be summarised thus: union history has tended to be the basis for much labour history; although labour history has expanded in Australia, it still lags behind other countries and we may accept that Australia falls into the ambit of countries in which good yields may accrue from conventional histories. Equally, might there not be ways in which union historians could work with new techniques at hand and new questions in mind? In thinking about this we encounter some constraints—the very absence of other union, or labour movement, histories, the evident failure of the new left to produce much work, and the immediate and not unimportant problems of 'thesis production'. There is no ready formula for success which this introduction can summarise. Rather, the thesis itself is an answer. It is the full response to these problems. With this in mind, we may look briefly at how these problems are resolved.

In summarising the constraints upon the trade union historian it is clearly implied that this history is one which is 'old-fashioned', that is, in which the development of the union's structure and the unfolding of its activities are defined in an essentially economist way. There is an internal logic which, to some extent, allows this.
Because the union is an industrial union, covering practically the whole clothing trade (or aspiring to), its development may be traced against the changing industry in which it operates. The internal dynamics of the organisation itself may be similarly traced. This history is primarily based upon this development as revealed through the Union's Federal and Branch records. It is, then, an institutional history. It is not a history of the industry, of women workers, of piece-work or of tariffs. During the research for and writing of this study all these histories impinged - as did thematic concerns of class, gender and the state. But this thesis is not 'about' all this. Its centralising theme is the development of a union structure.

This is not to say that this thesis is indistinguishable from those written in the 1960s. In general this would not be possible: all work is affected by the conditions of its production. Further, some of the above problems become explanatory tools in the history. It is necessary to provide 'pocket histories' of the industry, of changes in women's work and arbitration practice.

It is possible to isolate several ways in which this study is poised between new and old left. First, it looks explicitly at what inspires and constrains union action; that is, at determinants of and changes in the structure. (In trying, in turn, to explain these determinants, the limits of 'labour history without society' begin to appear). Second, it emphasises the internal dynamics of the Union. In using the familiar 'growth/structure/policy' model of union development, it is not just the nature of each aspect that is studied but the relationships between them. The phrase 'internal dynamics' and the
analysis of these relationships also comprehends a history of relationships between membership and officers. Third, in dealing with the origins of the Union, some attempt is made to construct a model of the relationship between the determinants of those origins; in this case, between the state, protectionism, and work processes. Finally, it addresses something with which both old and new left might have dealt more explicitly: the definition of unionism. For, if we say we are writing the history of an institution, we still have to be explicit about how we define it. By working within an exclusively economist framework, might we not be missing important aspects of unionism?

If some of these concerns might be seen as advances on older histories, we should be quite clear about why they can be discussed. A first reason, in line with much of the reasoning herein, is the prior work of other historians, particularly in work on craft unionism and in mapping out major reference points in twentieth-century union conflicts. A second reason relates to the changes in the historian's tools of the trade. Of these, the most significant for the study of an industry union is the development, or more precisely the revival, of labour process theory. This has allowed a more detailed analysis of the development of control, of the transition from craft to industry, and of the sexual division of labour. The structure and organisation of, and work in, the industry is not merely a 'back-drop' to the Union. It is an important part of explaining the development of a range of activities and structural aspects of the Union.

A discussion of the determinants of union action follows, but we may
conclude this section by adding a significant point about labour process. A central concern in labour process theory is the nature of control. This is an immensely complex area in itself but, for now, we may confine discussion of it to its impact on trade union history (and, potentially, action). In his exemplary discussion of the limits and possibilities of trade union action, Richard Hyman recalled the importance to unionists, particularly early this century, of conflict about control in the workplace. He noted that 'this can form the basis for far more explicitly 'political' demands' than economism or even control itself. This view allows us to escape the rather arid debates on the nature of trade unionism and union history. Even in the traditional formula of the study of the internal relationships of union, this thesis can highlight disputes about the nature of work, union democracy and unionism itself and can discuss the development of political consciousness.

To summarise the nature of this thesis: it is more 'determined' by national practice than international theory. It is a history of the development of the structure of the CATU - its external determinants and internal dynamics. As, however, national boundaries are not barriers to ideas, the study has some different bases from earlier union histories. In especially emphasising the origins of, determinants on, and possibilities for the Union's structure, it would go some way to satisfying one recent reviewer of labour history.

Margaret Sampson wrote that new forms of history should switch the emphasis, from what people did, to trying 'to comprehend the forces limiting, and in that sense, determining ... choice'.

How that is done, and how argument and narrative, empirical evidence and theoretical clarity should be balanced, is not, in the final analysis, discernible from this introduction. The balance between competing ideas of what a union history should be is to be judged from the complete text. That is the theory and the history.

This thesis is located in the centre of debates about the theory and practice of trades' unionism because it asks the questions: 'what is the Clothing and Allied Trades' Union?'. 'How and why has the Union developed?'. The thesis traces the development, in different conditions, of an actual historical solution to questions about the nature and aims of trades' unionism.

To answer these questions, the thesis relies upon an analysis of the economy, the structure of the industry and its work processes, the role of the state, the development of working-class politics and, importantly, the role of the Union's past. There are some different approaches to earlier union histories. In an examination of the nature of work we immediately encounter the sexual division of labour. This is discussed in the first chapter and at periods of change in industry and union. It also draws attention to something which is both anterior to and conditioned by it - wider, if often

implicit, notions about the work done by women. This is perhaps most important, or best documented, in relation to the two world wars and the depression of the 1930s.

There are, also, areas in common with earlier histories. Because of the system of compulsory arbitration of industrial disputes, the state is particularly important for Australian labour history. In this history the impact of different systems of arbitration is given great emphasis in explaining the Union's origins. Strictly, the CATU is a 'law-made' union, established under and for compulsory arbitration. Equally, the unions which set up the CATU had origins in different colonies with unique arbitration frameworks, industrial structures and trade policies. Emphasising the question of 'determination' straightaway suggests the possibility of conflict between the sorts of unions created under such different circumstances and of conflict between the CATU's proximate origins (the state), and its earlier roots in the factories and shops.

The thesis lays an unusual emphasis upon the Union itself as a determinant, that is, on the ways in which the structure and traditions of the Union determine subsequent developments. It will, in part, be the aim of this study to show how these determinants are important in shaping the Union and in answering questions about the nature of the Union.

The answers to the questions posed, and the history informed, by these determinants are underpinned by several related questions which, again, relate to existing work. That the CATU is predominantly a
'women's union' suggests several things. First, it provides an interest beyond the 'institutional field' in that there is a growing number of studies dealing with women's paid-work. Second, it suggests a difficulty in that, as the first such history, there may well be problems of comparison with the existing literature. This history would perhaps be more intelligible if we knew more about the textile or boot trades - and their unions. Third, it suggests other 'organising questions': does the Union have - and did its officials think it should have - special characteristics because of its female membership? This question will recur in the thesis. That the CATU is, formally, a 'law-made' Union leads us to ask questions about the impact of arbitration on both the structure and politics of the Union.

Just as 'determinants' and 'questions' are consistent, so are 'themes'. With the establishment of craft unions, 'control' was a central motif, as with the forming of the Federal union, 'amalgamation' was central. These union policies are used throughout the thesis to link determinants and action and to explain relationships outside and within the Union. This thesis traces the outline of the transition from handicraft production to modern industry - a process which is never complete in that the international and local structure of the industry and the nature of its work processes are still changing. The thesis uses this transition to help explain another one - from craft to industrial union. This transition may have been, formally, complete in 1907 but, like industrial change, it is central to the whole thesis.
The nature of the Union is explicable through given determinants, understood through consistent themes and may be seen as being fought over in terms of craft and industry.

