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

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SKILL AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF LABOUR
IN NEW SOUTH WALES 1840-1915

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

BEN (Richard George) MADDISON  MA (Middlesex Polytechnic)

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND POLITICS
July 1995
I HEREBY CERTIFY that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

R. Maddison

Richard Maddison
ABSTRACT

This thesis historicises the concept of skill. It does so firstly by developing a typology of skill, identifying and distinguishing the "artisanal" from the "industrial" concept. The artisanal concept of skill existed as part of the cluster of pre-industrial European attitudes to society and labour, the principal emphasis of which was their existence outside the market relations of capitalism. In contrast, the industrial concept of skill meshed absolutely with the characteristic features of capitalist social and productive relations. Not only did it inscribe specialised and mechanised labour with skill, but it also positively embraced the notion of labour, and skill in particular, as a commodity.

This typology is the central motif of the thesis, which traces the relationship of both concepts to the history of industrial capitalism in New South Wales between 1840 and 1915. It argues that up to 1900, the artisanal concept dominated the understanding of work and its classification in New South Wales. However, from 1870 this dominance was increasingly contested, and by the early twentieth century the artisanal concept had been displaced by the industrial.

The thesis examines this process as it occurred in a variety of social locations - the New South Wales censuses, 1841-1911; the colony's general history of capital and labour, 1840-1900; in the early twentieth century New South Wales Arbitration Court; and in the more specific site of the iron trades, the history of which between 1840 and 1915 is viewed through the typology of skill. The central explanation for this displacement lies in an increasing acceptance of the commodification of labour power by a variety of actors in New South Wales. The distribution of artisanal and industrial approaches to skill thus did not readily fall into alignments of class, race or gender. Rather, the displacement of the former by the latter represented not so much the
victory of industrial capitalism over the working class it spawned, but a re-
configuration of the relationships between classes in New South Wales. A new
social order was born, and with it a new way of conceptualising human ability
became dominant.
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NOTE ON REFERENCING

In this thesis the Introduction, each of the five Parts, and the Conclusion, - rather than individual Chapters - are taken as cognate units of referencing.