



The University of Newcastle

History Club

Department of History

**STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

No. 6

1981

Price : 50 cents

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

HISTORY CLUB

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS

IN

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

No. 6

1981

Printed at the University of Newcastle.

PREFACE

This year sees a slight change in the nature and emphasis of the published Student Research Papers. In previous years they have been the product of Second Year students working on topics of their own choice from primary sources. As of 1981, Australian History is a first year subject only, and it was thought initially that the quality of primary research by First Year students would not be up to the standard we had set for the Research Papers in previous years.

However we have, in 1981, gained the opportunity for a new kind of historical training exercise, for the Department has become involved in research and writing for the 1938 volume of the Australian Bicentennial History Project. In particular a Working Party has been organised to carry out an oral history survey of life in Newcastle in 1938 using an interview schedule adapted from the oral research 'headquarters' of the Bicentennial Project.

The Working Party, comprising University and CAE staff, decided that students from both institutions should be invited to assist in order to widen the scope of the enterprise and to provide useful training in research and writing techniques. The exercise would be integrated into existing Australian History courses as part of the students' normal assignment work.

Each institution has proceeded in the manner best suited to its course requirements. We in the University chose some fifteen students from over a hundred in our First Year course and gave each a set of background readings on national and local history for the 1930s and some tuition in interviewing techniques. The students chose their own interviewees, people who were articulate and had good memories of Newcastle in 1938, were at least fifteen years old then and were still living in Newcastle in 1981. Because of competing course demands, each student was required to do only one interview and then to write an interpretative paper on the issues facing men or women in Newcastle in 1938.

This was very much a pilot project and the results reflected the trial and error gropings of the organisers and the students. The narrow interviewing base, the difficulty of saying anything significant about issues from the results of one interview, the lack of good local background publications for 1938 (except newspapers), the variable quality of interviewees, the vagaries of cassette recorders were just some of the difficulties encountered along the way. In the end we did not insist on an in-depth treatment of issues facing men and women but encouraged students to make the best of their interview and readings, stressing the importance of analysis and interpretation.

The best of the results appear in the following pages. The first two have chosen to widen their treatment beyond the experience of their interviewees to deal with general educational and lifestyle issues of the time. The other three have focussed on the patterns of their subjects' lives and tried to set them against a backdrop of Newcastle work and society in 1938. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of interviewees have not been used.

The project requires still a great deal of work to improve the interview schedule, to provide manageable and relevant background readings, to prepare students for their encounters and to train them to knit interviews and research together into historical analysis. These things will be done in the years to come, for our results have encouraged us to think that such an exercise can be, with proper direction, a useful tool in learning an historian's skills. It remains an exercise for First Year students and we are aware that expectations should not be pitched too high. Nonetheless, the information and insights gathered so far will contribute to an accumulating body of research material in local history which will at the same time assist in the writing of the Bicentennial History volumes.

Peter Hempenstall
Sheilah Gray
Noel Rutherford
Margaret Henry

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the following students who participated in the first year of the oral survey of Newcastle for 1938.

Gina Barbon
Kevin Cranson
Beverley Croft
Raelene Gregg
Val Hamson
Veronica Lunn
Francis Muckle
John McQualter
Margaret Paino
Elvira Sprogis
Marion Tonsen
Demetrius Voutnis
Joan Watkins
Marjorie White

We also wish to acknowledge the indispensable assistance of the University archivist, Dennis Rowe, and the support and expertise offered by Phil Vaile, Department of Social Sciences, Newcastle College of Advanced Education, Mr. C. Smith, City Librarian, and Miss Jennifer Sloggett of the Newcastle Central Reference Library.

Copyright: The University of Newcastle

CONTENTS

LIBERAL OR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: A GULF IN NEWCASTLE IN 1938	
by Veronica Lunn	1
ISOLATED, POOR, BUT HAPPY: LIFE IN WEST WALLSEND 1938	
by Marjorie White	11
WORK AND AMBITION IN NEWCASTLE 1938: A MIDDLE CLASS CASE	
by John McQualter	17
STEEL THE MASTER: THE IMPACT OF WORK ON LIFE IN NEWCASTLE IN 1938	
by Kevin Cranson	22
THE IMPACT OF SHIFT WORK ON FAMILIES IN 1938: A CASE STUDY	
by Gina Barbon	27

THE IMPACT OF SHIFT WORK ON FAMILIES IN 1938:

A CASE STUDY

by Gina Barbon

6

The interview with Mr. D. of Merewether revealed that most of his life in 1938 was strictly governed by his work on the railways, or more particularly by his hours of work. Shift work affected almost all aspects of his life, from family and social life to religious life. Another predominant theme in his recollections was the financial problems with which his family were faced during this period, and their means of coping with them. The very limited education which he was able to attain clearly influenced his later life and it is evident that although Mr. D's work on the railways enabled him to travel and experience other parts of Australia, his outlook and awareness of the outside world remained fairly narrow and restricted.

