



The University of Newcastle

History Club

Department of History

**STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

No. 6

1981

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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.

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Margaret Henry

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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

WORK AND AMBITION IN NEWCASTLE 1938:

• A MIDDLE CLASS CASE

by John McQualter

A dominant theme in Australian history of the 1920s and 1930s was the adjustment of Australians to secondary industry as a major contributor to the economy. Nowhere is this represented more starkly than in the Newcastle region where the change from a coal town to the centre of Australian heavy industry was definitely complete by the late 1930s. This view of Newcastle society in the late 1930s considers the history of the rise of heavy industry, dominated by B.H.P. and the effect on the male, middle class employee compared with that on the working class employee.

By the mid '30s the B.H.P. Board of Directors had laid the groundwork which ensured the future viability of the company as a vast fully integrated operation. They ensured that the plant was modern and efficient and that technology was kept abreast of world wide developments. In the shutdown of 1922-23 and during the depression, modernisation schemes could be carried out at cheaper cost. A number of steel finishing industries were attracted to Newcastle and became subsidiaries, as did Rylands, Lysaghts and Titans; or associates as did Stewart and Lloyds. During the '20s B.H.P.-owned collieries and a shipping fleet were established. By 1929 tariff protection was beginning to relieve the pressure of competition from overseas steel. In 1935 the B.H.P. gained a monopoly on steel production by taking over A.I.S.

This period of Australian history where secondary industry was gaining strength was one where the working class was increasingly mobilised in unions, especially the new metal trades unions, and the A.L.P.¹ Throughout this period "the ruling class was culturally on the defensive"² and the "hegemony of the bourgeoisie"³ at its most incomplete. The managers of the B.H.P. were defending against a working class onslaught. Connell and Irving see the conservative political attitudes as "loyalty to the Empire and British traditions; strict law and order, including the absolute right of property owners to control those whom they hired, and to fire them if they couldn't; it assumed that property and respectability conveyed a moral right to rule".⁴ The first of the above attitudes would have been placed in jeopardy during the '20s when British steel was a major competitor, but the latter attitudes are borne out in labour relations. In 1936 the B.H.P. workforce was only 25% unionised and union officials were accompanied by "works policemen" when discussing grievances with the workers.⁵ The Board would not consider any attempt by a union to tell it who it should employ and union delegates engaging in recruitment at the works were dismissed and would find it hard to get another job in heavy industry.⁶ In 1922 the decision of the company to shut down the

plant and the resultant widespread unemployment were a prelude to stormy labour relations. The B.H.P. had little respect over this whole period for the arbitration system, which was unsympathetic to the company's claims that wages were too high.

The conservative political attitudes cited above were an extension of 'bourgeois social morality' - 'maintenance of decorum, respect for property and rank, sexual and social repression'.⁷ The B.H.P.'s attitudes, expressed in a refusal to be dictated to by arbitration courts and unions, made it an attractive workplace for those with conservative ideals and aspirations, and the company naturally preferred this type of employee. They provided the loyal staff that could man the works during a strike: in return they retained their jobs during the hard times and achieved promotion in the good years. For these men, "To join the B.H.P. was akin to joining the Public Service. It was for the dedicated a job for life...Those who were... 'too indolent, lazy or apathetic to keep themselves on in life' were unwanted".⁸

The case of the interviewee dealt with in this paper reinforces this. From a middle class background, and with an above average education, he joined the B.H.P. in the mid '20s. His attitudes to unionism and his bitterness about Jack Lang were shared by the company. By the late '30s he was a chief engineer on B.H.P. ships and looking forward to a shore job.

The depression also illustrates the loyalty of the company to this type of employee. The B.H.P. weathered it better than most businesses due to the cost cutting of the '20s. The interviewee knew he was lucky to be kept in employment. He also states that he did not know personally anyone suffering badly during the depression, although he knew of the distress of the working class. During the depression half the workers at the B.H.P. lost their jobs and production was reduced to one quarter. It is probable that the loyal and ambitious, those with similar attitudes to those of the company were last to be sacked. The depression was harsher for the lower working class and even tended to widen the social gap between the respectable and the unemployed.

