There is ample evidence that for at least the first thirty years of white settlement in New South Wales work and its control was contested terrain. During these years there was a complex, vibrant and at times fierce struggle between convict workers and the colonial managers of convict labour. This should not be surprising given that criminal conviction and transportation did not fundamentally resolve the basic labour management issue of the control of the labour process. It may have established the cost of convict labour power to the State, the price of convict labour, but it left untouched the challenge of making convict workers productive, extracting labour use. Arguably, extracting labour use from convict workers was more complex in New South Wales than it may have been in many parts of British industry. The convict labour force was perhaps even more hostile to its work environment, less motivated, was under skilled, poorly supervised and often physically unsuited to the work demanded of it due to illness or previous lifestyle. Convict workers and managers also had fewer or less resilient traditions upon which to rely than free workers and employers in Britain.

While it is true that colonial managers of convict labour had great powers of coercion there were in practice many limitations to these. Governors could allocate convicts to any work they wished but in reality up to 1822 were motivated more by the rational than the whimsy or pathological. The physical punishments that could be imposed by the State were also highly significant and loom large in the convict work experience but there were such clear limitations to brutality that its use was moderated until the early 1820s. It must be appreciated that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries public violence was commonplace and modern sensibilities can exaggerate the distress this caused. But more importantly, flogging damaged individual workers and significantly lowered their productivity without measurably maximising the efforts of other workers. Productive workers, particularly skilled ones, were critical to the colonial economy. Hanging too had clear shortcomings as a mechanism for controlling a labour force. Other forms of punishment like working in chains were also understood by Macquarie's Principal Superintendent of Convicts, William Hutchinson, to have inherent limitations.3

The convict system, on the other hand, denied the State the most fundamental labour control mechanism possessed by all private employers; dismissal. Unlike private employers in Britain (and even in New South Wales) the government, as the owner of convict labour power, had an indissoluble employment contract with all convicts. It could not dismiss convicts from its employment as a means of imposing control over the labour process. Nor could it use dismissal as a threat. If a convict could not be assigned to a private settler or was returned to the government, it had to find work for that worker and support him or her by providing a legally specified quantity of rations and clothing. The suffering caused by unemployment to a free workforce had no impact on the way management treated or organised its convict work force. There was also no Reserve Army of Labour, or at least not one that could influence the nature of convict employment. While it is true that convict workers could not legally or freely choose their employer, there is evidence that they consciously tried to position themselves within the labour market. Convicts concealed or invented skills in order to influence their allocation to specific types of work4 and they displayed a preference for different types or locations of public work.5 However, they were most active in exploiting the distinction between private and public sector employment, often manipulating their allocation from one to the other.6 To understand the convict work experience it is essential to recognise the limitations that bonded employment imposed on management and not just on the convict worker.

It can be argued that the need to extract labour use from a workforce is a motive possessed only by management concerned with surplus value. Historically the profit motive is certainly one of the major mechanisms that fuelled the collective evolution of management practice and strategy. However, the public sector can be as equally motivated by the need to make its labour force as productive and as cheap as possible. This productivity concern also makes the extraction of labour use from labour power a critical management task. The colonial authorities of New South Wales from 1788 to about 1822 were no exception. The economic circumstances of white settlement in New South Wales during these years demanded that convict labour be made as productive as possible. This productivity imperative created the elaborate and large gang system of organising male convict labour. A Colonial bureaucracy and sophisticated management strategies were also developed in order to administer and improve the work by the many gangs of convict workers, particularly during the Macquarie years. It was only after 1822 that the growth in the public employment of male convicts in work gangs began to slow while their administration became increasingly concerned with the imperative of punishment.

For the first 34 years of white settlement colonial managers of convict labour were vitally involved in extracting labour use from convicts. This was achieved not simply by terror but through the adoption of increasingly sophisticated ways of organising work, of supervising it and of motivating the convict workers. Although the State possessed the power of coercion this did not give it absolute control of the labour process because male convict workers were by no means powerless. As will be seen convict productivity and work effort were the outcome of interaction between convict managers and workers over the contested terrain of the labour process. An effective analysis of this interaction and, in particular, the management and convict strategies adopted at different times are well beyond the scope of a paper such as this. However, this paper will examine one of the most enduring management strategies developed to extract a minimum quantity of work from male convicts: Task Work.

