USE OF THESES

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THE CONDITION OF THE URBAN WAGE EARNING CLASS

IN AUSTRALIA IN THE 1880's

E. C. Fry,
Thesis submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy,
The Australian National University,
June, 1956.
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The Preface briefly discusses definitions of cities and social classes. The wage earners to be examined in the thesis, their significance in Australian history and the period covered are outlined.

Part I deals with the background to the period and the composition of the urban wage earning class.

Chapter I places the study in perspective by examining the importance of the 1880's, city life at that time and the economic background for each colony.

Chapter 2 sets out to establish the numbers and composition of the urban wage earning class in each colony; to determine the growth of manufacturing industry and the various types of employment in each of the capital cities. Appendix I is a discussion of the statistical sources. Appendix II is a detailed
study of Melbourne industry during the 1880's.

Part II covers working conditions, legislation affecting these, and hours of work.

Chapter I includes such aspects of working conditions as buildings, ventilation, space, lighting, amenities, dangerous machinery and industrial accidents. Appendix III tabulates industrial accidents for a sample period.

Chapter 2 deals with outwork as a special type of urban employment of the time, and its relationship to factory production.

Chapter 3 deals with industrial legislation in Australia before 1890. This is principally concerned with Victoria, where the greatest advances were made. A detailed account of the legislation and of numerous abortive bills is used to illustrate the political activities of organised urban workers and the conditions in which they operated.

Chapter 4 on hours of work sketches the comparative position in Britain and the United States of America from the early nineteenth century. The material on Australia is basically an account of the extension of the eight hour day between 1855 and 1890.
traced for each colony, principally for Melbourne and Sydney, in detail for the 1880's. The chapter also covers shop hours and the early closing movement and holidays. Appendix IV tabulates the spread of the eight hour day in Melbourne and Sydney, 1879-81.

Part III is concerned with wages and employment.

Chapter 1 deals with methods of wage payment, time and piece rates, conditions of payment, additions to and deductions from wages.

Chapter 2 is an examination of money wage rates in each colony, particularly for selected urban occupations. Trends during the 1880's and for the previous thirty years are discussed, with comparisons between colonies and occupations. Various retail price indices are used to determine real wages. The detailed tables are set out in Appendix V.

Chapter 3 collects evidence on the nature and extent of urban unemployment during the 1880's.

Chapter 4 examines the conditions under which juvenile labour was employed at the time and the effectiveness of the forms of apprenticeship for training purposes.

Part IV consists of one chapter dealing with living conditions. It examines the distribution of
population in the Australian cities of the 1880's; the 
materials of construction, types of dwellings, home owner-
ship and city facilities. Appendix VI analyses the 
records of a Melbourne building society in connection 
with these questions.

Part V deals with the legal position, 
organisations and outlook of urban wage earners, con-
centrating on those aspects which flow from the previous 
analysis.

Chapter I examines the position of wage earners 
under Master and Servant and Trade Union Acts.

Chapter 2 completes the picture of the conditions 
of life of urban wage earners with an examination of 
welfare services. Some features of the organisations, 
principally trade unions, and outlook of urban wage earners 
are then discussed. Appendix VII sets out particulars of 
Sydney trade unions in 1891.
ABBREVIATIONS

Builder and Contractor

The Australasian Builder
and Contractors' News.

CENSUSES

Vic. Census, 1891.
N.S.W. Census, 1881.
N.S.W. Census, 1881, Report.
N.S.W. Census, 1891.
N.S.W. Census, 1891, Report.
S.A. Census, 1881.
S.A. Census, 1891.
Q'land Census, 1881.
Q'land Census, 1886.
Q'land Census, 1891.
Q'land Census, 1891, Report.
Tas. Census, 1881.
Tas. Census, 1891.
W.A. Census, 1891.

Coghlan, T. A. Seven
Colonies of Australasia.

Census of Victoria, 1881.
Census of Victoria, 1881.
General Report.
Census of Victoria, 1891.
General Report on the
Census of Victoria, 1891.
New South Wales Census of
1881.
New South Wales Census of
1881, Report.
Results of a Census of
New South Wales... 5th
April, 1891.
General Report on the
Eleventh Census of New
South Wales.
South Australia. Census
of 1881.
South Australia. Census
of 1891.
Sixth Census of the
Colony of Queensland...
1881.
Seventh Census of the
Colony of Queensland...
1886.
Census of Queensland, 1891.
Census of Queensland, 1891,
Report.
Census of the Colony of
Tasmania, 1881.
Statistics of Tasmania for
1891.
Census of Western
Australia, April, 1891.

A Statistical Account of
the Seven Colonies of
Australasia.
Coghlan, T. A. Australia and New Zealand.

History of Capital and Labour

J. & P.

Legislative Assembly.

N.S.W. Census and Industrial Returns Act.

N.S.W. Strikes Comm.

P.D.