The study is set out in an orthodox manner, some explanation of which draws together the questions raised thus far. To explain the early characteristics of the Union, it is necessary to examine in some detail the industry and the craft unions from which it was built. Unfortunately, we can only do this for Victoria and New South Wales, because there are no extant Union records elsewhere. Thereafter the study aims to be more truly national.

'Standard practice' is followed in that the 'British heritage' is first examined. It is also necessary to look at the industry, the nature of the work and at unorganised labour. In the opening three chapters, an attempt is made to show that a variety of options existed for unionists. For this reason, clothing unions choosing not to join the new organisation receive some attention. The opening chapters conclude in December 1907 with the formal registration of the Federated Clothing Trades' Union.

The history of the Union is then covered in six chapters. Most correspond with a familiar economic periodisation of Australian history. This is important for both context and comparison. The date at which each Chapter concludes is also of significance in emphasising the nature of the Union, for most end with the setting of Federal Awards. These may be seen as the culmination of much of the Union's activities in a given period, as indices to the nature of the Union.
and, at least formally, as part of the context for further development. There is no clear-cut point at which to conclude. In terms of conflicts about the nature of the Union's structure, 1960 is decisive; equally, important questions about the industry and the nature of the Union's goals were dealt with in 1967. We conclude at the latter date. A 'Summary and Conclusion' follows.

The structure of each chapter emphasises general themes in the same way as the structure of the thesis. In the early chapters, the craft unions are discussed separately because of the very different conditions under which they operated. Chapters Four and Five are similarly divided although they begin to move towards a more thematic consideration of the topic. Not until the first Award - and Chapter Six - can the Union be properly thought of as a unity. Theme may then be emphasised as much as chronology.

Chapters Six to Nine, covering the years 1920-67, are structured alike, beginning with an account of the economic, social, political and industrial structures which explain the development of the Union. These 'contexts' should not be taken to imply that the Union was merely a pre-determined 'function' of external conditions. Much of the thesis is about resistance to change, but is helpful to set out the dominant trends in the economy and industry.

The Union's history is dealt with in terms of a 'growth/structure/policy' model. Beginning with the size, distribution and nature of the membership, we then look at the relationships between members, employers and officials. The relationship between union structure and
changes in the industry can then be explored. The kinds of formal 'policies' developed by the Union are then discussed. A separate section, 'Arbitration', summarises claims and cases, not merely for themselves but as expressions of the nature of the Union. A commitment to arbitration is no more overarching than 'context'. Hence, questions about that commitment are raised. In the final section of these chapters, 'Politics', similar themes are raised as we explore the nature of relationships between the Union and other working-class structures - and, frequently, challenges to the Union's traditions. Overall, the chronological arrangement helps to make clear the importance of those traditions, just as the structure of each chapter tries to highlight, not just growth, structure, policy, arbitration and politics, but the relationships between them and relationships with the society and industry of which the Union is a part. The contradictions between these elements and, often, between the Union's past and the immediate changes in the economy are central to answering the question 'how and why has the CATU defined itself?'
CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS AND CONTEXT
(i) THE BRITISH LEGACY

Explaining the origins of clothing trades' unionism is rather more complex than tracing the history of guilds and informal associations, the first benefit societies and union foundations. For although tailoring is, in many ways, a classic case of the 'craft', having similarities with trades like printing, there is also a hidden side to the production of clothing. This is the unpaid domestic labour of women. If we may explain the origins of craft unionism in a traditional way, we must go beyond this in order to understand the industry and the forms of unionism that subsequently developed. This section will only deal briefly with these themes. Because the greatest growth in the clothing trade, the factory employment of women and the subsequent 'tailoresses' unions' are nineteenth-century phenomena, it is in the Australian context that they will be fully explored.

For centuries, clothes were made within the household. Although there were tailors and dressmakers at court and in wealthy homes, it was production for use, not exchange, which preponderated. In production for use, the skills were neither scarce nor recognised. Although there were women in paid-work, mainly as dressmakers and milliners, the main sexual division was between work done in the home and outside it. This came increasingly to mirror the division between use and

exchange, between girls and women on the one side, and men on the other. Men's work became protected in, and skill institutionalised by, apprenticeships and guilds. They made all manner of garments - and made them 'through', that is, completely. Women's work was correspondingly seen as of less value. When we speak of 'the clothing trade', then, we are only dealing with part of it. Much, even of the tailor's work, is difficult now to recover but we may begin to look at what kind of a legacy was brought to Australia by the first tailors.

Like all craftsmen, tailors formulated two fundamental notions of control. The first was control of the work itself, of methods, hours and rules, all in the context of a fair price for their labour. Second, the numbers working 'at the trade' were controlled. This restriction, dating back to the fourteenth century, protected earnings, prestige and employment. There was a seven year period of 'servitude', or apprenticeship for tailors.

When tailors worked for masters, rather than directly with clients, the methods of payment assumed importance. The time-logs or piece-rate scales which were used institutionalised the ideal of the artisan's work: the tailor was not to be seen as directly employed.


rather, he negotiated a rate and sold the product to the client or the master. It has been frequently pointed out that in a trade like clothing - with its handicraft basis and seasonal fluctuations - there was ample scope for the payment of piece-rates, but it is important to remember that piece-work suited both master and journeyman.

Such a harmony of interest ran through the tailor's social relations. In establishing local guilds, masters, tailors and apprentices had a common interest in protecting the status of the trade against 'unfair' competitors and in restricting entry to the craft. Despite this, there could be moments of conflict, as in 1415, when young journeymen refused to 'live in' with their masters. The Mayor of London was told that some serving men and journeymen called yo-man taillours, dwelling with one another in companies by themselves, did hold and inhabit divers dwelling houses in the city against the will of their superiors.

They had held their own meetings, attacked 'many lieges of our lord the King' and battled with the city's elders. The outcome of this


5. Piece-rates suited tailors for more tangible reasons than status. The role of time-logs etc is discussed below.

6. Quoted in M. Stewart and L. Hunter, op.cit., p.4. Spelling is as in original.

7. ibid.
is most revealing, for it was the masters who were the first to feel the wrath of the city's officials. The masters were reminded that it was their duty to control the journeymen. The men were then told to submit to their masters.\(^8\)

The guilds' attempts to control the trade itself were more problematical. The historians of British clothing trades' unionism believe that, in the fifteenth-century, 'liveried companies' were set up outside the guilds. Although a historian of the guilds sees this process somewhat differently, it is clear that, by the sixteenth-century, the exclusiveness of the guilds was under threat. There were increasing divisions within the guilds and access was widened. Where it had once been through apprenticeship or inheritance it was now through 'redemption', that is, through buying into the trade.\(^9\)

The state provided some relief in accordance with the custom of regulating the trades. In 1557 a monopoly had been granted to the Stationers' Company for printing - albeit as much to control what was printed as by whom.\(^10\) Nevertheless the regulation of the trades

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8. ibid., pp.4-5. Stewart and Hunter suggest that 'yo-men' meant young men or even apprentices. These events may signal that the guild was stamping its authority upon the trade - with the aid of the state. The strictures of the court, then, would not have been unwelcome to the masters.