Menzies identified the middle class as the "backbone of the nation". They were the backbone of support for his later Liberal Party. He also identified home ownership, the raising of family ("not as leaners but lifters"), and individual enterprise as noble traits of this class.⁹ Due to continual employment the interviewee could pay off a house and own it by the late '30s. Newcastle was divided into distinct working and middle class housing areas which have not changed much even today. The interviewee's house was in Hamilton East, which he perceived as a middle class suburb. The price of houses here in the '20s, from £500 to £1100, excluded all but the most affluent of the working class from purchasing them. The broad treelined streets, brick and tile houses, and abundant parks and gardens were obviously appealing to the middle class. (Hamilton East was developed as a "garden suburb", the features of which can be seen today along Stewart, Gordon and Parkway Avenues.) That a "good class of people" (the interviewee's words) lived here was attested to by the high ratio of employers to employees and the wealth of the suburb.¹⁰

Inside the household, male and female areas of activity were sharply divided. There was lack of any involvement on the part of the interviewee in the woman's domain of meal preparation, shopping or housework; the whole realm of household budgeting was a mystery to the male. The above delineation of sex roles, one suspects, was just as typical in an Australian working class household. The middle class housewife's duties were probably made easier by the employment of domestic "help". Another of Connel and Irving's "Bourgeois morality" strands was the maintenance of decorum. This would be illustrated by the whole middle class family sitting down together at meals, in the dining room, with attention to table manners. The interviewee stressed that attention was paid to the company that his children kept. The leisure time of the middle class spent in some family activities like picnics, trips to "the bush" (to maintain the urbanite's ingrained Australian reverence for the bushman image?) or beach also maintained decorum. Charity concerts, working bees and bazaars were supported by the better off in their leisure; the interviewee was most particular to state that his family helped the needy "at every opportunity".

Leisure time was scarce. His occupation dominated the breadwinner's life. Shift work could upset the normal routine and have disastrous effects on family harmony.¹¹ "Employees had to meet the B.H.P.'s demands to work overtime or risk loss of job".¹² Of the five days off each month my interviewee enjoyed, up to three could be worked as overtime. For the ambitious, work had to dominate life, like the case of Rudd Sweetapple¹³ or that of the interviewee here, who had to study in his time off on board the ship to sit for his first and second engineer's ticket exams.

The issue facing the group dealt with here was prosperity. The employee who stuck with the B.H.P. would be well rewarded. This paper deals with the case of one such man. The expansion of the B.H.P. and its allied heavy industry in Newcastle in the late 1930s preceded for some the long boom in Australia from 1950-1970. The prosperity of the men loyal to the company symbolised the rise and dominance in Australian politics of a party sensitive to their enterprise. For these men, the working class challenge ended and middle class ideas prevailed.

FOOTNOTES

1. R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving, Class Structure in Australian History, Singapore, 1980, p.280.
2. Ibid., p.286.
3. Ibid., p.286.
4. Ibid., p.287.
5. The Worker's Case Against the B.H.P., issued by the T.H.C. in 1936.
6. A. Trengove, "What's Good for Australia....!": The Story of B.H.P., Stanmore 1975, pp.141/2.
7. Connell and Irving, op.cit., p.288.
8. Trengove, op.cit., p.143.
9. Document by R. Menzies in Connell and Irving, op.cit., p.350.
10. J.C. Docherty, "The Second City: Social and urban change in Newcastle, N.S.W. 1900-1929", Ph.D. thesis, A.N.U., 1977, p.208.
11. Docherty, op.cit., p.124.
12. Trengove, op.cit., p.156.
13. The ambitious executive in Dymphna Cusack's Southern Steel, London, 1953.

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