Task Work: a compromised management strategy

One of the earliest and most important strategies developed by colonial managers of convict labour was the Task Work system. Task Work was an official designation of a minimum quantity of work, or quota for individual convicts or more frequently a gang of convict workers, which had to be achieved on either a per day or per week basis. Commissioner Bigge explained it very well in his Report of 1822 when he observed it was "adopted more for the purpose of securing and ascertaining that a certain quantity of labour [was] performed, than of stimulating the quicker performance of it".7 In other words, it was not designed or could not be
enforced in ways that maximised convict work effort but was intended merely to extract an acceptable minimum quantity of work. The penal system of New South Wales, despite drastic powers of coercion, recognised the inherent and covert bargaining power of convict workers in the labour process and calculated a minimum rather than a maximum level of labour productivity.

Task Work began within the first months of the settlement. Faced with shortages of food and other essentials like accommodation and the fact that many of the convicts were in poor physical health, Governor Phillip was required to minimise the hours of convict labour. As a consequence Phillip allowed convicts time off from their public employment in order to grow food and build accommodation for themselves and for the officers. The nature of initial settlement created a distinction and ultimately a conflict between private and government time. In order to balance these interests Phillip negotiated acceptable minimum quantities of public work with the male convict workers and so established the system of Task Work. This action alone was highly significant. Although the convicts were not free, Task Work required the State to consult and negotiate with them.

At around the same time Captain Hunter introduced Task Work on Norfolk Island. He did this in order to extract an acceptable minimum amount of work from his workforce but also to address falling labour productivity caused by poor supervision and convict hostility to government work. Hunter explained that he:

...adopted the plan of tasking [the convicts], for which purpose I consulted those whom I thought conversant in the different employments that were carrying on: and their opinions, added to what I observed myself, determined me to fix the different tasks as follow, with which the are all content. Six men to cut the timber down on an acre of ground a week: six men to clear away and turn up an acre of ground fit for receiving seed, in twenty-eight days: two sawyers to saw one hundred feet of sawing each day. At these tasks the convicts would have an opportunity of saving time to themselves; and, as that time was to be employed in clearing gardens and ground to cultivate for their own use, what was thus saved from public work would not be lost to society; although it has been feared that some would pass their time in idleness.

In practice Task Work was an effort to balance public and private work interests. Where the Task Work was set too high the convicts would have had insufficient time to provide for their own lodging and other needs. Set too low and the convicts would have been able to meet their private needs with time to “loiter about the streets to the great annoyance of the inhabitants, and pass their time in gambling and riot”. However not all convicts had the same marginal utility for pleasure. Governor Hunter discovered that the sawyers at the Hawkesbury settlement did not waste their free time but used it in more enterprising ways. These sawyers had set their own Task Work at some earlier stage but by 1798 this was, in his opinion, too low and was “no longer to be allowed”. The lowness of their Task Work meant that these sawyers had a great deal of free time on their hands which, in a spirit of enterprise, they used by selling their services to the highest bidder – sometimes a private settler, sometimes even the government. With a low Task Work quantity these sawyers were free to spend considerable time working for themselves while the scarcity of their skills and the demand for building materials meant they were able to earn significant wages. It was their success that must have particularly upset Hunter.

Task Work as a system of determining work quantity and therefore effort also offered convict workers other benefits. As a system of work organisation it encouraged the male convicts to finish their Task as quickly as possible and this effectively reduced the number of hours worked for the government by the convicts. In this sense, Task Work must also be seen as a crude motivational device. It encouraged productivity although did not maximise it. However, apart from giving them free time and some independence Task Work also altered the nature of supervision. In the initial decade of settlement supervision was concentrated on establishing that the Task was actually completed rather than on the detailed control of the work performance itself. This reflected the poor quality and scarcity of supervisors within the convict system but it offered male convicts a degree of self-management. More significant was the fact that despite clear signs in the early 1800s that Task Work was not operating as effectively as it might in the State could not abolish it or extend hours of work to a full day or week. Instead Governor King attempted to make it more productive by setting official Task Work for a variety of work in March 1801. He established the following wage and Task Work rates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hourly Work</th>
<th>Per Acre</th>
<th>Week's Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threshing wheat (per bushel)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>18 bushels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting corn (per acre)</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1 acre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilling corn (ditto)</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1 acre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulling &amp; Husking Corn (ditto)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>25 bushels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pale splitting 6ft per hundred</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>800 (2 men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pale splitting 5ft per hundred</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>1000 (2 men)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly this Regulation not only established the Task Work required of convicts employed by the government in gangs or individually but also for convict assigned to free settlers. Any male convict who had finished his Task Work had to be paid according to the wages rates above for any additional work. Essentially these Task Work rates remained the required amount or quota for the work listed until at least after the Bigge Inquiry and despite Macquarie’s discomfort with Task Work generally. Indeed, Macquarie seems to have been unable to abolish it outright although the construction of the Prisoner Barracks in Sydney was an elaborate strategy in the struggle to remove, if not Task Work, then at least its most transparent justification; the need of convicts to earn sufficient income to support themselves. Over the years new occupations or activities were added to the calculation and some rates were increased. A notable example of the latter was again the case of the sawyers. Their Task Work increased significantly but fitfully during and after the Macquarie years but there is evidence that, unlike others, they resisted these increases. Druitt confessed,

I have had more trouble with the Sawyers than any other Description of convicts, & I attribute it to my obliging them to do a greater Portion of work than ever they Did before...