9. ibid., p7. R. Leeson, op.cit., pp.48, 67-72; Leeson describes the Guild of Tailors as being divided into a yeomanry for the bulk of the journeymen and a livery for the elite. Entry to the latter was by fee - in return for which members were permitted to employ greater numbers (and to wear a distinct livery).

brought benefit to other crafts, in 1563, with the Statute of Artificers which gave 'legal force to the ordinances of the medieval guilds'. Wages were set and conditions fixed.11

After this, the guilds were generally weakened by inflation and, most importantly, by the slow rise of merchant capital in the form of the 'shopkeeping tailor'. If we may see this period, from the late-sixteenth century, as the beginning of a transition from handicraft to manufacturing, then the gradualness of the change and the limited size of the trade must also be borne in mind. Some tailors, though, did achieve independence as against the guild, the client and the vagaries of demand. They did this by stocking up with materials, advancing credit and employing labour - often unindentured labour. Here, it might also be supposed, the sexual division of labour began to be established in production for exchange.12

When the guilds finally collapsed, both master and journeyman required new organisations. At first they found a common purpose, in inns and hotels known as 'houses of call'. Masters could find labour through this network. For the tailor, though, the houses of call were more than a labour bureau. They provided venues for mutual support and discussion of trade conditions. With these, and the earlier guilds,


as well as the craft traditions, tailors readily developed a 'habit of
association'\textsuperscript{13} - an ideology to sustain them as they 'ceased to be
independent producers'.\textsuperscript{14} In contrast, the bulk of women workers
remain obscure. If their garment work now took them outside the home,
they did not stay there long but rather returned home to domestic
work. There was neither the solidarity of the house of call nor the
guild tradition to encourage association.

Tailors were amongst the very first workers to attempt to combine as
unionists. In 1721, masters in London complained to Parliament when
the men so acted. Only eleven years before this, masters had combined
with their employees to stamp out unindentured labour, but anything
which looked like independent action was frowned upon. Parliament was
not unsympathetic. An 'Act for the Regulation of the Journeymen
Tailors' raised wages and reduced working hours.\textsuperscript{15} There is no
account of the fate of the union - if in fact it was ever established.

The legislation was enacted only for London. Many employers simply
took their business beyond the city's borders. There they enjoyed not
only a free market but the support of the state. Journeymen were

\footnotesize
13. H.A. Turner's phrase in \textit{Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy}

14. One of the 'pre-conditions' for unionism which the Webbs

15. F.W. Galton (ed.), \textit{Select Documents Illustrating the History of
Trade Unionism, Part One, The Tailoring Trade} (London, 1896),
p.xxvi.
prosecuted, meetings broken up, licences of inn-keepers friendly to the craftsmen were revoked. Some local unions organised strikes despite this hostility.\textsuperscript{16}

Even before the Combination Acts outlawed unionism, tailors' associations were isolated and secretive. Their size and their leadership were not known to outsiders or even all the members. Strikes in Scotland in 1797 and in London in 1799 confirmed for masters that action was necessary\textsuperscript{17} but the subsequent anti-union Combination Acts failed to break workers' resistance. In London, the tailors became more interested in politics than they would be again for many years. The leader of the Breechmakers' strike of 1793, Francis Place, became a prominent figure in the capital's radicalism.\textsuperscript{18}

The repeal of the Acts was a recognition of their failure. The important change which followed was to make amalgamation of the local societies more likely. However, changes in the industry presented other problems. In 1814, the repeal of Elizabethan Apprenticeship Laws and of anti-machine legislation opened all crafts to new dangers.\textsuperscript{19} That control of the crafts was already difficult had been

\textsuperscript{16} ibid., p.xxvi, xxx-xxxv.

\textsuperscript{17} ibid., p.xxxv; M. Stewart and L. Hunter, \textit{op.cit.}, p.20.

\textsuperscript{18} Place claimed that, despite the Laws, tailors' earnings advanced from 25s per week in 1795 to 36s in 1813 by which time the working day was reduced to 12 hours. See E.P. Thompson, \textit{The Making of the English Working Class} (Harmondsworth, England, 1968 edition), p.282.

\textsuperscript{19} R. Leeson, \textit{op.cit.}, p.110.
suggested in the 1790s, in printing, where the number of apprentices caused sufficient concern to inspire the establishment of the first London print union.20

The fate of the printers is a valuable guide to the status and problems of the tailors. Printers struggled to secure any restriction on apprentices but, by 1810, they had negotiated an acceptable 'Scale of Prices' in London.21 Control of the trade was more difficult for tailors because, as we have seen, the journeyman did not have a monopoly of skill. At the same time, universal conditions were more important because of the nature of the industry. Whereas newspaper proprietors were mainly concerned by competition within one city, clothing manufacturers were finding that competition between cities was increasingly important. For tailors, then, an agreed price list would have to be a national one.

These circumstances probably inspired an attempt at a national amalgamation of tailors' societies in 1834, following the establishment of a London union. London was the single most important centre for the clothing trade — truly the 'Athens of the Artisan'.22 Garments were made for the city's rich and, during the seasonal influxes, for the country gentry, whilst, of course, prosperous artisans made goods for each other. In addition, there were the heavy

21. ibid., p.17.
needs of the state - for military contracts. Within this framework, however, lay the beginnings of change. No sooner had tailors committed themselves to the vision of an alliance with other craftsmen than a catastrophic strike and unemployment sent them back to political and industrial isolation.23 By the late 1840s, the trade was being described as one of the most 'cheap and shoddy' of the sweated industries.24

Whilst the tailor's claim to craft status was not destroyed, there was a significant change in this period and throughout the century as the 'shopkeeping tailor's' rise culminated in a thorough-going transition from handicraft to manufacturing industry in the clothing trade. In London this combined new elements - the division of labour, with old - homework, or outwork. In other cities factory production began. In the second half of the century the sewing machine and 'band-cutters' were introduced.25

The transformation of the London trade was especially successful because the structure of the industry and the needs of the employer


fitted the capital's economy perfectly - for the capitalist. Women undertook detailed tasks on parts of garments at home as manufacturers tried to satisfy the city's mass market and to fight off competitors. The low and irregular earnings for men, to which casual labour led, necessitated the entry of wives and daughters to the paid work-force. Stedman Jones has emphasised how enmeshed these families were. If it was economic necessity that brought women to the sub-contractor or small master then, by definition, there would be no bargaining with him about rates - no 'fair price' here.26

In addition to the peculiarities of London's economy, this undermining of craft and the oppression of women workers needs to be situated in the context of the sexual division of labour. Women's unapprenticed work was classed as unskilled and they were excluded from unions. In short, their status - and the sexual division - was confirmed. Indeed women's entry into the trades acted as a kind of index of craft and indicated a down-grading of the work involved, and this was generally achieved through a change in the production process.27

In a sense, tailors contributed to their own decline. They would often have 'employed' women in their own family to supplement income.

S.W. Lerner has suggested that, by the middle of the century it could have been

26. G. Stedman Jones, op.cit., p.84. Outwork was encouraged by the high cost of fuel and the high rents in London. These discouraged factory production and, for a time, the advent of machinery.

27. S. Alexander, op.cit., p.74.
common practice for a journeyman, a wage-earner who worked for a master contractor, to employ one or two 'kippers', that is, tailoresses.  

This tended to confirm the division between men and women.

When the men began to try to reconstruct a union it was rather more defensive and isolationist than early organisations. They intended to re-assert craft control, opposing outworkers and demanding payment by the piece.  

This union - the Amalgamated Society of Journeymen Tailors - was established in 1866 along the 'New Model' lines which forsook strikes and attempted to centralise executive authority. They returned to an emphasis on restricting the supply of labour, adding benefit funds specifically designed to discourage 'ratting'.  

Thus developed such powerful organisations as the National Typographical Association (1840s) and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (1851). The Tailors' Society followed along similar lines in covering formerly independent unions all over the country but its coverage remained limited to the most skilled men. It was beaten down in a strike in 1867, its leaders prosecuted and its national ambitions thwarted.  

