The Smiling Professions

Salesmanship and Promotional Culture

in Australia and China 1920-1939

Sophie Loy-Wilson

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the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History
School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry
University of Sydney

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or institute of higher learning.

I affirm that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work. I certify to the best of my knowledge that all sources of reference have been acknowledged.

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Sophie Loy-Wilson
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Abstract

This thesis takes the topic of salespeople and promotional culture as a route into colonial modernity, and in particular the relationship between Australia and Asia between 1920 and 1939. Drawing on the writings of salespeople and the archives of the commercial institutions in which they worked, it traces the ways in which face-to-face commercial interactions make visible the economic dimensions of cultural encounters in colonial contexts. I suggest that salesmanship and promotional culture were colonial technologies of rule and I argue that examining salespeople personalises the economic policies behind colonial rule. One of the criticisms of cultural histories of colonialism is that they represent a turning away from class and political economy. Salespeople are useful in this regard because they inhabited the economic institutions of colonial regimes – from trading depots to railways and shop fronts. They were, therefore, present for moments of conflict over capital, labour conditions, unemployment, tariffs and boycotts. Theories of personal efficiency, self-salesmanship and promotional strategy, as they were applied to the lives of individuals, were cultural reflections of the economic conflicts brought about as colonial-era institutions modernised in the interwar period. Here I examine publicity agents, the use of celebrity in politics, union publicity and factory workers in Australia and China, Department Store sales training, sensational journalism, commercial travellers and store managers in Australia (both European and Asian) and Australian salespeople in China. As economic exchanges in colonial contexts were invariably trans-national and often multi-lingual, a focus on salespeople draws historical attention to non-English language sources and transnational movements of people and goods. This approach seeks to draw three lines of historical inquiry together: trans-national histories, histories of labour and histories of urban modernity.
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Introduction

You don’t know yourself
你不知自
He ought to speak face-to-face
以定面說
I don’t cheat every boy
小子我都 不騙
To buy and sell are very difficult
買麥 吃 苦
I fear you will run away
我怕你走 去
I want you to touch me
我愛你教我

The Chinese Australian History Museum opened in Melbourne in 1985. Soon after, the Chinese-English phrasebook quoted above arrived in the Museum’s collection. It is not known how it came to be there. Well-worn and stamped with the red, ink seal of a Chinese publisher, the phrasebook appears to be intended for Chinese hawkers traversing Victoria’s gold rush settlements between the 1860s and 1890s. Similar publications circulated in Cooktown and San Francisco around the same time, products of the widespread mobility of large numbers of Chinese in the late nineteenth century. Hawker phrasebooks emerge from a period of time labelled by Australian national historiography as the ‘colonial gold rush era’, a neatly packaged slice of the nation’s history, evoking images of the frontier – of mining, fortune and deserts pockmarked with shafts and tents. References to digging equipment in the

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1 ‘English-Chinese Phrasebook’, unknown provenance (c1860s-1890s), Chinese Australian History Museum Collection, 1985.14. My thanks to Sophie Couchman, curator of the Chinese Australian History Museum, for allowing me access to this phrasebook. The quotes used here are directly transcribed from the phrasebook. Its pages are not numbered. The last sentence “I want you to touch me” translates as “I want you to teach me” in Mandarin.

2 The Ethnic Studies Library at the University of Berkeley, California has digitised a English-Chinese phrasebook from San Francisco. This phrasebook appears to have been used for medical purposes as most phrases in it relate to physical ailments such as ‘Cancer of the Breast’ and ‘Sleepiness of the Foot.’ A Chinese-English phrasebook from Cooktown by Sun Johnson is held at Mitchell Library in Sydney. On the importance of Asian migration in the nineteenth century see Adam McKeown, Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
Chinese-English phrasebook (picks, shovels, candles) and to mining towns (Bendigo, Ararat) confirm this association.\(^3\) Further snippets of conversation (“Do not strike me! Why do you abuse me? He is my customer. I will not cut off my pigtail. He has cheated me many times”\(^4\)) are also suggestive of cross-cultural encounter and of the well-known violence of goldfield life. The Chinese English phrasebook is also a type of ‘Salesmanship Manual’ for mass selling, a genre Judith Hilkey argues eased the transition to “a new capitalist order” in Gilded Age America.\(^5\) More than a reified artefact of gold rush life, the manual confronts the problems of mass society usually associated with western modernity: sincerity, fakery, authenticity, mass communication and persuasion. Preoccupied with customers and salespeople, trust and credit (“I cannot trust you”, “I hope you will trust me”), promotion and profit, its Chinese-English phrases provided a language of consumerism and a means to circulate goods and individuals through global networks.

This artefact speaks to the key themes of this thesis. Firstly, salesmanship manuals and the larger archive of promotional culture of which they are a part, document the cultural rituals of economic exchange. They therefore allow historians to foreground the economic dimensions of cultural encounters and identity. Secondly, economic exchanges in colonial contexts were invariably trans-national and often multi-lingual. A focus on these exchanges draws historical attention to non-English language sources and trans-national movements of people and goods. This thesis locates commercial encounters, such as those suggested by texts like the Chinese-

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\(^4\) Ibid.

English phrasebook, in what Anna Tsing has called an “ethnography of global connection.” It suggests that Australian colonial modernity is best understood when positioned trans-nationally across different colonial contexts and that salespeople and promotional culture can provide a vehicle for doing this.

Histories of colonial modernity in Australia have, until recently, been largely preoccupied with either the British or American origins of this modernity. As Jill Julius Matthews has argued, the emphasis has traditionally been on external causes of socio-economic change – urbanisation, industrialisation, demographic upheaval, American mass culture, bureaucratic nationalism, the expanding capitalist world market – and how these forces were internalised within Australia as a “developing nation.” Erik Eklund has criticised “models of cultural transmission, which see English forms dropping and appearing ‘Tardis-like’ on the Australian landscape.” Recent histories, which combine multiple colonial sites in the same analytical frame, have demonstrated the usefulness of a trans-colonial model which can disrupt center-periphery approaches to cultural transmission and exchange. Such a frame contributes to the recovery of global connections and networks that shaped the ways in which Australians experienced modernity. As Tony Ballantyne has written, “these connections and movements

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actually made places.” Examining the archival remains of the salespeople who traversed these networks can reveal what Frank Trentmann has called “globalization at the margins.” The resulting tension between Australia and Asia, nation and region causes a certain unravelling of nationally defined political space and a reconstruction of places in terms of “desired trading realities.” Australia’s relationship with Asia is often viewed in oppositional terms. Re-orientating the focus of Australian colonial modernity towards Asia and away from Britain and America turns the Asia-Australia nexus on its head, revealing a shared history of connection, rather than conflict.

This chapter introduces the people and places that contributed to what I have called a new ‘promotional culture’, which peaked in Australia in the interwar period, and then receded during the 1940s with successive amendments to the state Factories and Shops Acts. These amendments began to restrict sales and advertising techniques in NSW in 1943. My argument is in two parts. Firstly, sources dealing with self-promotion and salesmanship produced between 1920 and 1939 allow us to view the economic and cultural changes of colonial modernity on a human scale. They open up ways in which Australians translated ideologies of industrial efficiency and mass democracy into their everyday interactions and personal aspirations both at home and at work. Salespeople, after all, were uniquely concerned with how they were perceived by others. In their struggle to incorporate theories of efficiency into their personal encounters, they dramatised both the pre-occupations of modern

social planners, bent on creating more efficient ‘white’ citizens, as well as the messiness of commercial transactions ‘face-to-face.’ Secondly, viewing the interwar years in Australia through the eyes of salespeople and through the register of promotional culture reveals hitherto unexamined links between Australia and the wider Asian region. During this period a large underclass of Australian salespeople saw Asia as a commercial frontier (the ‘Eastern markets’), an element in a European imperial web of which Australia was but one part.15 Promotional literary-like business magazines encouraged Australians to ‘conquer’ these ‘Eastern markets.’ My approach seeks to draw three lines of historical inquiry together: transnational histories, histories of labour and histories of urban modernity.

Examining salespeople introduces sources rich in descriptions of behaviour and interpersonal encounter. Salesmanship provides a view of colonial economics at the level of cultural encounter. This is in contrast to the impersonal scale of twentieth-century institutions. Salesmanship was a science and a system that made individual sovereignty and personal experience an occasion for education in mental and business efficiency.16 Its manuals, schools, and literature were prescriptive, with authors and trainers observing and recounting examples of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ interaction, ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ sales attempts, how one should move, think, feel, speak and smile. “A sales smile should come from serenity and

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content”, Dr A. H. Martin from the University of Sydney instructed staff at David Jones in 1934, “sincerity and goodwill.”17 In this archive of promotional culture, and the behavioural shifts and new social forms described within it, we see Australians grappling with conflicting ideas surrounding mass society and modern self-hood, connecting larger processes of modernisation and industrialism to their personal experiences and to what became known in this period as their ‘personalities.’

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Industrialisation came late to Australia. Ann Stephen and others have argued that large-scale industrial production and mass consumerism were not firmly established in Australia until the 1950s.18 Although the industrialisation of such rural activity as shearing began in the 1900s, Australian urban factories before WWII were often small, poorly regulated and fitted with outdated machinery.19 Vere Gordan Childe commented in the 1920s that there were still at that time practically no manufacturing towns in Australia.20 The peculiar economic conditions of interwar Australian society, where nineteenth-century work practices rubbed shoulders with a burgeoning commercial leisure culture meant that while the imported cultural products of modernity were available to many Australians, the technological advances were not. Few

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Australians owned motor cars until the 1940s, and Australia’s theatres were lit by electricity twenty years before its streets and homes. If this was a jazz-age then, to quote Kirsten McKenzie, “it could sound both distant and tinny to many.” As Jill Julius Matthews and Michelle Arrow have recently shown, Australians experienced popular culture in the twenties and thirties more intensely than other nations because of their relative isolation. Modernity – in the form of radio broadcasts, jazz music, Hollywood cinema, dance crazes, advertising and magazines – gave Australians glimpses of a world far more glamorous and fast-paced than their own. Wages did not keep pace with the cost of living. In 1928 the Commonwealth Statisticians Office produced a table combining occupation and income to divide the Australian population into four categories. By far the largest group (46 per cent of the population) were in the bottom category, labelled “unskilled, unemployed and poor” with an income of £400 per annum, just the level of income that Stuart Macintyre has estimated was the dividing line in the 1920s between those able to enjoy a comfortable life and those living in more straightened and precarious circumstances. In 1928 the Melbourne-based Rydges Business Magazine referred to these tensions - between the availability and accessibility of modernity in Australia – as a “clash of desires” caused by low wages in a “mechanical, inventive age.”

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21 A 1923 survey showed that 34% of houses were wired for electricity. 75% of these had electric irons, 20% had radiators, 7% had fans and 2% had vacuum cleaners. Itiel Bereson, Australia in the 1920s (Victoria: Binara Publishing, 2000), p. 15. Australian historians have recently explored ‘sound’ as a way into Australian experiences of modernity. See Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon, eds., Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2007).
23 Jill Julius Mathews, Dance Hall & Picture Palace; Michelle Arrow, Friday on Our Minds: Popular Culture in Australia since 1945 (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009).
Promotional culture helped ameliorate this gap between an awareness of modern living and the ability to experience it. Correspondence courses and schools in ‘self-salesmanship’ or ‘personal possibilities’ multiplied in the years before and after WWI, and the books written to accompany this training could be found in Church reading groups, scout and girl guide troupes, YMCA halls and employment offices throughout urban and rural townships.26 “This is an age of correspondence classes,” wrote a female reader in The Sydney Morning Herald in 1924. “One may learn anything from correspondence from medicine to wireless telegraphy, but the most popular subject seems to be salesmanship. One wonders if the whole world will not soon be made up of salesmen.”27 The professionals who graduated from these courses went on to staff Australia’s new commercial institutions: cinemas, department stores, amusement parks but also political publicity campaigns and empire marketing schemes.28 Part One of this thesis uses the personal archives of these professionals to trace their impact on Australia politics through trade union publicity initiatives, empire marketing schemes and political election campaigns. Part Two focuses on the training of salespeople in Department Stores and business schools, and in the colleges associated with the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia (CTAA). This section also traces the decimation of ‘self-salesmanship’ and promotional culture through the interwar popular press. By the early 1930s some households were turning away fifteen door-to-door salesmen selling correspondence


courses in self-salesmanship every day.29 “A CAREER IN SELLING! – Do You Want It?” asked an advertisement for the Hemingway & Robertson school of salesmanship in the Broken Hill Barrier Miner in 1938. “If you want a life unfettered by restrictions – a freedom not found within closed walls, a salary much in excess of that which is obtainable in other professions … there is for you a lifetime career in selling.”30 During the Great Depression a large number of these salespeople ended up in debtors’ courts or prison.

For many Australian salespeople and promotional professionals in the late 1920s and 1930s, those parts of the British Empire scattered across Asia were viewed as new markets for Australian goods and therefore logical places in which to make a living.31 In a time before air travel, treaty ports such as Hong Kong and Shanghai were part of the everyday geography of many Australians because they were on established imperial shipping routes and could be reached relatively cheaply.32 Such shipping routes had long been on the itinerary of Chinese traders who travelled between China and the northern coast of Australia from the sixteenth century onwards.33 Part Three of this thesis follows Chinese hawkers and shopkeepers through rural Australia, and Australian salespeople through Chinese treaty ports, and looks at what their activities can tell us about the role of trans-national connections in Australian modernity. I do not attempt a comprehensive history of Australian salespeople and traders in

32 Angela Woollacott ‘ “All this is Empire, I Told Myself”: Australia Women’s Voyages “Home” and the Articulation of Colonial Whiteness’, American Historical Review 102, no. 4 (October 1997), pp. 1006-1008.
Asia. Rather, I focus specifically on patterns of commerce and trade that emerged between metropolitan China and Australia between 1920 and 1939. As Lake and Reynolds have argued, nationalised historiography has minimised the importance previously attached to imperial connections including regional connections between dominion states. The interwar years, punctuated by the 1926 Balfour Agreement, were pivotal in the history of ‘Britishness’ because the dominions were declared autonomous within the empire at this time, a sentiment codified in the Statute of Westminster in 1932. The Balfour Agreement brought to an end the economic dependence put in place in the nineteenth century and gave “a jolt to the old dominions which prompted them to develop alternatives which fitted their economic needs better.” As Deana Heath has shown, tensions subsequently emerged in dominion states like Australia between “colonial modernity and national desire.” This lead dominion states to seek a degree of independence from empire and justify their new authority by declaring “the nation the true, legitimate and authentic bearer of modernity.”

David Walker has documented this tension in Anxious Nation, showing how Australians always viewed their relationship to colonialism through a filter of hopes and anxieties about Asia. After 1900, Walker argues, there was a growing national desire surrounding the Eastern Markets, and calls for trade with Japan and China independent of Britain. These ambitions were in

34 For a history of Australian trade with Asia for the period up to 1850 see James Broadbent, Suzanne Rickard and Margaret Steven, India, China, Australia: Trade and Society 1788-1850 (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 2003). See also: Ganter, Mixed Relations.


conflict with British colonialism in Asia and were ultimately thwarted by Australia’s inability to sign trade treaties or send trade commissioners to Asian cities.

In response to poor employment opportunities in the thirties, Australian salespeople travelled to Asia on government and company-sponsored programs to open up Asian markets for Australian trade. “The proximity of Australia to those markets in the East should and would count in our favour,” wrote one salesperson in 1928. “Nowadays one hears a lot about salesmanship. Why not apply it, then, to the Eastern market and establish a big trade there for ourselves?”

By 1932 there were so many Australians in Shanghai that the British Government asked Prime Minister Joseph Lyons to issue an official warning dissuading Australians from travelling there for employment. This Australian presence (which one Chinese official termed ‘commercial warfare’) modified and aggravated the ways anti-colonialism was expressed by the local population in Asia’s treaty ports and as chapter three of this thesis shows, also shaped how class conflict played out in Australia.

Those employed as ‘salespeople’ constituted a commercial network from below, which linked Australia and Asia in geographies of promotional culture absent from official diplomatic accounts of the period. When they returned to Australia they could compare British

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governance across multiple imperial centres in Asia and Australasia. By overlaying the language of markets onto the older language of imperial conquest, promotional culture translated colonial forms of Australian masculinity into Asian frontiers. Australian salesmen, it was argued, were better suited to selling in the East than British salesmen because they were used to inter-racial encounters and drew virility and strength from outback life. When female salespeople took positions in Asia alongside their male counterparts (and they did so in surprisingly large numbers) they had to re-work this representation, drawing on missionary stories and civilising myths to justify their careers.

The ‘problem’ of Australian Colonial Modernity

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer an exhaustive account of the dense set of intellectual debates surrounding ‘modernity’. As Jill Julius Matthews reminds us, the term modernity is problematic for historians. It can be used to “refer to any period between the Renaissance and the Present, and be understood as having lasted anywhere between five centuries and fifteen years.” The decades around the turn of the twentieth century are a useful period for the study of modernity if we are to define it not as a historical shift, but as a state of mind – “the sense contemporaries had of their own modernity”, in Kate Murphy’s words. As a point of departure I define modernity as inseparable from colonialism, an

45 Beatrice Thompson papers, NAA 1948/732 SP 104/1 Box 29.
argument well established by Antoinette Burton.\textsuperscript{48} Drawing on a definition put forward by Barlow, Burton proffers \textit{colonial} modernity not as a hegemonic force or moment of transformation but rather as a “speculative frame through which researchers can attempt to grasp the technologies of colonial power as they connected, at key moments, to shifts in global capitalism.”\textsuperscript{49} Such a frame de-centres histories of colonial rule from discrete territorial sites. This is an important shift and useful for grappling with what Fiona Paisley has called the “complex relationship between colonialism, nationalism and empire in Australian history.”\textsuperscript{50} As Paisley writes:

\begin{quote}
National history cannot be so directly read as signalling ‘separation’ from empire. In the Australian case, post-federation nationalism emerged hand-in-hand with, and not in opposition to, empire. In fact loyalty to the British Empire increased in the first decades of nationhood as strengthened race ideology provided for both a white and an imperial Australia.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Contrary to what has been argued in some nationalist histories, Australia’s identification with the British Empire, and the resultant “articulation of whiteness,” may in fact have been most overt and marked in the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{52} Although Australia was federated in 1901, the meanings of institutions, bureaucratic habits, and cultural styles set up in the colonial era were continually being reshaped in the 1920s and 1930s through modern technologies designed to preserve ‘whiteness.’\textsuperscript{53} Salespeople provide an ideal window into this process because they were constantly crossing the very boundaries on which the new Australian nation depended – circulating goods, seeking trade, speaking “face-to face”, as the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Antoinette M. Burton, ed., \textit{Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities}, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid, pp. 4-5.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Fiona Paisley, ‘Introduction: White Settler Colonialisms and the Colonial Turn: An Australian Perspective’, \textit{Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History} 4, no. 3 (2003), p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid p. 5.
\end{itemize}
This thesis draws on innovations in trans-national history, labour history and histories of urban modernity. It has been commonplace in recent scholarship to focus more on the culture of colonialism and its relation to modernity than on commercial interactions and political economy. In the 1980s and 1990s a number of publications by labour historians drew attention to the importance of salesmanship and personal efficiency in the development of urban modernity.\(^{54}\) One of my goals here is to draw out the trans-national contexts of these earlier studies. As Raymond Markey has written, comparative and trans-national labour history remains relatively underdeveloped in Australia.\(^{55}\) Tony Ballantyne has recently argued that histories of colonialism need to be re-connected to the history of capitalism.\(^{56}\) “This means not simply paying close attention to the material aspects of colonialism, but also recognising that economics had a culture and that culture has an economics.”\(^{57}\) Here I suggest that archives produced by and about salespeople provide one way to underscore the commercial dimensions of colonial modernity in Australia for the period 1920-1939. Making


\(^{57}\) Ibid, p. 17.
these commercial relations visible through salesmanship draws attention to unexpected networks linking Australia with Asia.