P.P.

Queensland Factories Comm.

S.A. Factories Comm.

S.M.H.

V. & P.

Vic. Tariff Comm.

A Statistical Account of Australia and New Zealand.

The History of Capital and Labour, in all Lands, etc.

Journals and Papers.

Reports under the New South Wales Census and Industrial Returns Act of 1891.

Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes, Sydney, 1891.

Parliamentary Debates.

Parliamentary Papers.


Sydney Morning Herald.

Votes and Proceedings.


Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Workrooms and Shops, for the year ending 31st December -

(Note: The apostrophe has been omitted before eighties, nineties, etc. when used as abbreviations for 1880's, 1890's, etc.)
PREFACE.

A comprehensive study of the condition of the urban wage earning class in Australia in the 1880's would provide a very wide and diffuse subject. It would, indeed, be nothing less than a detailed survey of workplace, home, leisure, interests, attitudes, of the economic, political and social life, of a numerous and scattered class. While this may be attempted by the contemporary investigator for a small number of subjects, or less intensively for a larger group, in an historical study the ephemeral evidence of everyday life is not available, and the records from which some of it might be reconstructed are unsatisfactory or limited.

Though a complete picture of the daily life of urban wage earners in Australia at this time cannot be pieced together, the utility of a more restricted enquiry is not thereby lessened. Such a study is necessarily selective, but the limitation of the field permits the concentration of attention on such aspects as provide a coherent and significant account.

In an attempt to do this the thesis will, in Part I, outline the economic background to the 1880's and specify the section of the population with which the thesis is concerned, namely the urban wage earners in general, and certain groups of these wage earners in particular. Part II is concerned with working conditions - the circumstances of the working lives of urban
wage earners in the factory, shop or other workplace, legislation affecting these, and hours of labour. Part III deals with wages, including methods of payment, rates and earnings, with prices as they affected real wages and with unemployment. Part IV treats of living conditions, primarily housing.

Finally, the organisations of workers, mainly trade unions, are examined, and some brief attention is paid to other social institutions to the extent to which they affected conditions of life; from this an attempt is made to sum up working class attitudes.

Working conditions, wages, living conditions, organisations and attitudes, together provide a theme which does not set out to be a complete social history, which scarcely touches manners or morals, for example, but which does describe how urban workers earned their living, what that living was, and some of the effects on them of this position.

A limitation must be made with regard to urban centres, for the area of the study is primarily the capital cities. To some extent this is arbitrary. But the distinctive development of urbanisation in Australia has been towards a high concentration of population in the capitals. If the criteria of numbers and density of population together with occupational diversification are taken as the criteria of a city, there were few urban

(1) "City" is a term frequently used, seldom defined. This is sensible enough, for the urban features under discussion are generally obvious. Officially, towns and cities are usually defined on the basis of population. For the purposes of the social sciences most writers use the criteria of numbers, density of population and diversity of occupations. Applications of these tests
centres at this time, apart from the capital cities, worthy of study. Between 1881 and 1891 Melbourne was the largest city, its population growing from 282,947 to 490,902, its proportion of the population of Victoria from 32 per cent. to 43 per cent. Sydney contained 224,211 persons in 1881, 29 per cent. of the population of New South Wales, and 383,366 in 1891, 34 per cent. of the New South Wales population. Adelaide's population rose from 103,864 to 133,252, as a percentage of the South Australian total from 36 to 42 per cent. The population of Brisbane increased rapidly from 31,109 to 101,564, the latter being 26 per cent. of the colonial total. The population of Hobart was 21,118 in 1881 and 35,450 in 1891; of Perth, 5,822 in 1881 and 8,447 in 1891. Neither Hobart nor Perth contained a quarter of the population of its colony. Apart from the capitals there were seven urban centres, five of them in Victoria and New South Wales, whose populations ranged from 52,000 to 16,000. Some of them find a place from time to time in the thesis as they become more useful than fixing any arbitrary dividing line for towns and cities; the joint criteria draw attention to important differences between cities.

For a discussion of the criteria of a city see:-
S.A. Queen and L.F. Thomas, "The City", New York, 1939, Ch. I.
S.A. Queen and R.B. Carpenter, "The American City", New York, 1953, Ch. 2.
important in relation to particular aspects of the study. (1)

Melbourne and Sydney dominated Australian urban life; following them, but much smaller, came Adelaide and Brisbane, which latter had grown in ten years from a large town to an important city. Hobart and Perth were in a different category. (2)

The growth of the Australian capital cities reflected a growing diversity of occupations. Their original administrative and commercial functions were supplemented by the development of manufacturing industry, which took place mainly in the capital. (3)

It is with the wage earners in these newer industries that this thesis is particularly concerned. They were especially concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney. The locale of the study, then, is primarily Melbourne and Sydney, to a less extent Adelaide and Brisbane, with other cities mentioned only to the extent of their influence on general urban life.