Outside London, the factory system expanded, machinery became more widespread and costs were reduced. Besides changing the nature of  

work in those areas, this also affected London in that wages were driven down still further. Imports and immigration exacerbated the problem of control.\textsuperscript{32} Jewish immigrants - as competitors and masters - received special criticism but amongst their ranks had been socialists who tried to get the London union to widen its ranks. Equally, immigration immediately added to the potential supply of labour.\textsuperscript{33}

Women remained beyond the union pale although, by 1866, they outnumbered men at the trade by more than three to one.\textsuperscript{34} Not until the 1880s did women begin to enter unions in any numbers.\textsuperscript{35} This, however, was coincidental with, rather than a model for, women's unionisation in Australia. Tailors and tailoresses began to work in the Australian colonies at the same time as the industry in Britain was being transformed. The 'British legacy' was, for all women, 'a contradictory and confusing'\textsuperscript{36} set of notions about women's roles and for clothing workers this was especially so. Women's work seemed to stand with outwork and with machinery as an external 'problem' to the tailor.

\textsuperscript{33} Compare S.W. Lerner, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.86-7 with p.88. See G. Stedman Jones, \textit{op.cit}, p.282.
\textsuperscript{34} G. Stedman Jones, \textit{op.cit.}, p.358.
If we may speak of an 'inheritance' amongst journeymen, it would be found in the desire to maintain the craft by piece-payments, apprenticeship and exclusivism. Control remained central to this and to the self-image of the tailor. In 1825 a London newspaper reported that this independence of spirit was strong:

tailors doggedly refused to shape or sew, goose or seam or wad a collar, unless they knew the reason why and wherefore.37

This hankering for control in the workshop had inspired political action outside it. Although tailors had retreated from this field after the 1840s, it could well be argued that control and politics - more widely understood - were more important than ever. Immigration, imports and competition between cities all pointed to the ineffectiveness of local action. Only the best-placed tailors could hope to survive these threats. For men and women in the ready-made trades it was proving more difficult to resist any of the imperatives of capital.

Amalgamation was part of an answer. The undermining of the London agreement of 1721 had emphasised the importance of national action. Perhaps the employers' hostility to the Societies formed in 1833 and 1866 indicated that the men had chosen the right path.

The unionist's heritage revolved, then, around craft tradition, control and amalgamation. The industry itself, shared many features

37. The Trades' Newspaper, quoted in E. P. Thompson, op.cit., p.291.
with other changing trades: a pronounced sexual division of labour, growing use of machinery and changing patterns of work. In this environment, the bulk of workers, the women, had few, if any, union traditions to sustain them. How unions developed in Australia would depend as much upon the development of social and industrial conditions there as upon the traditions and expectations that men and women brought with them.

(ii) THE INDUSTRY AND ITS WORK PROCESSES

The clothing trades in the Australian colonies were blessed with extremely favourable conditions for growth, although their progress was, at first, distorted by the Gold Rushes and, later, retarded by their aftermath. However, the period from 1861 to 1890 was one of sustained growth, during which manufacturing was 'by far the fastest growing segment of the Australian economy'.\(^{38}\) Massive increases in population, and high levels of capital accumulation underpinned this period of rapid expansion. The nature of domestic capital formation was as important as its volume. It was heavily concentrated in areas where long-term considerations overwhelmed the short-run, such as in residential building, pastoral equipment, railways and local authority works. This, and the manufacturing boom, meant that urbanisation, too, was encouraged. At the same time, wages rose and employment was

fairly stable. In short, there were more people than before the Rushes and they had more money to spend on consumer goods. For many of them, the savings from making their own clothes, and making garments last, were no longer so significant. It would be difficult to imagine a setting more conducive to the growth of the clothing industry.

If population and income factors underlie the growth of the trade they do not fully explain its development in Victoria, where the most dramatic advances were made. Manufacturers there set out to make and protect their own market. In 1859, they formed the Tariff League to encourage manufacturing and, thereby, to utilize more fully the colony's resources, which, in the wake of the Gold Rushes, were as plentiful as they were underemployed. At first, there was almost no manufacturing at all, so 'the object was to incubate rather than protect' Victoria's industries. A limited tariff was introduced in 1861 which was the cause of serious dispute between mercantile and manufacturing interests. When the McCulloch government introduced legislation for a wider tariff, these disputes developed into a constitutional crisis which, amongst other things, resulted in protection being identified with the 'democratic' cause. After 1871, there was minimal opposition to the tariff because it had so evidently


encouraged manufacturing and allowed capital to be invested successfully in new industries.

The clothing trade enjoyed rapid growth in Victoria in the 1870s with employment rising from 2561 persons in 1870, to 4378 in 1880; whilst in New South Wales (NSW) there was great growth in the 1880s.\(^1\) Increases in demand for clothing changed the nature of demand. 'Order' clothes (made-to-measure) became a less significant part of the trade as against 'slops' or 'stock' clothes (ready-made). Within these general categories, there was, from the 1870s, a particular increase in dressmaking and millinery and in the production of shirts. With these changes there were, necessarily, changes in the conditions of labour and in the labour process itself. How managements attempted this and what this meant for workers are central concerns in the origins of clothing trades unionism.

In clothing factories and shops, whatever their product, a similar line of production was followed, once some measure of division of labour had been introduced. The following description, then, may be taken as being characteristic from the 1870s, by which time the sewing machine had become the basis for the production of clothing. The

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41. *Victorian Statistical Registers, NSWSR.* These heavily understated the total number employed. The massive differences between the figures in the Census Reports and the Statistical Registers suggest that outworkers, casual employees and those at work in small shops were excluded. The following account of the industry and work process is drawn from these sources and reports listed in the Bibliography. Specific references are footnoted.
major processes of manufacture were marking and cutting, sewing, pressing and finishing.

Work began with the cutter, responsible for supplying, to tailors or machinists, material cut to the ordered sizes and quantities. Materials were 'marked in', 'laid up' and then cut. The job, then, required the ability to visualise further production and a knowledge of the full process and the finished commodity. Pride in the skill of the trade was central. The 'art of cutting', as it was referred to, was the most technical of the old crafts. Pamphlets and books on its 'secrets' abounded as the cutters sought to master and improve their craft - and themselves.

The cutter's kindred spirit was the trimmer, who undertook the slightly less demanding task of cutting the 'trimmings' - lapels, cuffs, facings and lining. In order to become a cutter, a seven-year apprenticeship was required (although by the last quarter of the nineteenth-century this had been reduced to three or four years). Once cut, material was pressed (often by apprentices) while 'fitting up' was done (by the trimmers, cutting the 'extras'). Garments were then either handed to a tailor to sew or, increasingly, 'basted', that is, tacked, by tailors or tailoresses and then transferred to the sewing machines or the hand-tailor. In Sydney and Melbourne, material designated as 'first class' was usually sewn by hand. Other materials - cheaper - were machined. The garments usually received another pressing before 'finishers' added the last touches - buttons, button holes and studs.
Just as the process had begun with the craftsman's touch, so it ended. The final press was known as 'pressing off' and was reserved for journeymen pressers or, at first, tailors, who had served their time. It was a task most emphatically distinguished from the lesser, intermediate, pressings given the material, seams and constituent parts of the garment, known as 'seam' and 'under-pressing'. There only remained examination of the product (although this, too, was increasingly divided and carried out at different stages) and then packaging.