The dominant intellectual tradition has argued that Australia in the interwar years was economically isolationist and culturally conservative. This tradition, which began with nationalist historians including Vance Palmer, Manning Clarke and Russell Ward following WWII, locates the real modernisation of Australia in the prosperous 1950s and 1960s and reads the interwar years as a type of intellectual blank space in between peaks of nationalist sentiment – characterised by R.M. Crawford as “the mean decades.”

“In fact the whole interwar period, compared with those which preceded and followed it, was an uncertain, cautious and shabby era”, wrote Ward in 1967. Ward’s dismissal of the 1920s and 1930s was part of a broader rejection of both conservative and pro-empire political views in the 1960s, which associated interwar Australia with submissive empire patriotism. This nationalist vision of Australian modernity was revised from the early 1970s first by labour and feminist histories and later due to the influence of the linguistic turn and the subsequent shift to post-colonial, trans-national and trans-colonial critiques of the nation. Recent work on Australian politics has chosen to uphold the original conception of the interwar years expounded by Ward, Clark and Crawford. These histories have perpetuated the original ‘conservative/isolationist’ narrative of the interwar years when “Britishness was the dominant

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cultural myth in Australia, the dominant social idea giving meaning to its people.”

Meanwhile, cultural and Aboriginal histories have drawn on feminist and post-colonial critiques to revive debates over the interwar years, by, for example, focussing on intimate relationships and domestic spaces. Pulling in different directions, ‘high’ political and cultural histories of modern Australia have remained to an extent quarantined from one another despite the radical potential for cultural history to change the way Australian modernity is conceived. Such a divided field – between nationalist-institutional and cultural modernities – is partly due to the rejection in the 1990s of Marxist-inflected labour and social histories which have fallen by the wayside and as yet not been integrated into cultural and trans-national studies of this period. In Part One of this thesis I trace the lives of political publicity agents, union promoters and celebrity politicians to show how commercial culture was closely connected to the reception of political policies in the interwar period. In doing so I show the potential of labour histories to enrich histories of urban modernity between the wars.

Australian modernity in the years after 1914 has been depicted as a ‘problem’ by those

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histories which choose to emphasise either the ‘Britishness’ of Australian political institutions or the cosmopolitan Americanisation of Australian cultural practices.\textsuperscript{66} In these histories, modernity in Australia is caught in tension between a British past and an American future – a dichotomy that overemphasises the role of nationalism and misses the influence of regional connections between Australia and other British colonial outposts in Asia.\textsuperscript{67} Part of the problem has been archival. The key points of tension in the 1920s and 1930s – tariff agreements, cost of living, wage arbitration, imperial preferences and conferences, farming subsidies, manufacturing, the great depression and the subsequent search for new markets – rested on economic questions (‘Boom and Bust’ and the ‘New Protectionism’) and have not slotted easily into studies using political, social or cultural archives. Noel Butlin referred to the challenge of linking culture to economics when in 1982 he wrote his famous economic history of Australia, \textit{Government and Capitalism}, describing Australia’s modernisation and industrialisation as “the severe development problems in the interwar years.”\textsuperscript{68}

Australian interwar economic policies have often been interpreted as proof of a conservative ascendency out of kilter with the experimental and cosmopolitan cultural modernities embraced in other parts of the world such as Weimar Germany. “Never had Australia’s innocence and purity been protected with more zeal,” wrote Richard White in 1981 of this economic ‘conservatism’; while also quoting from the \textit{Australasian Manufacturer}, “there

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\textsuperscript{67} As Ann Curthoys has argued, “historians of the interwar period in Australia have stressed Australia’s relations to Britain and its place in Empire.” See Ann Curthoys, ‘Does Australian History Have a Future?’ \textit{Australian Historical Studies} 333, no. 118 (September 2008), p. 141.
[was] safety in mediocrity.”\textsuperscript{69} For Stuart Ward and James Curran these policies were proof of Australia’s clear loyalty to Empire and best understood through what they called the “British race myth.” “For much of the early twentieth century”, they wrote in 2010, “Australia’s commercial dealings … were influenced by the idea that Australia was for all intents and purposes a British country … and it was this idea that fell victim to the global collapse of British power after WWII, and the rapid decline of the British Empire.”\textsuperscript{70} Focusing on the 1960s and 1970s, Ward and Curran have continued the earlier ‘nationalist’ tradition of downplaying the cultural and economic shifts of the interwar years. “Almost overnight Australians were confronted with rapidly changing horizons”, Ward and Curran wrote of the post-WWII era. “Where once the certainties of the British world had provided the material and sentimental foundation of their self-image, the onset of decolonization forced them to think anew about themselves and their future.”\textsuperscript{71} In the assertion that modern Australia was ‘British’ until the 1950s, they play into vintage assumptions about the impact of WWII and economic change, without taking into account the interconnectedness of Australian experiences of industrialisation and modernity within the wider Asian region. In these ways nationalist histories of twentieth-century Australia have treated the interwar years as a ‘before-period’ out of which a fresh, independent Australian nation emerges.

Recent histories have sought to extrapolate from economic policy the cultural results of interwar economic thinking. Jill Julius Matthews has shown how Australian tariff barriers were ‘racialised’ – partially designed to keep out American movies (especially ‘talkies’) and

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, p. 254.
preserve “civilized, white” Australians ways and “sounds.”

Joy Damousi has extended this argument in her study of the Australian reception of American ‘talkies’ and American accents. As Matthews comments, “Across the [interwar] period there was much skirmishing around issues of trade and tariffs – and a central field of resistance was culture.” Tracing the mobility of “commercial middlemen” who purveyed mass-produced modern technologies between Australia and America allows Matthews to capture “the global bricolage of things and ideas” that brought modern ways “of doing and seeing” into Australia.

Angela Woollacott demonstrated that the mass migration of skilled British workers to Australia alone in the early twentieth century was a two-way flow, allowing colonial Australians, particularly Australian women, to travel back to the metropole to try and make their fortunes in London.

Colonial modernity was constituted in such an interaction, Woollacott shows, with implications for the reproduction of racial hierarchy. “Whiteness travelled both discursively and materially between Australia and Britain, and its meanings were always reconfigured in these circulations.” In a recent work, Race and the Modern Exotic: Three ‘Australian’ Women on Global Display, Woollacott captures the central role played by popular culture and trans-national celebrity in the “production and negotiation” of whiteness. Colony and metropole are also at the forefront of the work of Kate Murphy, whose 2010 book Fears and Fantasies: Modernity, Gender and the Rural-Urban Divide used gender to trace the ‘Edenic’

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74 Mathews, Dance Hall & Picture Palace, p. 11.
75 Ibid, p. 11.
79 Woollacott, Race and the Modern Exotic, p. xvi.
and tragically miscalculated visions of 1920s and 1930s imperial economists. In a country
where the majority of the population was drawn to the cities and urban living, these imperial
economists were bent on creating in Australia an agrarian civilisation which would be a
primary producer for Britain, through British loans for soldier settlement, agricultural
subsidies, and a disinterest in manufacturing. Their policies (inspired by particular
conceptions of what made strong ‘masculine’ workers and ‘healthy’ feminine mothers in
colonial settings) made Australia’s Great Depression one of the world’s most severe
(unemployment reached 32 per cent in 1931). 80 In sum, these new histories have deepened our
understanding of the economic dislocations of the interwar period, and in doing so have
demonstrated the value of trans-national frames of analysis. This thesis seeks to extend this
work by using ‘salesmanship’ as an entry point into the relationship between economics and
the cultural domain of interwar colonialisms.

*Interwar Economics and the ‘Smiling Professionals’*

‘The Smiling Professionals’ is not an economic history. It does, however, track networks of
commercial contact and interaction that emerged in the interwar years. A brief look at the
economics of this period in Australia is necessary to demarcate the radical market shifts
*against* which sales people were required to operate. During the nineteenth century the
Australian market for manufactured goods – spread through six autonomous colonies – was
too small for cheap production. 81 Furthermore Australia was isolated from the world’s main
industrial centers and the demand in Europe and North America. 82 The smallness and

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80 Kate Murphy, *Fears and Fantasies*, pp. 189-190.
81 From the beginning of the century the Federal Government developed direct modes of economic intervention
in an attempt to protect a local market. Three Federal tariffs were introduced: the ‘First Federal Tariff’ of 1902,
the ‘Excise Tariff Act 1906’ and the Australian Industries ‘New Protection’ Act of 1906. E. A. Boehm,
82 Ibid, p. 185.
fragmentation of the Australian market contributed to a tendency for techniques and capital equipment in Australia to be simple and primitive and increased Australia’s dependence on Britain.\textsuperscript{83} Australian governments raised loans in London and invested in rural areas reflecting the antipathy of Australian planners to city and urban life, and the belief that Australia should be an agrarian primary producer for Empire. In line with the ideas of Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce, Australia would resist industrialisation, working, instead, to support the needs of the Empire. Australia would send Britain foodstuffs and raw materials, and receive in return farm migrants, capital and manufactured goods, as part of an agrarian vision Bruce dubbed ‘Men, Money and Markets.’\textsuperscript{84} The subsequent failure of these policies propelled many Australians into sales and service work in the cities.

In addition to accelerating the dispossession of Indigenous Australians from their land, ‘Men, Money and Markets’ belied an urban reality. Rural towns were – by the 1930s – actually declining while cities were expanding. In 1896 the white population of the combined Australian colonies was only three and a half million people, slightly larger than the population of the city of New York at that time. By 1933 that number had reached 6.6 million, with one fifth of that number living in Greater Sydney.\textsuperscript{85} The population shift between rural and urban areas was dramatic with both Sydney and Melbourne passing the two million mark in the early 1920s.\textsuperscript{86} Nevertheless subsidies for farm immigrants from Britain remained throughout the 1920s in an apparent misjudgment of Australian farming prospects. Such subsidies can be explained by a public decision to offer a particular mode of

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{85} Mathews, \textit{Dance Hall & Picture Palace}, p. 9.
compensation to war veterans, ‘soldier settlement’, as well as by the intervention of the British Government in seeking to contribute to a redistribution across the Empire of population and resources, through policies such as the ‘Thirty Million Pounds Agreement.’

Many of these public efforts were disastrous failures, and have only reluctantly and belatedly been acknowledged as such. The main outcome was to swell the populations of the towns and the cities even further, contributing to an expansion in services and manufacturing. In the minds of early twentieth century observers, this changing balance between city and country was most vividly symbolised by a phenomenon they called ‘the drift to the metropolis’, the steady leeching of youth and talent from the bush as young men and women abandoned farms and country towns. So while Australia’s policy makers imagined the inevitable spread of white settlers into Australia’s Indigenous spaces, the vast majority of the population was moving in the opposite direction. By 1929 only one in four Australians was employed in farming. The result was an increase and diversification of jobs in the city, dramatic industrial unrest (6.3 million working days were lost to strike action in 1919 alone) and a growth in what Chris Nottingham called “the insecure professions.” Many of those newly arrived in Sydney and Melbourne tried to start their own factories. Henry Ford’s My Life and Work sold 47,000 copies in Australia during the 1920s. By 1930 government factories accounted for over 15 per cent of the entire manufacturing workforce while the number of Australians working in manufacturing rose from 17 per cent in 1901 to 28 per cent...

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88 Marilyn Lake, The Limits of Hope, pp. 229-238.
89 Noel Butlin, Government and Capitalism, pp. 30-31.
in 1940. Women moved from domestic service to commercial and white-collar work. The number of women in ‘commercial’ professions went from 10.2 per cent in 1901 to 17.9 per cent in 1933 while the proportion specifically employed in sales work doubled, from 10.6 per cent in 1891 to 22.4 per cent in 1921. Meanwhile the percentage of women working in domestic service fell from 40.3 per cent in 1901 to 24.1 per cent in 1933. As Inara Walden and Victoria Haskins have shown, the resulting shortages in household servants were filled mostly by Aboriginal girls taken from missions (some as young as twelve) who worked for paltry wages that were largely withheld by the State.

From 1920 to 1929 Australian overseas debt to Britain rose from approximately £360 million, to £595 million, by far the largest debt of any dominion or colony in the Empire. Debt to Britain was a manifestation of a basic problem confronting Australian economic development. After WWI the relationship between Australia and Britain could no longer be regarded as one of the essential engines of Australian economic growth. The retreat from indebtedness to Britain began after 1932 along with the termination of large-scale migrant flows. Britain no longer functioned as a financial centre and Australian exporters had to find new markets for the goods Britain was no longer able to buy. This shift is borne out by Australian export figures. In 1901 65.8 per cent of Australian exports went to Britain, 6.4 per cent to the US and only 0.5 per cent to Japan and China. By 1929, 41.3 per cent of exports

63, 187.
These statistics are from Raelene Frances, The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria, 1880-1939 (Hong Kong: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 79.
N. J. Butlin, A. Barnard and J. J. Pincus, Government and Capitalism, p. 36.
went to Britain, 3.3 per cent to the US and 15 per cent to Japan and China.\textsuperscript{97} What Peter Cochrane calls Australia’s “belated industrialization” was, therefore a highly regional industrialisation, brought about by the very real economic failure of the interwar years, and the sourcing of Asian markets after 1932.\textsuperscript{98} But how did these economic changes affect life at the level of the personal and the everyday? This thesis aims to traverse the strange historical ground between economic and cultural change by utilising the archives of salespeople and promotional workers, individuals John Hartley has called “the smiling professionals.”\textsuperscript{99}

‘Smiling Professionals’, as I define them for interwar Australia, were salespeople who negotiated the new, mass scale of modern commercial encounter through scientific salesmanship and in the name of pleasure, entertainment, attractiveness and appeal. Most lacked both the financial and social ease of more established professions. Drawn predominantly from working class families – 45 per cent of Australians identified as working class in 1931– they saw promotional work as a form of social mobility.\textsuperscript{100}

This thesis examines the emergence of ‘smiling professionals’ in Australia in the early twentieth century and uses these professionals to investigate the larger economic and geopolitical shifts described above. I draw on both personal archives and institutional collections. Despite the large growth in sales jobs, commercial institutions and promotional work in Australia after WWI, these archives have tended to fall between the cracks of historical enquiry because they lie outside the specific concerns of labour, political and cultural

\textsuperscript{98} Peter Cochrane, \textit{Industrialization and Dependence, Australia’s Road to Economic Development 1870-1939} (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980).
\textsuperscript{100} Jill Julius Mathews, \textit{Dance Hall and Picture Palace}, p. 35.
In addition, some of these archives have only recently become available – for example, the Coles Myer Archive, by far the largest retail archive in Australia, was only open to researchers after it was acquired by the State Library of Victoria in 2006. Between 1950 and 1990 Myer gradually took over flagging companies like Grace Brothers, Fosseys and Farmers as well as regional chains like Penneys, Dalton Brothers and the Western Stores. Along with their companies Myer also took their archives, amassing 5000 boxes of uncatalogued material, much of it dealing with salesmanship, salesmanship training and promotion. These archives also document the large number of Australian salespeople and department store staff working in Asia in the 1920s and 1930s.

Promotional Culture and Australian History

This thesis defines promotional culture as a set of behaviours and logics produced by the emerging publicity and salesmanship industries in the early twentieth century that urged its adherents to apply scientific techniques of industrial efficiency and ‘self-salesmanship’ to their daily lives. ‘Promotional Culture’ was built on a new ideal of modern selfhood loosely described at the time as ‘personality’, a concept well documented by Warren I. Susman, Charles Ponce de Leon and Judith Hilkey for American history. Personality – as opposed it its earlier incarnation ‘character’ – offered up a strategic view of selfhood, one less concerned with stable, internal qualities and more with artful self-presentation. Kay Whitehead and Kirsten McKenzie have both taken up ‘personality’ as a useful way into the strange and rather

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fraught experience of Australian modernity through their work on film magazines and career advice for women in the 1920s. Whitehead found that by the 1920s processes of modernisation – namely the shift to service, sales and distribution work in Australian cities – were clearly evident in the career advice offered up in women’s magazines. Good ‘personality’ became “an essential” requirement for aspiring shop girls, radio announcers, girl clerks, mannequins, switch girls and commercial artists, hence the subsequent proliferation of popular literature on the subject. Following WWI commercial publications such as Rydges Business Journal and Tips on Good Salesmanship swamped Australian bookshops and newsstands all claiming to be the last word on ‘self-salesmanship.’

Kirsten Mckenzie unearthed a different form of promotional culture in her study of film magazines in 1920’s Sydney, revealing the clever ways publications such as Photoplayer and Picture Show smoothed the creases between aspiration and desire for Australian women by providing an affordable version of Hollywood glamour: film star dress-patterns on the cheap, old shoes made glamorous with do-it-yourself designs – advice on looking modern even if one couldn’t quite afford to. In this way modernity was tangible not through the ownership of new products, but rather “the possibilities of the self as product.” Writing about America in the 1920s, Elspeth Brown has called this idea “the commercialization of subjectivity.”

In contrast to American historiography – and apart from the work of Whitehead and Mckenzie

104 Ibid, p. 67.
107 Ibid, p. 129.
– there has been little interest to date in salesmanship and promotional culture in Australian history.\textsuperscript{109} While public historians and museum curators have regularly returned to the history of shopping (a major exhibition on the topic was held in Melbourne in 2010) salesmanship and sales philosophies have received little attention.\textsuperscript{110} Urban history – which spawned dozens of studies of promotional culture in America – has tended, in Australia, to privilege the gold-rush era of the 1860s-1880s, so-called ‘Marvellous Melbourne’, and has been decidedly Melbourne-based.\textsuperscript{111} Historical research touching on promotional culture and salesmanship was mostly completed in the 1980s on the fault lines of a shift from labour to feminist and then cultural history, and has since been fragmented between disciplines and methodological schools. One of the goals of this introduction is to bring this work together so we can delineate the field and suggest ways in which this promotional culture can open up Australian interwar history to trans-national and trans-colonial research.

Sales people have already inspired a body of scholarship published in the 1980s in the fields of labour and feminist history. For example, in Part Two I use the work of Gail Reekie whose 1987 PhD thesis, ‘Sydney’s Big Stores 1880-1930: Gender and Mass Marketing’ was published in 1993 as \textit{Temptations: Sex, Selling and the Department Store}. Reekie was part of a wider group of scholars who used scientific management and the theories expounded by

\textsuperscript{109} Substantial research has been completed into the history of advertising but not promotional culture or salesmanship. See, Robert Crawford, \textit{But Wait, There’s More: A History of Australian Advertising, 1900-2000} (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2008).


