

*Papers in Labour History No. 23, December 2000, ISSN 1030-6218*

# PAPERS IN LABOUR HISTORY No. 23

**Paddy Troy Memorial Essay  
Prize, Essays  
1999**

Editor: Dr Patrick Bertola  
Curtin University

**Perth Branch, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History**

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*Papers in Labour History No. 23, December 2000*

Editor: Patrick Bertola

School of Social Sciences  
Curtin University

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**Paddy Troy Memorial Essay Prize  
Essays  
1999**

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*Papers in Labour History* seeks to publish material of a serious nature about the historical development of the Labour Movement, and of the history of work in Western Australia. It is intended to carry a balance of contributions from students and workers and veterans of the Labour Movements. Naturally, this raises controversial issues and no apology is made for the fact that few readers will be able to agree with all the views expressed here. While the editors have made suggestions regarding some contributions, these have largely been of a stylistic nature and have not been intended in any way to interfere with the expression of the views of the authors.

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### **Acknowledgments**

As well as those listed above as having contributed this edition, acknowledgment is due to fellow workers who have made suggestions, proof read, and supported the publication.

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## Notice

### National Labour History Conference

The editor wishes to remind members that the seventh biennial national Labour History Conference, "Work, Organisation, Struggle", will be hosted by the Canberra Branch of the ASSLH at Canberra from 19 to 21 April, 2001. The editor has copies of the brochure for the conference (phone 9266 7395 or write to Dr P.Bertola, Social Sciences, Curtin University, Box U1987, Perth 6845) or you can contact the Labour History Conference, PO Box A43, ANU, ACT 2601.

Conference details are also available at the following World Wide Web site:

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### Apology from the Editor of Issue 22:

I wish to apologise for a number of typographical and other errors that appeared in *Papers in Labour History* No. 22, in particular in Bill Anderson's article 'On the Waterfront'. Joan Williams, who proof read several of the articles, was not responsible for these errors. They were incurred in the rush to meet a printing deadline.

Bobbie Oliver, Editor, *Papers in Labour History* No. 22.

## Obituary

### John Joseph Jones

John Joseph Jones died on 13 August 2000, after a brief illness. He was 70. John contributed an article entitled 'The Independent Ladies' to *Papers in Labour History* No. 22. In the 1960s, he was an active member of the Independent Schools Salaried Staff Officers' Union and supported the successful claim for an Award for Women Teachers. Later, John was an Education and Research Officer and edited the *Teachers' Journal* for the State School Teachers' Union of WA. He designed and built the Parkerville Amphitheatre in a rehabilitation project for prisoners in 1968-69 and published many poems and plays.

The ASSLH (Perth Branch) extends sincere sympathy to his family.

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**BACK TO THE FUTURE:  
A Comparison Of the Maritime Disputes  
of 1890 and 1998**

Jo Kowalczyk

“...well, when I look out the window in the 1990s, the industrial relations scene looks just the same as in the 1890s to me”

Dr B Ellem, University of Sydney, at the National Labour History Conference, Perth, October 1997.

Stuart Svenson<sup>1</sup> claims that the Maritime Strike of 1998 was history repeating itself in the way that it resembled the 1890 Maritime Strike. There are a number of points of comparison - who was involved, what the issue was at stake, the economic context - but it is the contrasts which are the most important when examining the two strikes. The major point of contrast was the legal context within which the unions were operating. In 1890 there was no formal recognition of trade unions - this did not come until after the strike - whilst in 1998, the recognition, and associated ‘power’, that had been achieved was considerably diminished by the newly elected conservative governments Workplace Relations Act.

The period 1860-90 has been described as the ‘long boom’, a time when the positive effects of the gold discoveries spread throughout the economy.<sup>2</sup> The economic prosperity enabled union expansion and, as a result of stronger and more efficient unions, an improvement in wages and conditions.<sup>3</sup> The 1890s saw the collapse of the land boom, -a dramatic fall in the value of Australia’s exports and a withdrawal of overseas investments. As a result the economy went into depression and unemployment was at unprecedented high levels.<sup>4</sup> In response to the worsening economic conditions, employers sought to reorganise production and reduce the cost of wages thus bringing them into conflict with pastoral, mining and

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<sup>1</sup> S.Svensen, *The Australian Wharf Lockout*, National Key Centre in Industrial Relations, <<http://www-personal.buseco.monash.edu.au/~svenson/wharfies.html> (1/6/99).

<sup>2</sup> M.Waters, *Strikes in Australia. A sociological analysis of industrial conflict*, Allen and Unwin Australia, 1982, p.77.

<sup>3</sup> L.Churchward in N.Ebbels, *The Australian Labor Movement, 1850-1907, historical documents*, Hale and Iremonger, 1960, p.18.

<sup>4</sup> B.Scates, *A New Australia. Citizenship, Radicalism and the First Republic*, Cambridge, 1997, p.24.

transport sectors and triggering wave of strikes throughout the decade commencing with the Maritime Strike in 1890.<sup>5</sup>

We can draw parallels with these conditions and the economic context in which the 1998 Maritime Strike operated. Overall the preliminary factors were the same - high unemployment, economic downturn and the aim of the employers to achieve productivity and efficiency gains - the main difference was that for the first time since the Great Depression, union membership had fallen to only one-third of the workforce.<sup>6</sup> Griffith and Svensen argue that the employer, Patrick Stevedores, had the objectives of decreasing costs, increasing profits and increasing the company's value by replacing its union labour force with 'cheaper and more compliant labour'.<sup>7</sup> These objectives, Griffith and Svensen claim, were aided by the Howard conservative Government's objectives of introducing individual working arrangements - in this case called Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) - and to encourage the use of these AWAs throughout the entire workforce.<sup>8</sup> In both years, 1890 and 1998, the waterfront was considered the strategic area in which reforms could be initiated that would reverberate throughout the labour market. In both instances conservative governments sided with the employers, aiding them in attaining their goals. In 1890, just prior to the onset of the depression, the employers strengthened their position by forming a number of employer associations. When the Maritime Strike broke, the employers were more organised than the unions.<sup>9</sup> In comparison and in terms of organisation prior to the dispute, in 1998 there is some evidence, including through Government documents, that the Coalition Government, under Prime Minister John Howard, was instrumental in the planning stages of the events that occurred and so took a pro-active role in the dispute.<sup>10</sup> A memorandum by departmental officers in March 1997 outlined ways in which employees could be terminated for breaches of the Workplace Relations Act in the form of illegal strike action:

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<sup>5</sup> S.Macintyre and R.Mitchell., 'Introduction', in S. Macintyre & R.Mitchell, *Foundations of Arbitration: the origins and effects of state compulsory arbitration, 1890-1914*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> T.Bramble, *War on the Waterfront*, Brisbane Defend Our Unions Committee, 1998, <[http://members.xoom.com/\\_XOOM\]takver/wharfie/wotw.htm](http://members.xoom.com/_XOOM]takver/wharfie/wotw.htm)>, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> G.Griffin and S.Svensen, *Industrial Relations Implications of the Australian Waterside Dispute*, National Key Centre in Industrial Relations, Monash University, 1988, <<http://www-personal.buseco.monash.edu.au/~svensen/muaabl.html>>, p 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ebbels, *Australian Labor Movement*, p.18.

<sup>10</sup> See in particular D.Elias, 'War and Peace: Parts 1-4', *Age*, 17 June, 1998, <<http://www.theage.com.au/daily/980617/news/news30.html>>

stevedores would need to activate well-prepared strategies to dismiss their workforce and replace them with another quickly ... a dispute would not, of itself, remove or alter NWA coverage, remove or suspend registration, or cancel the award or terminate any agreement ... What would be needed for the MUA's influence on the waterfront to be significantly weakened would be for a range of affected service users and providers to take decisive action to protect or advance their interests.<sup>11</sup>

The 1890 Maritime Strike, which began in August, arose when Marine Officers walked off their ships after the refusal by the shipowners to negotiate rates of pay and conditions while the Mercantile Marine Officers' Association remained affiliated to the Melbourne Trades Hall Council.<sup>12</sup> A letter from a member of the Steamship Owners of Australasia to the Secretary of the Mercantile Marine Officers' Association, outlines the employers' concerns with the affiliation:

We do not object to any labor union or the Trades Hall Council *per se*, but we say that our officers are in a confidential and responsible position, together with the captain, as representing the owners' interests. This being so, they should not associate themselves with any labor union which may be used tyrannically to force the owners, captains or officers to comply with any demands they deem it necessary to make.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, shearers in NSW were in dispute over non-union shorn wool and subsequently the President of the Shearers Union met with representatives of maritime unions where a decision was reached that NSW maritime unions would boycott the wool.<sup>14</sup> When the Marine Officers walked off their ships, the promise of cross-union support was honoured and the issue of non-union wool served to fuel the flames of the dispute. Within days seamen, wharf labourers and coal lumpers were on strike in support of the Marine Officers or against the non-union wool.<sup>15</sup>

In 1998 the dispute was 'announced' by Peter Reith, Minister for Workplace Relations and Small Business, in parliament on the night of April 7<sup>th</sup>. Moments after his speech, where he revealed that Patrick Stevedoring would be replacing its 1400 permanent and 600 casual staff with non-union members and that the government was intending to cover the redundancy and superannuation costs, workers, who had been transferred to labour hire companies without their knowledge - companies now claiming no assets, were ousted from

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<sup>11</sup> 'Dock plot: how to kill a union', *Australian Financial Review*, 16 December 1997.

<sup>12</sup> J.Sutcliffe, *A history of trade unionism in Australia*, Macmillan, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1967, p.93.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of James Huddart of the Steamship Owners of Australasia to C.E.Parkin, Secretary of the Mercantile Marine Officers' Association, *Age*, cited in Ebbels, *Australian Labor Movement*, p.125.

<sup>14</sup> Sutcliffe, *A history of trade unionism*, p.94.

<sup>15</sup> J.Merrit, *The Making of the A WU*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p.163.

the wharves by balaclava-clad security guards and replaced by scabs from other labour hire companies, including a company that had been formed by the National Farmers Federation (NFF). The NFF had been leasing dock space from Patrick to train replacements and had recruited non-unionists to be trained in Dubai (where unionism is outlawed) and to return to train others in the workplace. The collapse of the Dubai mission, and the implication of government involvement, led to the events of April 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>.<sup>16</sup>

In both instances, the target of the employers was to destroy the closed shop, or the rights of workers to organise collectively<sup>17</sup> and both occasions involved lockouts albeit with different levels of sophistication in terms of conception and execution on the part of the employers and conservative governments. In 1890 it was 'freedom of contract' and whilst not directly related to the dispute, the President of the Master Bakers gave a definition, presumably from the point of view of the employers, of the term which seems to reflect the thinking of the time:

1. They [the employers] shall have the right to discharge any man without being asked the reason for so discharging.
2. They shall have the right to bring a man in to their shop without being questioned whether he is a union or non-union man.
3. They shall have the right to employ whom they please.
4. They shall pay what they choose without being questioned on the matter by anybody.<sup>18</sup>

In 1998 the desire to break the waterfront monopoly held by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), was a reason cited by John Sharp, Minister for Transport and initially responsible for the government's waterfront reform, for entering politics.<sup>19</sup> On the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, Prime Minister John Howard appeared on the Channel 9 program "A Current Affair". When asked by the host, Ray Martin, "If it was about productivity then why sack waterfront workers in Adelaide and productive ports?", John Howard replied, "Well, they are all part of one union."<sup>20</sup> There can be little doubt that the overriding objective in both 1890 and 1998 was to destroy the union movement and to begin this by breaking the MUA, the union

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<sup>16</sup> Svensen, *The Australian Wharf Lockout*, p.1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>18</sup> W.G.Spence, *Australia's Awakening: thirty years in the life of an Australian agitator*, Worker, 1909, p.112.

<sup>19</sup> Elias, 'War and Peace...', Part 1, p.2.

<sup>20</sup> ACTU Fact Statement for Union Members Re: Maritime Dispute, April 21, 1998. <<http://www.actu.asn.au/mua/resources/muafactl.htm>>, p.3 (25/5/99).

considered to be the most militant and, by virtue of this, the strongest, in the hope that it would demoralise the rest of the union movement.