Details of changes within this work process will be discussed in the following two chapters. It should, however, be noted that within this increasing specialisation of work the sexual division of labour was as marked as it had been in Britain. This was neither clear-cut nor universal but, in essence, women performed the more detailed tasks while men continued to make garments through. Male tailors retained most coat work while women did most of the trouser-making and vest (waistcoat) work. The distinctions were most clear in pressing and, in particular, in cutting where men retained control of the labour process and kept restrictive apprenticeships intact. That this was rather more difficult in pressing than cutting is indicated by the difficulties of pressers' unions in the nineteenth-century. Nevertheless, pressers probably earned wages above the industry average and roughly on a par with the best tailors. They worked shorter hours, having perhaps maintained the eight-hour day longer than most. Within their ranks there were clear categories. The distinction was asserted between seam-pressers and under-pressers on the one hand, and those who 'pressed-off', on the other. The best
paid were able to pull others up with them in the boom decade, utilizing market forces through their individual bargaining power, ad hoc organisation and - early on - membership of the Tailors' Society.

The 'chronology of unionism' in the clothing trades in Australia is something of an oddity. The most 'aristocratic' of the craftsmen, the cutters, tended to be the last to form distinct unions. The first societies were merely described as 'journeymen tailors' societies'. It is likely they embraced all males, who had 'served their time', and that the subsequent formation of pressers' and then cutters' unions was the answer to the growing division of labour in tailoring and the growing employment of women. A tailor could now be less easily defined; he might still be an almost independent craftsman, or a coat-hand, a machinist or a leading hand, making suits, coats and uniforms through. In the shops making quality goods, the old tailors' unions dominated; but elsewhere their grip was less sure. Nevertheless, he remained one of the few organised workers in the trade. Outworkers, women, cutters and pressers did not have their own organisations.

A cutter was in an ambivalent position because he was often an employer himself - yet unable to compete with the bigger firms; he was often a tailor, superior to the others in the shop, and sometimes he was the foreman of a factory. In fact, cutters were organised for a time in a Foreman Tailors' Society, an organisation not involved with other unions and reflecting the duality of their position. Like the cotton spinners, cutters controlled an early stage of production and could turn out perhaps ten times their own number. They rarely did
so; no early union was built upon this base, perhaps because they had no independent tradition of association or because there was something transitory about the cutter's role - sometimes tailor, sometimes foreman, sometimes cutter. Most important though, was probably the hold of the bourgeois ideology of self-improvement. Part draughtsman, part artist, usually aspirant master, cutters did, on occasion take direct action but, until the road to individual success was barred, they kept away from consistent collective action. Eventually, of course, they could become a powerful weapon in the armoury of industrial unionism.

Between the establishment of tailors' and cutters' organisations came the unionisation of pressers. These men, specialised in one vital skill, gravitated to the cutters rather than to the tailors who, increasingly, became sewing and general hands. Only those who pressed-off could lay claim to genuine aristocratic status. These men spent as much time in combat with other pressers, tailoresses and boy labour as in direct struggle with employers. Indeed, they often saw the employer as their ally in these campaigns.

Amongst women, the sequence of organisation was different. In dressmaking and order-tailoring there was some apprenticeship for women and it was here that the core of women's unionism was established. Divisions between women workers partly mirrored craft attitudes. In Melbourne the order tailoresses insisted upon their union's separateness from the ready-made, or 'slop' trade. Women were poorly placed to defend their work, conditions and earnings - and
poorly placed to unionise. It was a vicious circle built around the sexual division of labour and sustained by the view that women in the paid work-force were 'invaders'. That their employment was concomitant with the growth of the division of labour, factory system and the introduction of the sewing machine exacerbated this.

From the 1860s, Isaac M. Singer's sewing machine was widely available in Australia. This presaged the utter transformation of the trade. Employers adopted 'the Singer' to meet the demands of the new market. They were able to increase output, with a given amount of labour, thereby reducing unit costs. More importantly, it allowed managements to bring un-apprenticed labour into the trade, further reducing their costs. Instead of apprenticed tailors, they used female labour - and the 'tailoress' became the 'typical' worker of the trade.

There were two further important considerations. First, the machine itself was not a fixed factor. Since its introduction it has been refined, such that its range of stitches and its speed have increased. As the variety of tasks which could be done by machine increased, so division of labour continued and many of the skills of the tailor were rendered redundant. Therefore, the employer was not only able to increase production, but unskilled and therefore cheap labour could be used. Second, the machine was relatively inexpensive, and, like all new products, it became cheaper as its availability grew. It was quite within the scope of cutters and many tailors to set themselves up as small masters. For perhaps a fortnight's wages a cutter could in the 1880s, purchase a good machine. There were, too,
hire-purchase arrangements, as well as the possibility of bank credit to finance this social mobility. In addition to creating a multitude of minute enterprises, this meant that the clothing trade was, from very early on, perceived as one with the potential for quick personal advancement. With this problem too, unions would have to contend.

The craft unions faced a plethora of employers and (from as early as statistics are kept) a huge proportion of female labour. Although Melbourne boasted a few firms employing hundreds of people, the average number of employees per unit was 28.8 at the end of the century. In NSW it was 21.5.42 The difference is significant, for it is a further manifestation of the growth of the ready-made trade in Victoria.) The same characteristic is exhibited in terms of the employment of women: by 1907, when the Federal Clothing Trades' Union was formed, the proportion of women in the Victorian Industry was 89 per cent; in NSW it was 77 per cent.43 The use of women, in increasing numbers, both as outworkers and, as these figures show, in the factories was, perhaps, the dominant characteristic of the changing trade in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The exclusivism of the craft union was, then, under threat at the very advent of factory production. Control of production was being fought out in those factories, but, in other areas, management enjoyed almost complete freedom in its attempt profitably to organise labour.

42. Calculated from Victorian Statistical Register and NSWSR, 1907.
43. ibid.
Outwork was important throughout this period as employers sought cheap labour to defeat their rivals. E.C. Fry has described three main sorts of work under this heading: outwork pure and simple, that is to say, work done only in the home; second, work taken home by factory workers; and, third, individuals working at home and, in turn, employing others in their homes or in small work rooms. It was widely believed that, in the 1880s, outwork accounted for half the industry's output in Victoria. This may well have been an understatement if Census Reports are compared with other official statistics. The Victorian Census of 1891 found 36,130 persons 'engaged in dress'. If the 7,654 workers in boot and shoe production are deducted, the total for clothing is 28,476 but in the same year, the Factory Report listed only 9,927 in its clothing trade categories. No doubt, thousands were accounted for in the smaller, unlisted shops, but, equally, it is clear that outwork was a very significant part of the trade, particularly when the work taken out by factory hands is included.

The increasing division of labour and diminution of traditional skills through the wider use of the sewing machine, the number of hours of

46. Census, 1891; VPP, 1892-93, Vol.5, pp.23, 32.
outwork and the need to compete were held together by management manipulation of both methods and levels of payment. In the period from 1860 there were three systems of remuneration: a time log, piece-rates and daily wages.

The oldest method of payment was the complex time log, of which the core was the 'time statement' delineating the number of hours to be spent upon each part of the making of a particular garment, and the consequent total. A price was then agreed for the men's labour - an hourly rate of pay. It is noteworthy that these logs provided for 'making through' by a tailor; that is, they included time for fitting, basting, pressings and pressing off as well as sewing each part. Such an arrangement was an attempt to retain an entire craft as well as defend an income.

The piece log was a simplification of the time statement. It was especially favoured by pressers for much of the nineteenth-century and, by the 1890s, was also used for cutters, tailoresses and many tailors. Only NSW tailors remained on the time log. The piece system described not times but rates of pay for each item and task. Nevertheless, it still enshrined an article of faith for the (would be) independent journeyman: the rates were prices for the worker's labour. That is, the perception remained that the goods were sold to the master, rather than the labour power itself being sold. The piece-system was the most common in the industry.