Frederick Winslow Taylor to explore the efficiency movement in interwar Australian workplaces. The movement for national efficiency was a reform movement led by bureaucrats, managers and professionals in Britain, the United States and Australia in the early twentieth century. Its basic tenet was that social problems could be eradicated by the organised application of science and expertise. As such it was a manifestation of the increasing legitimacy of science in this period, a legitimacy which facilitated the rise to dominance of scientific medicine. In ‘No More Amazons: Gender and Work Process in the Victorian Clothing Industry, 1890-1939,’ Raelene Frances showed how women’s ‘efficiency’, as observed by industrial psychologists in Melbourne’s textile factories in the 1920s, challenged male notions of female physical strength. Desley Deacon’s ‘Taylorism in the Home: The Medical Profession, the Infant Welfare Movement and the Deskilling of Women’ used the archives of the Infant Welfare Society to show how Taylorism was applied to motherhood and family life. Elite reformers in this period, Deacon argued, were strongly influenced by overseas movements (particularly American Progressivism) that sought to address social problems, especially those associated with the urban environment, through the application of modern technology and expert knowledge. The most intimate of processes – such as breast feeding – could be broken down into segments and scientifically managed, just like the factory workers on Taylor’s assembly lines.

113 Raelene Frances, Gender and Labour in Victoria, 1880-1939 (Hong Kong: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
The work of Reekie and others on the efficiency movement marked a transition point in Australian humanities research between Labour, feminist and cultural histories. Anne Curthoys cited Reekie as part of this transition in her critique of Labor history, ‘Labour History and Cultural Studies’, published in *Labour History* in 1994.116 The move away from Marxist and Structuralist methodologies in the late 1980s and early 1990s shaped up as a moment of conflict – drawing lines between ‘purist’ labour historians and others who were embracing gender studies and the linguistic turn.117 Some scholars peeled off into industrial relations and political science departments where they remain to this day. On the back of these conflicts Verity Burgmann controversially declared ‘the death of labour history’ at the Australian Historical Association Conference in 1990.118 The result is that work done by these researchers is often obscure, hard to access and marginal. I suggest there is much to be gained by re-visiting some of this scholarship, especially for historians interested in the cultural and representational features of colonial authority between the wars, and the imperial origins of modern capitalism.

*Australian Labour History*

Until the 1980s, the *Bulletin for the Society of Labor History* was arguably the most influential journal in Australian historiography. Started in 1962 by ANU academics Eric Fry, Ian Turner, Russel Ward, Brian Fitzpatrick and Bob Gollan, its articles were celebratory affirmations of working-class protest and organisations – strikes and riots, unions, employer-

117 Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates, ‘Is Labour History Dead?’, *Australian Historical Studies* 25, no. 100 (1993), pp. 470-481
union relations, Labour and radical organisations, biographies of Labour movement figures – in line with the Marxist politics of the time which saw the working class as the most significant force for social change. Labour History’s founding editors were influenced by “a desire to establish an [Australian] national cultural identity, which, against the claims of a British-oriented economic and cultural elite, asserted the egalitarian and anti-imperial values of the Australian people and aspired to a radical democratic Australia.” These historians showed little interest in the interwar years and their work remained staunchly national in orientation. The appropriate way to claim uniqueness for Australian history beyond empire was, it was felt, through class, and through a binary that pitted a bourgeoisie-British establishment history against a working class ‘authentic’ Australian one. The interwar years were placed squarely in the box of sycophantic empire patriotism and largely overlooked. The result was less research on the middle classes and middle-class culture than, for example, what was being written in Britain and America at the time. Evidence of modernity – urbanisation, industrialism, bureaucratisation, mass democracy – was of interest in so much as it promised the inevitable break away from British roots. Commercial leisure, white-collar workers and salespeople fell into the middle class category (read ‘British’ and derivative) and – unlike manual workers and bush workers – not celebrated as contributing to a unique ‘Australian-ness.’ They were also felt to be part of a mass culture traditionally associated since the Frankfurt school of the 1920s with the capitalist corruption of working-class politics. In the early 1970s the women’s movements, along with other social movements, had a “sudden and dramatic” impact on Labour history by politicising a wide range of

experiences and by addressing the labour of women and their relationship to the economy.\textsuperscript{121} Previously non-political locations (the workplace, the neighbourhood, the family, the home) were claimed for ‘politics’ in new ways taking politics away from conventional institutional arenas – “out of doors” as Geoff Eley and Keith Neild have written.\textsuperscript{122}

Feminist historians defined themselves against the narrowness of Labour history as it was then practised and understood.\textsuperscript{123} Due to the dominance of labour studies in Australia and the central place of class in celebratory histories of Australian nationalism and its bush-worker mythology, the turning away from ‘class’ to ‘gender’ in Australia was also a turning away from nationalist historiography and its large schemes of historical explanation. Scholars turned instead to micro-history, cultural history and oral history, where they could expose how “power is structured into the most basic and usually unspoken assumptions through which we perceive our relationship to the social world and the practices of the everyday.”\textsuperscript{124} Local histories of single urban neighbourhoods, factories or rural districts proliferated.\textsuperscript{125}

For Ann Curthoys, micro-history and cultural studies approaches failed to account for the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Kate Murphy, ‘Feminism and Political History’, \textit{Australian Journal of Politics and History} 56, no. 1 (2010), p. 21.
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\end{footnotesize}
colonial context of modern Australian history.\textsuperscript{126} By focusing on specific neighbourhoods and workplaces, the whole was sacrificed to the parts – the attempt to grasp human experience in its complexity paradoxically produced studies of increasingly narrow focus.\textsuperscript{127} Curthoys felt that a focus on labour – even if that focus included women workers – had blinded historians to race, and the colonial violence of Australia’s past.

Historians influenced by shifts brought about in post-colonial studies began reacting against the small scale of many cultural and urban histories, suggesting innovative ways of enriching the field while also keeping in mind the need to view power through quotidian and intimate encounters and relationships.\textsuperscript{128} The result was a growth in comparative studies, histories of colonial encounter and trans-national histories.\textsuperscript{129}

It is now well established that the production of colonial knowledge occurred, not only within the bounds of nation states and in relationship to their subject colonised populations, but also trans-nationally, across imperial centers.\textsuperscript{130} Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds’s \textit{Drawing the Global Colour Line} has shown how a racial lexicon forged in multiple colonial sites, especially the confrontational and violent sites of settler colonialism such as the Australian

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{130} C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Mathew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, ‘AHR Conversation: On Transnational History’, \textit{American Historical Review} 111, no. 5, (December 2006), pp. 1441-1464.
\end{itemize}
gold fields, shaped British and hence Euro/American conceptions of racial hierarchy. Isabel Hofmeyr has defined trans-national history as “a wide field of endeavour which seeks to understand the cultural meanings of geopolitical processes in a world shaped by imperial forces.” Trans-national histories have sought to break down simplistic distinctions between ‘global’ ‘world’ and ‘national’ histories by showing that global forces (networks, ideas, institutions, processes) do not ‘transcend’ nation states; they create them. Trans-national historians working in Australian history, such as Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott, have criticised the “homogenising impulse” behind national history, “Seeking what is held in common, it is tempting to smooth over the chequered world of difference, held by fragile bonds, that inevitably defines a society built primarily on migration.” Trans-national history, therefore, is preoccupied with highlighting the instability and historical contingency of the modern political terms which we often take for granted; “nation state” “Chinese trade”, “European progress.”

This turn towards trans-national history included new attention to the historical relationship between metropole and colonies, and metropole and dominion, but it has also raised new questions about modernity and colonialism. As Wendy Kozol put its, “Moving beyond an understanding of modernity as a Western process of progress and enlightenment, trans-national narratives reveal modernity to be a multifaceted process whereby political, economic,
and cultural exchanges occur in varied and often unpredictable ways.” Following Angela Woollacott, Tracey Banivanua Mar argues that Australian colonial modernity needs to be viewed trans-nationally and that one of the vehicles for doing this is ‘whiteness studies.’ A key reason, she argues, is that the idea of being white was essentially oppositional and defensive, and was deployed in relation to what it was not, more often than in relation to what it was; “whiteness was a riddle defined by colonial shadows.” As Paul Gilroy has argued, colonialism and racism gave those who experienced them a vantage point on modernity that starkly revealed the limits to economic progress, political participation and social inclusiveness.

In this thesis I attempt to implement trans-national methodologies for the interwar period in Australia. I suggest that salesmanship and promotional culture were colonial technologies of rule and I argue that examining salespeople personalises the economic policies behind colonial rule. One of the criticisms of cultural histories of colonialism is that they represent a turning away from class and political economy. As Woolacott puts it, “With the muting of political economy in recent colonial studies, class too has often been relegated to the sidelines, held constant, sometimes ignored.” Salespeople are useful in this regard because they inhabited the economic institutions of colonial regimes – from trading depots to railways and shop fronts. They were, therefore, present for moments of conflict over capital, labour conditions, unemployment, tariffs and boycotts. These moments of conflict were common to

140 Angela Woollacott, ‘Whiteness and the Imperial Turn’, in Katherine Ellinghaus, Jane Carey and Leigh Boucher, eds., Re-Orientating Whiteness, p. 27.
other capitalist contexts in the 1920s and 1930s, but were also specific to the cultural configurations of colonial situations. Theories of personal efficiency, self-salesmanship and promotional strategy, as they were applied to the lives of individuals, were cultural reflections of the economic conflicts brought about as colonial-era institutions modernised in the interwar period.

In the past few years Australian historians have returned to the efficiency movement documented by Labor historians in the 1980s. Lisa Featherstone found that Australian sex education in the 1920s and 1930s was allied to a growing faith in expert knowledge and modern rationality as a cure-all for social problems – including those associated with unwanted pregnancies and venereal disease. Kate Murphy found that progressive charitable societies such as the Travellers Aid Society of Victoria [TASV] (which met newly arrived country girls on city train platforms) used scientific efficiency to impose new constraints on young women through prescriptive training in personal efficiency and self-salesmanship. As Murphy argues, the influence of the efficiency movement in Australia shows “The role of philanthropic organization [like the YWCA and TASV] in shaping understandings of modernity”, which persists as “a relatively unexplored area of inquiry in Australian history.” Penny Edmonds and Victoria Haskins argue that ideals of efficiency worked within narratives of modernity to extend state control over Aboriginal people. “As the industrializing methods of the twentieth century infused all aspects of life and penetrated the

142 Kate Murphy, ‘The Emotional, the Weak, the Wayward, the Innocent, the Unsophisticated and the Misplaced Girl: the Travellers Aid Society of Victoria and the Country Girl in the 1920s’, Journal of Australian Studies 34, no. 4 (December 2010), pp. 447-457, 447.
modern home, the sporadic repressions of the nineteenth century colonial administrators in Aboriginal lives shifted in the early twentieth century to a mode characterized as bureaucratic custodianship in which private homes would provide a vital locale for new, technocratic forms of colonialism.\(^{144}\)

As I show in this thesis, progressive ideals of scientific management were present in salesmanship training courses and night schools (many of which were run by the YMCA and the YWCA) contributing to rise of ‘the smiling professions’ discussed in Part One and Two. These progressive ideas altered the character of Australian responses to British imperialism, as discussed in Part One and Three. The belief that scientific management was applicable to non-industrial activities like self-promotion and salesmanship spread because of the provision of cheaply available specialised training through correspondence classes, night schools and public lectures. Preparing for commercial success, salesmanship training manuals argued, depended on systematically assimilating scientific techniques and methods to maximise self-promotion. Just as important, the techniques themselves constituted a system or network of commercial customs that anyone could apply to their interpersonal encounters. “By careful training” wrote Adolph Johnson in his 1911 *Hints on Salesmanship* “you can make yourself what you will.” Without this system, experts emphasised, no modern salesperson succeeded. Thus promotional culture extended Frederick Winslow Taylor’s management principles beyond the industrial process so that the salesperson’s initiative could create new and hybrid forms of economic activity and cultural performance\(^{145}\). Learning from books and schools, aspiring salespeople need only to adopt a scientific point of view and they will acquire “those

qualities of body and mind that build up a strong personality which is capable of persuading and controlling the minds of others.”  

The Organization of the Thesis

At the heart of this thesis is the contention that Australian colonial modernity is best understood when positioned trans-nationally across different colonial contexts and that salespeople and promotional culture can provide a vehicle for doing this. Sources dealing with self-promotion and salesmanship produced between 1920 and 1939 allow us to view the economic and cultural changes of this period at an intimate level. They open up ways in which Australians translated ideologies of industrial efficiency and mass democracy into their everyday interactions and personal aspirations. Salespeople, after all, were uniquely concerned with how they were perceived by others. In their struggle to incorporate theories of efficiency into their personal encounters, they dramatised both the pre-occupations of modern social planners, bent on creating more efficient ‘white’ citizens, as well as the messiness of commercial transactions ‘face-to-face.’ Moreover, viewing the interwar years in Australia through the eyes of salespeople and through the register of promotional culture reveals hitherto unexamined links between Australia and the wider Asian region. During this period an underclass of Australian salespeople saw Asia as a commercial frontier (the ‘Eastern markets’), an element in a European imperial web of which Australia was but one part.  

Promotional literary-like business magazines encouraged Australians to ‘conquer’ these ‘Eastern markets.’ Examining the impact of this literature on the lives of individual Australians can suggest the importance of ‘promotional culture’ in shaping Australian cultural

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146 Adolph Johnson, Hints on Salesmanship (California: Stockdon, 1911), pp. 1-3.
as well as economic connections beyond national borders. These connections are opened up by a serious study of commercial archives and promotional literature in this period.

To trace the ways in which salespeople and promotional culture contributed to the development of Australian colonial modernity, this thesis is organised into three parts. Part One, ‘Politics and Promotional Culture’, contends that promotional culture and ideas about salesmanship played a central role in the representation and dissemination of political ideas in the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter one of this first section uses the personal archives of two political publicists to examine unexpected linkages between new forms of commercial media and Australian ‘high politics.’ It argues that the circuits of information flow made possible by publicity agents can illuminate a changing power dynamic between politicians and reporters that emerged in the 1920s and which would have lasting effects into the twentieth century. Chapter two is based on an archive of letters written to Australian politician Thomas Davies Mutch in the 1920s and 1930s and argues that promotional culture influenced the ways in which voters interacted with politicians. It traces the development of ‘political celebrity’ and draws attention to the history of compulsory voting in Australia. Chapter three examines Australian Trade Unions in the 1920s and 1930s through the lens of promotional culture. Analysing interwar unionism at this register reveals surprising connections between metropolitan Australian trade unions and Asian anti-colonial protest movements. For example, Australian union leaders used petitions from Asian factory workers to compare the conditions of Australian workplaces to those in places like Calcutta, Shanghai and Hong Kong.
Part Two, ‘Urban Modernity and Commercial Culture’, looks closely at cultural anxieties surrounding ‘salesmanship’ and commercial encounters. Chapter four, ‘Salesmanship in Department Stores,’ draws on the Coles Myer archive to analyse salesmanship training in Australian department stores. Documents preserved in this collection suggest that store managers borrowed from Church ritual, and particularly the evangelical gospel tradition, to train salespeople in ‘sincerity’ and ‘commercial morality.’ This was in response to customers’ complaints that their encounters with sales staff were becoming robotic, insincere and artificial. Chapter five, ‘Sensationalist Journalism and Commercialism’ traces the circulation of techniques of self-promotion and self-salesmanship through the interwar popular press. It captures the Australian response to commercialism through a boycott of the sensationalist newspaper *Beckett’s Budget* in the 1920s. Chapter six, ‘Commercial Travellers,’ analyses encounters between commercial travellers and their rural customers to explore the nexus between commercial culture and imperialist activity in Australia’s interior. It argues that commercial travelling was assigned meaning as an imperialist activity because the commodities circulated by travellers in remote parts of Australia were perceived as securing the domesticity and comfort of settler families. After the Great Depression sent many commercial travellers bankrupt, the figure of the failed travelling salesmen came to embody the conflict between the cultural projection of imperial ideas onto the Australian landscape and their economic impracticality.

Part Three, ‘Chinese Empires and Rural Geographies,’ re-creates commercial networks linking Australia to Asia. These commercial networks only become visible when we take the promotional and marketing literature produced in the interwar period in Australia seriously. Rather than attempt a comprehensive history of trans-national salesmanship networks here, I
focus on a number of discrete case studies of individual Australian salespeople and
promotional professionals who forged links between Australia and metropolitan China
between 1920 and 1939. I show how promotional culture draws historical attention to the
cultural reverberations caused by trade links between Australia and the Asian region. Chapter
seven, ‘Chinese Shopkeepers and Shop workers in Australia’, turns attention to the archives
left by Chinese shopkeepers and shop workers. It argues that the capitalist processes which
generated commercial development in Australia’s cities were interwoven with Asian traders
language sources as well as the archives of the Shanghai Municipal Police Force to examine
Chinese encounters with Australian traders and salespeople in metropolitan China. By using
Chinese language sources to examine Chinese attitudes towards Australians in interwar
Shanghai, we can begin to acknowledge the constitutive role of non-Western agency and
knowledge in shaping domestic settler histories. Indeed, as chapter eight shows, a cultural
history of Australian trade in Asia allows us to explore, in Anna Tsing’s words, the
“awkward, unequal, unstable and creative interconnection across difference” that occurs when
economic transactions take on cultural significance.147 Salespeople occupy the precise space
at which the material and the cultural interconnect. They show that commercial decisions in
colonial contexts were never purely ‘economic,’ but were always reflective of broader social
attitudes towards belonging and difference. A history of salesmanship positions commercial
culture as a central element in the articulation of Australian colonial modernity between 1920
and 1939.

Salesmanship training pageants, the writings of shop girls, the colonial-history parades staged by department store workers, the manuals for vacuum cleaner salesmen during the Great Depression, the memoirs of publicity agents, the notes of salesmanship correspondence school students, the Chinese-English phrasebooks kept by Chinese shopkeepers in Queensland or the diaries kept by commercial travellers passing through Shanghai or Hobart – all such sources document these larger processes. Salesmanship and promotional culture were sites where questions of ‘fake’ and ‘real’ personhood, of the sincere and the inauthentic, the bureaucratic and the intimate, the mass and the individual were played out. The crucial question is how we understand the civic life of an agrarian settler society on the Asian edge of the British imperial world as it moves into the modern, industrial and urban age. The influence of Asia as a region on Australian modernity is often overlooked in political-national histories which have written the history of interwar Australia through nationalist frames – as either staunchly ‘British’ or partially Americanised. As Angela Woollacott has argued, post-colonial and imperial histories have begun to re-orientate this perspective “to consider how Australianness was formed in relation to both the British metropole and the Asia-Pacific region.”148 This thesis builds on this work in order to de-center this Anglo-American story and personalise the broader processes of industrial mass production and urbanisation which led to Australia’s colonial modernity. The history of Australia’s economic relations with Asia has traditionally been the domain of diplomatic histories that focus largely on processes of political decision-making. Following Australian salespeople to Asia provides a counterpoint to these histories. The economically motivated mobility of salespeople built networks between Australia and Asia. Information that travelled along these networks (about Chinese anti-colonial boycotts of Australian products, for example) moulded how Australians

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conceptualised their place in the world. In this way, salespeople exemplify overlaps between Australian and Asian commercial and colonial spaces in the 1920s and 1930s. Drawing on the archive of promotional culture produced in the interwar years in Australia I argue that salespeople can tell us something new about the old concerns and paradoxes of mass culture.
Part I
Politics and Promotional Culture

Chapter 1
Political Publicists

Publicity agents were active in Australia from the 1920s onwards. The term ‘public relations counselor’ was coined in 1922.¹ This chapter uses the personal archives of two political publicists in order to re-examine the effects of promotional culture on Australian politics. Histories of interwar Australia have been preoccupied with the chaotic parliamentary politics of the 1920s and of the Depression years when recurrent industrial disputes and the emergence of pro-empire paramilitary organisations led to street violence and public disorder. Following publicity agents through this period exposes unexpected linkages between new forms of commercial media and Australian ‘high politics.’ Publicity agents forged clandestine circuits of information between individuals, and between commercial and political institutions, at a time when voting practices were changing in Australia due to the introduction of compulsory voting in successive states in 1924. Using the mobility of these agents as a vantage point from which to view the politics of the interwar years can illuminate a changing power dynamic between politicians and reporters that emerged in the 1920s, and which would have lasting effects into the twentieth century. Publicity agents provide a new way to examine the old themes of class-war, unemployment and empire patriotism common to interwar scholarship.

