

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

Labour Commodification and Skilled Selves in Late Nineteenth-Century Australia

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SUMMARY: This article uses the concept of labour commodification to critique common historiographical portraits of skilled workers in transition to industrial capitalism. The meanings with which skilled workers in late nineteenth-century Australia understood their own labour went far beyond a repertoire of technical abilities. They viewed skill as a socio-biological disposition specific to a human type (adult, male, Anglo-Saxon), and this view intimately connected artisans' work and selfhood. Capitalist industrial change threatened to disrupt those connections. The notoriously exclusive union policies skilled workers invented can thus be seen as designed not simply to position their members more advantageously on the labour market, but to protect artisanal selves and identities from the corrosive effects of labour commodification.

Transforming labour into a commodity – that is, turning it into a form in which it can be exchanged between sellers (workers) and buyers (employers) – is an essential part of constructing capitalism. Locating the commodification process in specific historical settings and tracing the accompanying consequences is one of the main intellectual objects of labour historians, although rarely articulated in this way. This article examines part of that process as it affected skilled workers, and as they affected it, in the second half of the nineteenth century in Australia. Although set in Australia, the argument addresses historical and historiographical issues which are relevant to labour and social histories and historiographies of other societies. Specifically, this article offers a new way of thinking about skilled workers and the exclusive industrial policies that they infamously invented to defend themselves against capitalism in its early (nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) stages.

In labour historiographies of early capitalism, the skilled figure either as demons, by virtue of their notoriously exclusive union rules and cooperation with their employers – in an old formulation, selling out class unity; in a

newer guise, fomenting gender and ethnic exclusion – or they figure as saints, leading the charge by “civilizing capitalism”. The argument in this article is intended to provide a way of understanding the skilled that escapes from this common historiographical tendency to either vilify or sanctify the policies adopted by skilled workers.¹

The argument proceeds from the observation that despite their obvious divergences, both types of account rely on a profoundly ahistorical view of the skilled. Both assume that the industrial policies of the skilled in early capitalism are best understood as “common sense” or “natural” strategies to combat the semi-proletarianization of their labour constituted by the development of a labour market and task specialization. The overwhelming assumption in both types of account is that the skilled in early capitalism were self-conscious and self-determining actors, protecting themselves by creating institutional structures intended to maximize the selling price of the commodity skill on the labour market.

1. In Australian historiography the tendency to demonize is exemplified in Ian Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics. The Dynamics of the Labour Movement in Eastern Australia, 1900–1921* (Canberra, 1965); Ian Turner and Leonie Sandercock, *In Union is Strength. A History of Trade Unions in Australia 1788–1983* (3rd ed., Melbourne, 1983), p. 22; Ken Buckley and Ted Wheelwright, *No Paradise for Workers. Capitalism and the Common People in Australia 1788–1914* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 141–143. For demonization through gendered and racialized exclusions in Australia see *ibid.*, pp. 143–153. For a sustained account of gendered and racialized exclusions – although in a less than demonizing framework – see Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work, Gender and Labour in Victoria 1880–1939* (Melbourne, 1993). A specific – and classic – example of the demonic skilled in British historiography is Eric Hobsbawm, “The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain”, in *idem*, *Labouring Men. Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), p. 274. The classic Australian example of the “civilizing” approach is Bede Nairn, *Civilizing Capitalism: The Labour Movement in New South Wales 1870–1900* (Canberra, 1973). Its British counterpart is A.E. Musson, *British Trade Unions 1800–1875* (London, 1972), pp. 10–11. An attempt to rethink artisans outside this typology is Royden Harrison, “Introduction”, in Royden Harrison and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *Divisions of Labour. Skilled Workers and Technological Change in Nineteenth Century England* (Brighton, Urbana and Chicago, 1985). Examples of more recent demonizations are Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers* (London, 1983); and Jack Simons and R. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850–1950* (Zambia[?], 1983), pp. 89, 94, 197. A synopsis of the British and European literature that uses a similar demonization/sanctification typology is J. Breuille, “Artisan Economy, Artisan Politics, Artisan Ideology. The Artisan Contribution to the Nineteenth Century European Labour Movement”, in Clive Elmsley and J. Walvin, *Artisans, Peasants and Proletarians 1760–1860* (London, 1985), pp. 191–192. For an appraisal of the German literature see Jurgen Kocka, “Problems of Working-Class Formation in Germany: The Early Years, 1800–1875”, in Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg (eds), *Working-Class Formation. Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 281 and 307; and Jurgen Kocka, “Craft Traditions and the Labour Movement in Nineteenth-Century Germany”, in Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Rodney Floud (eds), *The Power of the Past. Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (Cambridge and Paris, 1984), pp. 98–101, 111. In these articles Kocka observes a similar value-laden dichotomy in German historiography, while noting that there are some significant German departures from the typology I have identified. The continued salience of that typology in French labour historiography is demonstrated in Mark Traugott, “Introduction”, in *idem* (ed. and trans.), *The French Worker. Autobiographies from the Early Industrial Era* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1993), pp. 11–12, 41–42.

While such a “logic” and the concepts through which it is articulated may make a lot of sense to historians writing in mid to late twentieth-century capitalist societies, it is presumptuous to assume that the same “logic” and concepts can be transposed unproblematically to the actions of workers in other times and places. The modern conceptual framework through which capitalism has become understood evolved slowly and unevenly. In eighteenth-century England a separate sphere denoted “economy” was only slowly differentiated analytically and politically from “society” as capitalism evolved; the concept “capitalism” itself appeared in the nineteenth century, relatively late in its own history.² It was only later in the nineteenth century that concepts and logic derived from political economy appeared in the consciousness of British workers and started to inform their actions.³ In Germany the conceptual apparatus of feudal corporatism continued to vie with that of capitalism until the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ In Australia the evolution of the modern conceptual apparatus with which to understand capitalism was similarly protracted. As “late” as 1870 and 1880 Australians were having the meaning and advantages of the concept “division of labour” painstakingly explained to them.⁵ Here too the concept of a “labour market” was also incompletely understood, and the idea of labour as a commodity was strongly contested.⁶ Societies being transformed to capitalism in the twentieth century demonstrate contemporary examples of a similar phenomenon.⁷

This historicization of even the most familiar concepts through which capitalism is thought and lived is a reminder of the relevance to labour historians of Robert Darnton’s maxim that “historians constantly need to

2. Edward Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, 1993), p. 270.

3. Eric Hobsbawm, “Custom, Wages and Workload”, in idem, *Labouring Men*; idem, “Artisans and Labour Aristocrats?”, in idem, *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984); Keith McClelland, “Time to Work, Time to Live: Some Aspects of Work and the Re-Formation of Class in Britain, 1850–1880”, in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 186–196.