Towards the end of the century, some employers began to introduce the wages system. This was staunchly opposed by the craftsmen, who said
that workers received exactly what they earned under piece-rates; that there could be no confusion about payments, whereas, under wages, specific workloads could be insisted upon by management. With payment by the piece, the craftsmen could exercise control, without hurting their own income - provided the basic levels of payment were 'just'. Restriction of output was, occasionally, an important weapon against the employer. Whilst the men would be paid for work done, the employer might be unable to complete orders - or cover his running costs.

In public, the craft unions condemned wage systems as ushering in the 'task' system. They claimed that onerous work loads were being demanded in return for the minimum wage. More work was therefore required - work which if done under piece rates would be paid for. Under wages, it was not; workers were driven harder and profits increased at labour's expense. There were further problems when the two systems worked side-by-side. Many complaints arose from the practice of 'filling up', that is, the allocation of work to a factory's wage hands first and the mere crumbs to the piece-hands. For a variety of reasons, then, there was support for a system of piece-rates and condemnation of its alternative, wage systems.

For most of the nineteenth-century, however, management was equally happy with the piece-rate system. It worked very well for them in their efforts to control and exploit the mass of tailoresses. To these workers, piece rates meant something altogether different. As with the craftsmen, the vital consideration was the level at which rates were paid. Unlike the craftsmen, they could not consistently
maintain high rates. Indeed, because sewing machines had allowed so great an increase in output, employers were able to argue that piece-rates could be reduced. Indeed, it was suggested that piece rates had to be reduced, because employees would, otherwise, eat into profits. The increases in production, employers argued, meant that in a given number of hours of work, the employee would secure a greater wage: more 'pieces' produced, more income. In order to remain competitive, employers demanded that piece-rates fall as output rose.

In so competitive an industry, the rationale of this argument led to piece-rates being reduced so that, despite greater output, wages often fell. It must be remembered that women's wages in the industry were on a very low base at the outset. The number of hours worked was not, of course, 'given' and, therefore, to maintain income, workers had to labour for longer. Following legislation limiting women's hours of work in factories there was probably a further increase in outwork, as piece-rate levels necessitated the continued working of long hours. Just when this outwork (and the other forms) became 'sweating' was a cause of much debate. Most definitions, then and since, have centred upon the organization of production around sub-contractors and 'middle-men' who made their own profits through driving piece-rates down further. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to place both factory and outwork in the category of 'sweated' labour. Any such definition must be somewhat subjective.

The problem of 'sweating', in its usual form of sub-contracted work, raises other questions about the nature of the trade. The relationships between wholesalers and retailers, large firms and the
'middle-men' need to be fully explored in order to understand the dilemmas of workers and their unions - and the solutions which they adopted. Other problems are more clear: work in the factories, for instance, had its special problems, too - exacerbated by low piece-rates and the sewing machine.

As late as the 1880s, the sewing machine was still driven by the treadle in most places. A large number of physicians believed that this was an execrable state of affairs. Several doctors claimed that the trade was 'injurious' to women's health. Uterine complaints and nervous disorders were attributed to the use of the treadle. One doctor noted that 'since sewing machines have been in use, the amount of ill-health has tripled', whilst it was also asserted that the spinal cord could be affected by the 'constant pedal action' which was required.

The factories and work-rooms themselves varied enormously. The Factory Inspectors had claimed, in 1886, that 'the bulk of the clothing factories are fine large buildings, well ventilated and well kept'. If these had been typical, that is, the big establishments on Melbourne's Flinders Street, or the new Hordern's building in Sydney, then there might have been little ground for complaints. In

49. ibid., Q.1807.
50. ibid., Q.2468.
truth, conditions in most small factories and shops were appalling. They ranged from fetid basements, half sinking in swamps, to so-called shops which were ramshackle conversions. Of this type, a covered passage-way between tenements in Sydney was only the most extraordinary example. It is not possible to define or describe a 'typical' factory, for they varied so much. Factory Inspectors and Royal Commissioners uncovered some horrific scenes. The main problem was that factory building simply could not keep up with expanding demand, especially in Melbourne. Among other things, this helps to explain the phenomenon of factory growth and outwork dominance proceeding hand-in-hand.

These factories, which were often hot, dusty and filled with stale air, and the problems of working the sewing machines in them were extreme. However, the low levels of piece-rates must, once more, be remembered. It was the setting of low rates for the unskilled which tied the tailoress to the sewing machine. The need to produce large numbers of items lay behind the ill-health which observers saw, but did not fully understand. It was in management's unbridled control of the piece-system that this exploitation really inhered, not in the sewing machine itself, as some seemed to think.

53. The passage was, originally, a drainage area. See 'Census and Industrial Returns Act, Information Respecting', NSWPP, 1891-92, Vol.7, p.3.
Throughout the trade, exploitation assumed many forms. The very nature of the industry - its seasonality - at once intensified the problems of women and made sustained united action more difficult. If seasonal fluctuations were not quite as marked as in London, they were, none the less, important. Generally, winter was a slack period and the early summer or pre-Christmas season was one of boom conditions. In each year, there would be periods of, at least, 'short-time' and, usually, unemployment; then, in spring and summer over-time would have to be worked. In Victoria, the 'Cup Season', leading up to the November horse-racing carnival and the Melbourne Cup, invariably witnessed a short but truly fantastic boom in dressmaking and millinery.

Despite seasonal unemployment and an occasional poor year, the period 1860-1890 may be seen as a 'boom-time'. The trade was booming and changing - with low-cost, ready-made clothes being produced for the first time. The size of the unit of production did not appreciably increase; instead, both factory output and outwork rose. In most lines of production, management succeeded in dividing the labour process into increasingly specialised functions. Some could easily be carried on in workers' homes. The sewing machine allowed for increases in output and encouraged management to seek still further specialisations. There was, however, a marked reluctance to invest in power to drive these machines. No easing of work-loads resulted from technological innovation, then. The typical employer remained as a 'small master', with a handful of sewing machines and a tiny work-place, in an inner-city suburb. The crucial aspect of control and exploitation was a piece-rates system in which, despite increased
output, earnings were actually depressed for most workers. Although the craftsman was, for a time, able to defend piece-rates, for most workers – the women – they meant subjection to work-discipline and long hours either in menial 'tacking' and 'basting', or at the sewing machine.

These managerial initiatives are an essential part of the unions' histories. So too, for a full analysis, may be an understanding of the relationship between female workers and the sewing machine's dominance. For most tailoresses, the machine was a given factor. Unlike the tailors, they had no tradition of craft work and control from which to draw strength and, collectively, oppose managements. The implications of this (and the truth of it) are further avenues for exploration.

The boom conditions of the 1880s gave way to the deepest and most prolonged depression to affect the Australian colonies. The economy collapsed so comprehensively that the gross domestic product for 1891 was not regained until 1900.\(^\text{55}\) The tables indicate the extent of the change in the clothing trades in NSW and Victoria.

### Table 1  Growth of Employment in the Clothing Trade: Hands Employed[^56^]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>NSW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870/71</td>
<td>2561</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>1874/75</td>
<td>3897</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>1880/81</td>
<td>4378</td>
<td>1580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884/85</td>
<td>5317</td>
<td>2265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Victorian Statistical Register, VYB, NSWSR.

### Table 2  The Depression and the Recovery of the 1890s Clothing Employment[^57^]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>NSW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890/91</td>
<td>5536</td>
<td>2698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891/92</td>
<td>4774</td>
<td>2655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892/93</td>
<td>4330</td>
<td>1011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>4781</td>
<td>1466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>7302</td>
<td>1777</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Victorian Statistical Register, VYB, NSWSR.

[^56^]: Source: Victorian Statistical Register is more complete than VYB but is not published after 1916. See below.