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Voltaire Molesworth, publicity agent, had been waiting outside Sydney’s State Parliament. Having left state politics in 1924, he was barred entry while his ex-colleagues celebrated Christmas Eve 1925 at the parliamentary bar. He had, however, exercised an alternative kind of influence since his expulsion, preparing a ‘dirt file’ on an old enemy. Scouring family trees and council records, interviewing neighbours, staking out the houses of would-be-mistresses, avoiding rabid dogs as he sized up properties hidden in bank records passed on to him by an associate called ‘Stalker’, he had, he thought, got what he needed. This had been hard work helped neither by his alcoholism nor his heart murmur. Why Molesworth was drawn to Parliament on Christmas Eve is unclear, although he had been known, in recent months, to regularly burst into the chamber, leaving short interruptions in Hansard.²

Ignoring convention Molesworth entered the building (“as should be my privilege”) drank thirstily at the bar (“I was invited”) and confronted the Premier John Thomas Lang in the toilet. It was here, Molesworth explained to an assault tribunal six months later, that violence broke out, “I said to him ‘You’ve turned out such a trotter that I’m sorry I saved you because you had deserted your wife and kids and lived with that single woman in Bridge Road Homebush until your illegitimate child was born.’”³ The Premier’s chauffeur, along with other members of the NSW Labor Party rushed at him, beating him to the ground. Molesworth retaliated and was forced onto the verandah. Once again, he found himself outside the building. The dirt file – and news of “Vol’s stunt” – was published the following

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² Voltaire Molesworth Papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 71, Box 5.
The idea of a ‘public’ in Australia took on potent new meaning in 1924, when voting became compulsory nationwide. The years following this event saw expenditure on government communication soar as the Depression hit and politicians struggled to explain economic policy to an impoverished, agitating constituency. Enterprising individuals subsequently took advantage of the porous boundary of the parliamentary doorway, negotiating between official forms of governance and the external, slippery power of public opinion. Migrating from journalism, theater and even politics, publicity agents emerged in the 1920s, often with one foot in their old profession. Usually doubling as reporters and sensitive to norms of metropolitan hard-drinking masculinity, ‘public relations counselors’ were added to Australian politics, dramatizing the opposing political identities of left or right in pamphlets, posters, speeches, radio scripts and cinema advertisements. Publicists steered political communication away from a social constituency which ‘could be numbered or named’ towards an indefinite audience of ‘consumer citizens.’ While laying claim to ‘inside knowledge’ these men were usually on the outside of caucus, standing – literally – in the corridors of power and pressuring members through threats, stunts or bribery. Their archives

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allow us to view ‘high politics’ in the interwar years at the level of the everyday.

This chapter examines the personal papers of two political publicists operating between 1924 and 1935. It traces their careers in order to investigate the ways in which political parties courted Australian voters in the interwar period. Voltaire Molesworth worked as a Labor politician and a journalist before becoming a publicist for the American film industry in Australia, the conservative Bruce-Page Government and the United Australia Party.⁷ His equivalent in left wing politics was John Harvey Crothers Sleeman who promoted Labor policies through human interest journalism and wrote a biography of Premier J. T. Lang in 1933.⁸ Both men lacked institutional education and were self-taught – known for hoarding books and sprouting scraps of paper from suit pockets and briefcases, some of which has survived as personal archives.⁹

In the absence of opinion polls political publicists were the public for the parliament. Claiming to represent ‘popular feeling’, these entrepreneurs wielded disproportionate influence over individual parliamentarians. While the techniques used by publicists to sell policy cannot uncover ‘what the voters wanted’, they can indicate what politicians thought the voters wanted. Publicity lays open, for clearer viewing, government visions of ‘the public’, and the impact of these visions on legislative decision-making, indicating a new kind of voter engagement in the interwar years, as politicians became accessible to voters through consumer culture; films, radio, magazines, celebrity.

⁷ Molesworth Papers, MLMSS 71, 243, 398.
⁹ Molesworth Papers, MS 71, 243, 398.
The ‘Manufacture of Consent’

Recent theory has called for an historicising of ‘publics.’ This idea, wrote Jurgen Habermas, is a kind of “practical fiction” a cultural form with a complex past. “How” asked Walter Lippmann in 1922, “in the language of democratic theory do great numbers of people feeling each so privately about so abstract a picture develop any common will?” Academic interventions into the history of public opinion have questioned who or what counted as ‘public’ and much of this work revolves around definitions of access and marginality. The styles by which people enter public view are themselves contested, “The ability to bracket one’s embodiment and status is not simply ‘making public use of one’s reason’; it is a strategy of self promotion, profoundly linked to education and dominant forms of masculinity.” Being part of the ‘common will’ and contributing to the articulation of a ‘public’ was, therefore, tightly linked to class and gender. ‘Public relations counselors’ provided a professionalised service for this ‘bracketing’ of self-value. Whether such promotion was successful proved largely irrelevant; publicists sold the promise of transformation, rather than the transformation itself.

Like ‘publics’, ‘publicity’ too is subject to blurred definition, meaning not merely publicness or openness but the use of the media; “an instrumental publicness associated most with advertising and public relations.” Political publicity, as Noel Turnbull explained, is the fusion between commercial marketing and political activity or what the Australian Institute of

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12 Sara Maza, ‘Women, the Bourgeoisie and the Public Sphere: A Response to Daniel Gordon and David Bell’, in French Historical Studies 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1992), pp. 935-950.
Public Relations calls “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between [the government] and its public(s).”¹⁵ For Karla Gower, publicity is not advertising: “advertising promotes products and services, public relations promotes images and concepts.”¹⁶

The modern study of public opinion is credited to Lippmann, a Harvard-based social scientist with a pessimistic view of media and democracy who made the term ‘public opinion’ famous in the 1920s, with the release in America of his work of the same name.¹⁷ His study outlined a disconcerting formula: the media creates “pictures inside people’s heads, by picking samples and treating them as typical.”¹⁸ This ‘subjective reality’ scrambles rational judgment allowing powerful interests (like governments) to “manufacture consent” through “an art of persuasion.”¹⁹ It is now a cliché to talk of propaganda techniques or brainwashing but in the 1920s Lippmann’s arguments were new and spoke directly to concerns over the rise of dictatorships and personality cults, associated most closely with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

Lippmann’s analysis of audience control – the ‘manufacture of consent’ – articulated a growing belief among journalists that ordinary people were easily manipulated by the violent rhetoric of demagogues; unscrupulous and populist politicians, literally ‘leaders of the mob’

¹⁸ Lippmann, Public Opinion, p. 54.
¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 54-55.
who cultivated the mystique of their own personalities in order to maintain power. Applied in the United States to left-leaning reformers such as Franklin D. Roosevelt demagoguery has persisted as an explanatory framework in Australian historiography, usually summoned to rationalise the public devotion inspired by NSW Labor Premier John Thomas Lang between 1929 and 1931 (dubbed Langism). Lang’s rise from slum-dwelling urchin to political strongman (canonised as a boxer and as ‘Greater than Lenin’ in campaign posters and streetscape graffiti) resonated with city dwellers on the cusp of achieving middle-class status but thwarted by the depression. Lang often drew crowds of up to half a million to political rallies and these numbers were analysed as an opinion poll that worried conservatives who feared outbreaks of violence among the unemployed, and inspired supporters hopeful for respite from poverty through socialism (‘the socialisation of industry’ as ALP delegates put it in 1922).

Bede Nairn, in a preamble to his biography of Lang, lists two definitions, central, he implies to Lang’s attraction for voters, “demagoguery: referring to the style and form Lang used to attract backing on non-rational ground” and “populism: appealing to the fears of the numerous individuals being hurt and disadvantaged by the depression.” In this chapter I suggest that publicity agents can expand our understanding of this kind of ‘populist’ political

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culture. In order to explore why voters engaged with populist politics between the wars it is necessary to acknowledge the labyrinthine array of structures and individuals operating between leaders and citizens; the party, the media and the publicists.

For Walter Lippmann, public opinion was always mediated. “The facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known.”\textsuperscript{25} He dedicated a chapter of \textit{Public Opinion} to publicity agents “one of the various artisans who help the public visualize ideas.”\textsuperscript{26} The publicist was a new technology improving a faulty machine: “Whether they [the people] wish to secure publicity, or to avoid it, the exercise of discretion cannot be left to reporters. It is safer to hire a press agent who stands between the group and the newspaper.”\textsuperscript{27} Although as Lippmann admitted, “Having hired this agent, the temptation to exploit his strategic position is very great.”\textsuperscript{28}

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Political parties displayed distrust towards the electorate during the 1925 Federal election. Once voting became compulsory both the Labor and Nationalist Party walked with trepidation on new electioneering ground, unsure of old formulas and loyalties.\textsuperscript{29} “Labor people dare take no risks because anything is possible when even the most stupid sections of

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, p. 217.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, p. 218.
electors are compelled to take the poll,” read one Trades Hall pamphlet. Political campaigning was generalised in the 1920s and the expansion of the franchise – the acknowledgment of the woman’s vote and the youth vote – meant that fewer Australians came into direct contact with political candidates. With literacy rates estimated at 100 per cent in 1925 political debate was increasingly circulated through the morning and evening papers; consumed at the breakfast table, read free of charge in glass display cases on street corners, or picked up on trams and trains.

Few truly national broadsheets existed and Sydney papers dominated with The Sydney Morning Herald distributing 200,000 copies by 1930. But it was the so-called sensationalist press that far outnumbered more established papers in circulation figures – often by a factor of four to one. Such newspapers, modeled on England’s Daily Mail such as Smiths Weekly and Truth, serviced up to 600,000 readers. Embracing all the hallmarks of new journalism, news in these publications was packaged up into small portions, and a premium placed on attractive presentation. While Victorian papers catered for leisured readers, printing dense copies of Hansard uninterrupted by pictures or headlines, sensationalist papers were driven by the need to both attract and entertain for brief intervals, cutting down on the parliamentary in

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30 Trades Hall pamphlet, Molesworth Papers, MLMSS 398.
34 Ibid, p. 20. Walker writes that the success of these new players in the newspaper market was achieved through “unabashed sensationalism.” See also: George Blakie, Remember Smiths Weekly?: A Biography of an Uninhibited National Newspaper (Adelaide: Rigby, 1966).
favour of the anecdotal. As Laura Beers has observed, this reduction of political coverage awarded greater influence to editors and publishers who had the power to pick and choose between competing news items thereby practising what Lippmann called “an agenda setting power” – less politics and more carefully selected.

Voltaire Molesworth was hired by the Packer family in 1919 in the role of chief political correspondent for Smith’s Weekly, while still an active member of the Labor Caucus. Journalist Eric Baume remembered being introduced to a sandy haired “Voltaire Molesworth MLA” in the main reporters’ room, and being told “Cover Parliament today. I’ll probably make a good speech.” The son of a wharf labourer from Sydney’s working-class suburb of Balmain, Voltaire had spent the early years of his life in the middle of a socialist experiment as his parents were part of William Lane’s ‘New Australia’ settlement in Paraguay. After a truncated primary education he became a warehouse clerk in Sydney and wrote freelance articles on industrial affairs. He met J. T. Lang in 1913 as a delegate on the Nepean Federal Labor Council and promoted Lang’s campaign for election, knocking on doors and printing pamphlets, work that earned him a gracious thank you letter from Lang in 1914, a piece of paper which he guarded closely, and which acquired ironic overtones in the 1920s, when the two men became passionate enemies.

At Smith’s Weekly Molesworth pushed stunt journalism to new levels. Arriving at crime scenes before the police he requisitioned the suicide notes of ex-servicemen to publish in the

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37 Beers, Selling Socialism, p. 6.
38 Baume, I Lived these Years, p. 106.
39 Molesworth Papers, MS 71, 398.
40 Molesworth Papers MS 71 Box 1.
morning edition, removed family photos from mantelpieces to illustrate abduction stories and “climbed through the window of a murdered woman’s flat” to avoid detectives and interview her landlady.\textsuperscript{41} On 23 November 1925, Molesworth was forced out of the Labor Party by Lang supporters and called an “enemy of the working class” for his work in the “capitalist press.”\textsuperscript{42} Around this time he began travelling frequently to the outer reaches of Sydney’s southern suburbs to collect his ‘Lang dirt file’, as scrappy notes in his archive record. “This afternoon VM went to Concord Council Chambers where the rate books were searched and particulars of the property of Miss. Julia McNamara obtained.”\textsuperscript{43} Julia McNamara was Lang’s sister-in-law, as one helpful neighbour explained. “Her name is Miss McNamara and is said to be a sister in law of Mr. Lang the Premier. He is a very frequent visitor when he is in Sydney. Spends every night there in fact and weekends … the gossip is that [the child there] is Mr. Lang’s and she is the mother.” Visiting the site Molesworth took detailed notes “it is the last house on the water from Uhrs’ Point adjoining the public reserve … it is neglected and the old ferry wharf is used as a mooring place for Greek Fisherman … a savage dog runs loose in the grounds.”\textsuperscript{44}

Molesworth’s trespass on Miss McNamara’s privacy, his eager sifting of the detritus of her life (the gossip of neighbours, the fishermen’s moorings, the neglected yard) was proof of a public hunger for information outside of Parliamentary caucus as a growing group of Australians pledged an abiding and awe-filled loyalty to Jack Lang. Molesworth’s very presence at the house of Lang’s sister-in-law was itself indicative that Lang had moved from Labor leader to a hero-celebrity, and that his emotional life – no matter how dimly glimpsed –

\textsuperscript{41} Baume, \textit{I Lived these Years}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{42} Molesworth Papers MS 71 Box 1.
\textsuperscript{43} Molesworth Papers MS 71 Box 5.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, Box 5.
was worth as much if not more to voters than his politics and policies. This work was creating the cult of the ‘Big Fella’ (Lang’s folk-hero pseudonym) making Lang the tipping point in a conversation about class and social inequality which continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s in Australia.

Charles Ponce de Leon has demonstrated that by the early twentieth century, human interest journalism was closely bound up with the rise of the publicity industry, forcing a type of tension between exposure and secrecy, while public figures and media professionals battled to manage the dividing arms of interwar communication options. This focus on uncovering the private lives of celebrities (and politicians) was related to “changing conceptions of the self, theories of evolution and psychology, and concerns about appearance and self-promotion” fuelled by 1920’s catch-cries calling for the freedom to fashion one’s own identity and pursue the new economic and social opportunities made possible by modernisation. Lang’s greatest weapon against conservative government was his claim to class authenticity, to first-hand knowledge of poverty and slum life, credentials which allowed him to work social inequalities into clear moral and cultural differences between groups of voters; “they (the rich) can never appreciate what you and I know to be the painful reality of poverty.” What Molesworth tried to do at Uhrs point was puncture authenticity with smear, searching for anomalies and contradictions in the rhythms of Lang’s personal life to position against the wholesome, working-class imagery projected by the leader.

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45 Ponce de Leon, Human Interest Journalism, pp. 42- 75.
Conservative Politics

While the Lang Labor Government was in power in NSW, the Conservative Bruce-Page administration was in charge of the country, and attempted – sometimes ineffectually – to wield Federal power from Melbourne and eventually, as of 1927, from Canberra. While it is impossible to gauge the impact of Molesworth’s anti-Lang campaign on Australian readers, his work was clearly taken seriously in conservative quarters and in late 1925 he was recruited by staff in the Department of Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce to work as a
government publicist.\textsuperscript{47} Having published his file on Lang, been arrested for assault he had burnt his bridges in the Labor party.\textsuperscript{48}

Along with Nationalist Party member Archdale Parkhill, Molesworth scripted a short silent film on a ‘humorous base’ to help in ‘educating the public in the fact that voting is compulsory on this occasion.’\textsuperscript{49} The resulting product – dubbed ‘Jack and Jill’ – was shot by Paramount Pictures and sent free of charge to over 6000 cinemas nation wide, “to show on Saturday night, and every other night you are showing this week, it being the last week of the election campaign.”\textsuperscript{50} Some managers, such as Clarence Taylor of Monarch Empire Pictures in Dubbo, refused and replied ‘I am sorry but we will not be showing any TRAILORS or PICTURE SLIDES for either side, or any political matter.’\textsuperscript{51}

The plot of ‘Jack and Jill’ – captured in a script preserved in Molesworth’s papers – involved an argument between a young couple “boy pleading, girl angry.” While Jack understands the need to vote “show date 14 November 1925” Jill wants to go and picnic “Hang your election! What is it all about anyway?” Jack patiently takes Jill down to the harbor “Sydney Harbor is the sixth greatest port in the British Empire…when the ships run.” As Jack goes on to explain, due to strikers Australian goods (butter, eggs, wheat, wool) are all ‘chocking up’ unable to be exported, a situation Bruce had promised to change “show strikers leaving factory.” Jill “sighing” “I wish the strikers would let the women vote.” The scene switches to a “typical sheep muster in a field of wheat” while Jill asks “What is in Bruce’s … er .. what do you call

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Molesworth Papers, MS 71, Box 9.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Archdale Parkhill to H. E. Pratton, Minister for Trade, 2 October 1925, Molesworth Papers, MS 71 Box 9.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Molesworth Papers, MS 71 Box 9.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Molesworth Papers, MS 71, Box 6.
\end{itemize}
it – I know – policy speech?”52 The resulting ‘happy ending’ followed Jack and Jill joyfully embracing the pleasures of Bruce’s imaginary Australia (as explained in policy details at the bottom of the screen) buying a car and getting engaged, declaring “righto, vote national” as the film faded to black.

Here was prosperity – and a chance to embrace the consumerist expressions of family available to a modernising society – not through unionism, but through seamless connect to empire, goods flowing freely along channels unhindered by strikes and ‘blockages.”53 Jack was an empire man not a working man, seeing beyond petty local squabbles to the greater good of a larger geography, and benefiting financially from such a vision; Molesworth’s translations of Bruce’s economic logic joined cars to commerce and country and finally coupledom and marriage. Costing over £650 just to print and disseminate, ‘Jack and Jill’ was indicative of a new Conservative interest in experimental public relations, as well the relative wealth of Nationalist party coffers. Lacking financial resources to match, the Labor Party fought back weakly through its flagging broadsheet, the Labor Daily: “We understand that a picture with the high sounding name of “Jack and Jill”– part of the great Nationalist propaganda campaign – will be released to feed the starved intellects in country sections before the election … but it yet remains to be seen how the great body of workers will view the action.”54 As a correspondent in the know added acidly, “The idea would appear to have originated with some new adherent to the Nationalist fold.”55

52 Sally Young notes, “this is a very patronising portrayal!”, Young, The Persuaders, p. 219.
55 Ibid.
Publicity for Empire

As Victoria de Grazia has shown, interwar politicians used the Hollywood film format to transform “if not the basic substance of political power, then at least the style in which it appeared.”⁵⁶ Cinema attendance in Australia was at 110 million in 1926, and one in three Australians attended movies at least once a week; here was a reliable way “to persuade the new electorate to enter the thought-world inhabited by politicians.”⁵⁷ The first political films made in Australia were, however, not intended for local audiences, but were shipped to Britain. Between 1922 and 1929 the Nationalist Government spent over two million pounds a year on publicity in England (10 times the amount spent in Australia) and part of this budget was employed to make the ‘Australia Day-by-Day’ Film series.⁵⁸ Titles like, White Wings on Sydney Harbor, Fruit Canning in Australia and Playground of the Seafolk were shown from Bournemouth to Manchester, accompanied by a traveling publicity team who handed out free samples of Australian products, “The scheme provides for the total distribution of 300,000 balloons and 75,000 sultana samples.”⁵⁹

The British Government had established the Empire Marketing Board in 1924 to promote empire goods to British consumers and Bruce created the Australian “Development and

Migration Commission” to complement this work. The Commission worked to legitimise colonisation; bringing in up to 700,000 British immigrants a year to ‘develop’ Australian land, and searching for new ways to reinforce empire through the marketing of Australian goods, a marriage of race patriotism and business philosophy Stuart Ward has called “sentiment and self-interest.” An annual Empire Shopping Week aimed to solidify this link between consumerism and race loyalty, and acknowledge the role of woman (‘the great majority of purchasers and consumers’) in cementing colonial bonds.