As the employers in 1890 fought back against the unions, primarily by recruiting non-union labour, more and more unions came out in sympathy with the strikers.<sup>21</sup> Whilst there was also recruitment of non-union labour in 1998 - most notably the Dubai recruits - this support, through sympathy strikes was illegal in 1998 under the terms of the Workplace Relations Act 1996 which, amongst other things, prohibited primary boycotts if they involved movement of goods overseas (obviously targetting the MUA) and restored secondary boycott provisions to the Trade Practices Act which hinder worker solidarity.<sup>22</sup> Whilst unions in 1890 had no legal recognition within the industrial relations framework of Australia, this recognition - as the legitimate bargaining agent for employees<sup>23</sup> - was part of the conciliation and arbitration system which arose out of a recommendation of the 1891 Royal Commission into Strikes,<sup>24</sup> and was in operation for most of the twentieth century. This recognition was subsequently diminished by the Workplace Relations Act which curtails union power considerably.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the legal limitations, the support in 1998 was considerable - both from other unions and from the general community. Initially the Howard Government's anti-MUA campaign gained support in the general public. The campaign, which contained allegations that not only was the union responsible for the inefficiencies and low productivity levels but also that wharf labourers were also earning up to \$90,000 a year, served to outrage many Australians.<sup>26</sup> But Bramble argues that it was the sight that greeted many Australians on the morning of April 8th 1998 of balaclava-wearing security guards with rottweilers ousting MUA members from ports which changed peoples' minds and saw the swing of community support away from the government and towards the workers.<sup>27</sup> Within the context of support and solidarity, we see a huge contrast between the two strikes - the 1890 Maritime Strike would more correctly be called a general strike, while in 1998, in spite of the desire

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<sup>21</sup> Merritt, *The Making of the A WU*, p.163.

<sup>22</sup> C.Kingston, *Background to the conflict between the MUA, the NFF, Patrick Stevedores and the Government*, Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, Queensland, 1998, <<http://www.uq.net.au/~zzcjs/muabrief.html>> p.4, (26/5/99).

<sup>23</sup> Svensen, *The Australian Wharf Lockout*, p.10.

<sup>24</sup> Section XXIV of the Report of the Royal Commission into Strikes, 1891, cited in Ebbels, *Australian Labor Movement*, p.157.

<sup>25</sup> Kingston, *Background to the conflict*, p.5.

<sup>26</sup> See, amongst others, Elias, 'War and Peace...'

<sup>27</sup> Bramble, *War on the Waterfront*, p.5.

of many unions to go on strike, the constraints of the Workplace Relations Act made a general strike virtually impossible.

Community support was also evident during 1890 when the Marine Officers remained on strike whilst the shipowners refused to accede to a conference. Churchward claims that the Sydney and Melbourne Labor Defence Committees, which were formed to organise the strike, were able to, in the twelve weeks of the strike, raise £72,000 from unions and the general community.<sup>28</sup> One of the most notable of these supporters was Chief Justice Higinbotham who wrote the following letter:

The Chief Justice presents his compliments to the President of the Trades Hall Council and requests that he will be so good as to place the amount of the enclosed cheque of \$50 to the credit of the strike fund. While the United Trades are awaiting compliance with their reasonable requests for a conference with the employers, the Chief Justice will continue for the present to forward a weekly contribution of \$10 to the same object.<sup>29</sup>

The Maritime Strike of 1890 lasted for 12 weeks and involved at least 50,000 workers. One of the main stumbling blocks was the employers' refusal to meet with the unions. When 16,000 shearers in NSW, in a show of support, ceased work on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September the employers agreed to a conference if the shearers returned to work. The shearers returned but there was no conference. To add insult to injury the shearers were prosecuted under the Master and Servants Act, fined and had their wages forfeited.<sup>30</sup> Gollan claims that:

Seven weeks after the outbreak of the strike the shipowners refused offers of mediation on the grounds that there was no need to confer with the unions since all of their ships were running with non-union labour.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike 1890, the 1998 picket lines of MUA members and members of the community including politicians, actors and sports people, were able to stop anything getting in or out of the ports and were thus in a much stronger bargaining position. This coordination at a national level was aided by the existence of a peak body, namely the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

The ACTU also played a major role in negotiations and the legal processes after the breakdown of a bargaining relationship between the MUA and Patricks. With the initial

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<sup>28</sup> Churchward in Ebbels, *The Australian Labor Movement*, p.19.

<sup>29</sup> E.E.Morris, *A memoir of George Higinbotham*, Melbourne, 1895, cited in Ebbels, *Australian Labor Movement*, p.133.

<sup>30</sup> I.Tumer, *In union is strength. A history of trade unions in Australia, 1788-1983*, Nelson, 1983, p.42.

lockout at Webb Dock on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 1998, when the NFF recruits were to take over the dock and commence training of other non-union labour, the Government rejected the MUA's request to establish a tripartite body that would deal specifically with the regulation of wharf employment and Patrick refused the MUA request that the dispute be submitted to arbitration.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the employers in 1890 who refused requests for a conference, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1998 the company called for talks with the union and the ACTU, and in June the framework of an agreement was reached. The employees were to be transferred back to Patrick, enterprise agreements were to be negotiated and any outstanding matters were to be referred to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

There has been much criticism of the MUA's and the ACTU's reliance on courts throughout the dispute.<sup>33</sup> Griffin and Svensen argue that the whittling away of the power of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission has resulted in the usage of a variety of state and federal courts and that the dispute heralds the move away from specialised tribunals towards the general courts.<sup>34</sup> What does this move mean for the Australian industrial relations landscape? Ron Callus, the Director of the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training claims that:

The waterfront dispute highlights that industrial relation disputes are better resolved in the tribunals rather than civil courts where the aim is to win rather than compromise.<sup>35</sup>

In 1890, the employers were well placed to anticipate complete victory. Due to the depression and associated high levels of unemployment in 1890, employers faced no difficulty in finding workers to fill the strikers' places.<sup>36</sup> The surplus labour meant that employers were also in a position to secure wage reductions and to reverse the conditions of employment that the union, stronger at this time than at any period which had gone before, had successfully improved.<sup>37</sup> Workers returned to work on the employers' terms. Non-union shearing sheds did not become unionised; ships continued to be manned by non-union labour; miners returned to work on pre-strike conditions; and the Marine Officers remained

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<sup>31</sup> Robin Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, MUP, 1980, p.133.

<sup>32</sup> Svensen and Griffin, *Industrial Relations Implications*, p.6.

<sup>33</sup> See, in particular, Bramble, *War on the Waterfront*.

<sup>34</sup> Svensen and Griffin, *Industrial Relations Implications*, p.10.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in S.O'Neill, *The Waterfront Dispute: From High Court to Settlement- Summary and Comment: Current Issues Brief 1 1998-99*, Economics, Commerce and Industrial Relations Group, 1998, <<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/cib/1998-99/99cib01.htm>> (16/6/99), p.15.

<sup>36</sup> Turner, *In union is strength*, p.45.

<sup>37</sup> Ebbels, *The Australian Labor Movement*, p.18.

unaffiliated to the Melbourne Trades Hall Council.<sup>38</sup> Sutcliffe argues the result was disastrous for the unions and funds were practically exhausted, and that this, plus the depression of the next few years led to a considerable decline in union membership.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, the winners and the losers of the 1998 strike are not so clear cut although Griffm and Svensen claim that the obvious losers are the government, who were heavily implicated in the 'conspiracy'; and the NFF backed P&C Stevedores and their non-union recruits.<sup>40</sup> The eventual agreement made between the MUA and Patrick involved 626 voluntary redundancies and to the contracting out of about 40 security, cleaning and linemarking jobs and 160 maintenance jobs.<sup>41</sup> In terms of wages, the union has achieved its goal of higher base wages in return for overtime reductions. But, most importantly, the waterfront remains unionised and covered by a collective agreement – 'the union survived as a strong viable entity with a *de facto* closed shop at Patrick Stevedore'.<sup>42</sup>

The company could count amongst its gains the redundancies it did not have to fund, and changes to rostering and job control that should lead to improvements to productivity. Another gain was the MUA agreement to cease all litigation (and Patrick's agreement to cease litigation against the MUA). On the other hand, it is now faced with the prospect of having lost market share and having to regain it with a hostile workforce.<sup>43</sup>

While a number of authors have cited the Maritime Strike of 1890 as being the culminating factor in the unions' drive to organise for parliamentary representation and that the Royal Commission into Strikes recommended voluntary conciliation and arbitration which evolved into the compulsory system, it is not so easy to see what the long term outcomes of the 1998 dispute will be.

The dispute was the first real test of the Government's Workplace Relations Act and the union's strong response would surely have surprised those ministers who had changed existing legislation and introduced new legislation in an attempt to cripple the power of the unions. Are we destined to repeat history again and again or can we move on from here? One thing is certain, the solidarity of the union can never be ignored and no amount of

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<sup>38</sup> Waters, *Strikes in Australia*, p.104.

<sup>39</sup> Sutcliffe, *A history of trade unionism*, p.97.

<sup>40</sup> Svensen and Griffin, *Industrial Relations Implications*, p.8. For assessments of wins and losses more generally, also see Svensen, *The Australian Wharf Lockout*.

<sup>41</sup> Svensen and Griffin, *Industrial Relations Implications*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

punitive legislation will stifle the spirits of the workers. Spence's words in 1890 – 'The fact is that the leaders in the employer organisations were ignorant of the real strength of unionism, knew nothing of the spirit underlying it.'<sup>44</sup>, were echoed in the words of Jennie George in 1998 when she said, 'I tell you Mr Howard, when you mount an attack on one of our family, you face the rest of our family. The truth about this dispute is not about productivity, it is about the politics of union bashing.'<sup>45</sup>

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## FOURTEEN DAYS IN THE LIFE OF A POEM

Vic Williams

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It began as the first lightning flashes of the storm; not as an idea, not as a line or a phrase; but as an answer to the insistent questions of the workers. The air was heavy with rumours as the ferry went across the river with the evening shift.

“There’s a meeting on the corner in the morning.”

“What’s it about?”

“No one knows, not even the delegate.”

“They say we’ll stop, but what’s it about, Poet?”

Jim, the poet, sat listening and thinking. There were several things at issue, but one by one he put them aside for they did not look big enough for a stoppage. He remembered the last two; Maritime Workers had been full of amendments to the Stevedoring Industry Act, the plan of the Federal Government to cut down the power of the union in selecting the men for the draft of the new wharfies.

This must be it; the beginning of the all out battle with Menzies; the fight to stop the pattern of 1928 when the wharfies union was smashed by the use of non – union labour.

“It must be those stevedoring amendments,” he said.

“It could be that, but has Menzies time to get it through before they shut up shop?” asked one of the men.

There was tension downhold, a feeling of impending challenge among the gang. They were on edge and the foreman felt the tension when he came downhold to check on the cargo.

“It looks like they’re trying to get back to the bull – days,” he said, “with the companies picking all the new wharfies. But you can’t do much about it. Menzies has the majority in both houses.”

“But you don’t want to see the bull – days again, do you?” asked Jim.

“Oh, no, the bull – days were crook, but will you get the other workers to stick to you? They left us for dead in ’28 when we went out against the Beeby award.”

“The ACTU weren’t with us over the quotas and the Bowen blue,” came in one of the gang.

“The bull – days were no good, but you can’t stop Menzies,” said the foreman as he climbed out of the hatch.

The next morning on the corner, the federation leaders called for a twenty-four hour stoppage in protest at the amendments to take away the right of the Federation. All voted for it.

On the Wednesday morning it was carried on, with the proposal to go back to work on Thursday. But on the Wednesday evening the strike looked certain to go further.

Jim saw it was urgent that other workers should know why the wharfies were on strike, why they were being attacked. Jim sat down to write a leaflet for the Party branch, it was not the time for a poem. Yet it was then that the first colours of a poem began to show, a poem of defiance, not to be used in the prose but to be remembered and banked for the future.

*Now we must force the dangerous passage  
far into freedom against the reefs of time.*

The leaflet was finished by ten o’clock; he sat down and read it through. Good enough, water for thirsty men, but the wine of poetry was needed, by him and by the men – for the strike had put a new rhythm in the voices of the men.

Thursday showed the full pressure of the storm. The ACTU was backing the Federation to the hilt; the Federal Labor Party was levelling all broadsides at the Menzies Government; there was no talk of going back, only the way forward.

Jim spoke at the meeting.

“Now is the time for us to take the union case out to the other workers in the factories. It is our duty to defend the union.”

That night Jim and the young communist roneod the leaflet. The other man was not fired with the lightning of the storm: it showed in his face, his slow actions, the tiredness of his voice.

“Don’t you think we can win?” asked Jim.

“I’ve read the books for five years, but this is the first time I’ve seen anything like this. We won’t lead them here. I don’t know where to go,” said the young man.

“If the ball’s there, go for it; that’s football.” And Jim wrapped his hands around a leaflet.

“But I don’t play football,” complained the young man.

“I do,” said Jim. “we’ll take the leaflet to the pickup and the blokes will take it and kick it on.”

On his way home he thought of the stories of the men who had been in the battles of 1917 and 1919 to defend the union, the stories of the defeat of the 1928, of men who starved and died in those bleak days. But what of poetry? To be written and used in days of peace, or now, into battle with a song?