[^57^]: ibid. Note that the definition of a factory became more liberal in Victoria in 1895, and that NSWSR used calendar years in and after 1892. Dressmaking and millinery were not separately listed until 1896 (Victoria; 1897 NSW).
The major result of the depression in the clothing trade was probably an increase in outwork. Its impact upon the unions was complex because the economic setbacks of the 1890s were accompanied by an intense struggle between capital and labour. In terms of the industry itself, the major changes thereafter took place in NSW where the industry began to assume a similar profile to that in Victoria. This was coincidental with the establishment, in 1901, of the Commonwealth of Australia and the consequent introduction, from 1902, of a tariff system similar to that which had operated in Victoria since the 1860s. The relationship between the tariff and the development of the NSW industry is complex, not least because there is a range of variables which a full analysis would have to take into account.

Employment in the three main sections of the trade from the last year before Federation through to 1907 when the Federated Clothing Trades' Union was established increased significantly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>NSW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>1907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing and Tailoring</td>
<td>6291</td>
<td>8219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dressmaking and Millinery</td>
<td>4398</td>
<td>8765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirtwear</td>
<td>2220</td>
<td>4886</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Victorian Statistical Register, NSWSR.

58. See also The Wealth and Progress of NSW, passim for NSW statistics.
The ready-made section in NSW and the general menswear section in Victoria experienced some unevenness in employment but the other sections grew constantly. The implications – and details – of these statistics will be discussed in the following chapters.

Growth in employment was particularly noticeable in NSW. Of most interest is the trend within the 'clothing and tailoring' section where, in 1900, the ready-made section employed more people than tailoring. This was the first year in which this was so. From 1903 to 1913 it remained the leading sector of the two although the tailoring trade expanded consistently. This greater emphasis on the ready-made trade paralleled changes that Victoria had experienced earlier. Differences remained, though: dressmaking remained very much the province of the southern State. Within these trends there were two other factors worthy of inter-State comparison. First, although the use of horse-power remained limited in NSW, it did increase very quickly in the early years of the century. Second, in 'clothing and tailoring', the female percentage of the paid work-force grew from 62 in 1900 to 70 in 1907.59

By 1907, then, some of the industry-based differences between the two states had been lessened. Whether the traditions and practices built thereon would change had as much to do with political practice and the role of the state as with the industry.

59. Calculated from NSWSR. The percentage of women in each section changed thus: 'slops' 76 to 82; 'tailoring' 49 to 55. Thus women assumed a higher profile in both sections. The proportionate increase was greater in the craft bastion of tailoring. In dressmaking there was little change; the changes in shirtwear took place on so small a base that comparisons are unhelpful.
(iii) THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The political implications of Protectionism and, in NSW, of Free-Trade were no less important than the industrial. Prior to the establishment of Victoria's tariff system there was no consistent association between workers in the clothing trade. Like other workers in the traditional crafts, tailors enjoyed wages and conditions far better than those in most parts of Britain. In the new lands, civil rights, too, seemed easier to win. In the aftermath of the Gold Rushes, however, many of the gains made in the workplace were lost. From the 1860s, 'trade societies' were established in a number of industries, whilst in the two major towns, Sydney and Melbourne, the building trades' unions led the way in setting up, respectively, a Trades' and Labor Council and a Trades' Hall Committee.60

Most early unions were profoundly defensive, seeking harmony with their 'masters' and eschewing political action. In Victoria these characteristics were confirmed through the colony's tariff protection. Tariffs were designed to protect employment and, the unions and their allies argued, to allow the payment of proper wages. Capital and labour would each be guaranteed a 'just' return. Craft unions, such as the Tailors', worked closely with the employers who paid proper rates, opposed sub-contracting and outwork, and respected

60. The Melbourne Trades' Hall Committee subsequently became the Melbourne Trades' Hall Council (MTHC). Both organisations erected grandiose 'temples of labour' to house their collective meetings and member unions.
union conditions of work. Both tailors and big employers wanted to see the unscrupulous 'sweaters' cut out of the market; the manufacturers, because of the 'unfair' threat which they posed; the craftsmen, because of the danger to their employment and wages. Thus the unions came to work closely with many of the bigger employers. Protectionism itself also drove the two sides together; the Tailors' Union sometimes corresponded with employers before presenting demands, on behalf of 'all the trade', that tariffs on clothes be kept at a given level - or that tariffs on cloth and other materials be reduced.

The craft unions in Melbourne did not forsake other tactics, such as the strike-in-detail, nor did they yield craft privileges easily. However, their propensity for taking direct action was notably less than that of their colleagues in NSW. Conflict there tended to be greater and, from the 1880s, their Trades and Labor Council (TLC) in Sydney enjoyed more authority within the union movement than did the MTHC. The development of new kinds of unions confirmed this divergence, as miners, shearers and wharf labourers organised themselves into unions quite distinct from the exclusivist craftsmen's and, in particular, from the conservative protectionists of Victoria. From these men came the first attempts to build inter-colonial unions. The tradition of amalgamation which tailors brought with them from Britain was rekindled in NSW and perhaps fanned by the new unions - but it did not take on at all in Victoria where isolation from politics and other crafts ruled.

Other traditions were maintained consistently, notably the exclusion
of women from union life. Even with the great growth of unions from the 1870s, the TLC did not get beyond a brief consideration of unionisation among tailoresses. When the Melbourne unions did something, it was to be in concert with employers. Union expansion came to an abrupt halt in the 1890s when the Great Depression overwhelmed all but the hardiest unions. By 1895 more than half the MTHC unions had disaffiliated and subscriptions were about a quarter the 1890 level. In Sydney the TLC had stopped publishing lists of withdrawals by 1893. The level of unemployment, falling wages and immiseration in the colonies were not the only constraints upon union action. For, after some spectacular successes in the late 1880s, all unions, from the mighty Engineers' Society to the small craft associations and the huge unions of shearers suffered even more spectacular, and sometimes bloody, defeats. Employers themselves had 'organised'. Under their banner of Freedom of Contract, the ship-owners and pastoralists, manufacturers, and - in Sydney - master tailors, took on and beat unions' claims to represent workers.

Labour historians have thoroughly described the 'Great Strikes' and the consequent 'turn to politics' and support for conciliation and arbitration in industrial regulation. How the various trades' unions


in the clothing industry responded will form a large part of the following two chapters. For now we may note the outcome of events in NSW and Victoria - and the contrasts between them. In Sydney, the TLC had set up a Parliamentary Committee in 1890 but the Unions were not very interested until after the first of the Great Strikes. In 1891 the fore-runners of the Labor Party, the Labor Electoral Leagues, were established under the auspices of the TLC. Other parties, notably the Australian Socialist League (ASL), had existed before 1890 but the strikes saw their first clear cut ideology emerge. The ASL was unimpressed by arbitration, subsequently declaring for all-out state socialism, but there was a good deal of over-lapping membership between it and the emergent Labor Party.\[^{63}\]

The campaign to secure the regulation of industrial relations was more quickly, though less thoroughly, successful in Victoria. Here, neither moderate Labor nor militant socialism gained much after the strikes. Many unions remained in a kind of 'splendid isolation' - and the fair employer remained too, albeit with his image a little tarnished. A Progressive Political League was established in 1891 by 'new' unions and the MTHC but it made little headway. When, in 1894, a conservative ministry seemed to threaten protectionism, labour,

through the MTHC and the newly formed United Labour and Liberal Party, closed ranks with the liberal interests to preserve the tariff. The fair employer was thus secure. But, as not all employers were 'fair', neither the MTHC nor many employers were prepared to leave protectionism as it was. It must work internally. In 1895 these concerns led to the establishment of the Anti-Sweating League. From here, rather than directly from the strikes, came the impetus to the Victorian Wages' Board system. The 'sweating evil' was to be attacked in four trades: clothing, baking, furniture and butchery. From this base came demands for the regulation of all industries but we should note that the Boards' origins lay in Factory Regulation, not class conflict.64