Australians were assured that their efforts did not go unreciprocated. In English factories, they were informed, posters had been put up telling workers “How can you ensure future contracts from Australia? By buying and getting your wife to buy the goods Australia is sending us.” H. W. Gepp, head of Development and Migration, oversaw the manning of 5,000 displays and the printing of 40,000 pamphlets: “To buy within the Empire is to give a fellow worker of our race an opportunity to buy more of our own surplus products. To purchase from our kith and kin is the commonsense statesmanship of the man in the street.” In short, what Gepp wanted was the democratisation of economic policy emphasising political participation through consumerism. A lofty aim yet undermined by the stark disconnect between the promises of empire publicity and the reality of Australia’s economic conditions. In truth the man in the Dominion street had a raw deal from the British Government. Australia granted generous preferences for British goods in the Australian market in 1908 but did not receive

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63 J. Williams to H.W. Gepp, Empire Shopping Week Victoria 22 May 1929, NAA A786/2/176/3.
the same treatment in return. At the 1923 Imperial Conference in London a *Punch* cartoon played on this struggle for markets, commenting “Australia: fobbed off for a handful of currants.”

Supplied by 34,000 pounds from the British Government’s ‘Three Million Pounds Agreement’ the Commission was open to expensive proposals, such as suggestions received from T J Jenson of Film ads in 1922: “A Rough Idea for a lead for Immigration Scenarios.” This film opened showing Captain Cook on a pedestal with a telescope in his hands. As he rose from the bottom of the screen, his ship sailed across “as a vision.” Captain Cook raised his telescope to sweep the horizon while a map of Australia formed itself with the Georgian columns of Melbourne’s Parliament House filling the space, giving way to the wording “From the landing of Captain Cook to the present time there are only 20,810 square miles under cultivation out of a total of 2,974,581 square miles.” A tiny portion of the map was circled to show the small size of the area under cultivation, “The Prime Minister’s message to the people of Australia.” This lettering was followed by an image of Bruce seated at a table, and then by a close up of his hand writing across a white, empty map of Australia, “a blank slate.”

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64 Ward, *Sentiment and Self Interest*, p. 95.
65 *Punch* (17 October 1923).
66 ‘A Rough Idea for a Lead in Immigration Scenarios’, T. J. Jenson to the Secretary, Prime Minister’s Department, 23 March 1922, NAA A457/1/H532/5.
Figure 1.2 ‘A Rough Idea for a Lead in Immigration Scenarios’, 23 March 1922, NAA A457/1/H532/5.
Shown to both British and Australian audiences, ‘A Rough Lead for an Immigration Scenario’ visually articulated White Australia replacing a continent populated by Indigenous Australians with an imperial vision dependent on ‘newness’ suggesting to film goers an urgent need to fill an ominous “nothingness.” And this nothingness was to be addressed by their prime minister whose hand was suspended over the empty map, paternally poised to direct and manage the progress of civilisation. A note of urgency and doubt crept through departmental correspondence about the film, as if Australia had somehow failed to live up to the dreams of the early colonists. As Annamaria Motrescu’s work on this genre of Australian cinema has shown, “present across such films were thematic patterns and visual tropes indicative of British cultural unity, workforce networks and (white) racial supremacy as well as of Australian progressive economic policies, political loyalties, settler myths and, most importantly of an emerging autonomous identity.”

In a 1921 Commission pamphlet Developing a White Continent, H. W. Gepp urged Australia “not to throw open her doors to all (careless of the wretched outcome) but to carefully prepare for the coming of specially invited relatives, whose vision of life and Empire is also our own.” The problem was these ‘specially invited relatives’ had grown distant after the traumatic upheavals of WWI. The more Bruce searched for a spotlight for Australia within the British gaze, the more distracted and dismissive this gaze became; Britain was beginning the slow process of contracting attention away from the outer reaches of empire, and onto the structural, economic and social challenges of rebuilding after war. Worse, the little publicity

67 ‘A Policy for Capital’, by Goerge Pearce and sent to H. W. Gepp, 29 November 1929, NAA A786/2, A786/1.
68 Ibid.
Australia did receive in the British Press was, it was felt, mostly unflattering; floods, droughts and the “distortion of facts” outweighed, as Gepp put it, “our efforts to enter into communication with the financial and trading centers of the world” armed at times “I feel, with nothing but postcards!” Bruce agreed: “We cannot afford to have the center from which we draw the credit necessary for development subject to these ‘hot and cold’ fits due to a fundamental lack of knowledge of Australian conditions.”

Australia’s public debt grew from 360 million in 1920 to 595 million in 1929 and much of the money was raised from British bondholders in London. W. Arthur Lewis has called the twenties “an era of dislocation and economic experiment”, as governments launched unprecedented public projects to recover from the war, stop inflation, and halt unemployment. In Australia money was risked on rural development with British immigrants and ex-servicemen placed on land settlements, often little more than “clouds of sand”, as the wife of one soldier settler remarked. In order to expand the range of Australian primary goods (but not step on the toes of British manufacturers), grand experiments were launched into Australian dried fruit and peanut farming, as “Sultanas of Australia” billboards were put up in British cities, despite scientific studies which indicated these products were unsuitable for the majority of Australia’s terrain. These ambitious interwar empire projects were, according to Noel Butlin, “mostly disastrous failures, only reluctantly and belatedly

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72 Publicity in the United Kingdom, 15 December 1927, NAA CP211/2/1/58/9; H.W. Gepp to F. L. McDougall, Publicity British Press Statements Australia, 2 April 1928, NAA CP 211/2/1/68/77.
recognized as such” leaving a humanitarian crisis in their wake as soldiers and immigrants abandoned their debt-ridden properties to find work in the already overpopulated cities.\textsuperscript{76} Many found this difficult; by 1927 Australia was in the midst of an economic depression.\textsuperscript{77}


\textit{J. H. C. Sleeman and ‘Chasing Economic Rainbows’}

The Nationalists won a comfortable victory in 1925 – taking seven seats from Federal Labor – but the economic philosophy underlying publicity like ‘Jack and Jill’ contained the very policies which would lead to the spectacular collapse of conservative government in 1929; an undiversified economy acting as a primary producer for Great Britain, leaving Australia vulnerable to drastic fluctuations in wheat and wool prices, both of which plummeted in 1927.\textsuperscript{78} If the teenage Elsie Harrison had been in the audience for ‘Jack and Jill’ in November 1925 she may very well have dreamed of owning her own home and buying a car in ‘Bruce’s Australia’ – despite the improbability of these aspirations ever coming to be. In 1927 Elsie would leave school at fourteen to support her parents – her Father’s income as a council garbage collector failing to cover rising prices. Finding employment in a hosiery factory she worked six days a week and was paid fourteen shillings and six pence. Ten shillings went to her parents for board which left her with four shillings and six pence which was, Elsie pointed out “nothing, a pair of shoes alone cost 10 shillings.” By the end of 1927 her wage had dropped to thirteen shillings and three pence and her working hours had increased from forty-four to forty-eight.\textsuperscript{79} This fall was blamed on the Bruce Government which had tried to dismantle the arbitration system in 1929 and had lowered the basic wage, forcing a pivotal

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. p. 35.
moment which saw voters draw a direct line from their falling wages and conditions to Bruce and to England, whose gentlemanly reassurances of empire unity had failed to hold their jobs, or their security. Cupping this anger, and angling its direction, Labor bubbled with suggestive new policies.

On 23 October 1930, J. T. Lang spoke at the Grand Opera House near Central Railway station in Sydney. The hall was so full people spilled out into Belmore Park. Elsie was one of 15,000 who stood in the rain until 11pm as a loud speaker delivered Lang’s voice, distorted and jangly out into the cold, wet open:

Never forget that ... in all times and places the Labor movement requires of you that you shall be fearless in your championship of the downtrodden poor. When the citadel of unionism is assailed remember that it is one of your inalienable rights to resist in legitimate combinations the crushing despotism of syndicates and monopolistic rings … If Conservative government is returned all you can expect is …

(An interjector): ‘The Gap!’ (laughter)
Lang: ‘Better the gap than three more years of the Nationals.’

Proving a wry, if theatrical, awareness of his crowd’s fatalistic view of the future, Lang went on to promise what amounted to a socialisation platform; despite the depression he would refuse to cut wages, in fact, he would increase welfare, regulate finance, and socialise industry. To fund more jobs, the “socialization of credit” would enable Australians to repudiate interest on British war loans, eluding the “penny-gamblers” and the “financial-leeches.” J. B. Chifley, writing about this speech in 1942, was dismissive: “Mr. Lang spent his time tickling the ears of the unfortunate sections of the people who were themselves so

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80 Nairn, The ‘Big Fella’, p. 173; This policy in full: “The securing of the full results of their industry to all producers by the collective ownership of monopolies, and the extension of the industrial and economic functions of the State and Municipality“, Sleeman, Life of JT Lang, p 108. See also, Lang Papers, NAA 321/5/765 and Jack Beasley Papers, NAA 329/8. Jack Beasley (known as ‘Stabber Jack’) was a prominent member of Lang’s entourage after 1929.
distracted by their positions that they were prepared to chase any economic rainbow.”

Two days later Labor won the NSW State election by the biggest margin in the party’s history, marking the culmination of ‘Langism’, that Robert Cooksey would call “the most popular political movement in Australian history.” This landslide followed an earlier victory; in October 1929 the Scullin Labor Government won the Federal election with a majority of 46 seats.

Frank Cain has recently called Langism a “moment of hysteria” but such a description fails to interrogate the dynamic between Lang and his audience and trivialises the engagement of individual adherents to the campaign. Lang’s publicists negotiated his contact with voters and produced literature arming him with a web of cultural motifs which he drew upon to make sense of the economic collapse between 1929 and 1931 and to maintain a rapport with his unemployed and disenfranchised support base. While this work cannot voice the political sentiments of individuals, it can open up the space between leader and citizen, a space vulnerable to manipulation, but also charged with the emotional investment of depression-era aspirations for change, as criticisms of free flowing capitalism collided with culturally defined notions of economic morality, linked to ideals of class, gender and duty.

Lang came to prominence by tapping a “rising protectionist sentiment” in Australian public opinion that proposed isolation and bureaucratic simplification as a salve to the world

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81 Spearitt and Radi, eds., Jack Lang, p. 3.
82 Cooksey, Lang and Socialism, p. 45.
83 Edwards, Bruce of Melbourne, p. 78.
84 Frank Cain, Jack Lang: and the Great Depression, p. 56.
economic crises of the late 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{86} NSW, Lang argued, needed to be ‘protected’ not only from the global economy but also from the empire’s economy, which had allowed capitalism to insidiously corrupt society and democracy, “the acid of commercialism has burnt into our lives.”\textsuperscript{87} The “bureaucratic snake” (depicted in Labor publicity as a chaos of ropes binding the “working man” like a mummy) should be done away with, cutting out the middlemen (“parasites of commercialism”) in economic and governmental relationships; financiers, salesmen, public servants, bankers stood between producers and consumers and needed to be eliminated, simplified, “smashed.”\textsuperscript{88}

Fundamentally this message was anti-intellectual and contained within it a narrative of physical, earthy, metropolitan masculinity, a card Lang played fluently, photographed as a boxer battling “fat bankers”, and as a builder, putting a wall up between Sydney and the outside world, a “citadel of unionism” as he called it. Opponents, both within his own party and outside of it, referred to him as “mongrel thug” “brutish” and as a “bully”, criticism that only added to a reputation built around metaphors of violence, strengthening Lang’s fame as the ‘Big Fella.’ He modeled a new ideal of politicised manhood encapsulating angry times; advocacy for Australians not through decorous diplomacy or duty, but through recalcitrance and menace.

Bede Nairn argued that Lang’s pre-1930 electioneering locked him into an unhealthy relationship with the public – a ‘fantasy world’ – whereby the desperation of his crowd

\textsuperscript{86} Pemberton, \textit{The Middle Way: The Discourse of Planning in Britain, Australia and the League in the Interwar Years}, p. 55.


\textsuperscript{88} A. Paddison for J. T. Lang, \textit{Why I Fight} (Sydney: Alert Press, 1934).
forced a set of economic promises impossible to keep (Australia could not escape the
Depression no matter what plans Lang put in place) “economic woes could not be banished
by some irrational, incantatory formula.”89 This mutual denial was aided, Nairn writes, by a
growing number of sycophantic aids and publicists, stuck to Lang’s side like henchmen,
fanning his paranoia and egomania through a fog of party room rumour and innuendo, so that
Lang began to fight a war of deception against his own party, isolating himself in a fortified
tower (in reality a guarded wing of NSW Parliament) away from administrative process and
accountable governance.90

As Lang achieved high party and state positions from 1916 he had learned to exercise
duplicity often at one remove – he arranged for his go-betweens, a Laborite, a public servant
or one of the personal advisers he recruited as opportunity offered – to operate on his behalf.
These individuals were well remunerated and a list of salaries was published by Lang’s
opponents in 1931 (“The Tall Poppies!”) claiming a publicist’s salary in the inner enclave
could reach £850 a year.91 Among the group associated with Lang as premier in 1930-32 were
Harold McCauley, who became his confidant and director of government publicity, A. C.
Paddison, a schoolteacher with some training and ability in economics and J. H. C. Sleeman,
“an erratic journalist of dubious reputation who, in 1922, had served three months in prison in
Brisbane for bribery.”92

John Harvey Crothers Sleeman worked for the government under Lang’s control as a

90 Parliamentary Papers 1932, Second Session, Vol 1, Report of Royal Commission on Greyhound Racing and
Fruit Machines, pp. 995-996.
91 Molesworth Papers, MS 398.
92 Nairn, The ‘Big Fella’, p. 216.
‘publicity man’ from 1927. Coming to public notice through a pornographic publication *Beckett’s Budget*, Sleeman first campaigned for Lang in his “letter to the Australian people” published weekly in this paper, offering an odd mixture “of porn and hard core politics” which merged nicely with Lang’s macho image. Genial, portly and an addicted gambler Sleeman fostered Labor connections by frequenting the right bars and by inserting himself subtly into the fringes of Parliament house – making dirty jokes, taking bets, providing cigarettes – proof that a type of behavioral anthropology, once mastered, could mean instant political access in Labor circles. His official contributions to Lang’s campaign were a biography published in 1933 and an appearance in a *Royal Commission into Greyhound Racing and Fruit Machines* in 1934 (suggestive of a more muscular role off the written record). After his break with the Premier in 1935, he let loose with a public confession in *Smith’s Weekly* (‘Am I a Crook?’) and the slightly weightier ‘How Lang’s Victories have assisted High Finance,’ distributed in 1936.

Sleeman had his directive to explain Lang’s economic policy to a mass audience, in effect, to explain the Depression, while making sure the blame fell in all the right places. Until 1933 Sleeman worked to produce a fresh political vernacular in which to phrase Labor’s economic logics, and underlay them with something more potent, conflating small, micro-economic transactions into vital signifiers of class identity and hearthside morality (“babies over bondholders”).

93 ‘Am I a Crook?’ *Smith’s Weekly.*
In one 1930 pamphlet the socialisation of credit was imagined as a barter system, a utopia free from “gold-grabbing”: “Dentists offer to attend to teeth in exchange for house painting, billposters offer their services in return for two meals.” Australia had to be independent, Sleeman explained, and the way to this independence was through a rejection of the cash economy, although he conceded, closure to world markets would mean a closure to Britishness. The radical edge of Lang’s policy was repudiation, his refusal to pay interest rates on British war loans, and his publicists had to construct a discursive domain whereby empire was figured as an obstacle to Australia’s economic recovery. As Sleeman proposed in bar-stool repartee, Australia had been hoodwinked by the imperialists:

The Motherland in effect says to Australia: “Look here, sonny, you’re a bit of a boob, you know. As long as you can trade at a profit you don’t want to be squeamish about your customer’s political principles. Some of our great traders made profits supplying cannibals with skewers.”

In a sordid and amoral marketplace, Britain had sold out to capitalism, practising bad business by placing self-interest before race sentiment and civilised commerce.

Pinning down this link between world finance and saloon-speak were Lang’s street-smart credentials: “Lang says what he thinks. Mick Davoren met him first when as a newspaper boy he was fighting at the top of Market Street. Life for him has been a series of pitched battles. That is as it should be. He was born for the hurly burly.” While Molesworth’s Bruce strode a world stage for empire, Sleeman’s Lang was aggressively local, guarding Australia’s

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96 Ibid, p. 469.
97 “Empire which does not make its every section as self-sustained as humanly possible is an Empire that is being white anted and impoverished by the international financiers,” Sleeman, Life of John T Lang, p. 345.
98 Sleeman, Life of John T Lang, p. 379.
economic back alleys from charlatans and swindlers, and enabling the working man’s self-expression along the way: “When we light a pipe or cigarette we should not forget that before Lang, conservatives fined men caught smoking.”

Sleeman picked up this language through ‘research’ conducted at ‘street level’, reporting to Lang, “I act for you as the voter’s interpreter.”

Lang was dismissed from office in 1932 and subsequent investigations revealed a quagmire of illegal deals brokered on his behalf from 1930, such as Sleeman’s scheme for treasury which involved taxing illicit poker machines in pub basements to pay hospital salaries. This was Sleeman’s take on the ‘socialisation of credit,’ a skewed mirror of Lang’s policy, cutting out proper process and bureaucracy for the ‘greater good.’

By following in the footsteps of Voltaire Molesworth and John Harvey Crothers Sleeman – innovators in Antipodean public relations – this chapter has sought to understand how Nationalist and Labor leaders confronted ‘the public’ in the post-war period. The years 1924 to 1932, bookended by the introduction of compulsory voting and the shock of economic crisis necessitated risky experimentation in governmental communication as well as an intimacy in democratic relations, as movie going combined with politics, and political campaigning attempted to entertain in competition with commercial culture. The impetus to engage a mass audience forced policy into unlikely cultural scripts, and because these products were achieved with the help of freelance ‘public relations counselors’ (keeping personal records) they allowed entry into the grey area between economic ideology and the fashioning of a leader. Publicity agents brought their background to government, applying

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100 John Thomas Lang Papers, NAA 321/5/765.
techniques borrowed from sensationalism and Human Interest journalism to politicians only just becoming ‘knowable’ in photos and on screens. Publicity was obviously not an accurate reflection of public opinion. But by unearthing the ways governments balanced and measured the presentation of party ideology – notions of empire trade, and the ‘socialisation of credit’ – we can get a sense of what kind of voter they envisioned, and the values they thought individuals injected into their political loyalties.
Part I

Politics and Promotional Culture

Chapter 2

Celebrity

This chapter examines how interwar Australian politicians promoted themselves and how the electorate responded. It explores how leadership was conceived, how personality became intrinsic to the projection of ideology and policy, and how a mass, promotional culture extended and modified the connection between individuals and politicians. Using an archive of letters written to politician Thomas Davies Mutch, I also draw attention to the effects of compulsory voting on Australian society. Compulsory voting was introduced when film attendance was at its peak and when a commercial version of the self, based on techniques of instrumental self-presentation, was on the ascendancy propagated through new media forms such as celebrity journalism. The Thomas Mutch archive suggests histories of interwar Australian politics and histories of commercial leisure should be brought into the same frame of analysis. In doing so here, I emphasise the significance of both compulsory voting and film attendance in the development of Australian mass democracy in the early twentieth century.