On Friday morning the streams boiled up from underground. Men they knew and men they didn’t know responded to the Party and took the Party leaflet, taking small bundles of it, reading it rapidly and saying “This will do; this is what we want.” One of these in a group quoted, “If they jail a man fro striking it’s a rich man’s country yet!”

“My bloody oath,” another backed him.

But no committees were set up, despite the call for them, only asking for volunteers to take out a union leaflet on the Monday.

Jim saw the Party leaflet was a beginning, but it was urgent for a Party bulletin to show the wharfies the undercurrents, the tides swirling around the foundations of the union, to show them the way to victory, the flood to overwhelm Menzies. As he wrote for it the poetry ran deep but concealed, the rhythm hidden in the plain daylight of prose. If the time called for

a poet to write, not poetry, but explanation, then he must write as time demands. As he wrote a line started to form, a poem on international support, “a hand to Harry Bridges”. But the tide of events swept on, tumbling it over and over, and throwing it aside.

On the Sunday morning the writing of the bulletin was complete. But the young communist was doubtful.

“Not tomorrow. Let’s hold it off, see the union officials with it. Not that parody, it might offend the foreman.”

‘Catch the tide,” said Jim. “It must go out tomorrow.”

He argued until the branch agreed.

In the bulletin he put a verse from a May Day poem.

*I marched with angry thousands on the day Tom Edwards fell,  
for the union was in danger and we marched to guard it well.  
We cleared the wharf of blacklegs and non could bar our way  
for millions marched beside us on a world – wide Labour Day.*

But now the gathering storm clouds were black as Menzies brow; the unions are in danger, we must be marching now! But was it enough to dredge the past? No, he must finish the poem on Harry Bridges, the British dockers, and Jim Healy, together against the common enemy, for if they were international so must we be. But, time, time, time; time was needed for more urgent jobs.

On the Monday with the first of the union leaflets the tides were moving, though slowly; on the Tuesday the committees were elected and moved into action. Jim was on the Entertainments Committee; here was the place to use art as a weapon; to use the music and songs of “Reedy River” with its story so close to their own.

The stream flowed strong and deep, gathering pace and Jim moved with it, feeling the growing consciousness of power among the men. At the railway workshops a thousand men heard the wharfie speaker, then refused to move outside the gates when the wharfies were ordered out. They demanded the wharfies be heard inside the gates and they won their demand.

The secret Bookhove letter was made public by the Federation, a bolt of lightning, showing in a stark black and white a greater enemy than Menzies ahead: the full armada of the Conference Lines.

“Talks are now going on with the responsible Government officials and should we obtain the backing of the Federal Government, then the test of strength will actually be made with the Waterside Workers.”

The test was being made; the Federal Government was a cat’s-paw of the overseas shipping giants; so much for the national independence for which he and his mates, many on the waterfront, had fought in the mud and blood of New Guinea.

The foaming tide, tearing the now exposed reef of danger, forced Jim to look ahead, to see the bar thrown across time by the looming Friday, with the probable passing of the amendments. Surely the strike must extend, surely that must be the decision!

On the Friday morning Jim went with others to factories not yet covered by leaflets.

“I saw a grumpy old bloke by himself in a corner,” said one of them in the car afterwards. “I tried him. ‘Just what I’ve been wanting’ and he snatched it out of my claw and couldn’t read it fast enough. They’d come with us!”

“My father was right in the middle of the bloody Sunday blue against the police and scabs”, recalled another in the car.

“He was a big powerful man; said he lifted the cops horses up.”

And the poet saw the broad backs of the wharfies lift up and throw aside the Colebatch Government. Was that a line, an image?

Poetry began to shape and move within him, as the crest of a towering wave, a poem of exultation to overwhelm the hated Menzies.

But Friday night’s news of no extension, back to work, hurt like a crushed hand. Was it betrayal?

The growing poem blackened in the pain, and the fighting songs he had planned were not sung.

On the Saturday morning he came into town in the bus, and a wharfie he did not know sat beside him.

“I’ve a wife and kids, and it was going to be hard, but if we could have stuck it out, and brought the others with us, we’d have brought Menzies down. I’d have been in it.”

Jim remembered the old woman asking to join the wharfies women’s committee.

“I’ll be in anything to bring him down with everything I’ve got!”

These people had been prepared for decisive struggle; had they been denied victory with the no extension decision? Turn to books, turn to experience, turn to the Party. As if it had been written for him personally, that day he read Sharkey’s words written twelve years before.

“A general strike . . . must as a rule be a political mass strike . . . Our Party would call for such stoppage only in the most favourable conditions, particularly a revolutionary or near revolutionary situation.”

To extend the strike was an outright declaration of war, against the whole Government and the state, to win or lose in one throw. And what if they lost, like the New Zealand wharfies strike? How true it was, it was not yet the time.

In the flurry of jobs, in the pressure of coming meetings, on a scrap of paper on his knee, in a moving car, while the car waited the poet wrote. Over one shoulder spoke the wharfies, the old woman ‘anything to bring him down’ and at the other shoulder Sharkey, wise with many struggles, burning with hatred of war and exploitation, controlled, responsible to the people, guided his hand. Knowing so much to be missed, verse but not poetry, but knowing it must be written, he wrote *Not Yet the Time*.

*Our fathers fought before us in bitter seventeen;  
no honest man could stomach the treachery they'd seen.  
But the union had been handcuffed and hunger beat them back,  
till Bloody Sunday freed them, gave Bloody Hal the sack.  
Two years they toiled and waited, but time runs swifter now:  
we'll clear our land of Menzies, our hand is at the plow.*

*Not yet the time, not yet the day  
but every blow brings closer still  
the time when he is swept away.*

*We swung a mighty hammer, our fourteen days of war,  
the walls of Menzies shuddered, we wedged his prison door.  
But the clink of foreign money has sounded in his ear.  
He signed the union warrant though his lips were white with fear.  
"All out, and we will smash him, all out, this is the day!"  
But though our hearts are burning, what does our knowledge say?*

*Not yet the time, not yet the day  
but every blow brings closer still  
the time when he is swept away.*



## FREMANTLE MEN AT WORK

Patricia Brown

*[Patricia submitted an extract of writing from her research for the Paddy Troy Memorial Essay. Unfortunately, a computer problem forced her to discard a number of files including the one containing the original essay. Fortunately, she still had a copy of the chapter from which the essay came and we publish that in full. You will note that Patricia refers to other chapters of the thesis. Ed.]*

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“What is work? Some would claim it is the secret of all success in life, the foundation of achievement and prosperity; others see it as a totally negative experience, a dreary routine undertaken solely to pay the rent.”<sup>1</sup> In the context of this chapter such concepts of men’s work and working lives in Fremantle during the years under discussion are explored. In the space of this section it is not the intent to give an encyclopaedic overview of work. Its purpose is to relate men’s work to economic patterns that, as argued in the preceding chapter, directed business and industry in Fremantle. In doing so it will examine working conditions, question whether social status was defined by work, whether work created class divisions and how much upward or downward social mobility it provided.

The first workmen considered are the wharf labourers, whose employment was central to the port itself. The next division of labour is that within the mercantile establishments which supported waterside work. The workforce that related to the port, but in a less pivotal way is then surveyed. Finally, work that was done to sustain the local economy and maintain the running of the city is considered. Work on another level made up the web of the social environment of Fremantle, aspects of which are considered elsewhere and in other contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Fox and M. Lake, “The Meaning of Work” in T.Jagtenberg & P.D’Alton (eds.), *Four Dimensional Social Space*, N.S.W.: 1992, p.270.

Class divisions related to work or imposed by work are analysed in this chapter. Some types of work discussed here certainly contained the “secret of success”, and some, it will be seen, concede that work could indeed be a dreary daily routine. Regardless of either concept, what lack of work meant is also part of the discussion but dealt with more fully in other chapters.

Historical explorations of work and working conditions have provided a considerable field of study in the last two decades, usefully contributing to social history as well as to labour history. C.Fox, for example, has provided valuable general insights in his recent study of work.<sup>2</sup> Janet McCallum has made a classic study of a Victorian working-class community<sup>3</sup> as has John Lack of Footscray.<sup>4</sup> Raelene Frances’ and Bruce Scates’ research, also into Victoria’s labour history, recognise some working conditions that applied equally to Fremantle.<sup>5</sup>

While Fremantle’s employment milieu was similar to that of some other working-class cities in Australia, it was different from that of Perth, and these differences were in place in order that the capital should be served by its port. Perth, having some industry, was still not an industrial centre and its main purposes, as described elsewhere, (in the introduction) were very different. In Fremantle’s service to its separated capital, its work flowed from the harbour, and required a large pool of “unskilled”<sup>6</sup> labour. The activity of the port also relied on a supporting mercantile sector working in offices and warehouses. Getting cargoes in and out, the main duty of the port, also relied upon secondary industries which in the long run provided, and was replenished by, jobs in shops and factories. These exertions at Fremantle resembled those in other port cities. A further difference between Fremantle and Perth was that Fremantle had to supply particular goods and services for the consumption of “globetrotters and seafarers”<sup>7</sup>, habitués of a port city. At the same time Fremantle was a city that, like Perth or any other locality, needed workers and workplaces to produce goods and services for local consumption.

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<sup>2</sup> C.Fox, *Working Australia*, Sydney: 1991.

<sup>3</sup> J.McCallum, *Stuggletown: A Portrait of an Australian Working-Class Community 1900-1965*, Melbourne: 1984.

<sup>4</sup> J.Lack, *A History of Footscray*, Melbourne: 1991.

<sup>5</sup> R.Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria, 1880-1939*, Cambridge 1993, and R.Frances and B.Scates, *Women and Work in Australia from the Gold Rushes to World War II*, Cambridge: 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Skilled labourers will be differentiated from craftsmen in this discussion. Skill was a component of many occupations whereas craftsmanship was not involved.

<sup>7</sup> X.Herbert, *Disturbing Element*, p.97.

An ironic element of Fremantle's port-based workforce centres on the idea that a "labour aristocracy" existed within its large group of casual and unskilled waterside workers.<sup>8</sup> The terms "unskilled" and "casual" as applied to wharf labourers connote a disadvantaged section of the community. This was true in many respects, but within this group of labouring men in Fremantle there was an aberration. The Fremantle lumpers were unskilled in that their work was not a craft, and they were casual labourers hired if, as and when needed. Against this, the classic definition of a labour aristocracy is that its members are working class, but from a social point of view almost indistinguishable from members of the lower middle class.<sup>9</sup> To qualify as members of such a labour aristocracy workers are usually skilled craftsmen, artisans rather than labourers. Yet portions of the membership of the Fremantle Lumpers' Union - foremen, and the good and well-favoured workers who were virtually, but not officially, in full-time employment - "unskilled", though they might be, qualified as members of a classic labour aristocracy and as such had power in the workplace and in politics. These men could mount such a strong lobby group, for example, that in 1911, J. Taylor was, due to its urging, elected to represent the Lumpers' Union on the Board of the Harbour Trust.<sup>10</sup>

Employers of waterside worker bestowed the status of labour aristocrats on some few of their workmen. Foremen regularly engaged by shipping companies had permanency of employment. These foremen in turn worked closely with the pick-up men who chose favoured workers from the pick-up points. The foremen and pick-up men were accorded standing and respect by the employers, and were regarded as bosses by the lumpers.<sup>11</sup> The favoured workers chosen by the pick-up men were virtually assured of a weekly wage which equalled that of a branch manager of a shop or an assistant wool-classer.<sup>12</sup> There was yet another group of lumper-aristocrats, namely those who were also union officials. Notable among these were the Lumpers' Union secretaries Francis Rowe and Tom Fox, the Waterside Workers Federation secretary Dick Thornett and the Lumpers' Union Vigilance Officers William Renton and Orm Cook. These men were highly respected citizens, and in their life-style and outlook "middle-class". They

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<sup>8</sup> C.Fahey, "The Aristocracy of Labour in Victoria, 1881-1911", *Australian Historical Studies*, 102 (April 1994), pp.77-96.

<sup>9</sup> E.J.Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour*, London: 1964, p.273.

<sup>10</sup> Fremantle Branch, WWF, letter book, N28/294, Rowe to Secretary of CSSOA, 19 December, 1911.

<sup>11</sup> J.Bourke, personal interview, 2 January 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Shop Assistants' Union Minutes, 19 May, 1913.

lived well, dressed well, were respectable and mixed with all grades of society.<sup>13</sup> Eventually some were elected to membership of local councils and parliament. They stood proudly with other Fremantle citizens of high rank. Frank Rowe, for example, held prestigious positions in the city, posts which were the prizes for the finest. He was the founder and secretary of the Fremantle Citizens' Ambulance Service in 1912, and its treasurer in 1929. He was a member of the Fremantle Hospital Board for 16 years, trustee of the Fremantle Trades Hall in 1920 and an official of the Fremantle Labour Bureau after 1930.<sup>14</sup> Rowe was a typical lumper – a labouring man, lacking much formal education, lacking wealth and family position, but never accepting that he belonged to “an inferior class [which was] made to know and keep its place.”<sup>15</sup> Work in Fremantle did not necessarily define a man's place in the social order.

