



The University of Newcastle
History Club
Department of History

**STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY**

No. 7

1982

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PREFACE

The 1982 issue of Student Research Papers continues the practice began last year of publishing the best first year essays on aspects of life and work in Newcastle 1938. As explained in the last issue, the History Department of the University, along with colleagues from the C.A.E., is involved in research and writing for the 1938 volume of The Australian Bicentennial History Project. We have been training selected students to interview Novocastrians about life in 1938 from an interview schedule arranged by the National Oral History Project connected with the 1938 volume.

Ten students were selected this year to carry out at least one interview (one student Barbara Gaudry interviewed four people) and then, on the basis of controlled background reading, to write an interpretative essay on the problems deriving from work (or the lack of it) which faced a family during 1938. The results, like last year, were varied and many of the same problems were encountered despite our ironing out many of the wrinkles associated with the 1981 project. These papers are valuable mainly as training exercises for our first year students. We have continued to publish them in this form because, in spite of their incomplete nature, they help to give outsiders a glimpse of the rhythms of private experience associated with life in Newcastle and the coalfields.

The papers by Gaudry and Owens deal with the lives of men in Newcastle heavy industry in 1938. Payne's paper also deals with that work experience but adds a dimension to do with the Anglican church and its handling of industrial issues. The effects of religion, of Primitive Methodism specifically, on the lifestyle and expectations of a mining family at Dudley is also highlighted in Curtis's essay. Finally, Deacon examines reflectively the meaning of a single person's life experience in 1938 within the wider pattern of 'history'.

These are tentative steps towards 'people's history'. We hope the Student Research Papers will contribute a little to the data for a social history of this area and with it, to the story of what it meant to be an Australian in 1938.

Sheilah Gray
Peter Hempenstall
Margaret Henry

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STEEL OR STARVE

by Susan Owen

Mr. H's childhood during the 20's and 30's was filled with poverty and instability. His childhood unluckily coincided with troubled times for Newcastle's economy. J.C. Docherty asserts that "In June of 1933, 38% of the city's male workforce were either unemployed or partly unemployed".¹ Mr. H's father was unfortunately one of those statistics who found himself with the impossible task of raising a family of seven on little or no income. Because of these circumstances Mr. H. was withdrawn from school at the age of 14, after only eight years of regular schooling. He remembers with pride and regret the schoolmaster's dismay at losing such a promising student.² That Mr. H. was considered such a promising student was quite an accomplishment in itself, given the constant changing of accommodation the family was forced into by changing fortunes. Mr. H. remembers at least six different homes he inhabited as a child. One change in financial circumstances that Mr. H. remembers with glee was the introduction of the child endowment scheme.³ This was introduced by J. Lang in March 1927 and for Mr. H. it meant additions to his wardrobe. His wardrobe had hitherto comprised tee-shirt and shorts, nothing more. The poverty that Mr. H. experienced as a child did not diminish as he grew to manhood. As Sheilah Gray suggests "a picture of intermittent unemployment in Newcastle extending as far back as 1921, indicates that for many people the depression of the 1930's was only the coup de grace".⁴

The coup de grace came for Mr. H's family in February 1937 when once again the father was dismissed from the Newcastle steel works. In March of the same year at the age of 20 Mr. H. was offered an unskilled labourer's position with the same company. Mr. H. claims that it was the conscientious and loyal attitude shown by his father towards BHP that had motivated the company to make the offer of a job to himself.⁵ The responsibility of feeding and clothing a family of seven now rested heavily upon the shoulders of Mr. H. With a past steeped in poverty and instability, Mr. H. gratefully accepted a job with BHP, a job that was to last for almost forty years. This need for a secure existence that would meet the demands generated by ensuring a family's survival seems to have coloured the attitude of both Mr. H. and many of his fellow workers towards both employment and employer. There is evidence to suggest that employers took advantage of this vulnerability of the work force.