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Southwell Vaughan-Quliter had arrived in Sydney with a distinguished manner and a brazenly, offensively handsome person as almost his only assets … The inhabitants of Wilmot learnt it was worth attending his election meetings if only for the excitement … He was the super salesman of the Unseen, and once he had jammed one foot in the crack of his listener’s mind, there was no shutting it on him. His speeches filled the [floor] with hot, packed, expectant worshippers, until the air seemed heavy, soaked with human emotions, like cotton wool dipped in petrol and as ready to explode … His picture

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looked well on the posters … Many of the voters were young women with jobs and the promises of equal pay for equal work excited them almost as much as Vaughan-Quilter’s magnetic personality.²

When does politics become an instrument of mass entertainment, and political leadership become transformed into a form of celebrity? Kylie Tennant’s portrait of a candidate who trumped substance with style in the fictional Sydney seat of Wilmot offers us one critique of what Janet Gottlieb has called “interwar political personality.”³ Tennant worked as a publicity agent for left-wing causes in the 1920s modelling Southwell Vaughan-Quilter on her notes from the time. The papers of politician Thomas Davies Mutch allow us to expand historical research into the type of political celebrity portrayed so vividly by Tennant.

The Thomas Mutch Archive is kept in sixty-five boxes at Mitchell Library in Sydney and was mostly closed to the public until 2005 due to the highly personal nature of some of its content. The archive would have been larger had not an infirm Thomas Mutch lit a fire in the backyard of his apartment block in Sydney’s beach-side suburb of Bondi sometime in the early 1950s.⁴ He burnt a lot of his papers, saving a few at the last minute and some documents in the archive are singed at the edges. Living alone, estranged from his wife and children and without money, his landlord had asked him to clear the piles of paper which reached the ceiling of his ground-floor flat.⁵ After Mutch’s death in 1958 a friend packed what survived the fire into boxes, sealed some with ‘restricted’ stickers, and delivered them to the State Library of NSW.⁶ We cannot know what Mutch burnt, but among the documents he kept

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² Kylie Tennant papers, National Library of Australia, MS 10043,
⁴ Thomas Davies Mutch papers, MLMSS 426 Box 15A.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid.
there is a large collection of letters from voters which were placed in the ‘restricted’ boxes and therefore only recently accessible.

Although largely forgotten today, in the early years of the twentieth century Thomas Mutch was both well-known and influential in Australian politics. Despite being a state politician, his fame was national. As Minister for Education in successive Labor Governments (1925-27, 1927-1930) he was responsible for expanding education in NSW to poorer families, introducing bursaries for rural children, raising teachers’ salaries, and building new campuses such as Sydney Boys and Sydney Girls High Schools.  

7 Journalists compared him to American film actor John Barrymore, famous for his intense stare and for playing the lead in the first Hollywood version of *Hamlet* in 1921.  

8 Barely a decade after Federation, Australia had no capital city and the Premier of NSW was better known, at least to Sydney voters, than the prime minister. This was a divisive state of affairs that elevated local politics to a more powerful and relevant status than that of Federal Government. Australia’s newly minted capital city of Canberra would not be habitable until 1927 and then only sparsely. As a minister in Australia’s largest State Parliament Thomas Mutch was arguably a *national* political figure. Called “The Handsomest man in Australian politics” and “the most inspiring and passionate speaker in Parliament,” Thomas Mutch’s unprecedented visibility was partly due to earnest good looks but also to a much publicised friendship with the bohemian writer and socialist Henry Lawson.  

9 In the 1920s and 1930s Mutch received the same fanatical

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8 ‘Who is Officialdom’s Handsomest Man? Coote? Mutch?’ *Daily Telegraph*, newspaper cuttings, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426 Box 15A; ‘Barrymore Ballyhoo: Press Agents can make the illustrious John come to one of those terrible teas but they can’t make him behave’, *Photoplay* (September 1928), pp. 72-73, 99.

displays of devotion usually reserved for film stars; as Joyce McGovern of Granville wrote to her Catholic pastor in 1932, “everyone knows ‘Tom Mutch.”’

If modern political power rests in control over the production and management of images how did Australian politicians reconcile this new style of self-promotion and these new aesthetic priorities with the demands of their local constituency, where access to a politician’s person was still expected by most electors? Professional politicians like Thomas Mutch found themselves caught between the immediacy of their electorate, in which many of them lived, married and raised their children, and the increasing importance of what I term ‘commercial encounters’ i.e. engaging a national, and sometimes international audience through the techniques of a commercialised mass media. The Mutch archive suggests that as politicians became less grounded in place, politics became more open to fantasy, and to what some voters called ‘romance.’ As politicians spoke in more abstract terms about their policies and their electorates, in order to cater to audiences on a larger scale, they opened up spaces which the voters were invited to fill with their own imaginations. Politicians came to embody more of people’s aspirations just when they were saying less about their own communities.

While Australian conservatives owed some of their success and interwar electoral domination to a process by which the “political becomes aesthetic,” the Australian Labor Party struggled to communicate with the electorate in the interwar years. Attempts to overcome their political limitations through the manipulation of the media and through techniques now

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10 Letter from Joyce McGovern to Father Farley, Catholic Presbytery, 10 Randle St Granville, Mutch papers MLMSS 426, Box 5.
associated with celebrity can be explained in part by exploring the ways in which political ideology was changed to suit a modern audience. Imperative here was an acknowledgement that Labor politicians understood city and urban life. This involved accepting the aspirational drive motivating urban inhabitants, including those freshly arrived from the bush in the hundreds of thousands. While an embrace of the urban would have significant impact on Australian political culture, perhaps the most radical shift epitomised by interwar Labor and Nationalist use of celebrity was the attention given to female voters. Supposedly “forced from the hearth” by the compulsory voting legislation of 1924 women voters posed a challenge to interwar politicians. In order to appeal to women, they would need to interpret and connect to women’s lives.

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Scholarly work on celebrity has been concerned with explaining the rise of celebrity culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Leonard Berlanstein dates the word ‘celebrity’ back to 1850’s France where “Celebrity status drew together recognition for individual

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15 Scott Bennett, ‘Compulsory Voting in Australian National Elections’, *Parliamentary Library Research Brief*, Parliament of Australia, 31 October 2005, revised 3 March 2008 no. 6, 2005–06, p. 3; Report from the Royal Commission upon the Commonwealth Electoral Law and Administration, *Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1914–15–16–17, vol. II, part 1, no. 180, p. 10. According to Tim Evans, “Compulsory voting was first advocated by Alfred Deakin at the turn of the twentieth century. Voting was voluntary at the first nine federal elections. Compulsory enrolment for federal elections was introduced in 1911. In 1915, consideration was given to introducing compulsory voting for a proposed referendum. As the referendum was never held the idea wasn’t pursued. Also in 1915, compulsory voting was introduced in Queensland by the Liberal Government. The significant impetus for compulsory voting at federal elections appears to have been a decline in turnout from more than 71 per cent at the 1919 election to less than 60 per cent at the 1922 election. In 1924, a private member’s bill to amend the Electoral Act was introduced in the Senate by Senator H. J. M. Payne sponsored in the House of Representatives by Edward Martin. The impact was immediate, with turnout at the 1925 election rising to over 91 per cent. Victoria introduced compulsory voting in 1926, NSW and Tasmania in 1928, WA in 1936 and SA in 1942.” See Tim Evans, [http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/publications/voting/files/compulsory-voting.pdf](http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/publications/voting/files/compulsory-voting.pdf) accessed 2 February 2012.
achievement – the preeminent cultural ideal of western societies since the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century – with the power of the media to increase visibility and publicity.”

In a classic work, *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy wrote of ‘celebrity’ as a debased form of the far older concept of ‘fame.’ Celebrity, he proposed, developed around 150 years ago as a result of the unsettling of social hierarchies in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Prior to this shift fewer people were celebrated, and fame was overwhelmingly the consequence of either spectacular achievement or elite social position. But by the mid-nineteenth century celebrity was used to refer to someone who was “much talked about” rather than someone who had “done great things” – a shift in usage which has been consolidated since. As newspapers developed and photography was integrated into the reporting of news in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conditions for celebrity fell into place. With the advent of cinema, the industrial production of the film star and film ‘fan’, print journalism linked into celebrity culture through human-interest stories on celebrities, mostly film stars. Celebrity journalism – with its focus on home life rather than the workplace, the ‘true’ rather than the ‘professional’ self, the ordinary rather than the heroic was subsequently taken up by journalists and applied to other forms of print media, such as political reporting.

More recent scholarship dates the emergence of celebrity to the industrial revolution. Turner and Rojek suggest the long-term roots of celebrity lie in the predominance of industrial living, “partly a product of the world of the stranger, wherein the individual is uprooted from family and community and relocated in the anonymous city, in which social relations are often glancing, episodic and unstable.”\(^{23}\) Celebrity compensates for this isolation, filling the void with “para-social relations”, intimacy constructed by the media, with people we do not know.\(^{24}\) The need for celebrity is also found in the contradictions of modern capitalism. Marxist theorists argue celebrity perpetrates false consciousness, expressing “an ideology of heroic individualism, upward mobility and choice in social conditions where standardization, monotony and routine prevail.”\(^{25}\) Celebrity becomes an imaginative means of escaping the drudgery of everyday life, even embodying the hope of realising celebrities’ incredible lives oneself. Alternatively, some scholars see the alienation of capitalism as fuelling a profound need for celebrities through whom we can live better lives.\(^{26}\)

Some social science literature on celebrity assumes that famous people are the repository of fans’ dreams for distinction and glamour in a success-orientated culture and, therefore, that people with little status but hopes for more, such as the ‘lower middle class’, are the most susceptible to the aura of celebrity.\(^{27}\) As David Marshall has proposed, celebrities constitute

\(^{26}\) Ibid, pp. 37-38.  
the “public representation of individuality in a culture.” Societies project upon celebrities reigning myths about self-fulfillment and personal uniqueness and expect them to perform accordingly. Research with teenagers from the 1940s onwards indicates that celebrities do serve as sites for testing out possible behaviours and their likely consequences – perhaps in the way that observing members of one’s extended family may once have done. Celebrity became integrated into a form of social relations; “celebrity was part of the community’s common currency for conversation, gossip and the like.” Joshua Gramson’s studies on the reception of celebrity journalism caution against histories that assume a universal veneration of celebrities: Celebrity could be received with an inbuilt skepticism and celebrities themselves “could be objects of derision as well as desire.”

Charles Ponce de Leon connects the advent of celebrity to a shift in the understanding of selfhood in the late nineteenth century, from ideals of character to a focus on personality. After the turn of the century, the tendency to portray prominent figures as human beings (as opposed to figures of virtue) was reinforced by a new interest in the rewards of private life, leisure and self-expression outside the workplace. A crucial turning point, de Leon argues, came in the 1890s when journalists began crafting new techniques and rhetorical strategies for depicting celebrities, innovations that contributed to creating a new representational mould –

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28 Marshall argues that celebrities emerged as part of an attempt to control the new urban masses by providing highly visible symbols with which people could identify, demonstrating that talent was rewarded. P. David Marshall, ed., The Celebrity Culture Reader (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.
31 Ibid, p. 359. Richard Dyer suggests that Hollywood stars may have operated as ‘signs’ - as carriers of social myths and meanings. Particular stars reflected ‘dominant definitions of the type of the individual’ within society and so their significance was socially grounded. Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: Macmillan, 2004).
32 Gramson, Claims to Fame, p. 9.
33 Ponce de Leon, Self-Exposure, pp. 11-42.
personality – that was well in place by the 1920s.\textsuperscript{34} Like other forms of human interest reporting, interwar celebrity journalism sought to make the remote and impersonal seem familiar and human, a project that was central to the global expansion of western civilisation and efforts to make citizens of the West recognise their place in a larger unfolding drama – the rise of modernity and secular ‘progress.’\textsuperscript{35} The press served as the agent of celebrity because the phenomenon accorded so well with the defining feature of modern society, a paradoxical craving for both equality and personal distinction. Thus Berlanstein, in his work on celebrity in France described the true outcome of the 1789 French Revolution to be not equality, but rather “privilege for all.”\textsuperscript{36} The democratising force of celebrity, however, was not necessarily about distinction, but about ‘ordinariness’, and about the radical potential behind the everyday, and the common place. The right to connect with the famous because they were also ‘ordinary people’ allowed individuals to assert the possibilities of their own potential celebrity, even as they accepted the improbability of those possibilities ever coming to fruition. In this chapter I argue that personality and celebrity as applied to representative democracy encouraged voters to engage with politicians in ways impossible prior to the use of twentieth-century visual media. In this way modern perceptions of personality and celebrity facilitated mass democracy as it was expanding in Australia after the introduction of compulsory voting in 1925.

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Sometime in spring 1925 a young schoolteacher called Dorothy Joyce decided to write a

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, p. 6, 43.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{36} Berlanstein, ‘Historicizing and Gendering Celebrity Culture’, p. 69.
letter. “Never in my life have I been guilty of writing a love letter,” she admitted, “but I really believe I am capable of it.” Teaching in the bare, windblown town of Albury Wodonga on the edge of the Victorian border, Dorothy had little time for letters, as when she was not teaching she worked on the farms of local families in return for food and board. Sometimes she nursed the family’s children, with whom she shared a room. The previous day she had met Thomas Mutch, NSW Minister for Education, at a function at Albury Primary School. “Listening to you, meeting you,” she wrote, “it was like two electric lights had been lit up inside me.” Although Thomas Mutch did not respond to her first letters, Dorothy continued to write: “My last two letters were reckless admissions of love to you – but underneath there is still that knowing unrest and a hungering for understanding.” What she wanted most was a reply “for I am so starving!”

Over the following months, Dorothy placed her daily struggles and thoughts in her letters to Thomas Mutch. She also ordered three newspapers to be sent to her so she could follow Mutch's political career though press and pictures: “I had another surprise when I saw your photo taken at the Manly school on Saturday of course it is only a newspaper print – but you look honestly worried.” When she felt the coverage of Tom was unflattering, she sent on her cuttings, and prescribed advice on his appearance: “I enclose another cutting which Ella sent

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37 Mostly she left her correspondence undated, adopting pseudonyms ('Joy' ‘Senorita S’), and putting ‘Strictly Private’ on envelopes. Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, 16 September 1925, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8; Dorothy Annette Joyce correspondence, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426.


39 Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8.

40 Ibid.

41 Dorothy wrote to Mutch for over twenty years. Most of her correspondence was written between 1925 and 1939. Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426

42 Ibid.
me from Friday night’s *Herald*. This paper did not even produce a nice photograph of you – it looked as tho someone had punched you in the mouth."  

She prescribed advice on clothing, makeup and stance in photographs, and admonished Tom when he failed to present at a flattering angle. Discussing Tom Mutch and Labor with local townsfolk, she found other admirers: “Last Tuesday Lorna told me she had seen about your eye trouble in the *Labour Daily*. My heart has just ACHED for you ever since. I have been talking to your photograph in the newspaper – you have wonderful speaking eyes. Eyes are the ‘windows to the soul.’”  

Attending the cinema whenever she could, Dorothy especially enjoyed films with John Barrymore, “who is so like Tom Mutch.” Gradually, she consumed articles on John Barrymore as avidly as she read those on Mutch. You are a “beau brum” she told him, referring to Barrymore’s starring role alongside Mary Astor in *Beau Brummell* in 1924. The more Dorothy read, the more she felt her horizons widening. “You give me the fascinating impression of having been everywhere and seen everything … I don’t know you at all, on the other hand I know you better than I know anyone.”  

As Dorothy posted her letters on Albury’s sleepy dirt roads, Thomas Mutch was placing them in a collection of fan mail, some from his male constituents, but mostly from women. Australians knew him not only as NSW Minster for Education but also as Henry Lawson’s companion, a friendship which had blossomed in the bush where he worked as a shearer and roustabout, and which wove his personal history into popular mythologies of the outback and of Lawson. His socialism was the product of his time with Lawson and much reading. Labor activist Mary Gilmore met Mutch while he was shearing and remembered “a man who...
devoured agricultural manuals” and who believed in “education as a means of self-improvement”, “the egalitarian nature of Australian society” and “that the working class should have a greater share of the national wealth.”

Having moved to Sydney as an assisted migrant in the 1880s, Mutch’s father was a Scottish grocer with bad luck in colonial business, eventually obtaining work as the driver of a horse-drawn bus in Rushcutter’s Bay. Poverty forced his mother to give up one of her children for adoption in the 1890s depression. She died of tuberculosis when Mutch was fourteen and it was after her death that he became an itinerant worker in the Lachlan. When Mutch was eighteen years old he was voted head of the Australian Workers Union, representing worker shearers, shed hands, miners and seasonal laborers – a position he held until his entry into Parliament in 1917.

Described in a 1976 biography as “attractive” his face was dominated by “dark, steady eyes” and “an air of dignity and purpose.” Standing just over six feet, he had prematurely grey hair. Particular about his clothes, he wore light grey suits, white shirts and plain ties, highly polished lace boots with a felt hat and always had his suits tailor made, even when economic circumstances did not permit the extravagance.

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47 Ibid, p. 3.
48 Ibid, p. 17.
49 Ibid, pp. 50-51.
Since the early 1920s Mutch’s movements had been assiduously recorded by journalists and photographers: the way he bowed in Parliament, the sound of his voice, his dancing in city ballrooms, what he wore to social functions, and the sarcasm he inserted into government debates.\(^{51}\) He arranged for his photo to be available on postcards: standing at lecterns, leaning on gum trees or flying a plane he kept at Mascot aerodrome.\(^ {52}\) He attended Australian film premiers (\textit{The Moth of Moonbi} and \textit{Around the Boree Log}) and personally sponsored

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\(^{52}\) Mutch papers, MLMSS 426 Box 13, 3, 5, 55A.
Australian folk singers. In 1927 he was asked to promote the Kellogg’s cereal company in Sydney, opening Kellogg’s factories in his electorate of Botany in 1928. Writing to an uncle in the 1930s, Mutch found himself startled by his own popularity, “I have been submerged in a storm of letters and telegrams and cables. I have a fan mail as big as that of a movie star.” In the tradition of such mail, Mutch was in the habit of replying to some of these letters, expressing gratitude, enclosing his picture and how to vote cards, and encouraging his admirers to attend to Labor Party campaigns. This correspondence was complicated by his liaisons with women around the country; he had affairs with teachers and supporters he met on the campaign trail, the source of some gossip and much innuendo among his constituents.