In 1817 Druitt not only increased their Task Work from 450 feet per week each pair to 700 feet but required them to cut more demanding types of timber such as Iron Bark, Stringy Bark and Blue Gum as well as the customary ceder, a very soft wood. In raising this Task Work Druitt also increased the rations given the sawyers by half, but those at Pennant Hills...

...in a body refused to do it; This continued for two or three weeks when H.E. The Govr. [sic] Requested me to visit the Settlement & and to speak to the people to represent to them that they were only asked to perform the same work as their fellow prisoners did in the Lumber Yard. I did so & there was a general murmur
throughout the whole body; & two men stepped forward close to me; & said if all the men were of their way of thinking, that nothing more than the old task should be done, as they considered the ration of a pound & a half of beef & a pound & a half of flour not near sufficient for a man to work hard upon. They were extremely insolent & I have no doubt wd.[sic] have made an attack upon me had not a resolute Overseer been near me & ready to offer assistance. 31

Escaping from these ‘striking’ sawyers Druitt reported the situation to Governor Macquarie who ordered that the two spokesmen be flogged the following morning. Each was given 100 lashes “The Greatest Punishment” that Druitt remembered ever being inflicted. 22 This swift and punishing response broke the strike “& from that day the usual task required at the Lumber yard was performed by the Sawyers at Pennant Hills”23. This example highlights not only the power of the state over employment relations within the penal system but also that convicts did quite openly resist. The actions of the Pennant Hills sawyers, it should also be remembered, would have probably been illegal for free workers. However, a postscript to this dispute offers yet more evidence of convict bargaining power.

Defeated in their overt actions the sawyers resorted to more covert resistance. Although the Task Work was increased, by 1820 it was widely known that the sawyers were still completing this additional workload with time to spare. The Task Work for “the Government was done on Thursday Evenings of every week”. 24 In other words the sawyers still withheld productive capacity from the government and finished their government work by Thursday leaving Friday and the half Saturday to be used in paid employment for themselves. 25 They performed more work but could have performed even more. Nevertheless, the government did not further raise the Task Work despite a shortage of building timber. This acquiescence seems to have arisen in part from the reality of the sawyers’ covert bargaining power. 26

Other male convict workers, however, managed to balance government and private work demands and ambitions with less obvious conflict. The Grass Cutters Gang was employed in Sydney to cut grass to feed government horses and those of the military officers. The way the work of this gang was organised illustrates not only the Task Work system in operation but also the reward system that was used to motivate some gang workers.

Those of the grass-cutters that are well conducted, are allowed to lodge in the town [Sydney], and after they have procured the quantity that is given as a task to each man, they are allowed to dispose of the surplus for themselves; those likewise who have been able to furnish a half of beef & a half of flour not near sufficient for a man to work hard upon. They were extremely insolent & I have no doubt wd.[sic] have made an attack upon me had not a resolute Overseer been near me & ready to offer assistance. 31

There is no evidence that the grass-cutters resisted this increase in their Task Work. However, it is clear that, to encourage an acceptable minimum level of labour productivity from the convicts employed in this gang, a number of very significant concessions were given to them. If well behaved they were able to enjoy independent life-styles outside the Barracks and in this way minimised the penal system’s regulation of their lives. Task Work, in a sense, divided a convict’s work effort into publicly and privately owned spheres. As long as the convict grass-cutter produced the required Task Work during his public employment he was allowed to work in a private capacity for part of the day or week. And it was in this latter capacity that the system allowed reward for greater personal effort. When working for themselves the convict grass-cutters could increase their personal rewards by increasing their work effort. But more than this, the personal or private work effort of these convicts was subsidised by the public sector. Government property, in the form of the boats, tools and even the vacant land upon which they harvested the grass, was freely made available to them. In other words, the State sanctioned private enterprise amongst those convicts who conformed to acceptable habits and patterns of behaviour.