In delimiting the personnel of the study, an objective test is applied to distinguish wage earners. This test is that

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(1) T.A. Coghlan, "The Seven Colonies of Australasia", 1892, p. 352. The capital cities and their populations are discussed in more detail in Part IV.

(2) In the words of a contemporary observer, "In regarding urban Australia one instinctively puts the capitals in two groups - Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane in one; and Perth and Hobart in the other." Gilbert Parker, "Round the Compass in Australia", n.d., Melb. c.1892, p.98.

(3) As C.M.H. Clark, "Select Documents in Australian History 1851-1900", Sydney, 1955, p.659, says of the second half of the nineteenth century, ".....the capital cities were gradually changing in function and appearance. Before 1850, apart from government, their main function was to provide services for the pastoral hinterland....They were the entrepot depots between the areas of production and the markets of Great Britain. By 1900, with the possible exception of Hobart and Perth, they were also industrial towns."
of source of income, wage earners receiving their income in the form of wages paid by other individuals or combinations of individuals. Members of a society may be classified on many bases, as, for example, by their occupations, by their associates, or, in the manner fashionable amongst some sociologists, by such subjective criteria as their attitudes or their self-evaluation of their position within the society. Such methods of division may illuminate particular aspects of the life of a group, but the test of source of income is still a basic preliminary. It is in this way that it is used in this thesis.

The great differences within the wage earning class are obvious. In taking them into account the subject matter of the thesis is further limited. The wage earners with whom this thesis is concerned were engaged in community services, transport and storage, construction and building, the processing of raw materials and manufacture proper. But the thesis does not set

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(1) A.M. Carr-Saunders and D. Caradog Jones, "A Survey of the Social Structure of England and Wales"; London, 1927, in the course of a very thorough examination of social structure arrive at this conclusion. "We found reason to believe that the occupation which a man follows is of more immediate importance to him that the industry in which he is engaged. Industrial status is of still greater importance. It makes all the difference to a man following the occupation of agriculture whether he is an employer, say a large farmer employing many labourers; an independent worker, say a small holder working his holding by himself; or an employee, say a labourer working for wages." (p.61) Their example is chosen from agriculture, where this consideration of industrial status is often regarded as being of less importance than mere participation in rural life.

Various concepts of class are discussed by Richard Centers, "The Psychology of Social Classes", Princeton, 1949, Chapter II, who shows that the importance of the criterion used in this thesis is generally acknowledged by sociologists.
out to deal with professional or managerial employees, with technicians, nor those engaged in education, government or finance. Clerks are neglected because of their small numbers and special position. Shop assistants are included, for they occupied a central place in some of the social questions of the day. Seamen are not taken as urban workers, though port workers are, and there was a close connection between the two groups. Domestic servants are treated only incidentally. Naturally there are many borderline cases, and in consideration of many questions bodies of wage earners outside the scope of this study, such as bushworkers and miners, had an impact upon urban workers which cannot be neglected.

What is the justification for studying these groups of wage earners? In the balance sheet of the time these sections of the population were not negligible, even when all eyes were on the number of sheep and the price of wool. More important, they represented the growing trend, those sections of the community which were to play an ever larger part in Australian life, and whose early history has often been neglected. The historian may be doubtful of his foresight, but at least he has hindsight. The bushman and the shearer were to be displaced from their leading position in the Australian working class by the city dweller and the factory worker. This thesis attempts to describe, at a stage of their development, those elements of the Australian working class which were to become increasingly important with the growth of the Australian economy.
The period covered by the thesis is roughly the decade of the eighteen-eighties. This provides a fairly definite and natural end point. The advent of the severe depression of the early nineties brought to a close the epoch of prosperity which had provided the background to Australian life for many years previously. The nineteenth century as Australia's era of expansion ended in 1891. The Maritime Strike of late 1890, and the subsequent formation of political labour parties was a turning point in trade union and political organisation and attitudes of the working class. For these reasons a new period in the study of the urban wage earning class in Australia begins from about 1891.

The beginning of the period is less definite. No such sudden transformation marks the beginning of the eighties. As will be seen, this decade carried on those economic influences which had been growing for many years. It would be necessary to go back to the gold rushes, or at least to the establishment of a settled post gold rush economy and society, for the previous turning point in Australian history. Nevertheless, the eighties are in many respects the culmination of an epoch, the crowning point of thirty years of rapid progress, revealing in their maturity those trends which had been shaping Australian life since the mid-century. Recovery from the minor depression of 1879-80 was followed by unparalleled prosperity and living standards. For many purposes the census year 1881, which can be compared to that of 1891, provides a convenient starting point. The tremendous expansion of the cities during this
decade gives it a special significance in the history of Australian urban life.

At the same time many new trends which became prominent in Australian life later had their roots in the eighties. The importance of the period in Australian history is discussed in the following chapter.