One day, months after she began writing, Thomas Mutch replied to Dorothy’s letters. Grateful for her advice, he solicited more. Dorothy wrote to Mutch telling him she had compiled a scrapbook of features and articles on Mutch and the Labor Party. She found herself dissecting the intricacies of Labour’s Royal Commission into Motherhood Endowment, one of Australia’s earliest incarnations of welfare as well as Mutch’s performance in Parliament.

Please allow a very insignificant person to say that she is watching ever so closely – the big Drama – in which you are a principle actor. You – the hero – are fighting with clean hands – and the villain and his forces with unclean ones. Oh what a wonderful part you are playing dear – I can only echo the voices of the throng of spectators and with them say – GO IT TOM!!! I hope you are possessed of that winning personality that will bring Labour through these hard times.

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53 Ibid, Box 5, 13.
54 Thomas Davies Mutch to Uncle Samuel, 2 January 1938, MLMSS 426, Box 13.
57 Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, 8 August 1927, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8. See also: 29 November 1926.
Her hobby became all-consuming and she felt distanced from those around her: “It is as though a barrier had arisen between me and the other girls.”\(^{58}\) She confessed to Mutch a growing desire to leave Albury and join the stream of young women on their way to the cities: “I want to take art and singing lessons from a conservatory teacher. I want to do something more than teaching. I want to learn the things that COUNT in Sydney.”\(^{59}\) Her art was something she included in the letters, drawing caricatures of Mutch’s rivals, or portraits of her own face showing different emotions. In Sydney, she hoped to join one of the technical colleges sprouting in the outer suburbs: “Will I live in Granville, Parramatta, Strathfield or Under a Mushroom? As long as there is a good Art School near by.”\(^{60}\)

Leaving, however, was close to impossible. In the 1920s the lives of female schoolteachers were tightly controlled by the Department of Education, which could transfer a teacher at its discretion, and did not respond to requests to move.\(^{61}\) One teacher in Queensland was transferred seven times in a four-year period, always to a one-classroom school in the bush.\(^{62}\) Paid half the wage of their male counterparts, female teachers had little money left over to save for a new life. Expected to leave their profession after a maximum of five years and get married, women workers were tolerated, not desired. As early as 1916 company and government managers began encouraging women to spy on their colleagues, “lest a married women be masquerading as single.”\(^{63}\) By the 1920s in-house detectives were employed to...

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\(^{58}\) Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, 20 December 1926, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8. See also, Box 55A, 10.

\(^{59}\) Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, 19 September 1925, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 74.

\(^{60}\) Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, Jan 1927, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 74.


\(^{62}\) Ibid, p. 227.

\(^{63}\) ‘Married Women or Girls: Which Ones are Better Workers? Distractions of Paint and Powder’, *The Argus* (18 September 1930), p. 7; ‘There were present married women working in shops under their single names and this was opposed to the integrity of morals’, ‘Women’s claim in Shop Assistant’s Award’, *Canberra Times* (15 February 1936), p. 4.
carry out this surveillance. Staying unmarried carried its own burdens. Being an ‘old maid’ in the professions was stigmatised, as Queensland teacher Emma Harvey remembered. “There was something wrong with you if you didn’t get married.” Apart from teaching, the range of occupations available to a young woman like Dorothy, who had completed some secondary education, was limited to nursing, working in a bank or office or working as a shop assistant or a maidservant. Dorothy did move to Sydney, but she never studied Art. She married, and then divorced, entering domestic service as a maid and governess in the 1940s.

Martin Lyons has written of private letters that they reconstitute “fragments of experience” pruned over time often presenting a lopsided view, being the choice of the recipient, not the writer. Dorothy Joyce’s letters to Thomas Mutch may be an edited selection – the flattering remainder of another story. Notwithstanding the potential incompleteness of the picture presented by these letters and others within the Mutch archive it nevertheless provides glimpses of the way political allegiance was negotiated and expressed in the interwar years. Dorothy’s story can be elucidated as a statement about political engagement within the confines of romantic love. Thomas Mutch’s celebrity made him visible to Dorothy in ways that allowed for familiarity, through media forms that broke down the formality and

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impossibility of an actual romantic relationship. Not knowing him at all, she felt “she knew him better than anyone.”

Part of this study attempts to understand how these media forms came about, and how they changed political engagement for Australian women. Histories of female labour unionism have tended to divorce the worlds of politics and commercial leisure, favouring the former. Close scrutiny of women’s attitudes to politicians in the Mutch archive demonstrates that in reality commercial leisure and the spaces for celebrity, fantasy and romance it provided, shaped political attitudes and voting practices for some women. Young women’s aspirations and political loyalties were “ambiguous and nebulous and cannot simply be characterized as the pursuit of easily definable political goals.” Dorothy clearly felt she had a stake in Mutch’s Labor politics, and the links she formed between her own world and Mutch’s allow us to see a dialogue between economic and social change, and the ways in which people made sense of the political realm through whatever cultural resources were available to them. Her politics was woven into and derived its meaning from the total social context.

While some historians have established that Australian women gained increasing freedoms within their lives after the turn of the century, others have been quick to note the limitations of these freedoms. At a time when inflation rose in quick step with the glamour of modern life, women’s average salaries fell short of even the most basic of lifestyles, and this was

68 Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8.
69 Selina Todd, ‘Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women’s Entry to Employment in Inter-war England’, Twentieth Century British History 15, no. 2 (2004), pp. 120-121.
especially the case for working-class women. In 1921 the starting wage of a sixteen-year-old female typist was 22/6 shillings, that of a female clerk 17/6 shillings while a female department store assistant received just 15 shillings, less than a third of the male basic wage of £3.\(^71\) As Selina Todd has written of England, a young working-class girl’s “imagined future was tempered by poverty.”\(^72\) Social aspirations were defined more by a desire to avoid this poverty and attain economic security, than by an aspiration to middle-class status. In an attempt to attract female voters to its cause, Labor would play on the insecure economic situations of women, arguing that conservative governments would remove welfare reforms such as the Motherhood Endowment, gradually introduced after WWI.

In her study of interwar film magazines *Picture Show* and *Photoplayer*, Kirsten McKenzie notes of celebrity journalists: “they were very aware of the need to mediate the substantial gap between reader’s desire to participate in the global culture and the limited possibilities that working class Australian women had for doing so.”\(^73\) Celebrity, as McKenzie shows, was brought to women despite the impediment of poverty – rendering glamorous dresses affordable through smart patterns and prescribing advice on the minutiae of grooming, courting and self-invention. Even more than newspapers these magazines were instrumental in transforming men and women with local or regional reputations into internationally known figures. Authors of celebrity profiles often tried to link their subjects to national events and developments, establishing a cast of characters associated with broader trends. By the early twentieth century celebrities like John Barrymore overshadowed small town businessmen,

\(^72\) Todd, ‘Poverty and Aspiration’, pp. 120-121.
civic leaders and society figures who had dominated the columns of the provincial newspapers since the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{74} “Few people realise the extent to which the motion picture has made its heroes and heroines international figures,” Karl Bickel, President of the United Press Association told the \textit{American Magazine} in 1923. “Mary Pickford’s popularity is such that she cannot step onto the street anywhere in the world without police protection. Charlie Chaplin (called ‘Charlot’ in the Latin counties) and Douglas Fairbanks are almost as well known in the interior of South America or China as they are at home.”\textsuperscript{75}

How women like Dorothy Joyce responded to celebrities depended on their economic resources. In 1918 Alice Ward, a part-time Sydney waitress and department store worker, told government bureaucrats she spent six pence of her twenty-four shilling pay on movie magazines, which she read in the cramped room she shared with her landlady’s daughter.\textsuperscript{76} The world, according to such magazines, was Hollywood and its embodiment was the star, whose “celebrity and saleability crossed over from film into all other media of commercial popular culture – magazines, novels, radio, gramophone records, advertising – linking them all into a metaphorical unity suffused with romance and glamour.”\textsuperscript{77} According to Wilson and Bonney, Hollywood was an American version of royalty, a “source of fantasy for women” and “a more democratic model” because many classic Hollywood stars were presented as having a background in poverty.\textsuperscript{78} “Have you ever thought over the rough times and knocks that are strewn along the path of the movie actor and actress?” wrote \textit{The Picture Show}, “They are many. The question arises: Will they live up to the standard of perfection set for

\textsuperscript{74} Ponce de Leon, \textit{Self-Exposure}, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{75} ‘15 Most Interesting Men and Women: Chaplin and Pickford Included’, \textit{The Photoplayer} 14, no. 8 (September 1923), p. 31.
\textsuperscript{76} Mathews, \textit{Dance Hall & Picture Palace}, pp. 69-70.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{78} Turner, \textit{Celebrity}, p. 149.
them by their admirers? They are all human beings, even as you and I.”79 To become part of this world, readers like Alice Ward were told to express themselves in the relatively cheap and efficient format of the fan letter. “Billie Dove values the friendship of the 1000s of fans that take the trouble to write to her.”80 Studios held out the promise of a response “How would you like to get a real personal letter from Clara Bow? Well you know how Wanda Blank felt when the postman handed her a letter which began ‘Dear Wanda’ and ended with Clara’s characteristic signature.”81

Film magazines trained readers to become fans – providing letter templates, suggestions for stationary, and photographs of stars opening their fan mail, and writing replies. “Lets’ have a peek in John Barrymore’s fan mail bag” one article suggested “There are letters from Glasgow and Sydney! It is too bad some people write begging letters.”82 In “What happens to fan mail?” Photoplay published images of mailboxes and sorting rooms: “From all parts of the world these letters come. They are the star’s applause. They are the star’s best critique. They are the instrument that measures the star’s worth.”83 Readers were told they could influence the direction of a career. “The Public Just Won’t Let Mary Pickford Grow Up” declared Pickford’s publicity agent in Photoplay. “Mary changed her type but 20,000 fans from every continent clamoured for their old sweetheart and the result is Little Annie Rooney.”84 To thank their fans, stars published open letters: “You discovered and created

79 ‘Hard Knocks that Count’, Picture Show. 5, no. 10 (1 August 1923), p. 32.
80 Mark Larkin, ‘What Happens to Fan Mail?’ Photoplay 34, no. 3 (August 1928), p. 38.
81 Frances Kish, ‘When They Write Letters’, Photoplay 37, no. 2 (January 1930), p. 81.
82 Mark Larkin, ‘What Happens to Fan Mail?’ Photoplay 34, no. 3 (August 1928), p. 38.
83 Ibid.
me,” Rudolph Valentino wrote, “Your kindness came to me at a time when it seemed things could not be more desolate. You write and tell me that I bring romance to your lives.”

The notion that fans not only could – but also should – dictate the behaviour, style and career choices of their favourite stars had clear democratic overtones. The fan letter, conveniently linked to mechanisms of mass production and mass audience appeal, was a formula ideal for candidates trying to position themselves within the transition from local to mass Australian democracy. Although Australian politicians did not officially employ fan mail formats in their campaigning in the interwar years, fan culture prescribed behaviours and vocabulary useful to candidates trying to reach larger audiences, but retain a sense of familiarity with supporters. ‘Fandom’ was conflated with a type of friendship en masse, as one 1927 article observed, “Thomas Mutch is affectionately known as ‘Tom’ among 10,000 personal friends and fans.”

Dorothy Joyce might not have seen her correspondence as ‘fan mail’, but she did borrow from the genre. Film magazines not only provided a template for political celebrity, but also a legitimising message. Dorothy could feel confident in the knowledge that thousands like her also felt a strange intimacy with public figures they did not know. Placing an American film star like John Barrymore in the reach of rural Australians, celebrity journalism made looking to a Sydney politician like Thomas Mutch seem natural regardless of whether Mutch represented his distant, industrial electorate in South Sydney, or a country one like Albury Wodonga.

In the 1900s Australians were hard pressed to describe the physical features and mannerisms

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86 Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 74.
of their Federal leaders, let alone reflect on their personalities or predilections. Although photography was well established, news reports eschewed features and photographs for verbatim copies of Hansard, and local political branches lacked the funds or technology to distribute photographs of candidates. Visiting Sydney in 1903 Prime Minister Edmund Barton was neither interviewed nor photographed, although his daily schedule was published in the *Herald*. One could travel to Rockdale or Woollahra to meet the Prime Minister at open-air meetings where Barton took questions from the audience. The divisive conscription referendums of WWI, and an increased interest in politics around these years attracted more attention to the techniques and manner of campaigning and caucusing. Reporters reflected on the impact of a persuasive speaker on his or her audience. One *Argus* writer following the Anti-Conscription campaigns of 1916 wrote that Thomas Mutch – then a union organiser – delivered “a speech on Tuesday night so full of emotional power that afterwards several men and women ran up and kissed him with great favour.”

During the same campaign, voters were encouraged to follow the electioneering progress of Prime Minister Billy Hughes across the country, with maps showing his track through country districts.

The physical trials of campaigning increased during and after WWI, as politicians stretched themselves to reach remote electorates, charting unreliable motorcars or – in Thomas Mutch’s case – walking with drovers and travellers from town to town. Having reached their stop, campaigners would speak for up to four hours standing on makeshift platforms in town squares or, when possible, on the stage in picture theatres. Jack Lang covered 5000 miles (8000km) in three weeks during his 1920’s campaigns, having given up smoking to preserve

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87 ‘Elections: How Mr. Hughes is Faring’, *Daily Telegraph* (25 April 1927); Newspaper cuttings Voltaire Molesworth papers 1909-1935, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 243 Box 6 (8).
88 Newspaper cuttings, Molesworth papers, MLMSS 243 Box 6 (8).
his voice. For the same reason he would not speak at open-air meetings, “No hall, no speech.”90 On two occasions in the country he beat challenges from a travelling circus.91 Keen to make politics into a profession, Lang changed Cabinet’s sitting hours in 1925, forcing resentful members to sit from 10am to 6pm, “as if it were a bakehouse.”92 Most nineteenth-century parliaments sat from 4.00 pm to an indeterminate hour – sometimes all night – allowing MPs to maintain day jobs, but from the 1920s on politics was day-time work, and more accessible to media, particularly photography.

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91 Ibid, p. 208.
Although half-tone photography had been used in Australia since the 1890s, daily newspapers did not print photos until the 1920s, with The Sydney Morning Herald employing its own photographers in 1925 and The Age in 1927.\textsuperscript{93} When photographs were published more prolifically they were not scattered throughout the newspapers as is current practice but concentrated on the front, middle and back pages as freestanding pictures, most of them having no relationship to the major news stories of the day.\textsuperscript{94} Mutch, an impulsive hoarder of paper, religiously pasted stories about himself into scrapbooks. Cuttings from this collection capture a moment of transition when street shots of politicians were first embedded in the text of articles.\textsuperscript{95} With the invention of small, mobile cameras such as the German Leica, street photographers slipped into the crush of modern streets, snapping passers-by and then handing them a card in the hope they would want to see the proofs later.\textsuperscript{96} This was a precarious existence with unreliable dividends and politicians were good clients. Street photographers soon began to follow men like Thomas Mutch around the city. Eventually these photos would drive the news story itself, as was the case in one Daily Guardian piece: “Who is Officialdom’s Handsomest Man? Coote? Mutch?,” showing four, large full-length pictures of Australian politicians: one lighting a cigarette with furrowed brow, one posing with hand on hip and flower in lapel, another in full coat tails and the fourth striding purposefully towards the camera.\textsuperscript{97} “Captain Coote [National Member] is a flapper’s dream” declared the paper “his peach complexion, his laughing eyes, his silvery laugh.” The article was part of an ongoing

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{95} Newspaper cuttings, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426 Box 15A, 55A
\textsuperscript{97} ‘Who is Officialdom’s Handsomest Man? Coote? Mutch?’ \textit{Daily Telegraph}, newspaper cuttings, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426 Box 15A.
competition in the *Guardian* allowing readers to vote for the ‘most handsome’ politician:

Mr. T. D. Mutch, Minister for Education, is easily the handsomest man in local politics. He lacks the adventurous aid of a uniform and has never been seen in a top hat. But he wears a smartly cut sack suit and an Australian-made felt hat with the same unconsciousness of clothes acquired by well-dressed men. In his case clothes do not make the man for in his younger days he was equally debonair in moleskins, bluchers, bow-angs and cabbage tree with Matilda cross his shoulder … gets the palm as the *Beau Brummel* of politics.  

Although the *Guardian* did not state so directly, it had clearly published the pictures with an eye to female readers, as Thomas Mutch was a man “any lass would be glad to love.”

Sliding narrative techniques over from celebrity journalism, and publishing unofficial snapshots of political figures, the *Guardian* gave readers the right to view politicians not as revered superiors, but as objects of desire.

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98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
Figure 2.3 Court’s Silk House and Lafayette photographic studios, Barrack Street, Perth c1927. Source: State Library of Western Australia b1919860

Figure 2.4 The entrance to the Lafayette - Dease Photo Studios next to Laubman & Pank premises, Barrack Street, Perth c1949, open from the 1890s-1950s. Source: State Library of Western Australia b2507932
Innovation in street photography paralleled the rise of new lighting technology for Salon photos and glamour shots. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, artificial light was being used in studio portraits in salons dotted around the city, mostly in terrace basements or through cloth-padded doors off alleyways. This, plus the influence of Hollywood portrait photographers, meant that subjects could be treated in more dramatic and sophisticated ways. Close-ups and extreme angles came to have favoured connotations of ‘the modern’ and clients were encouraged to look directly into the camera and wear make up for the shoot. *Picture Show* and *Photoplay* took advantage of the portrait trade, and nearly 40 per cent of their pages were filled with glamour portraits and photos supplied by Hollywood publicists.

Thomas Mutch was one of the first Australian politicians to have a glamour portrait taken in 1918, with expensive lighting set-ups and shadowing, a picture Dorothy Joyce would later refer to in her letters when she told Mutch he had “wonderful speaking eyes.” Film Fan culture dictated the collecting of matinee idol photographs, and coaxed Hollywood stars into ‘types’, linking physical features to internal emotion, a media form easily applied in politics where politicians were beginning to be portrayed as ‘personalities.’ In 1923, city cafes like Fisher’s Cosy Corner in George Street offered every tenth customer a free six and half inch photograph of stars like Tom Meighan and Rudolph Valentino, “Actual photographs which you will be proud to frame.” By 1926 *Photoplay* had so many requests for portraits of male stars that it published them all together on the same page as “a cubist vision of what the perfect movie idol should look like … See if you can find some characteristics of your favourite in the

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100 Willis, *Picturing Australia*, pp. 169-170, 173.
102 Advertisement for Fisher’s Cosy Corner - Homeopathic and General Chemists, 554 George Street, opposite the Town Hall, ‘Have an Ice Tea with Thomas Meighan – and Take him Home with You’, *The Photoplayer* 17 (29 September 1923), p. 7.
The uptake of new media forms in politics had very real effects on the ways in which voters could receive information about their political representatives. Press analysis of politics as theatre, signalled a shift away from publishing speeches in transcript, to an interest in the act of speaking itself. Reporters began to read and photograph crowds at political rallies to capture their responses to politicians, gauging atmosphere and interrogating onlookers. Photographs of politicians also circulated more widely in newsprint. In this way a visual language of gesture and facial expression became part of the circuits of information through which voters became informed about politics.

This new focus coincided with a sudden drop in voter turnout. As Australian society moved forward after WWI alarmed commentators worried over ‘apathy’ among electors. The first four Commonwealth elections had produced a 55.3 per cent average in voter turnout, but this had jumped to a 74.3 per cent average for the next four. There was therefore surprise and dismay when the 1922 figure plummeted to only 59.4 per cent.