By the middle of the Macquarie period the modification or setting of Task Work for new jobs was determined by senior administrators (management): the Chief Engineer, Principal Superintendent of Convicts and even the Governor. While Superintendents, Principal Overseers and Overseers may have been consulted they had no formal or consistent input into the calculation of Task Work. Similarly, male convict workers seem to have lost any overt role in the setting of Task Work during Macquarie’s administration. Of course this is not to say the convicts were an unimportant consideration in the setting of Task Work, only that their participation was covert. Given the stability of Task Work and the slow response of government to abuses or low levels of productivity, the spectre of convict resistance is very apparent up to 1822. However, after this date the ability of convict workers to resist management control of the labour process was very significantly reduced.

After Macquarie Task Work as a strategy fell into disuse. Governor Brisbane abolished many of the convict gangs that worked under Task Work 29 and reallocated convict workers to his new Clearing Gangs. 29 These were gangs of male convicts employed to clear new or existing land for free settlers at a price per acre. In regulating the work of the convicts within these gangs there was no direct reliance on Task Work. Each gang consisted of 22 convict workers and a convict overseer and they were expected on average to clear 15 acres per month but this was not a Task Work calculation. The varying physical conditions in different parts of the country would have prevented any meaningful standard of work but more importantly there was no longer any need for Task Work. Brisbane designed extremely complex organisational structures and bureaucratic controls to measure and monitor gang work performance while overseer motivation was improved with monetary rewards and convict motivation with extra rations. 11 With these reforms control over and the motivation of the overseers were both improved, thus addressing the traditional weaknesses of the convict system in New South Wales; the poor quality and unreliability of the overseers.

Governor Darling, Brisbane’s successor also made no use of Task Work. While he abolished the Clearing Gangs and many of the other convict gangs he imposed even more elaborate structures of control on the convict labour process. Darling reformed the Road Gangs and imposed the stringent and often brutal working conditions that are commonly used to describe the convict work experience. Men worked lumbered to logs of wood or in leg and sometimes also neck irons. Even worse were the Penal settlements some of which provided “the last penal infliction short of death”. 33 Under Darling the hours of government work were extended to sun-up to sun set and by 1827 the government had access to the whole of a convict’s working day. 34 The only exception made to these hours of work were for some skilled mechanics in Sydney, who were still allowed Friday and Saturday to work for themselves. This leniency was because this arrangement had “prevailed so long that it could not without some risk and great injury to the Town and Inhabitants be put a stop to”. 35 However, in general terms the removal or abandonment of Task Work, as a management labour process strategy was symbolic of the defeat of convict resistance. The government no longer needed to make the concession that Task Work represented to male convict workers. This change occurred because the administrative efficiency of Darling was so great and because...
were equally concerned with punishment and terror. Public employment of the convicts was quite deliberately intended to punish convicts and to strengthen the managerial prerogatives of private employers of convicts. By 1830 the relative importance of convict workers had changed for the government and with this came a decline in their ability to contest the control of the labour process.

Who Worked Under Task Work

The convicts most likely to perform their work under Task Work were those whose work could be most easily quantified. These included the convicts in the Brickmakers Gang, the Bricklayers Gang, the sawyers at Pennant Hills, the stone cutters who were essentially working with formed blocks of stone, most of the agricultural gangs as well as the Shell Gang and Grass Cutters Gang. At Emu Plains convict workers were “required to fell the timber on an acre of land in the course of a week; and in burning it off, he is required to perform ten rods per day”. The Brick makers Gang was another in which Task Work was an appropriate method of extracting an acceptable level of labour productivity. As Barrie Dyster explains, brickmakers worked in teams or ‘sets’.

“A set’ of brickmakers mined the earth, put it through the pug-mill, pressed it into separate sanded moulds, emptied each brick from its mould onto a pallet which, when full, was taken by barrow to drying racks and left for several days before the bricks were stacked in the kiln.”

In 1820 a brickmaking set of 29 convicts produced 25,000 bricks per week. In 1825, Major Ovens estimated a brickmakers Set consisted of only 15 men but they still produced 24,000 bricks per week. Although the stone cutters were highly skilled, it seems that because they were generally working with formed blocks of stone their work too could be more reliably quantified. Dunn claimed stone cutters were required to cut 16 superficial feet a day while “The good Stone masons are obliged to perform three perch of rough work Per day”.

On the other hand there were a number of gangs whose work could not practically be quantified into meaningful Task Work. The most obvious example of these were the road gangs. Nevertheless attempts were made. John Ford, the overseer of a Windsor Road Party working at the Parramatta end was in Bigge’s estimation “one of the best and most experienced of overseers” partly because he used his skill to attempt to set Task Work for his gang. He attempted to set the amount of work that 30 convicts working with six carts could consistently achieve in two monthly periods. While he may have been successful for his gang working on their stretch of the Windsor Road, Bigge concluded that this Task Work could not be applied elsewhere. As a consequence, the road gangs were regulated by senior administrators fixing “a daily quantity of labour proportionate to the difficulties and obstructions that occur” on individual sections of individual roads. In this way the unique difficulties posed by local terrain could be taken specifically into account.