Shift work was a strong feature in Newcastle industry, for it affected the iron and steel workers as well as men on the railways and tramways. "Shift work [was however] abominated by everyone",¹ and although while a coalminer at Kurri Kurri Mr. D. had struck for 10 months in favour of the abolition of shift work, his transfer to the railways forced him to endure again its hardships. The extensive effects on his way of life were all detrimental and restricting: shift work and the irregular railway roster drastically upset the balance of normal family life, restricted his recreational activities, and also prevented regular church attendance. As one Newcastle shift-worker stated in reply to an inquiry, "I do not go to church. I have not got the time. I go to work".²

The limited social life of Mr. D. and his family was due to both the irregularity of his work and the lack of money available for such activities. Shift work prevented the family from making any arrangements for future social outings, and the weary condition in which the father returned home from work meant that many weekends were spent at home. The few clubs of Newcastle at the time, such as the Businessmen's Club and the Tattersall's Club were fairly exclusive, and therefore because of a strict household budget, entertainment was limited to such venues as the local pub, football matches, Friday night shopping and the occasional visit to the pictures. Holidays to Queensland each year were only made possible through his free interstate railway pass, and once there the family spent two weeks in a cheap cottage where fruit cases held up the beds and "rats jumped across the rafters".³ Thus Mr. D.'s work significantly affected the social activities of his family, but more importantly, it affected family life and the relationships within the family itself.

The interview revealed that shift work and irregular hours put extra stress upon the family as a unit. F.R.E. Mauldon corroborated this when he wrote, "its effects on the home life of the district [were] undeniably bad".⁴ Shift work for Mr. D. meant a weakening of his relationship with his two sons, and their common question, "when's Dad coming home?",⁵ gives some indication of the minimal time he actually spent at home. Of course shift work was also "a great strain on the shift worker's wife",⁶ as Mrs. D.'s contribution to the interview revealed. She was left with the responsibility of rearing her two sons almost totally alone because, as Mr. D. explained, "I was never home to boss my two blokes".⁷ During this time Mrs. D. also undertook some charity work for the local Methodist Church in the hope of perhaps reducing the sense of loneliness and isolation that her husband's absences caused.

It is interesting to note that as a child Mr. D. experienced long separations from both his father and mother, and perhaps his experience of this type of life enabled him to accept his own separation from his children as an inevitable and normal part of life. His father was usually away gold digging in West Australia for two to three years at a time, and because his mother was a nurse who acted as a local midwife, she would also have to leave seven children for periods of up to a fortnight. This situation naturally initiated an early sense of independence in Mr. D., and he left school at the age of thirteen and then raised his age to fourteen to enable him to get a job as a coalminer. This, of course, prevented him from gaining the full education which may have stopped the continuation of paternal separation in his own family, by offering him the chance to get a job with regular hours of work. But as a fictitious railway character remarks, "...if you haven't got a trade or an education you've got to take anything you can get".⁸

The humble wage earned by Mr. D. on the railways also significantly affected his family's way of life. Although the family "always got enough to eat",⁹ vegetables were grown in the garden and traps were often set for rabbits at Werris Creek in an attempt to ease financial pressures. Unfortunately Mrs. D. was unable to contribute to her husband's earnings through her own employment, as all married women were forbidden from doing so, and therefore she balanced the family budget by sewing her son's clothes, and by managing the money with extreme caution. In her own words they "had to live very meagrely",¹⁰ by living on what was earned with no hope of ever being able to save for the future.

This inability to save for the future forced Mr. D., like most Newcastle people, to ensure some sort of security for his family through a number of funds and schemes. These funds included a doctor's fund, a hospital fund, and an ambulance fund, which were payable weekly in small amounts. The railway workers also collected weekly sums from wages to cover themselves in case of sickness. P. Haslam states that "in 1938 these people had no worries about their health services".¹¹ The railway workers also organised a "Christmas ham" fund that ensured that a leg of ham would be on the dinner table at Christmas, while a suit lottery drawn every fortnight provided the lucky winner with an entire, new suit. There was also a general helpfulness among neighbours and friends that ensured that there would be willing hands in cases of trouble and emergencies. Thus because there was no money in the bank to fall back on, fairly extensive insurance schemes were implemented and the "strong tradition of self-help in Newcastle" continued.

Although Mr. D.'s work on the railways enabled him to gain a much wider experience of people and places, his overall outlook and awareness of the world remained fairly narrow. He did, however, acquire an unusual racial tolerance through his railway experiences which led him to befriend both aboriginals and European migrants. Many of the events of the outside world, however, remained obscure to him, and although he listened to overseas radio stations on his wireless, he most probably did so because of the novelty, and not for any informative objective. Overall his life remained centred around his work which left little time and perhaps little interest for the happenings of distant nations.

Thus, Mr. D.'s own words - "It's a dog's life"¹² - give a clear indication of the immense strain that shift work placed on his life and the life of his family. Shift work, and the persistent working needed to maintain a family, also caused a certain apathy to outside affairs and a narrow and isolated outlook which was reinforced by a limited education.

FOOTNOTES

1. F.R.E. Mauldon, Social Economics: The Hunter Valley, Melbourne, 1927, p.124.
2. ibid., p.125.
3. Interview with Mr. D., tape 1, side A, count 380.
4. Mauldon, op.cit., p.125.
5. Interview, tape 1, side A, count 92.
6. Mauldon, op.cit., p.125.
7. Interview, tape 1, side A, count 102.
8. J. Booth, Only the Tracks Remain, Sydney, 1972, p.7.
9. Interview, tape 1, side A, count 145.
10. Interview, tape 1, side A, count 137.
11. P. Haslam, 'Notes on Life in Newcastle 1938', University of Newcastle Archives, p.2.
12. Interview, tape 1, side A, count 93.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Taped interview of Mr. D. on 10th August, 1981, for the 1938 Newcastle Bicentenary Project.

- Haslam, P., "Notes on life in Newcastle in 1938", University of Newcastle Archives.
- Booth, J., Only the Tracks Remain, Sydney, 1972.
- Docherty, J.C., "The Second City, Newcastle, N.S.W. 1900-1929", Ph.D. thesis, A.N.U., 1977.
- Mauldon, F.R.E., A Study in Social Economics: the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, Melbourne, 1927.