In 1938 under the guidance of Essington Lewis, "an industrial Churchill",⁶ "BHP's profit soared to £1,300,461, higher than any profit ever made by an Australian company".⁷ It is tempting to agree with the Trades Hall article published in 1936 that this unprecedented high profit was built "upon the sweat and blood of the metal workers".⁸ There is evidence that this rhetoric does have some truth in it. Helen Hughes notes that "throughout the 1930's labour conditions were favourable to the industry".⁹ The unemployment within Newcastle throughout the 1920's and 30's seems to have weakened the worker's position so greatly that it literally became a question of steel or starve. This factor, added to BHP's negative policy towards unionism,

made possible the continuation of profits paid for by the workers, most assuredly in sweat and too often in blood.

In 1938 Mr. H. was receiving from BHP a wage of £3.6s, "which was approximately 30% below the average weekly wages".¹⁰ Helen Hughes claims that in comparison with British and Continental steel wage rates, Australian wage rates were amongst the lowest during the depression and the slowest to rise after the depression. She asserts that in 1937 "Australian wage rates were still below those of 1929".¹¹ This is in spite of the fact that BHP "now had an impetus that nothing short of another nationwide slump could halt".¹² Another disadvantage that Mr. H. and many like him were forced to cope with was shift work. Mr. H. describes shift work as a "major social and family handicap".¹³ His own personal experience of shift work added to the experience of belonging to a family whose father was on continuous shift work for many years must stand him in good stead on this subject.

The forty-four hours of every week that Mr. H. spent within BHP were remarkable only for their dangers, exhaustion and poor working conditions. When asked about the conditions of his workplace, he responded, "we used to call it the abattoirs".¹⁴ The Trades Hall article concurs that "the works are commonly called the abattoirs by the Newcastle workers and that the number of accidents, both fatal and otherwise give point to the sobriquet used".¹⁵ F.R.E. Mauldon claims that "BHP's motto of safety first was sincere and effective".¹⁶ This conflicts with BHP's introduction of the Bedeaux Bonus system during the 30's. This system effectively aimed at increasing the productivity of the workers. The Trades Hall article claims that "the inevitable outcome of this incessant speed-up, despite elaborate safety first campaigns and devices, is a continually growing crop of accidents".¹⁷ It goes on, "the record number of accidents treated in one week at the Company's First Aid station up to the present time was 800".¹⁸ Mr. H. asserts that when first working at BHP the fatality rate was high.¹⁹ He felt the general attitude amongst his workmates towards the dangerous nature of their work to be one of apprehension and fear, lest they too should be incapacitated or killed. Nevertheless death or maiming was accepted as an integral hazard of their work.

The fear of maiming or death on the plant and the lack of quality of family life because of shift work were accepted as the lesser of two evils, the alternative being unemployment. If by chance a man proved himself loyal and conscientious then between a period of ten and fifty years he might find himself in a good position within BHP's hierarchy. But as Helen Hughes points out "the process of promotion was slow and uncertain and a man might never be selected for more rewarding work".²⁰ So not only was the present poor for steel workers in the 30's but the future looked equally bleak. The unions, the working man's usual avenue of appeal and support do not appear to have been very active within Newcastle at this time.

There are at least three factors that could explain the unions' relative inactivity, relative, that is, to places such as the "Wollongong area which had similar economic and social problems".²¹ Mr. H. claims that the union movement within BHP in 1938 was not a strong one.²² The Trades Hall article claims that "In the BHP steel works only 25% of the 4,671 workers are members of trade unions".²³ A. Trengove suggests that "The depression had shattered many unions, including the Federated Ironworker's Association and only a minority of BHP's employees were union members".²⁴ BHP actively pursued a policy of not hiring militant union labour. Helen Hughes suggests that the price paid for union involvement was high and lasting, "The works kept a record of men dismissed for union activity so that they would not be re-employed at the steelworks or by associated companies".²⁵ The unions, having been weakened by the depression were deliberately kept in a state of weakness and as Helen Hughes

comments "the pressure of unemployment outside the iron and steel industry reduced the number of industrial disputes and made the BHP's hostile attitude to unionism viable".²⁶ This appears to be one of the contributing factors to the working man's acceptance of dangerous and destructive work conditions.

