



**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.

Peter Hempenstall  
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STEEL THE MASTER:

THE IMPACT OF WORK ON LIFE IN NEWCASTLE IN 1938

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by Kevin Cranson

In 1938 the world was approaching the climax of what had thus far proved a very troubled decade. Newcastle had shared the world-wide problems of a shattered economy and the growing threat to world peace. However, Novocastrians also faced problems uniquely their own. It was, and still is, "a city of workers",<sup>1</sup> predominantly industrial workers, struggling to cope with the conditions and demands of labour at a time when management held the upper hand. Many were faced with an inability to make the most of themselves and their life, being denied the opportunities to do so. There were, of course, features which brightened life in Newcastle in 1938, most stemming from a certain Novocastrian spirit which the time produced. These positive and negative aspects of life have a particular association with Newcastle because it was an industrial city, made up almost entirely of industrial workers, with a working class outlook and values. Bill K. was an ironworker at Lysaghts in 1938. As such, his experiences would be typical of many Novocastrians. This paper is based on his reflections, and those of his wife, Dorothy.<sup>2</sup>

Docherty points out that the changing face and great expansion of Newcastle after 1912 was due to "the sharp changeover from mining to heavy industry".<sup>3</sup> The growth of steel and associated industries in Newcastle continued rapidly throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The city's population was boosted by an influx of industrial workers, while many miners moved to the coalfields areas further inland.<sup>4</sup> The brooding presence of the industries was most apparent. The scene is portrayed graphically and accurately by Dymphna Cusack when she describes "the innumerable factory chimneys, [with] towering above them all, sign and seal of Newcastle's existence, the smoke-stacks of the...Broken Hill Proprietary under their perpetual silver-black clouds".<sup>5</sup> Thus by 1938 the economy and appearance of Newcastle were dominated by heavy industry.

The industries held a similar domineering stance over the lives of those who worked within them. Excessively long hours and rostered shift-work, cut deeply into the workers' effective leisure time. Enforced overtime, with no stipulated maximum, was a major grievance of the labour force. An enquiry held into shift-work in Newcastle in 1936 by Justice Browne found that as a result of the "most pernicious" working of systematic overtime the 44 hour week had become "merely a farce". Many B.H.P. workers were being regularly employed for 52 hours per week.<sup>6</sup> The situation worsened towards the end of 1938 due to accelerated production. There was unemployed labour which could have been called upon to meet this increasing demand, but industries found it less costly to limit the number of skilled tradesmen employed, and to offer overtime to men already employed. The problem of the shortage in leisure time was exacerbated by the fact that there was no paid annual leave or public holidays. Some workers enjoyed the luxury of one week's annual leave, without pay.

Not only were the hours long, but the working conditions were "difficult and arduous".<sup>7</sup> The change from mining to heavy industry "made little difference to the kind of work Newcastle offered its people". What was still required was "a plentiful supply of manual labour".<sup>8</sup> Work in the industries was exhausting, the conditions noisy, dirty and excessively hot. There was little in the way of amenities, with the men having to "walk home in their dirty, often wet clothes and eat their meals on the job, sometimes without time for a proper meal break".<sup>9</sup> Bill K. summed up the situation with a reply pertaining to his occupation in the industry, when he stated: "They called me a labourer, but I'll tell you what I was - a slave".<sup>10</sup>

With long hours and bad conditions, accidents and fatalities were all too frequent. In their safety programmes the management put the onus on the men to be more careful, rather than recognise the management's own responsibility to install safety devices. If men escaped direct injury, their general health was still bound to decline. The situation is once again portrayed vividly by Dymphna Cusack in Southern Steel:

"I saw Bondy Hoare today", Hoppy remarked. "He looked a sick man".

"Been workin' too hard, the poor bastard. Doin' his best to get full production, with plenty of provocation from the bosses and the new-born militant, and the management doin' their best to make the boys boil over with their talk of peggin' wages and conditions".<sup>11</sup>

The issues of improved working conditions and safety standards were incompatible with the employers' goal of lowered cost structure, and thus the worker suffered.

The industrial worker could not leave his problems behind him at work either. The effects and memory of these come home with him, impairing his family life and whatever social life he may have had. When the worker returned home he had little time for other family members, the main desire being "to get to bed and get some rest".<sup>12</sup> And, says Bill, "In hot weather it would kill you. You wouldn't know where to turn...you'd get under the table, under the bed, lay in the hall...".<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the spectre of work made one "frightened even to go out at night",<sup>14</sup> for fear of missing sleep and making work the next day even more difficult. The psychological effect of this was obviously a huge drawback on life in Newcastle in 1938, and as can be seen, affected not only the worker, but those close to him. This, along with the severe lack of leisure time already highlighted, retarded the ability to really enjoy life.