4. Kocka, “Problems of Working-Class Formation in Germany”, pp. 310–312, 325–327, 333–334, 343. See also generally idem, “Craft Traditions and the Labour Movement in Nineteenth-Century Germany”.

5. For example John West, the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, referred in an editorial in 1870 to the importance in economic development of “the principle of division of labour”, and felt it necessary to explain this importance by adding that it was for “the purpose of labouring with greater economy”: *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), 4 April 1870, p. 4.

6. For a fairly “late” example see the comments of Sir Samuel Griffith, the Premier of Queensland, who asserted in 1891 that labour “may be spoken of as a commodity by economists, but it is an entirely wrong concept”, Minutes of Evidence, *Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes* (Sydney, 1891), q. 7200.

7. For a luminous early example see Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980). Also see the comments on New Guineans and wage labour in the mid-twentieth century in Maurice Godelier, “Work and its Representations: A Research Proposal”, *History Workshop Journal*, 10 (Autumn 1980), pp. 173–174.

be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past”.⁸ For if historians use concepts such as “labour market”, “labour power”, “division of labour” and “skill” (to name a few) as though they have an eternity and universality, one of the effects is unwittingly to dehistoricize workers and their responses to capitalism. When the actions of the skilled in early capitalism are resolved into the “logic”, tactics and terms – the conceptual framework – indigenous to modern and late capitalism, the result is to misconstrue the significance, origins and “logic” of their actions.

In order to avoid such examples of the “outrageous condescension of posterity”, it is necessary to write social and labour histories which give due weight to the fact that workers and others in early capitalism lived and thought through a rather different conceptual prism than that current later in the history of capitalism.⁹ While some recent work has attempted to do just this, there is still strong resistance to this project of completely historicizing the history of labour. This is particularly the case in the historiography of a settler capitalist society such as Australia, which emphasizes the continuity of the conceptual order since European occupation, rather than the discontinuity.¹⁰ Here, it is assumed, the working class developed in the absence of the kinds of feudal ideologies and conceptual regimes which inflected the responses of the nascent European and British working class.¹¹

While there is thus a significant difference between Australian and Euro-

8. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (Ringwood, Victoria, 1985), p. 12.

9. The quoted phrase is from Edward Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), p. 13.

10. I have in mind here the influential perspective of the Australian historian W.K. Hancock, who wrote in 1930 that “The record of a bare six generations of British enterprise would be incredible were it not for the fact that it falls wholly within the epoch of the stupendous energies let loose by the Industrial Revolution [...] and the Democratic Revolution [...] The continent has been peopled by a civilization ready-made [...]”: William Keith Hancock, *Australia* (London, 1930), p. 32. For an appraisal of Hancock’s significance see R. Pascoe, *The Manufacture of Australian History* (Melbourne, 1979), pp. 18–31.

11. European and British histories of labour and working-class formation are nowadays unthinkable without consideration of these issues. The detailed attention given to these matters in Hobsbawm, “Custom, Wages and Workload”; Edward Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism” and “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”, both reprinted in idem, *Customs in Common*; Kocka, “Problems of Working-Class Formation in Germany”; idem, “Craft Traditions and the Labour Movement in Nineteenth-Century Germany”; McClelland, “Time to Work, Time to Live”; John Rule, “The Property of Skill”, in Joyce, *The Historical Meanings of Work*; William Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France* (Cambridge, 1980), contrasts with the non-existent or passing attention in Australian labour and social historiography. See, for examples, Buckley and Wheelwright, *No Paradise for Workers*; Charlie Fox, *Working Australia* (North Sydney, 1991); Mark Hearn and H. Knowles, *One Big Union. A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886–1994* (Melbourne, 1996). They do get more than passing attention in Robert Connell and Terry Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History: Poverty and Progress* (2nd ed., Melbourne, 1992), chs 2 and 3; and Frances, *Politics of Work*.

pean historiographies in this respect, European and British work on the mentalities of the early working class displays some of the Australian historiographic tendency to operate around continuities, especially in those cases where the existence of a vocabulary common to both past and present operates as a device seemingly telescoping or bridging temporal – and conceptual – distance. The terms “labour market”, “labour power”, “division of labour” and “skill” are good examples of this. In addition, British, European and Australian historiographies share an unproblematic and ahistorical understanding of human identity formation and the histories of the subjectivities of working-class and labouring poor communities.

This article attempts to address these historical and historiographical problems through a case study in a specific national context. It focuses on the conceptual apparatus through which skilled workers in late nineteenth-century Australia oriented themselves in the shifting seas that constituted the intensification of capitalism at that time. One of the aims in the article is to argue that for labour and social historians to “defamiliarize” their relationship to capitalism’s past, it is necessary to historicize basic concepts embedded in labour and social historiographies – in this case “skill”. It presents the argument that how the skilled understood their own labour – as opposed to the assumptions of historians about the meaning of artisans’ “skill” – imposed a logic of action which made it virtually impossible for them to develop the kinds of inclusive policies which labour historians in particular – as well as many contemporary actors – demanded of them. In order to do so the skilled would have had to act ahistorically, by denying the whole basis of their social being – their selves. In short, the mentalities of the skilled operated to constrain the range of responses which they could develop to capitalism and the commodification of their labour power.

I

In Australia from 1850, the technical conditions of labour commodification were firmly established. Increasingly as the decades went by, wage workers came to comprise a greater and greater proportion of the population. At the same time, the rewards for the expenditure of labour power became more and more closely connected to the supply of and demand for labour. Increased technical specialization of work and the development of fine-grained classification of occupations which accompanied that process; the prevalence of piece-work schemes of payment (especially in the pastoral industry); and mechanization of production processes meant that employers in Australia were increasingly able to purchase just the right quantities and qualities of labour power that they required.¹² As a consequence, relations

12. For these techniques see *ibid.*, pp. 61, 63, 84; Noel Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development 1861–1900* (Canberra, 1976), pp. 206–210; Ray Markey, *The Making of the Labour*

between employers and employees were increasingly confined to the sale and purchase of the commodity labour power. So pronounced was the trend to commodification that more perceptive observers in the late 1880s began to identify it, rather than the vagaries of any putative “Australian national type”, as a central characteristic differentiating Australia from other countries.¹³ For example, the New South Wales government statistician T.A. Coghlan wrote in 1887 that in the 1840s Australian workers had referred to “the standard of labour in England” as their gauge of the condition of the working classes in Australia. However, he continued, “Since the gold era this has been changed, and the standard now made for themselves by Australian workers has no reference to any other country.”¹⁴ Coghlan was referring to the discovery made by workers – and particularly unskilled workers – during the propitious conditions of the early gold rush period (1851–1855), that the value of labour in a capitalist society could be determined by supply and demand, and that this had the capacity to liberate labour from the limitations of “Old World” preconceptions about appropriate and customary rates of pay. In short, Coghlan was observing the process described by Eric Hobsbawm as “learning the rules of the game” of capitalism – the existence of an entity called the “labour market”, and the nature of its rules of operation.¹⁵

