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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy, 2006.

**INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN THE NEW SOUTH
WALES BUILDING INDUSTRY 1850 – 1891:
CONFLICT, CO-OPERATION & RADICALISM.**

ABSTRACT

Australian government policy today aims to ‘deregulate’ industrial relations. A fractured system has ensued where uncontrolled market forces disrupt both business and unions. The building industry is particularly affected by uncertainty and industrial barbarism. Precisely one hundred years ago government policy was to create order, becoming directly involved in industrial regulation. This thesis aims to understand how building unions maintained their rates and conditions in the pre-arbitration era when there were no legislative minimums, and it seeks to place their labour relations within a political and ideological context.

The thesis criticises historical scholarship surrounding artisan unionism in Britain and Australia, in particular the role of building tradesmen. Positive relations between employers and employed in the industry are often described in pejorative terms with tradesmen labelled ‘aristocrats of labour’ – apolitical, middle class and lacking class-awareness. The thesis argues this view does not adequately describe the qualities of building operatives, or place their motives within a ‘deregulated’ industrial context.

To demonstrate nineteenth century building industry unionism in NSW had a broader nature, the thesis looks at British trade union radicalism. It examines both changes in structure and ideology caused by growing industrialisation and competitive organisation affecting building tradesmen known as general contracting, as well as continuity and differences in ideas of social change and progress. The thesis connects the ideology of British and colonial building unions in this regard.

It then turns to the lives, work and society of nineteenth century building workers in Sydney and the make-up of their organisations. The thesis seeks to understand the political and ideological aspects of Australian building unionism and the effects of general contracting and competition. Central to the discussion is the influence of the Co-operative movement, and the significance of the struggle for the eight-hour day to the labour movement. Both were progressive responses to unfettered market forces on the trade. It argues that the challenges faced by operatives in maintaining conditions led them to develop politically, creating ‘modern’ class representation and ideology.

The thesis ends with a chapter that examines the evidence before the 1891 NSW Royal Commission into Strikes showing the building industry to be characterised by conflict, co-operation, and radicalism. Unionists expressed progressive ideology and industrial militancy but maintained positive relationships with certain employers for whom they provided market security. The trade-off for efforts in this respect was recognition that union rules would be the primary form of industrial regulation. Their system, however, was ultimately unsustainable because of competitive pressures, and industrial militancy against builders outside the system flourished.

In conclusion, the thesis suggests that nineteenth century building workers improved and maintained industrial standards by militant unionism, and yet, at the same time, by forming co-operative relations with employers. In dealing with the corrosive effect of market deregulation that undermined control over their trade, operatives also built progressive organisations which forged working class unity and developed politically advanced ideologies of social change. Their ideas and practices were at times unsuccessful or contradictory, but building unionists were *not* inward-looking ‘labour aristocrats’.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Bradon Ellem for his optimism and encouragement throughout the project, and hope he may yet be *fully* convinced as to its argument. Thanks are due to Professor Greg Patmore who allowed me the opportunity to conduct the research, and who at all times has been generous and open. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Terry Irving who remarked upon the closeness in time between Eureka and the eight-hour campaign, and thank Dr John Shields of Sydney University who advised me to read more widely those works providing an alternative and positive view of pre-industrial trade unionism. Professor Ray Markey's suggestion to look closely at E.P. Thompson's 'Freeborn Englishman', was of enormous help in providing a radical context to early building unionists. My Aunt, Kathleen Collins, was of invaluable assistance in proof reading and removing or amending most modern grammatical atrocities; those remaining are due to my stubbornness or fatigue. I'd like also to apologise to my wife Sabine for allowing our home to fall apart while writing this thesis, a matter she accepted without much complaint and I thank her for her support.

I would also like to acknowledge the many characters in the building industry who encouraged and informed this work: Brian Seidler of the Master Builders Association whose interest in the project proves its basic tenet, and those 'shonky' builders - inside and outside the MBA - against whom I have often stood toe to toe, and who demonstrate that there is no lesson like a practical one. Andrew Ferguson, State Secretary of the CFMEU Building Division, was good enough to allow me time off work to complete the study. Russell and Donna Cunningham kindly sorted out computer problems, and Paul True, CFMEU Education Officer, was also very obliging. I trust not to have wandered far from his thoughtful suggestions.

Thesis drafts have enjoyed useful criticism, some pointed to the study's innate (though unintended) conservatism, others thought I erred too much towards giving nineteenth century building workers a radical perspective. Perhaps this history, in hoping to ennoble its subjects, is too accommodating of their foibles and makes too much of their actions. But, in a way, it is a history of human relations in an industrial, political and economic context more than it is a political history that seeks to stamp out a position in the well contested field of historical analysis. It is merely an acknowledgment of building unionists, trades and labour, now and in the past, working so hard to create a better and fairer world.

I hope this history is a useful contribution to their memory.

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