The suggestion that men who engaged in humble work as these men did could claim standing as labour aristocrats is not without precedent. Ray Markey has made similar claims in an Australian context for members of other unions. The belief that some wharf labourers are included reinforces his argument that “the concept of an aristocracy of labour might easily be extended to include other groups”<sup>16</sup>. Markey contends that shearers and coal and metal miners who “occupied an upper strata in the workforce hierarchy of their particular industries” can be so classified because “in good times their earnings rivalled that of tradesmen,” they were respected by employers and were dealt with accordingly. However, the concept of a labour aristocracy and the creation of rigid socio-economic groups is also based on British and American notions of class hierarchies. In Fremantle, by contrast, there were indeed rich and poor, but despite this, there was a pervasive “community spirit”<sup>17</sup> over-riding putative class distinctions.

The port was the centre and provider of work – work which could be for both labour aristocrats and for others the foundation of achievement and prosperity or, for the less favoured, a daily grind. In either case it was vital for the life of Fremantle and its capital and for the hinterland. Ships called with cargo to be discharged and loaded, passengers had their luggage taken off arriving vessels and departing passengers had theirs put on board those leaving. Imports and

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<sup>13</sup> Conversations with Molly Jennings, daughter of Tom Fox.

<sup>14</sup> *Biographical Register of Western Australians*, p.172.

<sup>15</sup> Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p.275.

<sup>16</sup> R.Markey, “The Aristocracy of Labour and Productive Re-Organization in NSW, c. 1880-1900”, *Australian Economic History Review*, 28, 1 (1988), p.44.

<sup>17</sup> J.Lee, *This is East Fremantle (the story of a town and its people)*, Perth 1979, pp.1 and 34.

exports had to be carried from ships to quays and warehouses, and from trucks and lighters to be stowed on ships. Steamers were coaled. All these extremely labour-intensive tasks required the labour of the plentiful pool of casual workers. The Fremantle Harbour Trust was the largest employer of wharf labour. The Trust controlled administration of the port and its facilities, acting, uniquely among Australian ports, as wharfinger.<sup>18</sup> The other main employers of waterside labour were registered in the Arbitration Courts as the “Employers of Waterside Labour”. This association comprised the shipping companies which federated in 1902 as the Australian Steamship Owners Association,<sup>19</sup> later the Commonwealth SOA, and the Melbourne Steamship Company, the Anglo-American and Continental Shipping Association, the stevedoring firms of R.G. Laurie, and Fremantle Stevedoring Company.<sup>20</sup>

Wharf labourers whom these firms and authorities employed were not craftsmen, but were of necessity, as will be seen, skilled workmen. The lumper needed no accredited craft apprenticeship to be accepted as a member of his union, but rather he learned his trade on the job. Three ways of acquiring skills are classically identified, namely regular service, migration and following-up.<sup>21</sup> The lumper had regularity of service in the sense that once a lumper he was always a lumper. He migrated within the trade in that he took on a variety of work as it was demanded by day-to-day circumstances and needs of the port. He followed up by working alongside other members of the gang. Markey makes the point that “picking up was learning in a more casual way that could have elements of all three other methods”<sup>22</sup> and such picking up was an essential apprenticeship to the lumper’s trade.

Hobsbawm has written about the skills required of the British lumper. He “had to have at least the qualities of the iron-puddler - strength and dexterity within a limited range, and very frequently the qualities of the all-round craftsman or supervisory workman - initiative, wide experience, the ability to make a variety of decisions to fit the necessities of loading and unloading the hundred and one non-standardised ships, the ability to supervise men.”<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>18</sup> *Port of Fremantle. Handbook of Information Relative to the Port of Fremantle, W.A., 1935*, Perth: 1935, p.17.

<sup>19</sup> ASOA records, N46/835/41, Noel Butlin Archives, ANU, Canberra (henceforth NBA). The members of the association were the Australian United Steam Navigation Company, the Adelaide Steamship Company, Howard Smith, Huddard Parker & Company, and McIlwraith McEarchern.

<sup>20</sup> Fremantle Lumpers’ Union of Workers, Industrial Agreement 1911, NBA, Z430, box 1.

<sup>21</sup> C.Fahey, “The Aristocracy of Labour in Victoria”, p.91, and C. More, *Skill and the English Working Class, 1870-1914*, London: 1980, pp. 60-61.

<sup>22</sup> Markey, “Aristocracy of Labour” pp. 56-7.

<sup>23</sup> Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p.207.

was no different from work practices in Fremantle. There are many examples. Cargo handlers had to know how to trim cargoes of coal, wheat, phosphate and other bulk cargoes, for badly trimmed cargo was a danger to ship and crew. They had to be skilled stevedores, particularly as Fremantle was the first or last port of call for many interstate and overseas ships and for this reason it was necessary for cargoes to be “topped up” in the holds. This required that “everything had to be stowed tightly in the small places left available at the other ports”. It was also likely that cargo from elsewhere had to be shifted and re-stowed before Fremantle cargo could be loaded. Every foot of available space, therefore, was used.<sup>24</sup> Labourers in the goods sheds on the wharves, the “spotters” and “trackers”, needed remarkable expertise. They were expected to work swiftly and efficiently and know without hesitation exactly where to locate a consignment of goods called for by the consignee.<sup>25</sup> Hatchmen and winchmen on the wharves were responsible for directing workers, and a mistake or any confusion would result in injury and damage. All operations on the wharves needed the skill of good team work. Those, for example, working on the tables in the ships’ holds, onto which the gantries sent the bags of cargo from the railway trucks, had to place the bags swiftly and correctly on the shoulders of the lumpers who stowed them. Speed and synchronisation were essential in both categories and mistakes could cause injury or death.<sup>26</sup>

In its service to the capital and the hinterland, the port was a dangerous and unpredictable workplace. Mistakes and mishaps inevitably did happen, underlining the importance of the judgement and dexterity of the men so as to limit disasters. Taking 1928 as a mid-year for the period under discussion, there were four hundred and seventy five accidents of a “more or less serious nature”. Forty five men were incapacitated for up to one month, twenty eight for five weeks, twenty for six weeks, forty eight for up to ten weeks, ten for three months, eleven for eighteen weeks, and fifteen for longer. Two men died as a result of one particular accident. Several other accidents resulted in partial incapacity for some of those involved, two being permanently incapacitated.<sup>27</sup>

The best of lumpers earned the respect of their colleagues and bosses. They took pride in their work and position. However, the great body of lumpers did not fit the criteria of the labour

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<sup>24</sup> Records of the Fremantle Lumpers’ Union, NBA, T62/11/16. Press cutting, 16 July 1928.

<sup>25</sup> J.Dix, personal interview, June 1994.

<sup>26</sup> J.Dix, personal interview, June 1994.

<sup>27</sup> Fremantle Lumpers’ Union report, 21 July 1928, NBA, T62/11/16.

aristocracy.<sup>28</sup> They, to whom work was probably “totally negative”, did not have regularity of earnings. Their employment was casual,<sup>29</sup> depending on many matters. It rested on the amount of shipping in the harbour, which in turn was governed by factors such as the market fluctuations in the Western Australian economy and the seasonal and irregular volume of the harvests. It could also be affected by strikes, not only those of the waterside workers’ unions themselves, but strikes by other unions, such as the Shearers’ Union and the Seamen’s Union. It was also linked to politics: the preferential employment of cheaper “National Workers”, or non-union men, which governments endorsed and encouraged, and to government measures of discipline designed to control their labour. Then there was the constant worry that next week, after the ship being worked was gone, there would not be another. Even the weather played a part. Rough conditions could prevent the docking of ships on which their livelihood depended. Such was this insecurity that lumpers without work had to rely on charity, or on second jobs. A family member of a Fremantle lumper recalls that in slack times it was necessary for men to take on other jobs, such as collecting and selling firewood, in order to provide for his family.<sup>30</sup>

Other vicissitudes which contributed to the casual nature of the lumpers’ employment lay in personalities. In bad times in Fremantle, when shipping was scarce, the lumpers believed they had to keep on the right side of the foremen. Known trouble makers were passed over by foremen in the pick-ups. Some workers were so favoured as to be chosen at all times to the extent that they had what amounted to a permanent job which meant that others could get no work at all. Some foremen, it is alleged, could be bribed, the bribes usually in the form of pints of beer, in order to secure jobs. “Men assembled at pickup points and ‘pannikin bosses’ would dish out jobs by pointing and saying ‘you, you and you.’ The stevedore foremen would pick out men like live cattle in a sale yard.”<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, for those within the labour aristocracy, there was job security. To be a lumper and accepted into the Union of Waterside Workers meant “a job for life”.<sup>32</sup> Because of the general lack of secondary education available in Fremantle, many boys attending the Fremantle Boys’ School of necessity followed their fathers and elder

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<sup>28</sup> Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p.273.

<sup>29</sup> The casual nature of waterside labour is referred to in much labour history. See, for example, Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, p.208, R.C. Miller, “The dockworker subculture and some problems in cross-cultural and some cross-time generalisations”, *Comprehensive Studies in Society and History*, 11 (1969), p.305, and F. Broeze, “Maritime Labour 1870-1914”, *International Review of Social History*, 36 (1991-2), p.169.

<sup>30</sup> Freeman, oral history collection, Fremantle City Library.

<sup>31</sup> Hector McDonald, oral history transcript, Battye Library.

<sup>32</sup> J.Dix, personal interview.

brothers into wharf labouring. Yet, one former lumper recalls that when boys were asked by teachers at school what eventual work they would choose, the reply from many would be “I am going to be a lumper” and it was a “proud reply”.<sup>33</sup> “We never thought of doing anything else”<sup>34</sup> was a verdict of school boys in those years.

Nevertheless, the lumper looked like a humble man. His working uniform was bowyangs round his trouser legs, a sweat rag at his neck and a lunch pail in hand,<sup>35</sup> or a sugar bag slung over his shoulder in which he carried his meals along with the ubiquitous billy-can as he trudged, or cycled to his daily pick-up point.<sup>36</sup> Outraged at his presumed humble status, it was noted with disgust by a sympathetic member of the public that at one of the shipping offices there was a dirty piece of cardboard tacked to a wooden gate on which was printed “McIlwraith McEarchern & Co., Entrance to Pay Office.” The way to this pay office was through a laneway filled with debris, broken baskets, spilt coal, bricks and rubbish. The shipping offices themselves were, by contrast, “palatial”.<sup>37</sup>

In egalitarian Fremantle then social distinctions were deplored. However, some employers like the Employers of Waterside Labour, expected that keeping workers in their place was ensured by the instigation of clock time as part of “scientific management”<sup>38</sup> As early as 1902 the Adelaide Steamship Co. introduced time-sheets and a “medal system”.<sup>39</sup> Staff members of shipping and importing firms thus obeyed clock time officially, as did the lumpers in their pick-up times. Office employees worked from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on weekdays and until 12 noon on Saturdays. Adhering strictly to clock time, however, was obviously for the lower ranks, for the Secretary of the Head Office of Adelaide Steam was to query the Fremantle Branch Secretary, W.E. Moxon, as to whether it was necessary for his correspondence clerk to do so much evening work. He “did not see the necessity for so much night work.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> J.Dix, personal interview.

<sup>34</sup> J.Dix, personal interview, May 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Clifton, oral history transcript, Battye Library.

<sup>36</sup> B.Latter, “The Night of the Stones”, *Early Days*, 10, 4 (1992), p.387.

<sup>37</sup> *Fremantle Herald*, 28 February 1919.

<sup>38</sup> H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York: 1974, ch. 4.

<sup>39</sup> ASSCo, Letter Book, N46/567, Northcote to Moxon, 12 June, 1902, NBA.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Northcote to Moxon, 22 June, 1905.

Clock time for their waterside workers was called for by employers for their own convenience and in the hope of maintaining a pool of “docile and punctual workers”.<sup>41</sup> This was vindicated by the Arbitration Courts.<sup>42</sup> The discipline of morning and noon pick-ups, for instance, was based on clock time. Opposition to it was mounted by the Lumpers’ Union and endorsed by nature. The Union judged it “a waste of time” and nature decreed that it was insupportable. The two pick-up system was instigated after argument in the Arbitration Court in 1928, and reverted to an old system. It meant that “the lumper spends most of his time standing and looking for work, especially in the small hours when others are in bed.”<sup>43</sup> Under this system lumpers, if they wanted a job, had to appear once in the early morning and again at midday, and they dared not miss either pick-up. In 1928 Tom Fox, Secretary of the Lumpers’ Union, outlined the two pick-up routine for the men. For those who had to use trams, it meant: “Catch the 7.30 tram, arrive at the pick-up at 7.45, catch 10.30 tram home again, arriving at 11 o’clock, have dinner, catch a tram shortly after 12 arriving at pick-up by 1.p.m, catch 3.30 tram arriving home about 4 p.m. The whole day would be wasted. This was a common occurrence for hundreds of men on the waterfront.”<sup>44</sup> The hoped-for docile and obedient workforce thus reacted with anger and outrage, arguing that the plan did little to make for efficiency, as time could have been better spent on other projects.