Coghlan’s observations were echoed in 1888 by the professor of economics at Sydney University, Walter Scott. He considered that one of the central features of the transition from feudalism to capitalism was that “Free competition [in labour] prevailed over custom and regulation; and the reign of the cash nexus was established.” He went on to observe: “It is under this system that our colonies have grown up” and in them:

the relations between employer and wage-earner are probably less permanent, and more entirely limited to the cash-nexus, than in any other countries in the world, with the sole exception of the United States.¹⁶

While Scott and Coghlan had hit on one of the key factors differentiating nineteenth-century Australia from other comparable societies, their appraisal of the extent of labour commodification in Australia was an over-generalization. Their comments were as much prescriptive as descriptive – that is, they both were inclined to see labour commodification as progres-

Party in New South Wales 1880–1900 (Kensington, NSW, 1988), pp. 49–51; Frances, *Politics of Work*, p. 39; Fox, *Working Australia*, pp. 26–28.

13. For an account of the history of national types and national identity in Australia see Richard White, *Inventing Australia* (Sydney, 1981). The notion of national identity has been extremely influential in Australian labour historiography. Its classic expression is Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne, 1958).

14. Timothy Coghlan, *The Wealth and Progress of New South Wales, 1886–1887* (Sydney, 1887), p. 879.

15. Hobsbawm, “Customs, Wages and Workload”, pp. 344–345.

16. *The Australian Economist*, 3 March 1888, p. 3.

sive, and thus desirable, and to resolve all discussions of labour in Australia into its terms.¹⁷ In reality, their assessment applied far more to the labour conditions of the “unskilled” workers in the pastoral, mining and transport sectors, than it did to urban “skilled” trades. Around the same time that Scott and Coghlan were writing, the skilled tradesmen in Sydney’s building trades were on strike against their employers’ attempts to replace the existing standard wage for both carpenters and joiners with a wage scale which differentiated between the two occupations. The employers justified their efforts to introduce a wage scale instead of a standard wage, by arguing that such a scale would open up the skills of building workers to supply and demand. In opposition, the workers asserted that carpenters and joiners were of equal value to their employers, and the Secretary of the Operative Stonemasons’ Society commented that with regard to the law of supply and demand, “it was not proper to look upon the men as one would regard a bale of flock, so that which way the market went he (*sic*) would have to go with it”.¹⁸

The building tradesmen in 1888 were not unusual in rejecting the idea that supply and demand should determine their wage rate. The idea that wage rates for skilled trades were determined by customary rather than market consideration was one with a long history. Prevalent in Australia in the 1830s and 1840s, it continued into the 1850s.¹⁹ In 1853, for example, a blacksmith working at a Sydney foundry, on being paid the very high, but market, rate, of £6 a week remarked to a fellow worker that “I felt ashamed to take my wages”.²⁰ As this example indicates, customary considerations were opposed to the principle of market determination itself, rather than simply a cynical pragmatism against wage reductions.

In the conditions of high general levels of labour commodification adverted to by Coghlan and Scott, the continued adherence of skilled workers to the idea of a customary or subjective wage rate requires some explanation. According to standard labour history accounts, the wage rate which skilled workers attempted to enforce throughout the period was simply the main device, along with apprenticeship rules, with which the skilled tried to preserve the scarcity value of their abilities in a competitive labour market.²¹ But if we dig a bit deeper into the mental world of the skilled, we

17. For a more detailed elaboration see Ben Maddison, “Skill and the Commodification of Labour in New South Wales, 1840–1915” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wollongong, 1995), chs 3 and 6.

18. *SMH*, 20 October 1888, p. 15.

19. Connell and Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, pp. 48, 62, 100, 103; and L.J. Hume, “Working Class Movements in Sydney and Melbourne before the Gold Rushes”, *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, 2nd ser. (Melbourne, 1967), pp. 34–38.

20. Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1859/60, vol. 4, J.G. White, p. 1331.

21. See, for a classic example, Jim Hagan, *Printers and Politics. A History of the Australian Printing Unions* (Canberra, 1966).

can see how misleading is this way of thinking about the skilled and their policies. Underneath the discomfort of the blacksmith about taking higher wages than he felt he ought to, and indeed underneath all such references to customary rates of pay, lay a conception of skill which automatically positioned skilled workers against the market and commodification, independently of any strategic appraisal of their position in it. This conception was alluded to by the stonemasons' leader in the 1888 strike, when he commented that "The men's labour could never deteriorate in value" – no matter how much it might in terms of wages received.²² This understanding was more directly expressed by a Sydney fitter and turner in 1860 who remarked that he thought skilled work should be paid for according to its "intrinsic worth".²³ Such comments imply that skilled workers in the nineteenth century considered their labour to have a fixed and timeless value. In order to understand the significance of this for the types of responses which the skilled developed to capitalism, we must push further into the mental – the discursive – world of nineteenth-century artisans.

II

We can begin to understand the artisans' concept of skill by examining a comment made in 1870 by John West, the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He described the skilled or "better class of workmen" in the following way:

In them we see the amazing faculty which operates as if by instinct and perfects a task partly by the direct and conscious evolutions of the brain, and partly by the hardly-noticed "cunning-of-the-hand".²⁴

By giving closer attention to the internal logic within this description, and by considering also why it was likely to have been intelligible to West's contemporaries, it is possible to reveal the contemporary meaning attached to the artisans' understanding of skill – rather than the meanings which twentieth-century labour historians have attributed to artisanal skill.

We start by drawing away from the established procedures of labour history, and noting that West's description was rooted in a particular conceptualization of human beings, rather than in the details of the work of skilled workers. He prefaced his remarks on skilled work by noting that, "There is no such absolute division between the hand and the head as is sometimes represented [. . .]" – a conceptualization of human beings that was central to his description.²⁵ Crucially, it generated a particular positioning of the mental and the physical in relation to each other: skilled

22. *SMH*, 20 October 1888, p. 15.

23. Select Committee on the Working Classes of the Metropolis, J.G. White, p. 1330.

24. *SMH*, 2 August 1870, p. 4.

25. *Ibid.*

work was achieved “partly” by the activity of the brain, and “partly” by the activity of the hand. There is no suggestion that the mental and the physical were separate entities existing in a particular relationship with or to each other. Rather, these two together, in a symbiosis of mutual dependence, were portrayed as parallel moments of skilled work, intertwined as in a double helix. Skill was thus not portrayed as a combination of two separate and opposing mental and physical faculties which were brought into play with each other in the act of skilled work. Rather, these two together constituted a single entity – and this *faculty* (emphasis added) was the skill of artisans.