Another example of a non-Task Work gang was the Town Carter Gang. The work of the carters would have varied from load to load while delays and interruptions to their workflow would have been unpredictable and often beyond the control of the workers or overseers involved. Similarly, the boat crews were not on Task Work. Their work, “governed by the state of the tides and wind”, would have made Task Work meaningless. It also appears that few of the quarry or stone gangs were subject to Task Work. The work of the quarrymen, blasters and stone labourers was perhaps considered too variable or immeasurable for Task Work calculations for reasons similar to the road construction gangs. As Dyster explains “Stone differed from place to place, in grain, colour and ease of working...[while]... convicts named one public quarry ‘Heaven’ and another ‘Hell’ because of the difficulty of winning rock from the latter”.

Conclusion

In terms of Labour process theory the reasons why the management of labour adopts any strategy is often as important or as interesting as what that strategy is. Task Work, as a management labour process strategy, was relatively benign. It set minimum not maximum levels of work effort and in doing so offered male convicts a significant range of benefits. Their hours of work were variable and generally they could not practicably be quantified into meaningful Task Work. The labour of male convicts was no longer as important to the government. While the road gangs performed useful and even productive work there is no escaping the realisation that these gangs were equally concerned with punishment and terror. Public employment of the convicts was quite deliberately intended to punish convicts and to strengthen the managerial prerogatives of private employers of convicts. By 1830 the relative importance of convict workers had changed for the government and with this came a decline in their ability to contest the control of the labour process.
their important economic role in the colony to covertly thwart management.

The abandonment of Task Work in the 1820s was a symptom of the maturity of the government's control of the labour process but it also reflected the declining importance of convict labour to it. The increasing numbers of convicts transported to New South Wales and the allocation of 2/3rds of them to private settlers signalled the end of an economically critical public sector. The government no longer needed convict workers. In addition, the bureaucratic controls introduced by Brisbane and Darling were much more extensive and effective in controlling the labour process. Both introduced new and more levels of supervision and administration, recruited more reliable overseers who were better motivated and developed more stringent methods of work measurement and accountability. They also both increased the level of punishment inflicted on convict workers. By the mid 1820s Task Work was an unsophisticated and irrelevant management strategy. The male convicts lost the protection of a high and sustained demand for their labour and had to battle with a more mature and elaborate network of management controls. They continued to resist and contest management's control of the labour process but their ability to do so was much reduced.

Endnotes


3 See Evidence given by William Hutchinson in 1819 to Commissioner Bigge in Bonwick Transcript (hereafter referred to as BT) Box 1 p. 39795.


8 Historical Records of Australia. Series I. (hereafter referred to as HRA I) Vol. 1. Phillip to Sydney 15 May 1788 p. 22-23; Phillip to Granville 17 July 1790. P. 195 and the Enclosure dated 23 July 1790, which shows over half of the male convict workforce was too sick to perform work, p. 199.


15 See Hirst (1983) op. cit. p. 34.


19 Druitt in Ritchie. op. cit. p.37.


21 *Ibid.* p. 34.


23 *Ibid.* p. 34.


25 See Bigge Report Vol 1 op.cit. p. 29.

26 Druitt in Ritchie. op. cit. p. 34.


32 See AO Reel 590 for the Work Reports of the Road and Iron Gangs. 1827-1830.

33 Colonial Secretary, Copies of Letters to Norfolk Island 1825-31, AONSW, 4/3821. p. 94

34 HRA I Vol. 13. Darling to Bathurst. 1 March 1827. p. 136


36 See Grace Karskens "Defiance, Deference and Diligence: Three Views of Convicts in New South Wales Road Gangs" in *Australian Historical Archaeology* 4. 1986.

37 See HRA I Vol. 13. Darling to Brisbane 1 March 1827. p. 139

38 See Bigge Report Vol 1 op.cit. pp. 26 and 29.


41 ML A2086-A2088 CY Reel 1116.

42 HRA I Vol. 11:656.

43 Bigge Report Vol 1. op. cit. p.29.

44 Druitt in Ritchie. op. cit. p.29. As a measure of stone work a perch was 24 or 25 cubic feet.


49 Dyster. op. cit. p. 134.

50 See Druitt in Ritchie. op. cit. p. 28-29; and Bigge Report Vol. 1. op.cit. p. 59.