Clock time also measured shifts and hours of paid work, meal-times, smokoh-times and pay times,<sup>45</sup> but traditional time, too, regulated the working life of the waterside workers, and, it had to be recognised, that of their employers. The prosperity of all related, of necessity, to things of the sea. It was a maxim that “when the harbour is full the cupboard is full.”<sup>46</sup> Winds, and weather, however, governed the time of ships’ arrivals and controlled the time taken to work the ships. The whims and judgements of ships’ captains ruled the times of departure.<sup>47</sup> Waterside workers and employers of waterside workers were thus bound together by such dependence on traditional time. The firms of Elders, Dalgety & Co. and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company,

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<sup>41</sup> G.Davison, *The Unforgiving Minute: How Australia Learned to Tell the Time*, Oxford: 1993, p.14.

<sup>42</sup> *Age*, 18 March, 1930.

<sup>43</sup> *Fremantle Herald*, 14 November 1911.

<sup>44</sup> NBA, T62/11/16, Lumpers’ Union press cutting book, article from the *West Australian*, 16 July 1928.

<sup>45</sup> ASOA records, N28/294, 31 July, 1907.

<sup>46</sup> *Fremantle Advocate*, 28 August, 1930.

<sup>47</sup> C.Fyfe, personal interview, 15 December 1994. Mr Fyfe, who worked at Dalgety’s in the 1940s and 1950s, told the interviewer that if a ship’s captain decreed that his ship should leave port at 3 a.m., office staff, lumpers, warehousemen - all those involved with the export of wool from the establishment - would work until 3 a.m..

for example, relying on ships for their business, were dependent on their passages controlled by the weather and not timetables. Traditional time also dictated work through the rhythms of the body - whether a man could continue to work all night or all day, whether he needed food and rest and at what hours.

Clock time was more easily applied in the industrial sector of the economy. Fremantle firms, however, even local branches of large concerns, remained small throughout the years under discussion and were paternalistic rather than draconian. They were sufficiently small to be more like “family concerns” and “small partnerships”, as had been the case in 19th century Britain.<sup>48</sup> Of the earliest firms, those established by 1901, the small nature can be seen in the table opposite.

In 1922-3 the *Western Australian Statistical Register* reported that there were 300 “new” firms with 2,300 employees registered in those last two years. These ‘new’ establishments being small ones it was hoped nonetheless that they heralded “the long looked-for development in secondary industries...” The membership of unions registered at the Fremantle Trades Hall in 1934 gives an indication of the size of firms as membership was taken as a whole.<sup>49</sup> The modest nature of industry had remained.

Sugar Refining Employees	49 members
Soap and Candle Manufacturing	29 members
Rope and Twine Manufacturers	29 members
Shipwright and Boatbuilders	23 members
Wool scouring and Fellmongering	48 members
Bag, Sack and Textile Manufacturers	91 members
Millers and Mill Employees	260 members

In most Fremantle firms the staff employed worked within a hierarchy. There were managers and assistant managers, accountants, ledger keepers, cashiers, travellers, shorthand-typists, officers in charge of various departments, juniors or cadets, office boys storemen and packers, carters and warehousemen. At the top was the manager, who may have been a family member. Edward Wittenoom, for example, took over from his brother Frank as Manager of Dalgetys in

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<sup>48</sup> Baverman, *Labor*, pp. 294-5.

<sup>49</sup> *Western Australian Industrial Gazette*, 12 September, 1934.

<b>FREMANTLE</b>	<b>NO. OF ESTABLISH'NTS</b>	<b>NO. OF HANDS</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
	36		600
	1	under 4	4
	1	4	4
	8	5-10	137
	6	21-50	176
	1	58-100	103
<b>E. FREMANTLE</b>	1	under 4	3
	1	4	4
	4	5-10	29
	4	11-20	73
	3	51-100	62
	1	101 up	782
<b>N. FREMANTLE</b>	1	under 4	3
	0	4	0
	2	5-10	15
	3	11-20	65
	2	21-50	51
	1	51-100	51
	101 up	0	0

1902.<sup>50</sup> Frank and Edward Wittenoom were step-sons of Annie Dalgety Moore whose family was connected to Dalgety of London.<sup>51</sup> Mostly it would seem, however, well-qualified managers, who acquired skill through migration, were recruited from outside. W.E.Moxon, of the Adelaide Steamship Company, was from Brisbane. A.G. Leeds, who succeeded F.Wittenoom as Manager of Dalgetys and who was also superintendent of the Harbour Trust, was appointed from the Sydney branch.<sup>52</sup> Particular office workers, such as managers, chief clerks, and cashiers had the highest status within firms. Others, such as shorthand-typists (male) and ordinary clerks, bookkeepers and travellers, ranked below technical staff - the stock and

<sup>50</sup> N8/106, Dalgety Letter Book, 6 January, 1902.

<sup>51</sup> Moore family papers in the possession of G.Moore.

<sup>52</sup> D.Birmingham (nee Leeds), oral history transcript, Fremantle City Library.

wool people - in such establishments as Dalgetys and Elders.<sup>53</sup> Yet “the clerk was an honoured employee . . . .His position was a confidential one, the employer discussed affairs with him and relied on his judgement; he might, and often did, become a partner and marry the employer’s daughter.”<sup>54</sup>

Status in the workplace was, however, fluid, with upward movement possible. In 1907, for example, John McEwan, storeman of ten years service with the Colonial Sugar Refinery in Fremantle, rose to the post of bookkeeper, a position that meant he had full responsibility for the working of the store, for overseeing goods received and delivered, for shipping work and bookkeeping. The job required “someone who is intelligent and tactful, and fairly good at figures and writing.”<sup>55</sup> Peter Jensen, later a union official, started work in 1923 as a labouring lad with Burford’s Soap Factory at Rocky Bay at North Fremantle. He was eventually offered opportunities of becoming a prestigious wool classer, or a chemist, opportunities which he earned by being a good , diligent and intelligent worker.

For the highest and the lowest in the hierarchies of firms, for the skilled and the unskilled, working life probably began at 14. Some few might be fortunate enough, and have parents sufficiently well-to-do, to allow them to continue their education by learning a profession, the most accessible being teaching, which recruited promising lads through the “monitor” or pupil-teacher system,<sup>56</sup> or by taking on an apprenticeship. If these options were not available boys would seek work as hands in firms, factories and workshops in Fremantle’s incipient industrial areas. Mills & Ware Biscuit Factory was a reliable source of employment for school leavers. Another was one of Fremantle’s oldest factories, that of Burford’s Swan Soap and Candle Factory which set up business in 1886.

Young recruits to the upper echelons these firms may equally have had no formal education beyond the age of 14, any more than the lumper or carter. High school education was scarce in Fremantle in the years under discussion. A pool of prospective trainees for some Fremantle firms was the church-run Christ Church Grammar School in Claremont, a suburb near Fremantle. Yet Christ Church did not educate boys beyond the age of 14 until 1919, and even

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<sup>53</sup> C.Fyfe.

<sup>54</sup> Braverman, *Labor*, p.294.

<sup>55</sup> NBA, CSR letterbook, 142/775, 26 February 1908.

<sup>56</sup> J.Dolan, former teacher at Fremantle Boys’ School, oral history transcript, Battye Library.

then, parents had to be implored to leave their sons beyond that time.<sup>57</sup> The high-standing Wittenoom brothers, managers of Dalgetys in Fremantle had been denied the opportunity to pursue their desired further education after the age of fourteen and were sent instead to the Nor' West to learn the practices of family businesses.<sup>58</sup>

Applicants for prestigious appointments, however, were made through networks, and thus appointees were always members of a "good family". Boys of Christ Church Grammar School were, for instance, favoured for careers in Dalgetys and Elders,<sup>59</sup> generally starting as technical staff dealing directly with livestock and wool. Chris Fyfe, a former wool classer at Dalgetys, was an old boy of Christ Church. He recounts how in 1947, as the end of his school days drew near, his mother had lunch with the then manager of Dalgetys, Mr R.A.Cameron. Fyfe recalls that "At about the time they got to the sweets Cameron said to my mother, 'I believe you have a son at Christ Church. When he leaves school tell him to come and see me.' I knew then that I had a job waiting for me." Such methods of recruitment were common from the earliest years.<sup>60</sup>

In those early days Dalgetys called the young recruits "cadets". These boys were paid a living-away-from-home allowance, and became ineligible if married. They had at all times to be fully and usefully employed, were given assistance and guidance outside working hours, were provided with extra-curricular activities, and attention had to be given to personal attitudes, dress and general demeanour.<sup>61</sup> Boys learned on the job and were sent to the country to gain first-hand experience of growing and handling wool at source. The rules of the cadetship were strict and patriarchal.

Such recruitment from schools outside the Fremantle district thus brought in 'foreigners' to be groomed for senior posts, and imposed a class structure that was alien to Fremantle. By contrast, Dalgetys and Elders selected their young artisans locally. Dalgetys traditionally took on boys from North Fremantle, Elders from South Fremantle.<sup>62</sup> The boys started working life humbly sewing wool bales and stacking them, but they had no apprenticeships, and they

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<sup>57</sup> *The Mitre: Christ Church Old Boys' Magazine*, 1, 5 (December 1918).

<sup>58</sup> Moore family papers. After his father's death, Edward Wittenoom asked his guardian, W.D.Moore, to allow him to study medicine. Moore refused the request.

<sup>59</sup> *The Mitre; Christ Church Old boys' Magazine*, 1, 5 (December 1918).

<sup>60</sup> C.Fyfe, personal interview, 5th January 1995.

<sup>61</sup> Dalgety records, NBA, N8/163/140.

<sup>62</sup> Metherall, oral history collection, Fremantle City Library.

which is separated from Detroit on Lake Michigan by a narrow waterway, and the two cities are connected by ferries and tunnels. Ford used Canada as a base for its factories in order to obtain the advantage of lower tariffs operating between Empire countries, but to all intents and purposes, Ford-Canada was an American concern. The Fremantle factory assembled cars, the chassis coming from Geelong, and car bodies imported from Canada. These bodies were sent in packing cases, and packed according to American standards by proper time and motion study techniques. The packaging took four men exactly an hour.

Such "Taylorism", or time and motion practice, was to set the example for the Fremantle factory. After the car body reached the factory the chassis from Geelong, having been previously welded, was integrated with it along an assembly line.<sup>73</sup> Ideally, eight cars were expected to be finished each day. If only seven came off the production line, nine would have to be completed the following day. The foremen followed the work closely and if a man did not complete his allotted task, his portion of the car was whisked along the assembly line, notwithstanding, to the next man. A time and motion study was continuously conducted, based on a median of the time taken by the slowest, the time taken by the fastest and a control. Time sheets on each man worked out for every quarter hour, a horrendous task for men in the accounting office.<sup>74</sup> To encourage hard work, merits and rewards, American style, were also in use. Punctuality was rewarded, as was perfect attendance. Men who obtained merits were able to earn wages above the basic wage.<sup>75</sup>

Yet work on the factory floor was carried out in conditions which rivalled that of the lumpers' circumstances for inhumanity. From where the office staff worked in surroundings constructed of glass and beautiful timber members could look down to the factory floor where sprayed paint formed a miasma which would not disperse, where there was no ventilation due to windows being jammed and where the consequent heat made the metal parts of cars and machinery so hot as to burn and blister flesh, where painters used material in which the lead content was so high as to cause "madness".<sup>76</sup> These conditions are examined in another context below.

Marxist historians, like Braverman, deplore work disciplines such as Taylorism as a capitalist ploy to control the workers. In Fremantle, however, the men who were happy with the system

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<sup>73</sup> Roy Schultz, personal interview, 24 January 1995.

<sup>74</sup> T.Hagerty, personal interview, 25 January 1995.

<sup>75</sup> B.Logan, personal interview, 24 January 1995.

<sup>76</sup> T.Buswell, personal interview, January 25 1995.

did not object as it meant extra pay, and those who did find it irksome found ways of subverting the system. Some joined unions.<sup>77</sup> Loafers would take time off by lurking in the bodies of completed cars or hidden among the serrations of the roof. Pilfering was also an undermining ploy. Anything was pilfered, from paint thinner to entire car engines. However, the general consensus of men and women who formerly worked for Ford is that foremen and managers were hard men but fair, and that in paternalistic style the company was good to its workers, hesitating to put off casual labour in slack times, refusing to take on juniors at low wages. The fact that many employees stayed for 20, 30 or 35 years with the company speaks for a good working life.