On the basis of this conceptualization of the human essence, West’s view of skill attributed the capacity for intentional human productive activity to parts of the body which were not the mind, specifically the hand and the fingers. Thus for West the intentionality and conscious activity of the skilled worker was not simply the result of “direct and conscious evolutions of the brain”, but of what he describes as the “cunning-of-the-hand” – as though the skilled hand itself was a site of knowing and reason.

Although it was in the early seventeenth century that Descartes had identified the categories “mind” and “body” as the central terms describing a human corporeal division of labour, that conceptualization did not automatically or easily sweep to a position of dominance. Thus even in 1870 West’s mode of representing the work of artisans by using a weakly separated or non-existent distinction between “mind” and “body” was neither anachronistic nor idiosyncratic. West, as a Congregationalist minister, belonged to a Dissenting religious tradition in which the categories “mind”, “body” and “soul” were weakly differentiated.²⁶ Moreover, as E.P. Thompson has shown, the rejection of Cartesian dualism was integral to the understandings of such late eighteenth-century Dissenting sects as the Muggletonians, whose members were part of London’s artisan community.²⁷ The extent to which this conceptualization was common amongst eighteenth-century London artisans, let alone artisans and others in mid-nineteenth-century New South Wales, remains unclear. Nevertheless, West’s description was coherent with that tradition, and not mobilized in isolation. Other contemporaries of West also used a similar non-Cartesian mode of representing skilled work. For example, “Old Pioneer”, a commentator on life in the Illawarra region in the nineteenth century, explained that the excellence of boots made by a local bootmaker in the 1890s was because “in all the years of his life his hand never lost its cunning”.²⁸ Similarly, the *Sydney*

26. For West see *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. II, pp. 590–592. For some discussion of the content and texture of this tradition see Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 34–58, 385–440 and idem, *Witness Against the Beast. William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

28. *Illawarra Mercury*, “Old Pioneer”, series no. 25, p. 53.

Morning Herald in 1877 carried the observations of an English commentator about the success of the artisanal-based production which persisted in parts of Europe. In the article, tellingly titled “Artisan Culture”, the commentator described that in European craft-based production “The workman’s fingers are full of brains”.²⁹ This nonsensical physiology strikingly conveys the foundation of the artisanal concept of skill in a mental world which confounded the dualism of “mind” and “body”.

The dominance of the artisanal mode of representing skilled work meant that its non-mind/body logic persisted even when Cartesian categories were used.³⁰ For example, Thomas Bavister, the Secretary of the strongly artisanal Bricklayers’ Society continued this conceptualization in 1891 when he firmly resisted all attempts to portray the work in his occupation as divisible into discrete mental and physical spheres. Against the suggestion that bricklaying apprentices “could [. . .] take up the practical portion before they went into the theoretical”; or conversely, that education in the theoretical aspects was “a good introduction to the practical”, Bavister responded that “they should rather combine the two”, and that “the two ought to go hand-in-hand together”. His central point was that “thoroughly good workmen would be turned out” only where “theoretical and practical instruction would proceed together”.³¹ The same understanding was expressed by another trade unionist in 1889, when he commented that “they must unite theory and practice to make good workmen”.³²

Looking beyond the colonial context, we find an English wheelwright in the late 1880s describing in his occupation that “a stage was reached when eye and hand were left to their own cleverness”, and how a good wheelwright “knew, not by theory, but more delicately in his eyes and fingers”.³³ Something of that same understanding can also be found in contemporary English writings. Underlying John Ruskin’s critique of industrial society was the disappearance of just such a concept of skill. In *The Stones of Venice*

29. *SMH*, 17 November 1877, p. 5.

30. For a suggestive discussion of the historical specificity of Cartesian categories see I. Matson, “Why isn’t the Mind-Body Problem Ancient?”, in P.K. Feyerabend and G. Maxwell (eds), *Mind, Matter, and Method. Essays in Honour of Herbert Feigl* (Minneapolis, 1966), pp. 92–102. On this subject also see A. Sohn Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour. A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1983), pp. 13–19, 101–116; and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London, 1958), ch. 11.

31. Minutes of Evidence, *Report of the Royal Commission on Strikes*, qq. 8832–8838. For the characterization of the Bricklayers’ Society see Alice Coolican, “Master Builders and the Beginnings of Arbitration in New South Wales”, in Stuart Macintyre and R. Mitchell (eds), *Foundations of Arbitration. The Origins and Effects of State Compulsory Arbitration 1890–1914* (Melbourne, 1989), pp. 253 and 259.

32. *Report of Proceedings, Sixth Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress* (Hobart, 1889), Mr Aram, p. 31.

33. G. Sturt, “The Wheelwright’s Shop”, in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1974), pp. 322 and 326.

he wrote that “the great civilized invention of the division of labour” was founded on two “mistaken suppositions”, one of which was “that one man’s thoughts can be, or ought to be, executed by another man’s hands”.³⁴ Similar conceptions of lost artisanal skill were expressed in the writings of Ruskin’s disciple, William Morris.³⁵

III

With weak or non-existent separation between the categories “mind” and “body”, or their equal status in the accomplishment of skilled work, skill in the artisanal understanding could neither be explained nor analysed in terms of clear “causes” giving rise to clear “effects”. In this sense the presence of the ostensibly archaic terminology “art and mystery” in the description of skilled occupations in late colonial New South Wales was not simply a quaint reminder of the medieval origins of crafts. Rather, the frequent description of skill in terms of “art” throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflected the persistence of this understanding of skill.³⁶ The *Herald* in 1872 advised the house painters of Sydney that they would “find the improvement of their own skill through art culture”.³⁷ This was coherent with the representational style of the English wheelwright who asserted that in his occupation “the work was more of an art [. . .] than a science [. . .] A good wheelwright knew by art not by reasoning the proportion to keep” in making wheels.³⁸ A diverse group of colonial skilled workers also made similar claims about their work. Cabinet making was described as “art” in 1862; colonial tailors spoke of “the art of cutting” in the 1880s; and iron trades workers were still in 1910 describing their essentially prosaic skill as “art”, as also did typographers.³⁹

34. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (Orpington and London, 1989), vol. II, pp. 162–163.

35. William Morris, “Art Under Plutocracy” and “Useful Work Versus Useless Toil”, in A.L. Morton (ed.), *The Political Writings of William Morris* (London, 1973), esp. pp. 68 and 88 respectively. See also William Morris, “Medieval Arts and Crafts”, in A.H.R. Ball (ed.), *Selections From the Prose Works of William Morris* (London, 1931), pp. 76–81.