The Boards did not confer recognition upon unions. There were to be equal numbers of representatives from employers and employees and an 'independent' chair. Unions thus had to move quickly to ensure genuine representation for the workers. In many ways the Boards' powers were limited. They did not extend beyond the Melbourne metropolitan area. The clothing board was given a narrow occupational scope. In the parlance of the trade and in statistical usage 'clothing' meant only men's and boy's outer garments and, sometimes, women's coats. Here it covered only men's clothes, thus excluding all

women's wear, shirts, pyjamas, underwear, hats, ties and clothes-cleaning. Although extension of the Board's coverage began fairly quickly, changes to their administration tended to reduce unionists' enthusiasm for them. Improvements in one direction seemed to be matched with setbacks in others. Thus in 1902 the 'seven-tenths' rule was introduced. This required two employers' representatives to vote with the workers for union 'policy' to get through. When this rule was repealed in 1903 the legislature inserted a 'reputable employer clause' which was supposed to assist in wage fixation. Its main effect was to provide further delays. This clause was not done away with until 1907. In the interim, Parliament had established an Industrial Court which could overturn verdicts and the whole system had collapsed during a political crisis in 1902 which, amongst other things, re-established the faltering labour-protectionist axis.

These setbacks perhaps encouraged a belief in labour politics and a true system of arbitration in Victoria — just as the Great Strikes had in NSW. By the early years of the new century, Victorian unionists could look to NSW to see how compulsory arbitration might work. An Arbitration Act had become law there in 1892. Without any element of compulsion, it failed, as employers ignored it. A bill with wider parliamentary and public support was passed in 1901. It established an Industrial Arbitration Court which was empowered to enforce attendance, enforce its 'awards' and grant a 'common rule' for an industry. It recognised unions as official agents once they registered under the Act. In short, it went a very long way towards satisfying the pro-arbitration unions. Others, like the Coal-Lumpers' Union and, to some
extent, the NSW Tailoresses' Union, along with the ASL, were less impressed. Conflicts within the TLC broke out immediately. After an early period of harmony, conflicts between the TLC and the Government also broke out. There had been some limitations at the outset - notably the exclusion of domestic servants. This did not greatly concern the unions but subsequent events did. The very popularity of the Court led to delays of up to two years in hearing cases. Appeals to the High Court exacerbated delays and invariably went against labour. There was a delay in appointing a new judge when the first President's term expired as employers' hostility to the Court mounted. The Court lost much of its attraction in 1905 when the High Court ruled against the common rule, narrowed the definition of a dispute and limited the Arbitration Court's power to award preference for unionists.

Thus, in both NSW and Victoria there was intense disappointment with the outcome of the campaign, for a new system of managing industrial conflict. There were many reactions to this. One was to demand a federal system with the original features of the NSW Act. Another was to seek a new system in NSW, and, as political labour advanced in that State, this seemed possible. In Victoria - at last - there was also a growth in demands for a new order altogether, for socialism. In NSW, too, new kinds of socialist practice emerged.

65. For a recent account of the NSW legislation, with special reference to women workers, see E. Ryan, Two-Thirds of a Man. Women and Arbitration in NSW 1902-08 (Sydney, 1984). For reactions in the union movement see I. Turner, op. cit., pp.35-6.
It was, though, the prospect of a Federal system of arbitration for the new country that attracted most union attention. Once again, initial gains were apparently comprehensive. The alliance which brought this about was a familiar one—unions, liberal politicians and protectionist employers. The Commonwealth Arbitration Act was passed by the Federal Parliament in 1904, establishing an Arbitration Court which was to hear and settle disputes extending beyond the borders of any one State. In most details, the Act followed the NSW legislation. This meant that it gave greater recognition to, and protection of, unions, than did any Victorian legislation. Many Victorian unions therefore sought registration under the Act although they could not secure an award without inter-State amalgamation. Thus, after fifty years of Australian unionism, the state acted to encourage the kinds of amalgamation already common in England and much discussed in Australia. Clothing unions were typical: where there had been vague feelings of craft solidarity or even, as in NSW, a traditional interest in amalgamation, there was now a clear and immediate incentive for action.

The Arbitration Act had as a foil the Excise Tariff Act of 1906. Together, they institutionalised the fair employer-protection axis. Arbitration would settle disputes and enforce awards. Excise would be paid and tariff protection guaranteed to the 'fair employer'. Prime Minister Deakin called this the 'People's Peace'; the axis, 'New Protection'. Tariffs had made 'good wages possible. The 'New' Protection seeks to make them actual', he said.66 The new, Federal,

unions that would operate under the system would, then, be creations of the state, moulded in the image of the quiescent Victorian crafts. But, as Brian Fitzpatrick noted, arbitration would find

an uneasy bedfellow in a trade unionism that was the creation of workers and not of employers or the state. 67

The 'primary determinant' of many unions' activities had been the work processes within different industrial structures. This could generate very different imperatives from those of the state. This contradiction, as well as the impact of British traditions and overseas ideas explains much of the development of trade unionism in Australia. By the time the Commonwealth Arbitration Court began to function, challenges to the Labor Party and arbitration had begun. For clothing trades' unions these were of most account after 1907 but they may be briefly introduced here.

At the same time, it should be recalled that a part of the British legacy that was maintained was the lesser unionism of women. These political responses then were chiefly articulated by males and, hence, in the clothing trades by craftsmen. Women's position was marginalised in more ways than one. They were not able to vote in general elections in the Commonwealth until the poll of 1903 and in NSW until 1904; in Victoria until 1909. Working women found, as we shall see, some middle-class allies in their trade union conflicts. In their civil conflicts they found the road difficult in the unions and the Labor Party. 68 In the socialist organisations they found a


68 This is not to over-state the role played by women in the socialist parties. See V. Burgmann, op.cit., passim.
better hearing, and the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), founded in 1905, established links with clothing trades' unionism after 1907.

As Commonwealth Arbitration had drawn closer to enactment most labourites supported it. William Holman, the NSW Labor leader, and Billy Hughes, in the Federal parliament, tirelessly declaimed upon the virtues of industrial peace. At the same time the unions' inability to control the Labor Parties and a regrettable tendency for many Labor parliamentarians quickly to find harmony with their opponents quickened the pulse of socialism.

In Victoria this correlated with the failure of Wages Boards and, in 1903, the suppression of railway unionism. Socialists and suffragettes met before ever bigger audiences. They worked well with, and within, the Labor Party until many became dismayed with the torpidity of that body. Thus in 1905 the VSP was formed. In NSW, although Labor had made more progress, there was similar disaffection with the pace of reform, with arbitration and, particularly with what many saw as part of the problem, the craft basis of unionism.

By 1907, the year of the establishment of the Federated Clothing Trades, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had begun to organise in Australia, drawing together socialists from the disparate parties of the eastern States into a body designed to replace craft with industrial unionism, reform with direct action. In the same year, when the Arbitration Court was asked to define 'fair' wages it not only provided a material advance but it formalised the notion of
the family wage, paid to the male breadwinner. Just what women could expect was not yet quite clear but, just as unions seemed to be making the sort of progress looked for since 1891, there were challenges to that path.

In the following two chapters, the response of clothing unions to industrial change and to the initiatives of the state will be explored in the light of the British legacy and the Australian options.