A second factor seems to be the isolation that springs from a shift system of work. As Mr. H. mentioned, shift work is a handicap to both family and social life. The lack of contact and communication inherent in a shift worker's life could in part explain the non-identification of the average worker with the unions of this time. Mr. H. claims that the dinner break conversation would involve anything and everything except talk of work.²⁷ This lack of communication between the workers on important issues would have made solidarity impossible. Added to this separation within plant life was a similar separation in the worker's social life. The shift system of work is extremely disruptive to any social life and throughout the 30's this situation was worsened as individuals were forced by the depression to seek cheaper accommodation. This quite often entailed moving from one suburb to another. The necessity of movement from suburb to suburb did not encourage strong or lasting relationships and this isolation was aggravated by the lack of transport for the working man.

A third factor that cleaved the ranks of the workers was BHP's policy of promotion. Mr. H. claims that a job with BHP could mean a job for life if "you do the right thing".²⁸ Mr. H. was one of those men who showed "initiative" and gradually rose through the ranks. His slow but steady promotion could reflect not only his conscientiousness but also his political inactivity. Mr. H's sole concern was providing for his family and although he was a member of the union he was quick to point out that his membership was a token one and that his involvement was very limited. Mr. H. felt that his promotion from worker to staff made little difference to his relationships within the works. This he attributes to the respect he engendered amongst those who had previously been fellow workers. Other valued employees were not so lucky in their working relationships and Helen Hughes notes that the unions accused the company of "breaking social ties by staff appointment, setting workmen against each other".²⁹

Following a childhood of poverty Mr. H., like many others, accepted possible death, injury and the destruction of family life through shift-work for the weekly wage of £3.6s and there is no doubt that such men felt themselves to be the lucky ones. There were many examples of what happened for those who failed to find or keep employment. Helen Hughes claims that:

"Newcastle became a ghost town in the early 1930's as workers unable to keep up rent or house payments moved to shanty towns made of bags and corrugated iron on the outskirts of the town at Lake Macquarie".³⁰

The high unemployment in Newcastle made it possible for BHP to dominate a weakened workforce and adopt a stance towards unionism that would ensure the workforce remained weak. For men like Mr. H. BHP was a knight in shining armour, but with hindsight it could be said that BHP was slightly trashed in its dealings with its employees during the 30's.

FOOTNOTES

1. 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. 273.
2. Interview with Mr. H. taped Newcastle August 1981.
3. Interview.
4. S. Gray, " 'An evil long endured', Newcastle's depression", in Judy Mackinolty ed, The Wasted Years?, Sydney 1981, p.60.
5. Interview.
6. A. Trengove, 'What's Good for Australia!' The story of BHP, Stanmore 1975, p.144.
7. Ibid. p.158
8. "The Workers Case against the BHP". issued by the Trades Hall Council in 1936, p.7.
9. H. Hughes, The Australian Iron and Steel Industry, 1848-1969, Melbourne 1964, p.122.
10. Official Year Book of N.S.W. 1938.
11. H. Hughes, op.cit. p.122.
12. A. Trengove, op.cit. p.158
13. Interview.
14. Interview.
15. "The Workers Case against the BHP" op.cit. p.8.
16. F.R.E. Mauldon, A Study in Social Economics, the Hunter River Valley, N.S.W.", Melbourne 1927, p.190.
17. "The Workers Case against the BHP" op.cit. p.8.
18. Ibid p.8.
19. Interview.
20. Helen Hughes, op.cit. p.96.
21. S. Gray, op.cit. p.74
22. Interview.
23. "The Workers Case against the BHP" op.cit. p.11
24. A. Trengove, op.cit. p.160
25. H. Hughes, op.cit. p.95
26. Ibid. p.122.
27. Interview.
28. Interview.
29. H. Hughes, op.cit. p.96
30. Ibid. p.122.

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Interview

- Taped interview with Mr. H. in August 1981 for the 1938 Newcastle Bicentenary Project.