36. For this presence see Hagan, *Printers and Politics*, pp. 1–5, 58. The 1844 Apprenticeship Act referred to those engaged in any “art, mystery, or manual occupation”: quoted in John Shields, “Skill Reclaimed: Craft Work, Craft Unions, and the Survival of Apprenticeship in New South Wales, 1860–1914” (Ph.D. thesis, Sydney University, 1990), p. 30. Eric Fry, “The Condition of the Urban Wage Earning Class in Australia in the 1880s” (Ph.D. thesis, The Australian National University, 1956), p. 372, also picks up the presence of the artisanal idiom in the 1880s, noting that “In the most skilled occupations, [. . .] an ‘art and mystery’ [. . .] had to be acquired”. Some of the popular beliefs which supported the “art and mystery” tradition in England are discussed in R.W. Malcolmson, *Life and Labour in England 1700–1780* (London, 1981), pp. 83–93.

37. *SMF*, 7 June 1870, p. 4.

38. Sturt, “The Wheelwright’s Shop”, p. 322.

39. For cabinet making see Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture in the Colony, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1862, vol. 5, q. 1716. For the “art and mystery” tradition in tailoring, see Bradon Ellem, “A History of the Clothing and Allied Trades

This expressed the real “mystery” of artisanal skill. By processes which remained obscure, skilled workers arrived at solutions to problems associated with transforming natural materials into useful objects. The very form that these objects took – the fact that they worked, and that they were frequently imbued with aesthetic quality – demonstrated the presence in skilled workers of a capacity for reasoned and intentional activity which originated outside the primary organ of reason – the brain. As the wheelwright commented, in making a wheel it was necessary to give it “a certain convexity” without which it would “fall to pieces”. The “mystery” of this, and other operations of the wheelwright, was that a species of “knowledge” was being used which was not the “knowledge” of an identifiable logic or formula. As the wheelwright explained, despite the skilled wheelwrights’ paying close attention to matters such as convexity and the distance between spokes, “none of them [. . .] could have explained why it had to be so”. This was not just the observations of an outsider to the occupation, as he went on to describe how his “own eyes know because my own hands have felt, but I cannot teach an outsider the difference between ash that is ‘tough as whipcord’ and ash that is ‘frow as a carrot’”.⁴⁰ In a similar vein a correspondent to the *Herald* wrote in 1874 to protest that the name given to the new “School of Design” was nonsensical and inappropriate because “you cannot teach a person to design although you may to draw; you cannot give inventive faculties to those who have them not, no more than you can make a poet!”⁴¹ More directly within the skilled trades, a Sydney fitter and turner in 1868 described engineering and boilermaking abilities as being founded on “a mode of acquiring knowledge which you cannot impart to another”.⁴² Decades later, similar beliefs were still being expressed in the iron trades, such as when an engineer asserted that blacksmiths were “not made”, the work “particularly requiring a natural gift”.⁴³

From this understanding of human abilities the “mysterious” character of artisanal skill arose. For if “skill” was not the “body” being set in motion by the “mind”, how could it be explained? And if “skill” was not a species of learned rationality applied to production, what were “skilled workers”? And

Union” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wollongong, 1986), p. 39. For iron trades workers, see Industrial Court of New South Wales: Appeal by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, the Australian Society of Engineers, the Amalgamated Coachmakers Society, the United Society of Boilermakers, the Iron Workers Assistants against Award of Coachmakers Board [hereafter Appeal against Award of Coachmakers Board], August 1910, vol. 99, New South Wales State Archives, 2/151. For blacksmithing see pp. 144–149; turning, p. 156; fitting, p. 177; caulking, p. 457.

40. Sturt, “The Wheelwright’s Shop”, p. 323.

41. J.H. Thomas, *SMH*, 6 August 1874, p. 2.

42. Select Committee into the Method of Testing Marine Steam Boilers, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1868/69, vol. 3, evidence of D.C. Dalglish, qq. 116–118.

43. New South Wales Court of Arbitration: Amalgamated Society of Engineers, New South Wales District v. Iron Trades Employers Association, 1908. Transcript. New South Wales State Archives, vols 57 and 58, p. 650.

although it was true that the “skill” and the “skilled” went together, what was the relationship between the two? It is with these questions in mind that we can return to West’s description of artisanal skill.

Although for West the “artisan” and the “skill” manifestly went together, they did not do so in a relationship of direct, or even of intentional, causality. Rather, skill was present in the disposition of artisanal workers. West’s description began by noting that whatever skill was it existed “In them [. . .]”, and it did so as a power which was manifest almost regardless of the will, direction, or consciousness of the worker. Skill was thus not a “thing” to be brought into action when needed; rather, standing independent of the worker’s intention, skill “operates [but is not operated] as if by instinct” and not by any instrumental mind/body connections.

It was highly significant that West chose the word “instinct” to explain how the faculty of skill worked. In using “instinct” to explain where “skill” originated, West identified “skill” as an internal disposition or power which was neither physical nor mental, nor a combination of the two. In doing so he was only using one of a number of terms with similar connotations which were used by his contemporaries. For instance, Samuel Smiles, writing in 1860, described George Stephenson’s engineering skill as enabling him “to apprehend, as if by intuition” the nub of mechanical problems.⁴⁴ An English stonemason working in the 1840s and 1850s made a similar reference to an internal quality. He described how, on being set the task of working a block of stone into a hexagon, he found that “how to obtain eight equal sides was utterly beyond my comprehension”. On having the method described to him by another mason, he was amazed that, as he put it, “I had not intuitively discovered the simple process for myself”.⁴⁵ Here again the connection between the mental and the physical is mystified, and skill is explained by that vague internal quality, “intuition”. A similar sense was contained in the description of the work of fitting a rim to a wooden wheel. The wheelwright “knew” how tightly it should fit, but this was not the “knowing” of the intellect, but an internal and non-mental, non-physical knowing: “He felt it [. . .] in his bones”.⁴⁶ And again, in the same occupation, the best use of the available timber was not made through the application of reasoned and conscious knowledge, but through the wheelwright’s “skill and knowledge – not thought but felt”.⁴⁷ Such overt use of these categories was rare in colonial representations, but their use by metal workers in the early twentieth century is indicative of an earlier presence. For example, a blacksmith in Sydney described in 1910 that he could assess when metal was at precisely the right temperature to work, through a com-

44. Samuel Smiles, *Lives of the Engineers with an Account of their Principal Works comprising also A History of Inland Communication in Britain* (Newton Abbot, 1968), vol. III, p. 72.