Ford used tradesmen such as welders and panel beaters. True apprenticeships for trades were to be prized. A fitter, who had served his apprenticeship, was a cut above unskilled labour employed at Mills & Ware. He had charge of the machinery. Master coopers made the wooden boxes for biscuit packaging.<sup>78</sup> Braverman looks back on his own “old fashioned” experience, when learning trades which shaded into each other and fitted a man for work in many areas. He suggests this is a romantic view of trade, although in his experience,

because of [the] propinquity and the interlocking processes practiced by the crafts, and also because of the gathering together of apprentices of all crafts in a trade school for semi-weekly sessions, I learned not only my own trade but gathered a concrete understanding of most of the others.<sup>79</sup>

Braverman might well have been speaking of boys who worked at the Fremantle Car Barn.

Such a boy was W.E. Wray, whose father had been Mayor of Fremantle during the First World War. He began his working life with the Tramways & Electric Light Board in 1917 when he was fifteen, putting on lights for the trams with a pole. The pole would light a block of lamps. As he graduated in age and experience, he took on an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner but his training also taught him moulding, blacksmithing, and oxy-welding.<sup>80</sup>

Printing similarly included many skills and required an apprenticeship. In the years under discussion there were a sizeable number of printing firms in Fremantle, adjuncts to the daily business and personal life of the community. Printing firms included Spicers & Delmodes, M.L.C. Printing, Porter & Salmon, Bunars & Dixons, S.H. Lamb, the *Sentinel*, and R.C. Wades.

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<sup>77</sup> Shop Assistants' Union records.

<sup>78</sup> *Golden Gate*, 22 November 1911, p.9.

<sup>79</sup> Braverman, *Labor*, p.5.

<sup>80</sup> W.E.(Bill) Wray, oral history collection, Fremantle City Library.

There were other related industries such as paper ruling firms. Contrary to the assessment of Braverman that, as regards the printing trade, there is a “progressive elimination of the control functions of the worker, insofar as possible, and their transfer to a device which is controlled again insofar as possible, by the management from outside the direct process”<sup>81</sup> the Fremantle printing firms retained old-fashioned proficiencies.

The *Sentinel* was a weekly paper, hand set on an old Wharfingdale press. In the paper ruling business paper was ruled by pen and ink and fed through a machine by hand. Letter press was done from raised type, a method unchanged since Caxton’s time. Compositors had to be good artists and do their own graphics and designs by letter press blocks and engraving. Flour bags were also printed by hand, although indeed automatic flour bag printing machines did come into use eventually.<sup>82</sup>

In other fields of employment old-fashioned practices were taught by the masters. One such master was T.C.Bousefield, a tailor of Fremantle. Lawrence Haskell came to Bousefields before the First World War as a “young lad for sweeping”. This was the lowest rung in a hierarchy where the top job was the “top man”. At Bousefields, Haskell learned the trade of shop assistant. He was expected to give personal attention to customers, however humble their purchase might be. He was trained in deference. After saying “good morning” or “good afternoon”, the customer was offered a chair and “shown the wares”. If a humble purchase was merely a pair of socks, the foot was measured. Ships’ passengers and crews made up, as in so much of Fremantle’s business affairs, a large part of the clientele, and there was no racism or variation in the treatment of customer, be they Britons or other Europeans, Malays, Chinese, Indians or Japanese. Sign language was, in such circumstances, part of the assistant’s trade.<sup>83</sup>

As a port city, Fremantle’s business life of necessity supported many of the sleazier aspects of employment. There were bludgers, or procurers and protectors, for brothels, such as Cuban Lopez, a negro called Dixie Plum, Dublin Dan, an Irishman, and a Maori called Tiny Tim Too-  
hee who dealt mostly with the coloured clientele.<sup>84</sup> Opium dens were another source of business, and ones which offered chances of income for the owners and the stigma of immorality for the users. York Lit, a Chinese resident, was found to have large quantities of

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<sup>81</sup> Braverman, *Labor*, p.212.

<sup>82</sup> W.Wade, oral history collection, Fremantle City Library.

<sup>83</sup> L.Haskell, oral history collection, Fremantle City Library.

<sup>84</sup> X.Herbert, *Disturbing Element*, p.96.

opium on his premises in Henry Street. Chinese importers of opium were helped by unscrupulous white men, it was alleged. Indeed, when York Lit's premises were raided in 1908, the police found "a gentleman who is a government official" and who was "connected with shipping" hiding in a bedroom and he could offer "no satisfactory explanation" as to the reason for his presence. More damning, he had been on board the vessel *Paroo* the day before when 10 tins of opium had been seized.<sup>85</sup> Opium dens provided income because they attracted a sizeable number of patrons, many of them "young white men in good positions who smoke opium and drink laudanum."<sup>86</sup>

Respectably, North Fremantle market gardens abounded with the market gardens of the Chinese. They hawked their wares about the town. Win Kee or Winkie, for example, was a well-known fruit and vegetable seller, whose business premises were officially designated as Win Wor Kee & Co., Fruiterers.<sup>87</sup> Ethnic groups, thus, made up particular areas of labour. Fishermen were 50% Italians. They too hawked their wares. Italian boys were to be seen on the streets selling fish from baskets carried on their shoulders, and sold wholesale on the Victoria Quay. The fishermen were first located at Point Peron, where there was an Italian fishing village of sorts, and a co-operative business which owned the boats and gear.<sup>88</sup> Aspects of the conditions facing these ethnic groups are dealt with below in other contexts. Many older residents of Fremantle also recall Aboriginal families walking through the streets calling for customers to buy clothes props, which were forked poles to support rope clothes lines. This was their work in European terms. Work in their own eyes was what was done in private in their camps, in their service to the land through their ceremonies, for example.

Disreputable figures such as the bludgers and the drug dealers were opposed across the boundaries of law and order by the police, who, according to Xavier Herbert and from his knowledge of Fremantle society, were "pretty well Irish to a man"; he believed the reason was that Fremantle had "first been populated by political prisoners from Ireland."<sup>89</sup> True or not, the police recruits at the Police Academy studied long and hard. They had to become *au fait* with the Criminal Code, the Police Act, the Games Act, the Illicit Trading Act, the Cruelty to

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<sup>85</sup> *West Australian*, 17 March 1908.

<sup>86</sup> *West Australian*, 6 January 1906.

<sup>87</sup> B.Black, personal interview, July 1993, *Post Office Directory*, 1920, Fremantle Council Minutes, 1926.

<sup>88</sup> C.Gamba, "The Italian Fishermen in Fremantle: A Study in Sociology and Economics", B.A. Honours thesis, University of Western Australia, 1948, and the *West Australian*, 10 May 1923.

<sup>89</sup> Herbert, *Disturbing Element*, p.96.

Animals Act, the Lunacy Act, the Aboriginal Act and the Health Act. In practical work they had to master swordsmanship, the regulation of traffic, wrestling and self-defence, footprints (in plaster casts), finger prints, first aid, musketry and revolver instruction, and horsemanship.<sup>90</sup> A policeman thus had, it would seem, more intense apprenticeship training than was usual in those times. His skills were not learned 'on the job', however, as were those of another type of law enforcement officer, namely the prison warden.

In 1924 the young Metherall took a job with the firm of Locke's, furniture makers, as an apprentice carpenter. Not having the education or the family background to consider administrative work, the public service had not occurred to him then as an option. The Locke brothers were "fine gentlemen and considerate", but when the Great Depression peaked they had perforce to lay off staff. Metherall was willing to take any work which offered rather than "go on the dole". Through a football connection, Mr F. Townsend, Head Clerk at the Fremantle gaol, he was offered a job as a prison officer and, as it transpired, he was to rise to the top of this profession and become Superintendent. Metherall learned to deal tactfully and affectively with dangerous men in the prison, to sympathise with some, to help others, and to handle staff judiciously. He never, for example, insisted that any of the required fifteen witnesses to a hanging be staff members who he knew would be unutterably distressed and disturbed by such a horrendous experience. He himself managed to "take it in his stride" as part of his job.<sup>91</sup>

Work provides income, but, as Fox and Lake have pointed out it is also a source of self-esteem and identity.<sup>92</sup> The first World War and the Great Depression were to undermine these aspects of work for men, in contrast to the manner in which the War, at least, created opportunities for women's work. Men returned to Australia, and to Fremantle, to find that work they had left behind, or had hoped to find, had been taken over by other men, or by women. H. Parker, M.L.A. for Fremantle in 1932 remarked on the number of public service jobs which were now occupied by girls.<sup>93</sup> His own office was not faultless in this regard either, it was noted with irony.

The Great Depression was devastating in that the body of the "unemployed" increased. An overview of work by Fox and Lake cites the 1860s as the decade in which the new category of

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<sup>90</sup> *Votes and Proceeding of the Parliament of Western Australia, Report of the Police Commissioner, 1915.*

<sup>91</sup> Metherall, oral history.

<sup>92</sup> T.Jagtenberg and P.D'Alton (eds), *Four dimensional Social Space: a reader in Australian social sciences*, p.267.

<sup>93</sup> *W.A. Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 1, 1932, p.447.

“the unemployed” was coined, and as a consequence the belief that income should be earned, “caused particular distress to those unable to work, or denied work, on account of old age or illness.”<sup>94</sup> In the 1920s unemployment was rife in Fremantle, which was “a sick town and want and starvation were threatening.”<sup>95</sup> Men were forced to take something for nothing, in that the Council offered relief work.<sup>96</sup> The effects of unemployment on the economy and in a social context is dealt with elsewhere.

Ironically, despite causing poverty and anguish for so many, the Depression opened up possibilities of work for others, offering opportunities which some men and boys had previously been unlikely to contemplate as a choice. In many cases they prospered, and rose in these professions, in a manner which surprised them. One such boy was George Metherall. Metherall was typical of a working class boy with great, but untapped talent.<sup>97</sup>

Thus with luck, good connections, talent, and application a boy could rise in his chosen trade or profession. However, as regards the traditional professional class - doctors and lawyers, and semi-professional classes, - dentists and teachers, lack of educational opportunities and poverty limited openings in these areas. Doctors had to train overseas. Alix Dermer writes in her Fremantle recollections that both her father and eldest brother received their medical training in England. Indeed her brother received his total education there.<sup>98</sup> The father of Mrs B. Black studied in England for a law degree before the 1st World War.<sup>99</sup> John Dolan, a teacher at Fremantle Boys’ School recalls that despite winning educational scholarships and passing required exams, his parents could not pay for his articles to enable him to become a lawyer. Dolan settled for teaching as a career. He began his training as a monitor for which he received pay, and later was admitted to the Claremont Teachers’ Training College.<sup>100</sup> Dentists might have learned their trade on the job as tooth pullers.

A definition of work is a difficult concept. As remarked above, it was indeed the secret of all success in life, at least as regards maintaining respectability and contributing to the family as

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<sup>94</sup> C.Fox and M.Lake, “The Meaning of Work”, in Jagtenberg and D’Alton, *Four Dimensional Space*, p.270.

<sup>95</sup> *Fremantle Advocate*, 17 June 1927.

<sup>96</sup> Fremantle Municipal Council Minutes, 30 December 1930, 4 December 1931.

<sup>97</sup> G.Metherall, oral history collection, Fremantle City Library.

<sup>98</sup> Alix Dermer, “Childhood in the Pioneering West - when ties of Empire were strong”, *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 17 September 1975. Courtesy of Bill Latter.

<sup>99</sup> B.Black, personal interview, July 1993.

<sup>100</sup> J.Dolan, oral history transcript, Battye Library.

the economic unit. For men like George Metherall it was the foundation of achievement and prosperity. To others work could, indeed, have been “a totally negative experience, a dreary routine undertaken solely to pay the rent”<sup>101</sup> Yet even in what might be perceived today as dreadful Taylorism, or miserable and dangerous conditions, men of the past say “It was a happy place to work.” Work in Fremantle was all these things.

With the sea-port requirement for large numbers of men as casual labourers and a growing industrial community requiring manual labourers and, by comparison, a small number of managerial and professional people, Fremantle was a working-class city. This however, begs the questions not only as to what work is, but also as to what class is and how it is defined, and if indeed it relates at all to work. It has been said that “[A]rguing about class is like going for a swim in a country dam. As soon as you put your foot in, you are up to your neck in mud.”<sup>102</sup> However, it is also contended that “most critics agree what work you do is a key factor in deciding to which class you belong.”<sup>103</sup> Fremantle, therefore, can, according to these criteria, be described confidently as a working-class city, an egalitarian society, and one with a good degree of possible upward social mobility. Hard work was not shunned. The best that could be said of a boss for whom workers had respect was that he might be hard, but must above all be fair.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Fox, “The Meaning of Work” in Jagtenburg and D’Alton, p.270.