Similarly, even if there were the leisure time and the inclination to utilise it, there was hardly the means. Industry in Newcastle was struggling to regain its footing after the Depression. Management efforts to keep costs down has been seen in its attitude towards overtime and safety, and this policy was complemented by a tightfisted stance towards wage increases. In 1937 Australian wage rates were still below those of 1929. The fact was that during the 1930s employers held the upper hand in labour relations. The union movement, particularly in the B.H.P., was weak and divided within itself. Also, unemployment outside the industry kept disputes and wage cases to a



minimum. The worker simply lacked the power to stand up for himself, and this weakness was reflected not only in the working conditions but also in living standards. After the purchasing of necessities from the Co-operative Store there was "very little" left over for entertainment or saving.<sup>15</sup> Incomes invariably had to be supplemented by backyard gardens, the keeping of poultry, and such activities as fishing, rabbiting and blackberrying. Those for whom the going became impossible joined similar unfortunates, as well as the unemployed, in the shantytowns which grew up around Hexham, Shortland, Carrington and Nobby's. Some of these remained occupied for many years.

Thus, life for shift-workers in Newcastle in 1938 offered little scope for luxuries and basic working-class attitudes hardened. By necessity, vision and thought were restricted to things directly related to the immediate circumstances. Hence people on the whole led an insular life, with little knowledge, experience or interest in places and events outside their own spheres. This affected people in a long-term manner as well as on an immediate basis. Pragmatic issues of day to day existence elbowed aside less tangible concerns such as education and self-improvement. These features of life in 1938 have formed a stigma which Newcastle, fairly or unfairly, still bears today. That is, many people consider that before they can "do anything" worldly or cultural they must first leave Newcastle.

Despite the difficulties and drawbacks of life in Newcastle, a spirit existed within the city which helped form its major positive characteristics. The people recognised that they were Australian citizens and British subjects, but they were also fiercely Novocastrian. There was a seemingly incongruous pride attached to living in Newcastle. Bill K. ascribes this to the fact that most men were "shift workers in industry",<sup>16</sup> and also claims that the hardships, as outlined above, created a special kind of mateship. This also extended to the family of the worker. People banded together and "you always had someone to turn to".<sup>17</sup> People shared and helped out. In the same vein, men and women joined together to make the very most of the leisure time available in relatively inexpensive group-activities such as sport and picnicing. People "made their own fun"<sup>18</sup> in a bid to deny their problems for a while.

This, as one can imagine, was a difficult task. Indeed, if times were bad, future prospects too were "not very bright".<sup>19</sup> Radio contact kept Novocastrians informed on the worsening world situation, and memories of the depression as well as the current state of life, guarded them against being unduly optimistic. These factors were exacerbated by Newcastle's being "a heavily working class city dependent upon a single industry which was very sensitive to economic fluctuations".<sup>20</sup> This was underlined during the Depression, with the steel industry being one of the hardest hit. Clearly the immediate future as well as the existing situation, offered little for Novocastrians.

Thus one can see some of the aspects of the working man's life in Newcastle in 1938. The overriding theme is its restricted and oppressed nature. Many Novocastrians justifiably felt cheated by the inability to savour life fully. Whilst these observations are based on the industrial working class, it is clear that many of the points illustrated would have affected, either directly or indirectly, the remainder of Newcastle's population: the city's almost total dependence on the steel industry demanded this. Although it gave prosperity to the city and people of Newcastle, one cannot help feeling that at times the steel industry produced bars and chains of a non-ferrous kind for its dependents.

FOOTNOTES

1. C.M. Zierer, "Industrial Area of Newcastle, Australia", in R. Auchmuty, "City Building in Newcastle in the Interwar Years", 1938 Bicentennial History Bulletin, p.45.
2. Interview with Mr. & Mrs. K., conducted by Kevin Cranson, for the Bicentennial History Project 3-8-81.
3. J.C. Docherty, "The second city: social and urban change in Newcastle, New South Wales, 1900-1929", Ph.D. thesis, A.N.U., 1977, p.282.
4. F.R.E. Mauldon, A Study in Social Economics: the Hunter Valley New South Wales, Melbourne, 1927, p.182.
5. D. Cusack, Southern Steel, London, 1953, pp.3-4.
6. N.S.W. Arbitration Reports, 1936, in H. Hughes, The Australian Iron and Steel Industry, 1848-1962, Melbourne, 1964, p.124.
7. ibid., p.96.
8. Docherty, op.cit., p.282.
9. Hughes, op.cit., p.96.
10. Interview, tape count (A)330.
11. Cusack, op.cit., p.114.
12. Interview, tape count (A)190.
13. Interview, tape count (A)304.
14. Interview, tape count (A)209.
15. Interview, tape count (A)350.
16. Interview, tape count (B)069.
17. Interview, tape count (A)076.
18. Interview, tape count (A)324.
19. Interview, tape count (B)688.
20. Docherty, op.cit., p.282.

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