45. Henry Broadhurst, quoted in Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 312.

46. Sturt, “The Wheelwright’s Shop”, p. 322.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

bination of his “practical experience”, “judgement” and “Instinct, with the eye”. Similarly a riveter described his knowledge of when a rivet was tight enough as “merely instinct”.⁴⁸

IV

The impact of this conceptualization was profound. The explanation of skill as a capacity inherent to “skilled workers” contained within it the implication that those who were “unskilled” were not endowed with the internal capacity that constituted artisanal skill. And as skill in artisanal discourse was described by reference to “instinct”, which is wholly a category of biology, this implied an explanation for the unequal distribution of skill which was ultimately rooted in biology. In this way the artisanal concept of skill was constructed within the framework of prevailing understandings about the differences between humans as biological types, most evidently in the dimensions of sex, age and ethnicity. This meant that not only the definition of skill but also the actual categories of artisanal skill – the division into skilled and unskilled – were inextricably tied to contemporary perceptions and beliefs about the inherent capacities and suitable behaviour of members of biologically-based groups. In short, the dichotomy skilled/unskilled corresponded to the dichotomies male/female and men/women, child/adult and also to racial categories. The whole tendency of artisanal skill was to secure and to reproduce the various alignments between categories of biology and those of work.

To many of those who lived the consequences of the alignment between categories of work and biology in the later decades of nineteenth-century Australia, the alignment itself seemed self-evident. For example, it is a common observation that the sexual division of labour in nineteenth-century Australia was unusually free of ambiguities.⁴⁹ Typically women worked in occupations such as domestic service and factory work which had little status and less pay. This was also the case for the unpaid house and child care work they did.⁵⁰ In addition the integration of house/child work with paid outwork employment tended to reinforce the belief that women’s abilities were connected to biology.⁵¹ In short, the very form of the sexual

48. Appeal Against Award of Coachmakers Board, pp. 147 and 457 respectively.

49. An argument elaborated by Ann Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police. The Colonization of Women in Australia* (Harmondsworth, 1976).

50. For surveys of women’s employment in the nineteenth century see Edna Ryan and Ann Conlon, *Gentle Invaders, Australian Women at Work* (Harmondsworth, 1989), ch. 2; Katrina Alford, *Production or Reproduction: An Economic History of Women in Australia 1788–1850* (Melbourne, 1984); Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter, and Poor Mary Ann. Women and Work in Australia* (West Melbourne, 1977).

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66; Frances, *The Politics of Work*, pp. 4, 23; Fry, “The Condition of the Wage Earning Class”, ch. 2. See also Select Committee on the Employment of Children, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1875/76, vol. 6, p. 896, the comments of J.E. Woodford, the manag-

division of labour displayed to those who lived within it the “reality” of the correspondence between categories of skill and categories of sex. So fundamental was this alignment that a late nineteenth-century feminist such as Louisa Macdonald could describe it as a “popular idea” that:

Anything [. . .] nature points out as your work [. . .] nature will teach you to do. Nature having pointed out the work of the mother, the work of the household, as specially feminine a woman may be trusted to perform both by instinct.⁵²

So powerful were these ideas that they even permeated contemporary understandings about specific types of ability. They made deftness and delicacy, which were taken to be characteristic of women’s abilities, appear to be a product of biology and hence naturally occurring. For example in 1870 the landowner Sir William Macarthur considered olives as a crop which “requir[ed] the labour of women and children, rather than men, to make it available”.⁵³ A similar imputation of the gender-specific abilities – this time between girls and boys – can be found in the descriptions of their work in Sydney tobacco factories. They were, according to one commentator, “mostly engaged in sorting the tobacco from the hogshead, or in covering the lumps [. . .] of tobacco” after they had been made. At these tasks, it was asserted, girls were “quicker at sorting leaf”.⁵⁴ Equally as reflective of the artisanal attitude were the 1894 remarks of Richard Teece, an actuary, who considered that the difference in price between a dress made by a tailor (male) and that made by a dressmaker (female) was “because you know that (the former) is a better thing, better workmanship, a better article – more style about it”. In a similar vein Teece asserted that the poor performance of women in the arts in America provided “strong evidence of the superior skill and capacity of men” – not just in those activities but as general gender-ascribed characteristics.⁵⁵ Similarly, a Miss Badham believed that women and men might have parity in technical mastery of a particular activity, but that women were “incapable of originating; they have not the creative faculty”.⁵⁶ The alignment between categories of sex and those of skill were also

ing director of David Jones, that the exclusively female workforce who did outwork in millinery and dressmaking completed their work “by the persons themselves and their children”.

52. Louisa Macdonald, “The Economic Position of Women”, *The Australian Economist*, 30 December 1893 (no. 11, vol. III), p. 368. For Macdonald see Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia* (Melbourne, 1992), pp. 72, 194.

53. Quoted in H. Reed (ed.), *The Industrial Progress of New South Wales: Being a Report of the Intercolonial Exhibition of 1870, At Sydney* (Sydney, 1871), pp. 337–339.

54. Select Committee on the Employment of Children, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1875/76, vol. 6, q. 330.

55. *The Australian Economist*, 23 October 1894 (no. 9, vol. IV), p. 445; “The Economic Position of Women’. A Criticism by Mr Richard Teece”, *ibid.*, 27 March 1894 (no. 2, vol. IV), p. 388. For Teece see *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 12, p. 190.

56. E.A. Badham, “Women and Womanhood Suffrage”, *The Australian Economist*, 23 April 1895 (no. 14, vol. IV), p. 480.

captured in the comment of an observer of the bootmaking industry in 1878, who noted that in the “parts of the finishing work [. . .] [which] require but little skill, [. . .] the workman can be assisted [. . .] by his wife or his children”.⁵⁷ Skilled tradesmen frequently asserted that women were incapable of exercising skill, not because of a lack of training, but because they were supposed to not have the disposition.

The artisanal concept of skill also operated to align categories of skill with those of age. This dimension can be most clearly seen in an examination of apprenticeship and the structure of the artisanal trades. The internal structures of the skilled trades were articulated around the categories “journeyman” and “apprentice”. It had been the long-established practice in Britain for apprenticeships to run for seven years, and this practice was perpetuated in some colonial trades.⁵⁸ If this duration accurately represented the period of time necessary to become “skilled” in any technical sense, it was a remarkable coincidence that it applied equally to the technical requirements of an enormous variety of “skilled” occupations. It was less of a coincidence that the period of apprenticeship – the seven years from the ages of fourteen to twenty-one – spanned a notional onset of puberty and the attainment of manhood. The Sydney shoe and boot manufacturer William Alderson expressed a belief about this period of life that was both long-standing and widespread, when he remarked in 1866 that “between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one is the making or the losing of a man”.⁵⁹ In doing so he expressed something of the understandings which forged the connections between categories of age and those of skill.

The period of apprenticeship thus provided a structure within which the passage from boyhood to manhood was negotiated. In this journey the most significant point was the age of attainment of adulthood. This can be seen inscribed in the changing practices regarding the duration of apprenticeship. In trades such as cabinet making, compositing and tailoring, the period had been reduced in mid-colonial society, from seven to four or five years.⁶⁰ While this shortened apprenticeship potentially reduced the age of accession to journeyman status, in practice trade unions opted to reproduce the correspondence between “skill” and adulthood. In 1889 the Apprenticeship Com-

57. *SMH*, 8 October 1878, p. 7.