<sup>102</sup> R.W.Connell and T.H.Irving, “Yes, Virginia, there is a Ruling Class” in Jagtenberg and D’Alton, p.39.

<sup>103</sup> C.McGregor, “Class”, in Jagtenburg and D’Alton, p.36.

<sup>104</sup> Personal interview with former Ford Motor Co. employees, 27 January 1995.

## THE CHAIN

Mary McGregor

It was a strange feeling. Going to work in an abattoir. I'd applied for a job and had been reluctantly told to arrive on Monday at 6 o'clock to start work. I'd never worked in an abattoir before and knew nothing about it. It had been the only available place that I could reach by foot so I'd applied. Being a single Mum with three children to support I was not fussy as to what work I could get. I had rent to pay, plus food, so was glad of anything.

The year was 1969 and I was to be the first woman to work on the chain in an abattoir. Whether this was because the interviewing person took a dislike to me, hated women, or was an advanced feminist - the latter being extremely farfetched, I don't know.

But, 6 o'clock Monday morning I was put to work at the very end of the meat chain. I'd been given white overalls, rubber boots and a white cap. Yes, I needed them all and more...

The workers on the chain consisted of, at the top level, about 14 feet above the floor, seven young men, none over thirty. They accepted the carcasses as they came through a heavy plastic screen from the slaughter floor. These were the elite (or so they thought) of the chain. Their job was to skin the carcasses, chop off hooves *etc.* and send it on its way down the chain to the next floor.

Here would be another seven or eight men of various ages whose job was to cut the beast into quarters.

The chain itself was a heavy band of metal from which hung large hooks that could be moved along. It took in three levels with turning points at each end.

On the third and lowest floor there were huge trays on a conveyer belt which took these pieces to the boning floor.

The last part of the chain was reserved for the innards of the beast. The offal. I was standing at the very end of the chain and was told that my job was to separate the kidneys, liver and heart and put them into big buckets which were beside me.

Opposite me, but up the chain was Mario, a large Italian man whose animosity I felt immediately I stood there. He resented a woman on the chain, as did all the other men there.

At first they were going to put down tools and strike but someone came and calmed things down so the chain started up. I was terrified, not only at the men's obvious resentment but of the chain itself. It moved insidiously along, non-stop with loud creaking and clanging noises. Could I keep up with its relentless path, I wondered.

Down came the beasts on great hooks and by the time they got to our part of the chain they were reduced to large lumps on our trays. We had no hooks at our level.

Mario's job was to cut apart the kidneys, liver and heart so that when they came to me they were separate and I had to lift each one and put it in its appropriate bucket.

With his animosity showing and the taunts of the upper echelon on the chain, Mario tried to humiliate me as much as possible by throwing each item into the tray with a lot of force, thus covering me in blood. At first this raised a tremendous laugh, so he continued to do it.

By the time smoko came round I was a mess but I kept very quiet. After all, I needed the job so was not game to say anything.

The ladies in the ladies rest room were horrified; some tittered but most were concerned.

They were nice and got me clean overalls for the next stint. Back I went and the same thing happened, with Mario getting some encouragement from the top floor most times. I still kept quiet, not speaking to anyone. Indeed, I could not. If anyone had spoke to me I'd have bawled. But I stuck it out, not telling my children that night of my horrendous day. Indeed, I made jokes and told them lies about these great guys on the chain, especially Mario.

So this continued for days, weeks, then gradually I felt a change. Slowly, subtly at first, I realised that Mario wasn't throwing the offal quite so hard. My overalls were not so covered in blood.

Still, the lewd jokes were shouted from floor to floor. I still ignored them, except every now and again when a particularly clever one was yelled when I found it hard not to smile. Still no one spoke direct to me.

In the lunch room the women had found out my circumstances by devious questioning and had lost interest in me. They were still pleasant, giving me recipes and asking how the kids were, but I still felt a misfit.

Then came a day when we were all working as usual. I kept my head down and concentrated on separating hearts, livers, and kidneys. The silence suddenly got to me and I looked up meeting the eye of one of the top floor young men. He smiled. Quickly I looked down again. He couldn't have smiled; I had imagined it. Something made me look up again. They were all smiling. My God, what do I do now???

Then the chanting started

"Big fat Mario, little skinny Maryio

I couldn't believe it. They were singing about me... and Mario. I looked at Mario, scared of what I would see, but he was laughing, laughing. My God, I nearly cried! They'd accepted me. It had taken a few weeks, but they'd accepted me, I was overwhelmed.

Now I cried.

They couldn't make me cry when they were nasty but now I could not hold the tears back. The chant got louder "Big fat Mario, little skinny Maryio"

I smiled through my tears They were softies after all.

Anchorage at Coogee closed down in the late eighties but by then I had left and moved to the northern suburbs with my new husband.



**Oral History -  
The Changing Experience of Work on the  
Albany Waterfront from the 1960s to Today**

Simone Northcott

*This oral history arose out of a strong desire to understand the passion with which people spoke of the Waterside Workers' Federation; be it in angry mockery or in staunch support. My father has worked on the Albany port since 1972. Consequently, his experience of work on the waterfront for this period provided a focus for my interest, but it became obvious during preliminary research that to achieve the objective of this oral history a broader span of time was necessary. A loose time frame from the sixties onwards was set, however the reader knowledgeable in this area will find references to experiences materially before that decade. One could say this is an exploration of the changing experience of work on the post-war Albany waterfront. Understanding this changing experience helps to explain why the 'wharfies' acted as they did, why they were treated as they were, and why past generations' perceptions of labour and unions can jar so much with the climate of today.*

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None of the interviewees were on a full-time wage when they started on the waterfront, and some started before there was even a retainer. The hours they worked were the hours they were paid. John Rowe says that at that time it was not unusual to work around the clock when a ship was in - John Green remembers packing five or six meals for a shift. A person had to work for as long as there was work, because there could be up to six weeks between ships. For a decent wage it was necessary to hold two jobs. Burt Jackman said there were some that worked only on the waterfront, but it only provided enough for bare survival. He worked for the Town Council for some time, and then ran a fishing boat. The Council used to employ a lot of the 'wharfies' so they would be available when a ship came in.

Men used to be hired on a gang preference system, whereby gang one was given first priority for work. If there was more work, gang two would be employed, and so on. Mr Jackman remembers sitting on the seats of 'the [Stirling] terrace', waiting for work, "and the blokes who had come off the shift that night would get a job ahead of you" because they were in a higher gang.

When Harold Croxford chose to go onto the guaranteed wage system in 1968, people told him he was mad. The system provided for a minimum wage equivalent to working 20 hours per week regardless of how few hours were worked. Any time worked over 20 hours was paid on an hourly basis. People told him there would not be enough work for him. Mr Croxford made allowance for the expectation that he would lose 500 pounds in his first year compared to what he was earning in the full-time job he was leaving, expecting that work would pick up in subsequent years. Instead, he exceeded his previous wage by 500 pounds.

Mr Rowe explained that work on the wharf was inherently dangerous, because the work was always conducted with a depth below the worker, or a cargo suspended above his head. Mr Jackman fell 45 feet down an open hatch, ironically while attempting to demonstrate they were safe to work. However, no-one made a great deal of such incidents - the following day they would be performing the same work. The perception was that working on the wharf was not expected to be an office job, and that workers knew they had to be careful.

There were many cargoes that were extremely unpleasant. Grain is loaded for export by continuous pour, and today grain ships are designed so that for the most part they fill unaided ("self-trimmers"). However, the ships that used to carry grain were the same as for other cargo, and had 'tweendecks' which would not completely fill when grain was poured in. John Green explained that grain is a 'live' cargo, in that it moves freely, unlike (for example) rock phosphate, which stays where it lands. Consequently, if there are any empty spaces in a full hatch, then the grain will settle during the voyage into these spaces, and if the ship sways to one side, the grain will shift with it and cause the ship to list to that side. He says this caused a ship which sailed from Albany in 1961 to turn over in the China Sea. So once a ship's hold is partly filled, the wharfies had to go down and shovel the grain back into the corners. The grain dust was very unpleasant and used to choke up their lungs. Mr Rowe explained they would be coughing it up for some days afterwards.

Mr Jackman recalls unloading sulphur as being much worse. It had to be shovelled into steel tubs to be lifted out. The dust was not too much of a problem until the worker sweated, when the sulphur would run with the perspiration into the person's eyes. Some people's eyes were so affected they had to be led off the ship after a shift,

and no matter how much he washed his eyes, it would disrupt sleep for hours with the stinging sensation he likened to getting soap in his eyes. Now, most of the sulphur is removed from the hold by crane ('grabbed' out).

The WWF secured compulsory retirement and pensions in 1967<sup>1</sup>. This was significant for all Australian workers. Ralph Mason was a waterside worker who stayed on well into his nineties - because he had nothing to retire on. However, Jack Smith explains that "if a fellow couldn't do something, there'd be someone who'd help" and they would work harder to cover for a member who was not capable of working as well. For example, when they were loading apples, someone would have to make sure that the loading of cases on and off the rollers was synchronised, and that job would be given to the elderly worker.

There was what Mr Smith described as a brotherhood. There were men "who used to drink a fair drop of beer". The others would put him in a corner and cover for him. Mr Smith acknowledges it probably was not a good thing to do, but there was a mateship on the waterfront which extended to wherever a waterside worker was transferred. In spite of the tough work, Mr Green recalls that they would have "fun from the word go". He enjoyed the work - "it was keeping my family, why wouldn't I like it?"

The loss of Albany's wool cargo was of issue to many people, a cargo which substantially ended in 1977<sup>2</sup>. More than one of the interviewees proudly pointed out that Albany held the record for wool loading. They broke the national record for speed of wool loading in 1968<sup>3</sup>. However, Mr Rowe said the conference lines (large co-operatives of shipping lines) refused to go to regional ports, and the Menzies Government agreed. "The moment they did so, they killed the outports... It wasn't as if we weren't loading fast enough - that's what hurt - we worked our guts out and lost our cargo."

Live sheep was a cargo that came and went in the seventies. Mr Rowe recalls it as a cruel cargo - there was a given percentage of animals which just would not survive the

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<sup>1</sup> Margo Beasley, *Wharfies: The History of the Waterside Workers' Federation*, Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay NSW, 1996, p.209

<sup>2</sup> Les Johnson, *Albany: Port with a Past and Future*, Albany Port Authority, Albany WA, 1997, p. 256.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.252

voyage. Down in the hatches, after they had been loading for three to four days, the ammonia from the urine used to sting a person's eyes. The sheep on the deck did not fare much better, as they were subject to the elements for the whole voyage.

The loss of cargoes made the mid to late seventies a low point in the Port's history. Mr Blake recalls that a lot of people who did not understand the system of work directed a lot of criticism at the wharfies during this time. He points out that in many workplaces of today there are times when for five or ten minutes, or half an hour, there is nothing to do, but it is necessary to be present because soon the person would be needed. Perhaps the Taylorist vogue for 'time and motion' studies that then prevailed lent weight to a perception of wharfie inefficiency and laziness based on these observations.

Les Johnson, a local author who used to work for the ABC, explained that when reporting waterfront matters, it was usually done from a negative standpoint, and "you didn't say poor old wharfies suffered all these years and are entitled to have a point of view; what you said was the buggers are on strike again." The media would report an event with incomplete understanding of the issues or even at times the facts of the matter - for example the term "national strike" was technically accurate but often substantially wrong, because frequently half the ports at the time were empty and there was no work to strike from. Mr Johnson observed "I think the media carry a very large share of the blame for whatever image there is of the waterside worker."

Has much changed on the waterfront? Certainly the cargoes have, most of them are gone with the introduction of containerisation, for which Albany does not yet have facilities. The main cargoes handled now are grain exports, and rock phosphate imports. The practise of work has changed too. The work of the shovel was replaced by the bobcat, the front end loader, and now the backhoe; progressively larger machines which are lowered by crane into the hatch. Work can still be hazardous - Mr Blake explained that when operating these machines down in the hold, there may be half a dozen workers with shovels alongside. The noise of the machine means they can not be heard, and the cab of the backhoe makes it difficult to see; the turning circle of the backhoe is very tight, and can take a shoveller by surprise.

My father explained that the safety of the ships is at times an unknown quantity even though ship's gear are supposed to be annually inspected and stamped by an authority

like Lloyds of London. When they were handling one such ship, a crane dropped a backhoe the entire depth of the hatch, destroying the backhoe. It was later found that the core of the crane wire was completely corroded. Had it been properly lubricated and maintained, this would not have happened, but a cursory inspection did not reveal any fault.