58. Fry, “The Condition of the Wage Earning Class”, p. 373, notes that in glass and pottery trades, bellows-making and organ-making, apprenticeship was “usually four to five years, sometimes up to seven years”, and that in the metal trades “the seven year term of apprenticeship sometimes applied”: *ibid.*, pp. 378–379. For the currying trade note the remarks of J.E. Begg in 1859 that “To learn this trade it is necessary that an apprenticeship of seven years should be served”: Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis, New South Wales Parliamentary Papers, 1859/60, vol. 4, p. 1341.

59. Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture, p. 1066.

60. For tailoring see Ellem, “A History of the Clothing and Allied Trades Union”, p. 39; for compositing see Hagan, *Printers and Politics*, p. 45; and generally Fry, “The Condition of the Wage Earning Class”, pp. 372–384.

mittee of the Melbourne Trades Hall Council expressed the general commitment of the colonial trades to maintaining the link between categories of skill and those of age when it recommended:

That the minimum age at commencement of apprenticeship be fifteen years where the term of apprenticeship is five years, and fourteen where the term is over five years.⁶¹

The malleable nature of the age at which apprenticeship could be started contrasts sharply with the rigid boundary of the age at which it ended. It emphasizes the importance attached by those operating within the terms of the artisanal paradigm to aligning categories of skill with those of age.

In special circumstances the importance contemporaries gave to securing the alignment of categories of age with those of skill became apparent in a more detailed and conscious fashion. Such a circumstance was the debate which surfaced in June 1876 when the New South Wales Attorney General, Sir Alfred Stephen, introduced a Bill amending the Apprenticeship Act. The existing Apprenticeship Act laid down the age of twenty-one as the legal maximum age of an apprentice. Stephen's Bill departed from the Act by allowing the continuation of apprenticeship beyond the age of twenty-one. Under its provisions apprentices could be taken for seven-year periods at the ages of sixteen or seventeen, which meant that there could be apprentices of twenty-three or even twenty-four years of age.⁶²

There was widespread opposition to these proposals, both from within and without the labouring community. Andrew Garran, as editor of the *Herald*, mounted cogent arguments against the changes. Although Garran's legal training perhaps predisposed him to approach the issue from a legalistic standpoint, he was careful to show how this disruption in the legal sphere would ramify into wider society.⁶³ One of his main objections to the Bill was that it would foster the development of what he considered an anomalous hybrid – “apprentice-men” – blurring the hitherto clearly-separated artisanal categories “apprentice/boy” and “journeyman/adult”. Garran maintained that the clashing of these fundamental categories of social organization would create a situation so contradictory to the principles of social order that he feared “what would be said of us if we made the mechanic an infant, as a mechanic at twenty two years and eleven months, and yet, in all other respects liable to the responsibilities of a man!”⁶⁴

Garran's argument about the connections between skill, age and the structure of the trades, was of particular salience for those who would be most effected by the changes – Sydney's skilled workers. Especially evocative for those in the trades was the use made of the incongruous pairing of terms

61. Report of Proceedings, Sixth Intercolonial Trades and Labour Union Congress, p. 29.

62. See Shields, “Skill Reclaimed”, p. 34.

63. R.R. Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth* (Sydney, 1958), pp. 24–25.

64. *SMH*, 23 June 1876, p. 5.

in the description of “apprentice-men”. It was thus no accident that one of the principal participants in the debate which took place in the *Herald* over the measure, signed himself “Prentice Boy”, and in doing so reiterated the artisanal alignment of categories of skill and age. His argument, like Garrahan’s, also pivoted on the incongruities which arose in disrupting those alignments. By using the term “apprentice-men” in contrast to “mechanics”, he focused attention on the incongruous effect produced by the intrusion of this category of age into the harmonious pairing of the artisanal categories “apprentice” and “mechanic”. With similar taxonomic finesse, he referred to the subversion of the correspondence between categories of age and categories of skill by describing aged apprentices as “boys”.⁶⁵

The episode appears unique, but it casts light into the deep interior workings of the artisanal understanding of skill. It reveals that in the artisanal paradigm to refer to an “apprentice” was to refer unambiguously to someone who was a child because to refer to a “mechanic” or a “journeyman” was to refer unambiguously to someone who was an adult. In this context, the practice of excluding young workers from workplaces, or confining them to specifically “unskilled” tasks, takes on a dimension other than simply shoring up a labour market position. Rather, it reproduces this particular mode of differentiation and categorization – a mode which simultaneously inflected categories of work with meanings of social identity.

The alignment of categories of ethnicity with those of skill was also important. Although in southern Australia this dimension lay deeply buried it was not completely submerged. It was evident, for instance, in the report carried by the *Herald* in 1873, which read in its entirety:

A Maori Draughtsman – An Arawa named Aporo is employed in the Survey Office at Tauranghi, and he is said to be an “accomplished draughtsman”.⁶⁶

That this was the exception which proved the artisanal rule, is evident from the nature of the report. The brevity and self-contained nature of the piece indicates that its newsworthiness required no further explanation to make it intelligible to the readers. The report assumes precisely that draughting – which in the 1870s was still considered a skilled working-class occupation – was intrinsically the preserve of Europeans, and that thus the presence of a Maori in the occupation was cause for comment. The eye-catching nature of the item’s headline lay in the contemporary surprise of juxtaposing categories of race and skilled occupation – “Maori” and “draughtsman” – and the unlikely nature of that pairing is indicated by the “he is said to be” of his abilities – a far cry from an assertion that he is “accomplished”.

The racial dimension to skill was also reflected in the alignments between

65. *Ibid.*, 15 July 1876, p. 8.

66. *Ibid.*, 18 July 1873, p. 4.

the categories of skill and nation. In the 1870s it was usually nationalities from the north-western European quadrant which were seen as the repositories of skill at a national level. Thus, for instance, a correspondent to the *Herald* in 1876 wrote that “The Swede, the Dane and more especially the Norwegians [. . .] are skilful artisans”.⁶⁷ This was in contrast to the portrayal of the abilities of the Chinese, who were described as “expert in all that requires dextrouse [sic] manipulation of the fingers; they are imitative and quick to learn”.⁶⁸ The persistence of this representational pattern can be gauged by noting its occurrence two decades later, such as in the categories and alignments through which William Pember Reeves described “The despised cheap branch of the [cabinet making] trade” in the 1890s. He contrasted “White artisans” with Chinese furniture makers, who were “Without any skill, [yet] they could imitate”.⁶⁹ Similar opinions were expressed in Collier’s 1911 paean of praise to Australian pastoralism, *The Pastoral Age in Australasia*, which was suffused with artisanal vocabulary and concepts. After describing bullock-driving as a “craft [. . .] [which] would have been called by the medievals a ‘mystery’”, and as an occupation in which “The bullock-driver must be born to his trade”, Collier observed that although “Australian blacks [sic] acquire some proficiency in the craft” they were only “employed as offsidars”, offering by way of explanation the opinion that “aliens [sic] of the white, yellow, or brown races never rise above being ‘finished bunglers’”.⁷⁰ These examples gesture towards the connection between race and artisanal skill – a connection which was made much more overtly in South Africa, where the alignment between categories of skill and racial identity was so important that it was institutionalized and buttressed by legislation.⁷¹

It is interesting to note that such beliefs about the racial determinants of human capacities had distinct resonances with beliefs about gender and skill. In the artisanal framework both women and non-north-western Europeans were similarly devoid of creative potentialities, their abilities only extending to imitation of European adult male skilled production and techniques. As much as the artisanal concept of skill was gendered, it was never only gendered. It also operated to align the categories of skill with those of race and age.