In 1989 the Waterfront Industry Reform Authority (WIRA) was set up, and its resulting agreement “provided for employment security for existing employees, the rejuvenation of the industry and ‘retirement with dignity’ for older and long serving members through... an early retirement/redundancy package.”<sup>4</sup> My father recalls a lot of apprehension in the workplace, because people knew jobs had to be paid out, but no-one knew who or to what extent. The arrangement for the smaller ports (like Albany) was that the remaining WWF members work a 35 hour base week, on either stevedoring work (as previously) or port authority work,<sup>5</sup> and overtime as required.

My father explained that the Integrated Port Labour Force (IPLF) was formed from the remaining five WWF members (of 17 or 18), and 12 members of the Port Authority. He said the most obvious example of the change was to manning scales. Before the IPLF there was a supervisor, two foremen, and five waterside workers manning a grain ship. Now there is a supervisor and three waterside workers.

The IPLF has also given rise to multiskilling. My father remembers everyone working in designated areas, but explains that now the IPLF is trained so that each person is capable of doing any job. In practice, some of the IPLF cannot complete some of the more demanding manual work such as moorings because the cables are quite heavy. However while there is a little manual raking on a grain ship, and shovelling on a phosphate ship, the majority of waterside work today is operating machinery which most people can be trained for, such as driving forklifts, cranes and pulling handles on bins. The IPLF concept has also meant that occasionally the waterside workers help out in the office, photocopying and packaging letters.

My father says Albany was the first port in Australia to introduce a traineeship program, in 1992. A union initiative, it was a two-year apprenticeship with no guarantee of a job at the end. However, the four trained so far have all been made

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<sup>4</sup> Margo Beasley, *Wharfies*, p. 274

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 276

permanent. Such a program so soon after the push for retirement may seem illogical. The Port of today is not the wharf which has been discussed in this essay, nor do the respective workforces have much in common.

There is a great deal on the horizon for the Albany Port regarding new cargoes. An export-grade abattoir has recently been built at Narrikup, exporting containers of frozen meat. Silica sand has been introduced. A type of Bluegum being grown in the Albany region is used for computer paper, so woodchips are a potential export. Heavy lifting machinery is being investigated, which is necessary for handling containers. There is talk of exporting containers of grain and stockfeed for horses in Japan.

Much has changed from the bustling port of the sixties, which lost most of its cargoes in the seventies and early eighties, and lost most of its workers in the late eighties and early nineties. Arguably, the old culture of mateship left with them, replaced by a new way of work. In spite of the hardships they have seen, the six retired wharfies interviewed are not convinced that these changes are for the better, and some are glad to have left when they did. Five remain of a workforce which exceeded 100 in the sixties, men who Mr Jackman described as "Real crackerjack blokes. And they were workers, Simone. People can say what they want about the wharf, but nobody worked harder than some of the blokes I worked with early on the waterfront."

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## **Interviews**

The following people kindly gave up their time to answer my questions for the preparation of this essay:

Les Johnson; Saturday 29 March 1997

Harold Croxford; Tuesday 1 April 1997

John Rowe; Tuesday 1 April 1997

Jack Smith; Wednesday 2 April 1997

Burt Jackman; Wednesday 2 April 1997

John Green; Wednesday 2 April 1997

Owen Uebergang; Thursday 3 April 1997 (and other times)

Tom Blake; Friday 4 April 1997

# An Unwonted Exile: A Letter from the Goldfields

June 1897

Madeline Tingey

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Dear Aunt Agnes,

You will realise from the unexpectedness of this letter that it is the bearer of bad news. Alas, it grieves me to say that you are right, as I need to inform you of my father's, your only brother's, tragic death two months ago on the Goldfields.

I realise that you will want to know why you were not informed sooner, but more tragedy was to follow, and my dear mother has since followed him to the grave. Neither lived long enough to enjoy the fruits of their hardship in a place where troubles pile up without ceasing. The constant daily grind against a background of heat, dust, flies and water shortages, which makes up life in Coolgardie, is hard for you to imagine. This is a town where there is great wealth and great poverty. Unfortunately, we have known only the latter.

Dear aunt, I have been so overwhelmed with grief, forgive me for not writing beforehand. The pain of losing both my parents so cruelly and in so short a space of time is severe. However, I must stop this sorrowful rambling and suppress my emotions. I must do as mother used to tell me when, as a small child, I would run inside excited about something happening in my small world, 'Slow down and start at the beginning.'

You may have read in the Perth newspaper about the mining disaster at Mt Charlotte in April. Six men were killed far underground, one being my father, your brother. This horrifying tragedy made front page news in the *Coolgardie Miner* and the *Pioneer* for many days. The men died as a consequence of inhaling fumes of nitro-glycerine compounds. The accident was caused by a miner putting his spider candle on a box of dynamite and detonators, and the candle burned down.

Our community was in shock as a result of the accident. Safety measures had already been a major cause for concern for some time. Indeed, father was a keen member of the

Amalgamated Workers' Association, who had approached the Minister for Mines earlier this year begging for the appointment of assistant mines inspectors. They wanted men with practical knowledge to insist on safety measures. The East Coolgardie field has come to the fore with the continued expansion of deep mining. Gold production has tripled and with it the dangers the men face.

At first the diggers had no one to represent them on the field, and could only rely on letters to the newspaper. Letters to the *Western Mail* in Perth usually fall on deaf ears. It is well nigh impossible to imagine the hardships and appalling conditions here unless you have seen them for yourself.

Without the relief fund that was set up, and the generous assistance of the Workers' Association, to the wives and children of the victims of the disaster, I don't know how we would have managed.

You should have seen the sad procession to the cemetery where the men were buried. Several hundred people followed the coffins on foot, as well as vehicles and people on horseback and camels. The cemetery is a desolate place, a place of dread for Coolgardieites. Much of it is neglected, hundreds of forgotten people marked only by sinking mounds that bear witness to the horrendous typhoid mortality rate.

My father and the other miners were well liked and respected, their graves will not be unmarked. We erected a simple headstone which reads:

'Sacred to the memory of James Ambrose Rhodes, dearly beloved husband of Elizabeth, adored father of Alys. Tragically taken April 1897. Aged 37 years. Safe in the arms of Jesus.'

Another very supportive group to victims of disaster is the Gold Diggers' Association. They fight the cause of the diggers and are championed by a man named Clare. He is an incredible person, a pioneer printer and publisher. This man is a great reformer and stops at nothing to achieve rights for the miners. In fighting their battles he has been involved in a few fights himself.

After father's sudden death, mother lapsed into what I can only describe as a numbing apathy. It was left to me to give father's clothes to miners needier than himself. As I handed over the moleskin trousers, flannel shirts and boots, the tears were running down my face. A silver hunting watch is all I have to remember him by. Mother was unable to do anything.

She would just sit, hands in her lap, and stare at the hessian walls of our home. She had lost all her energy.

After one particular day of searing heat we were struck by a tremendous dust storm. It was impossible to see the buildings in town from our home. These hurricanes are common and wreak havoc, Mother just sat, uncomprehending, and afterwards I went about clearing up as best I could.

A week later she went down with a fever. It is so unfair. She was so careful, always boiling water at least three times. The feeling of dread I had threatened me with the blackest depression. I knew that for mother's sake I had to pull myself together, but it was the most difficult thing I have ever had to do. She was shivering uncontrollably, and had a terrible headache. I felt helpless, and could only sponge her down with cold water and try and make her more comfortable.

When our neighbour came in with a little arrowroot for mother, she was as concerned as myself. Later that day we got her to the hospital, and the doctor said it was typhoid, giving a name to my dread fears.

The next weeks were a nightmare I will never forget. Without the practical help through the relief fund and the concern of father's mates in the Workers' Association, I should never have managed. The nurses were also gentle and kind. Despite the saying hereabouts that a prospector without a pound in his pocket is like a dead dog lying in the road, I have been the grateful recipient of the help of many.

The men in the Workers' Association, have worked like Trojans to consolidate the miners' unions and they have achieved a tremendous amount in improving working conditions for the miners. Now I experienced first hand their support, as typhoid continued to take its toll. For indeed, another epidemic had broken out and the Coolgardie Hospital was crowded, A steady stream of patients were being admitted all the time I was visiting there.

For another two weeks I sat beside mother, helpless, watching her die. Most of that time she was delirious, especially towards the end, but there were lucid moments. I particularly recall one bitterly cold but sunny afternoon when she spoke of you, aunt. She told me of father's plans to make his fortune prospecting and bring his family back to Perth to live. How he dreamed of building a fine house like yours, near the river,

I remember it well, although I was only eleven years old at the time. I remember father's bitter farewell to you, the argument that followed. You pleaded with him to stay, not to risk the lives of his wife and child in so foolhardy an adventure. But gold fever was sweeping the colony, and father was irredeemably caught up in it. You called him a miscreant, a ne'er do well. Why could he not settle to a regular job in Perth?

He wanted to prove himself, to show you he could make good. My mother was crying as she spoke, not for the loss of this imaginary utopian future, but for the husband and the daughter she must leave to the vagaries of the goldfields.

She spoke of how she wanted me to leave here, how there would be no future for me in Coolgardie, how I must write to you and ask for assistance. But more of that later. First I must complete my story, lay the facts before you so you can judge my position for yourself.

So it was that within two months of father's death, I found myself again following the road to the cemetery. This is in itself a gloomy place, lined with shanties and the filthy Corporation rubbish site. So you can understand that the cemetery is surrounded by the dirt that breeds disease,

It is a common practice, when there are many deaths, to use packing cases for coffins. Indeed, these cases are invaluable for furnishing homes on the goldfields, and make sturdy pieces of furniture. Mother would use a bright gingham to cover boxes to make cupboards. So it was destined that she was to be buried in one of them, and it saddened me to see the words 'this way up' printed incongruously across the wood. But there was nothing I could do, as I could not afford any crepe for a covering. I was only glad that my poor father was not there to witness the indignity.

From what I have described in this letter, you could be forgiven for thinking that there have been no happy times. But that would not be true. I enjoy school, and have good friends who are fun. Until recently the school was held in a tent supplied by the Education Department. In summer it is broiling hot and impossible to keep the flies and red dust out.

It is the opposite in winter, which is harsh and cold. However, as more women and children settled in the area, conditions at school improved. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity for improving our homes. One of the things Mother most missed was her garden. Our neighbour tried to grow geraniums from cuttings, with water that had been used several

times, to but no avail. Mother said she cannot imagine a time when there will be sufficient water to grow a garden. We have become used to coping with water famines.

But I was telling you about school. My best friend, Annie was taken by typhoid last year. So even my schooling has been shadowed by sadness and I see it is impossible to write of our life here lightheartedly. Battling with heatwaves and duststorms that can last for several days enervate lives.

There are Many problems still to be solved here, aunt. The Afghans are the people who commandeer the camel trains, They wear voluminous pantaloons and turbans, so appear strange and exotic. The matter arose as to what they should swear on when they found themselves in court. What would your solution have been, aunt? The dilemma was solved by obtaining a Koran.

My father, with his optimism, had high hopes for the year 1897. He had faith in the union movement and the opening of the new year was full of exciting happenings. The races held on New Year's Day raised money for the St John of God Hospital We were not to know how closely this was to touch our lives.

For a great treat my parents took me to the opening of the Cremorne Gardens. During the entertainment there was a storm, but no one who lives in Coolgardie minds rain. When we hear rain beating on iron and canvas roofs we all cheer and the anger caused by fear is dispelled for a while. So you can see that our lives are not devoid of entertainment, and there is always some new experience in the town. I remember the time father won a gold sovereign at the Coolgardie Annual Sports. This is held on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, the Queen's birthday, and he won it in the donkey race. Mother and I had never laughed so much.

Before the double tragedy of losing my parents, I had considered that my childhood ended when we followed father to the goldfields. Now I realise what it is to be truly alone the world, my only relative an estranged aunt. Mother urged me to write to you, and I have been encouraged towards this path by a kind and gentle nursing sister who cared for mother till the last.

Therefore, aunt, I beg you to consider giving me a home until I can find work in the city. I am capable of doing all household chores as well as plain cooking. Both mother and father have helped me with my book learning. You know how clever father was. I can sew and mend, indeed, I enjoy needlework and am now making a pretty cream-coloured summer

blouse in esprit net, over a lining of pale turquoise blue silk. This is a most serviceable fabric. It lies half-finished in my work basket, as I have not had the heart to take it up since mother's death. I remember how we would work together on articles for the fancy stall at the Christmas bazaar.

I ask you to read my letter with sympathy, if only for the sake of your only brother who in childhood was so close to you. If you could find it in your heart to forgive I would be grateful. Please do not fear that I shall become a burden to you. I have been strengthened by the trials of life here, and desire to make my own way in the world and be independent. All I need is a chance to get out of a town where gold and typhoid vie for headline news.

Please write to me care of the Coolgardie post office.

With Kindest Remembrances

Alys