67. *Ibid.*, 28 November 1876: Louis Browne, letter, p. 3.

68. *Ibid.*, 18 December 1876: C.T. Jones, letter, p. 6.

69. William Pember Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand* (Melbourne, 1969), vol. II, p. 10. For a fascinating discussion of the history of the relationship between nationality and representations of productive ability, see Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca and London, 1989).

70. J. Collier, *The Pastoral Age in Australasia* (London, 1911), pp. 206–207.

71. See Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, p. 174.

V

The construction of the difference between the “skilled” and “unskilled” as an inherent difference of distinct biological types was one consequence of the tracing of skill into the interior of the skilled worker. But equally important was the difference between “skilled” and “unskilled” as a manifestation of the inherent difference of two quite distinct social types. This was reflected in the emphasis within contemporary discourse on the factors which distinguished the “skilled” from the “unskilled” as social beings. A fundamental line of social distinction noted by many historians was between “respectable” and “unrespectable” members of the working class. In general, these two categories were held to correspond to the categories “skilled” and “unskilled” in mid-colonial New South Wales. This was evident when contemporaries associated sets of social indicators – rates of crime, levels of unemployment, levels of intelligence, levels of cleanliness, dissoluteness, habitation and itinerancy rates – with the categories of skill.⁷²

It is possible to interpret the differences in social and behavioural characteristics between “skilled” and “unskilled” as purely the way differences in economic circumstances were translated into social circumstances. However accurate that interpretation may be, the emphasis here is on what this pattern of representation reveals about the meanings of artisanal skill. Although the varieties of terms which contemporaries used to describe “skilled” and “unskilled” referred to different areas of social behaviour, the combined effect of their usage was to arrange two “sides” to the description of workers, so that a host of positive terms and associations were attributed to “skilled” workers, and a host of negative terms were attributed to “unskilled” workers. This is not to say that all these terms were synonyms, but that all the terms congregated on either “side” circulated together and had an “exchange value” with each other. In short, “skilled” and “unskilled” were differentiated from each other as much by their association with normative categories as by any reference to their abilities at work. In this construction “skill” was just one of a number of positively-valued qualities which were considered to be inherent to a distinct human type, whose whole behaviour, demeanour, character and social existence seemed to mark them off from the “unskilled”.

VI

An older generation of Australian labour historians considered that nineteenth-century artisans were the bearers of highly developed labour power – or skill. It always seemed to them a frustrating conundrum that the skilled apparently refused to consider themselves as simply units of abstract labour power, and thus as having an essential core of commonality with lesser

72. See Maddison, “Skill and the Commodification of Labour”, pp. 47–51.

skilled workers. However, by recovering the point of view of nineteenth-century artisans themselves, their apparent stubbornness reads in quite a different way. If the conceptualization of skill as a capacity or disposition inherent in skilled workers was central to the outlook of artisans in nineteenth-century Australia – as the argument of this paper suggests it was – it followed from this understanding that “skill” did not have an existence outside the “skilled worker” from whom it was indissociable. It was thus not possible for skilled workers, enmeshed in this framework of understanding, to separate out “something” that was “skill” from the person of the “skilled worker”. If artisans thought of themselves as having a “Property of skill”, as the historian of English labour John Rule has claimed, then by “property” should be meant an internal and intrinsic quality, rather than a description of ownership relations of an external object.⁷³ Enmeshed in this understanding, it was correspondingly difficult for artisanally-skilled workers to think of, and act towards, “skill” as a term simply describing a level of ability – that is, as an abstraction separate from their human essence – their selves. One of the discursive effects of this understanding was to place at the centre of production the skilled worker conceived – not as the bearer of highly developed and abstract “labour power” – but as a representative of the social and biological type which his “skill” denoted him to be. This was to imply that the difference between “skilled” and “unskilled” was a difference between two social and human types. In understanding this distinctively artisanal construction of skill it is helpful to observe that it was markedly different from conceiving the difference between “skilled” and “unskilled” as that between the same human types who happen to possess different qualities of labour power.

To those who viewed the world through the lens of the artisanal concept of skill, the categories “skilled” and “unskilled” thus had meanings which extended far beyond the workplaces where human abilities were deployed, and into the social order of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian society. Indeed, the two artisanal categories (skilled and unskilled) were themselves points of convergence for patriarchal and racialized discourses, which read the world of human difference and identity as fundamentally biological in origin. From this perspective, productive activity expressed the essential characteristics of skilled workers as a particular human type.

Thus the exclusiveness of skilled workers was not simply – or even mainly – the result of a clear appreciation of the importance of labour market strategies. Instead, exclusive practices were designed to reproduce the alignments between categories of biology (gender, age, ethnicity) and categories of skill. The exclusivity which this generated was not that of clear-sighted political economists constructing labour market niches, aiming

73. Rule, “The Property of Skill”, pp. 104–113.

to maximize the selling price of their commodity, skill. Rather, skilled workers rejected the conceptualization of their skill as a commodity, because not to do so would have amounted to the ultimate denial, that of their social being as skilled selves – selves read as respectable, north-western European, adult male workers.

An older generation of labour and social historians made the essentialist mistake of seeing nineteenth-century skilled workers in Australia as class subjects long before they had been mentally and materially constituted in that way. The tendency in the current epoch to rewrite the history of labour as the history of the tactics of national, racial and gendered subjectivities makes an equally essentialist mistake of identifying the skilled as perpetual representatives of non-class subjectivities. Yet in Australia the skilled were in the twentieth century to shed those mystic and medieval understandings of their own labour, and the biological assumptions which accompanied them. By the 1920s the skilled were embracing the logic of labour commodification in Australia and in the process were constituting themselves as class subjects under capitalism. An historicized understanding of the connections between skilled workers, capitalism and commodification thus has the capacity to make sense of these apparently contradictory moments. In doing so, “class” and “capitalism” are reinvigorated as useful categories in the contemporary analysis of labour’s history.