Concerns over voter apathy propelled forward legislation to institute compulsory voting nationally. As early as 1915 a Royal Commission into Commonwealth Electoral Law and Administration had recommended the introduction of compulsory voting for Commonwealth elections. This was not taken up immediately, although the Compulsory Voting Act 1915

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103 ‘Six in One – Find your Own’, Photoplay 29, no. 6 (November 1925), p. 65.
provided for compulsory voting in referenda held under s. 128 of the Constitution.\textsuperscript{105} The Nationalist MP, Sydney Sampson, proposed an amendment adding compulsory voting for Commonwealth elections to the Electoral Bill 1918, noting that compulsory voting had been ‘frequently discussed’ around the country.\textsuperscript{106} He lamented that many voters would not vote unless carried to the polling booth “preferably in a motor car.”\textsuperscript{107} The first Commonwealth election held under compulsory voting was that of 1925, when the turnout figure climbed to 91.4 per cent, an increase of 32 percentage points on the previous election.\textsuperscript{108}

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|}
\hline
State & Turnout before compulsory voting (\%) & Turnout after compulsory voting (\%) & Increase in turnout (\%) \\
\hline
New South Wales & 82.5 (1927) & 94.9 (1930) & 12.4 \\
Victoria & 59.2 (1924) & 91.8 (1927) & 32.6 \\
Queensland & 75.5 (1912) & 88.1 (1915) & 12.6 \\
South Australia* & 50.7 (1941) & 88.5 (1944) & 37.8 \\
Western Australia & 70.1 (1936) & 91.6 (1939) & 21.5 \\
Tasmania & 81.9 (1928) & 95.0 (1931) & 13.1 \\
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* House of Assembly only.
Source: Hughes and Graham, \textit{A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890–1964}
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textbf{Figure 2.5} Queensland introduced compulsory voting in 1915, the first place in the British Empire to do so.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{106} Sydney Sampson (Nationalist), House of Representatives, \textit{Debates}, 7 November 1918, p. 7565; William Maloney (ALP), Ibid, p. 7568.
\textsuperscript{107} Senator Herbert Payne (Nationalist), Senate, \textit{Debates}, 17 July 1924, p. 2180.
\textsuperscript{109} Bennett, ‘Compulsory Voting in Australian National Elections’, p. 4.
Australia remains one of the only Western countries to have introduced compulsory voting, yet little is known about the motivations behind its introduction or the long-term effect of its application on Australian mass democracy. Higher voter turnout may not in itself be an indicator of political engagement, but the institution of a £2 fine (nearly the equivalent of a weekly wage for an average family) was an intrusive step. Given the lack of scholarly consensus over the explanations of political allegiance in the interwar years, it is worth pausing here to reflect on how coercive voting changed the patterns of everyday politics, as well as the visibility and popularity of individual candidates such as Thomas Mutch.

What is easily missed in statistical studies is the discrepancy between male and female voting practices prior to 1925. While women voted in federal elections as early as 1902, they did so in far smaller numbers than men. Long distances, larger families, no child-care and a grueling domestic workload meant many women (and especially working-class women) found the logistics of democracy impractical. Despite the efforts of suffragettes politics remained a predominantly ‘masculinist context’ and the stark lines between male and female social activity demarcated voting as a male civic ritual. Conservatives were among those...
most critical of the female voting turn out. Convinced women held beliefs in line with their policies, conservatives felt they were losing an entire demographic ‘to the hearth’.\footnote{113}

Recently opened files detailing how compulsory voting was promoted by conservative government publicists indicates this legislation was aimed squarely at female voters.\footnote{114} When advertisements for compulsory voting were released in Australia in 1925, the vast majority was sent to suburban and country cinemas in the form of newsreels. Posters were made and printed, but not many. While £61 was spent in Melbourne on posters for “hoardings and public places”, £549 was spent on newsreels for 347 cinemas state-wide, a pattern repeated around Australia.\footnote{115} Reels were to be shown twice daily, specifically during matinee sessions, when the majority of the audience would be female, or unemployed.\footnote{116} This was especially the case in suburban cinemas that structured their shows around women’s domestic lives, showing features between 11am and 3pm. Women made up the numbers in country theaters as well. As much rural work was seasonal many men led a semi-itinerant existence, droving or travelling between jobs for a large part of the year. Staying behind to mind shops and homes in town, women were far more likely to attend cinemas.

Compulsory voting has not drawn much attention in Australia partly because, as Michael Roe points out, little debate accompanied its introduction; it was “slipped into the statute books like a thief in the night.”\footnote{117} But attending to the promotion and application of the legislation reveals careful strategy on the part of conservatives, and a shift in attitude to political

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{footnote}{113} Audrey Oldfield, \textit{Women’s Suffrage in Australia: A Gift or a Struggle?}, p. 221. \end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{114} “Publicity to the Compulsory Voting provisions of the Law, by the display of notices on screens of picture theatres, advertising in country newspapers and exhibition of posters on hoardings”, NAA A406/68, E1927/0830. \end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{115} Ibid. \end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{116} Ibid. \end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{117} Michael Roe, ‘Herbert James Mockford Payne’, \textit{Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate} 2, p. 183. \end{footnote}
\end{footnotesize}
audiences *en masse*. There was a class distinction at work here; young, single, working women in the cities (of which the vast majority hailed from country areas) could not go to the cinema often, and rarely without a male companion paying for their ticket. A study on female blue-collar workers in the later 1920s found that roughly half could not go to the theater or cinema alone at all and most others only infrequently.\textsuperscript{118} Choosing film as the medium to promote compulsory voting was about the logistics of reaching a *certain type* of women.

![Cinema audience, Perth, c1930. Source: State Library of Western Australia b193672](image)

\textbf{Figure 2.6} Cinema audience, Perth, c1930. Source: State Library of Western Australia b193672

Crucially, the use of cinemas as political spaces was also a move towards the modernising of

\textsuperscript{118} Town Clerks Files, Sydney City Council, TCF 199/2356.
government language and outreach. By the 1920s politicians had acknowledged the overwhelming popularity of film-going in Australia, where more tickets were bought per head per year than any other country. While there were 800 picture theaters in Sydney in 1921 by 1928 that figure had risen to 1250, with an annual national attendance of 110 million people.\textsuperscript{119} Converging with the rapid uptake of cinema in Australia was the expanding visibility of women in public space, epitomised by the stereotypes of New Women and Flappers. The film fan developed in relation to these new types and functioned as their sub-category. Fans were, therefore, invariably represented as modern, young and female. Often described as semi-hypnotised, the film fan was surrounded in her cramped city room by photographs of matinee idols. While male cinema attendance was high, it was young women who exemplified the special power of film.

The link between film and femininity led political strategists to view the movies as an ideal mechanism through which to include women in the cultural fold of male-dominated politics. In 1917 the Labor party started using local picture theaters for campaign speeches with candidates speaking before the two-movie feature, and sometimes at intermission. In 1931 movie producers made election features for Prime Minister Joseph Lyons free of charge: “a film of Mr. Lyons policy speech, as well as a special talkie picture to accompany it – a poem of Henry Lawson, called ‘My Land and I.’”\textsuperscript{120} Fox Films wrote to both Labor and Conservative politicians, reminding them “You can’t visit all the centers you need to, so get that close and personal touch with talkie films …This is quite a unique mode of election


\textsuperscript{120} Personal Papers of Prime Minister Lyons, Correspondence ‘U’, United Australia Party, re Vaucluse State electoral conference, regional conventions, Hon J. G. Latham farewell, election campaign, includes pamphlet ‘Election essentials in a nutshell’, NAA CP 30/3/78.
publicity in Australia.” Ideally, Fox advised, “our film crew will capture you in your own home.”

While poverty did not automatically translate into class politics and many poorer Australians voted Conservative, the advent of Labor welfare policies for widows after 1917 attracted women to the left. These supporters were therefore disappointed when the gap between women’s lives and party publicity was exposed in 1921 after the introduction of inadequate welfare provisions under the *Widows Endowment Bill*. When the *Widows Endowment Bill* was debated it became clear that widows without children would not receive any payments. Mrs. Preston Stanley, the only female MLA in the NSW State Parliament recalled: “The promise was (in the publicity) that the Labor party would provide pensions for widows not for widows with dependant children only.” When a Labor MLA told her she was mistaken as Labor pamphlets explaining the policy had included photographs “with children in the picture” she replied “Such a message is [far] too subtle for the greater body of the electors.”

The demands of domestic work were often misunderstood and even widows with children found claiming their payments difficult; without childcare they could not leave their families to make the journey into the city to appear before a welfare tribunal. Sometimes a lack of infrastructure and transport money made this travelling all but impossible. When Labor governance failed to live up the promise of Labor literature, some women turned to Thomas

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121 Ibid.
124 Thomas Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 1.
Mutch as an advocate, invoking his celebrity as a way to mediate discrepancies between party policy and their daily lives. They were encouraged by Mutch’s well-known generosity. Loose with money, he often forgot to call in debts. “I would most gladly take any job at all,” wrote Lorna Robinson of Mascot to Mutch in 1929. “One cannot go on indefinitely. The mental stress and the perpetual strain involved of trying to make ends meet and the hopelessness of the position generally make one feel suicidal at times.”

Ruby Paul worked in a printer’s shop in South Kensington and asked Mutch for money when her application for Motherhood Endowment was rejected because her children worked in a Paddington factory. Her husband had fallen through a floor on a construction site and was now prostrate in a steel cage, “My responsibilities are a heavy one for a woman. I hope you will pardon me for not sending you the receipt earlier but I have been busy and sometimes very tired.” Minnie Tukey of Waterloo had taken in her daughter’s family as her son-in-law had been out of work for five months. “We are very badly in need of blankets”, she dictated to a priest helping her with the letter “there are six children and shortly will be another.” Laura Keenan wrote on behalf of herself and her illiterate brother, revealing the insecurity of their working conditions: “I have been twelve years a resident of Mascot. Employed out of the Woollen Mill Booths at Hughes & Widdens. Through the slackness of trade I am constantly being dismissed and reengaged for periods not exceeding three to four months. Myself and brother are the sole support of a widowed mother and children still going to

125 Letter from L. Robinson to Thomas Mutch, 12 January 1929, Thomas Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 1.
126 Letter from Ruby Paul to Thomas Mutch, Thomas Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8.
127 Letter from Minnie Turkey to Thomas Mutch, Thomas Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 21.
school.”

Summarising the hopes of “a number” of her neighbors and work-mates, Laura told Mutch “We look to you as our Labor progressor.”

In the early 1920s Thomas Mutch’s electorate included some of the poorest suburbs in Australia. Mascot, where he owned a house, bordered Sydney’s sewage works (“the violet farm”) and further south, La Perouse was urban hinterland; poultry farmers lived in shacks, and country migrants farmed illegal holdings made up mostly of sand and salt. After WWI, governments looked to improve areas like South Sydney by building garden suburbs inspired by Walter Burley Griffin’s design of Canberra. They hoped for suburban havens of identical, bungalow dwellings where working families could rent new homes from welfare departments, enjoy large backyards and scientifically designed kitchens, raise their children in protected parkland, and plant regulation-height shrubbery along their front fences.

The construction of Daceyville garden suburb near Kingsford and Mascot was Mutch’s campaign symbolising for him the advancement of working people and the social mobility of his area which he hoped would become “a nice, middle class place.” Pamphlets advertising Daceyville promised “Homes for the People – Each Daceyville room is 10 foot high. They are lit by ELECTRICITY… Infant deaths are half that of city Sydney.” With an eye to

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128 Letter from Laura Keenan to Thomas Mutch, Thomas Mutch papers MLMSS 426 Box 51.
129 Ibid.
132 Kate Murphy, Fears and Fantasies: Modernity, Gender and the Rural-Urban Divide (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 32.
133 Thomas Mutch paper, MLMSS 426 Box 34.
134 ‘Daceyville’ promotional pamphlets, loose in Thomas Mutch paper, MLMSS 426 Box 34. Access to electricity was uneven and remained a luxury well into the 1930s. A 1923 survey showed that 34% of houses in Australia were wired for electricity. 75% of these had electric irons, 20% had radiators, 7% had fans and 2% had vacuum cleaners. See: Iteil Bereson, Australia in the 1920s (Abbotsford: Binara Publishing, 2000), p. 15.
posterity Mutch had the area’s central reserve named Mutch Park. When he moved from Mascot to a new house in Daceyville in 1918, he presented himself as the embodiment of advancement – “from shearing shed to drawing room” – allowing photographers to document his new life for the benefit of his constituents; parking his car in a driveway, closing his freshly painted white fence, and enjoying meals in a newly minted kitchen. As Daceyville advertising boasted: “The tenants, as may be expected, include a representative of practically every occupation in the State, not omitting a member of parliament and a politician.” By 1919, 300 people were on a waiting list for houses, although not everyone was eligible; “Under the Housing Board Act one is empowered to exercise discrimination as to the class of persons to whom the cottages may be given.”

In many ways Mutch’s electorate was representative of national Australian demographics. For although conditions were good in Daceyville, a model suburb, neighbouring localities like Botany, Matraville and Kingsford remained largely untouched by improvement schemes with dirt roads, unreliable water, and overcrowded schools. “I am too ashamed to invite my friends to the area,” Joan Kirby of Matraville wrote to Mutch in 1929, “it’s the roads.” Despite Labor and the Conservative’s appeal to female voters in the interwar period most women undercut the party rhetoric as they were living in basic conditions with big families on small, irregular incomes. If this was suburban living, then it bore little resemblance to the stereotypical suburbia of the 1950s and post-war reconstruction. Studies of interwar domesticity show that it was the dreams and aspirations first formulated in the 1930s that

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135 Thomas Davies Mutch papers MLMSS 426 Box 33.
136 ‘Daceyville’ promotional pamphlets, loose in Thomas Mutch paper, MLMSS 426 Box 34.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
were only realised in the 1950s: “if one legacy of the 1930s was the desire for a modern home
another was the impossibility, for some, of attaining it.”

Figure 2.7 A residential street in Daceyville showing housing commission homes c1920s. Source: NSW State
Records Office, image no: 14086.

Splintered by small fissures, Daceyville and the suburbs that surrounded it were on the fault
line of the middle and working-class divide. Edith Meeks was one women straining to grasp
the way of life Thomas Mutch held out before her. Having married a builder, she felt removed
from a middle-class heritage. Her parents had been rural Methodists. She began writing to
Mutch in 1919, and as time went by, and his letters went unanswered, used her writing as a
confessional, recording the strains she felt in her marriage, and with those around her:

Clare Langhamer, ‘The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain’, Journal of Contemporary History 40, no. 2
My perception of character and people is pretty keen – but when one is blinded by
marriage and attraction one has to try to furiously disbelieve or make allowances. He
accuses me of having no friends – simply because I do not accept his people at
Daceyville – I can accept them up to a point but there I stop, and find nothing but
mistrust which brings out only bitterness in me.
I would just like to tell him that I could make far more friends if I didn’t have the tag
of his name tacked on to me – I DO when they don’t know but there is a difference as
soon as they do – unless they are of the intelligent upper class which are the only type
I can get on with – invitations from whom I have so often been obliged to refuse but
whose acquaintance I have LONGED for – people in the district just know me as
‘Mrs. Meeks’ and THAT is all they expect me to be – and the appearance of which I
have been struggling so hard to keep up.\textsuperscript{140}

Like Edith Meeks, Marion Cross found herself in an unhappy marriage, one which she
detailed in her own letters to Mutch. Relatively well off she was none-the-less plagued by
feelings of economic insecurity. Originally from New Zealand, she had come to Australia in
1916 and had given birth to a child out of wedlock.\textsuperscript{141} She had met and married her husband
Hal, a war veteran, in the space of a few months, and felt herself unable to connect with him:

You know hubby and I are almost strangers? Ever likely to be so. He being an
Englishman he is only interested in his own interests and I am far too sensitive of
ridicule to try to break through the wall.
Of course Hal is not a blackguard – he is a well-respected and liked man wherever he
goes but in the house it’s a different story. He never tells me anything and I tell him
nothing. I have this box solely to write to you. When things have looked and been
black for me I’ve always thought of you. You know Tom there is nothing a woman
likes better than to find true-blue men who will like and respect the
m and treat them as
human beings. I hope me telling you all about my marriage has not been taken
wrongly.
Tom if they do [Labour is voted in] try to make that Party a good honest and upright
party. Do your best to influence those who perhaps lose the proper way. I have always
felt that there is a good deal of fine material in your make up. If your party does get in
Tom don’t let anything lead you from the straight and good.\textsuperscript{142}

Marion Cross wanted to be a writer, but confessed to low self-esteem:

\textsuperscript{140} Letter from Edith Meeks 12 Alfred St Mascot to Thomas Mutch, Thomas Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 51.
\textsuperscript{141} Letter from Marion Cross to Thomas Mutch, Thomas Mutch papers MLMSS 426 Box 32.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
I am going to confide in you that as soon as I get settled I intend to do my utmost to be an authoress, fully realising the hard work before me – with perhaps not a chance of success. Anyhow, I’m going to do my utmost. I have the ambition but lack self-confidence. Tom you have done a considerable amount of writing – will you tell me what your ideas are? I am so nervous, sensitive – I could not talk to hubby on the subject or anyone else. I wonder Tom what you think of me when you read my letters. You know always when I want to express myself or talk to someone its always you I think of and wish I could talk to. That is one of the reasons I am always wishing you would write to me.  

Judith Brett has argued that popular understandings of the connection between good character and good government changed drastically in the first half of the twentieth century with the introduction of new media forms. The letters penned to Thomas Mutch were written during this shift. In her letters to Mutch, Marion Cross wrote about his political activity through the filter of her own aspirations. She also connected his good character to his personal attributes, his “honesty” and the “fine material” in his make-up. I suggest here that this highly personalised form of correspondence drew upon the model of the fan letter. As I indicated in an earlier part of this chapter, fan letters sanctioned the use of intimate language and personal revelation when writing to strangers. This cross over between the genre of fan literature and an older epistolary tradition of writing to political candidates can tell us much about the ways in which technological change effected the functioning of mass democracy between the wars. Cinema and celebrity culture generated new modes through which voters could engage with politicians. The political and the commercial have been treated as polar opposites in political histories of interwar Australia but developments in political communication were not merely a distant echo of commercial innovations.

143 Ibid.
Mutch invited correspondence; he directly asked for letters, and viewed those he received as ‘fan mail.’ Here was a way for politicians to speak to women outside of traditional settings like street meetings, Church fetes or school openings, and away from the protocols of respect and deference associated with this civic life. For some female correspondents the risks of personal disclosure may have been softened by Mutch’s long absences from the area. While representing his electorate Mutch was also barely there. He appeared steeped in the suburban and the local (he lived locally after all, and photographs attested to this) but in practice, modern politics made him elusive and physically unreachable. It was celebrity and the technologies of celebrity that allowed him to seem accessible even as he was travelling the country sometimes reaching twenty towns per week. Despite having never met Mutch, Florence Onslow Dagg was overtaken by nervous energy on election night in 1925. “I never stopped fighting in my heart for you. We never breathed freely from 6 until 9. The relief! Oh god, the relief! Big sigh. Thank God, Tom wins.”

Why did letter writers expose so much of themselves and of their marriages in their letters to Thomas Mutch? As we have seen, women were being told through party literature that their political citizenship was defined by their married state. Marriage was the brokering of a political legitimacy for women, especially for Labor supporters. Young single women (“those jazz babies”, according to one Labor leader) were regularly denied a vote at party meetings and conferences. Although tentative steps were being taken towards female welfare, this system was still under construction and women felt their economic insecurity acutely. Many of the women who wrote to Thomas Mutch had spent up to five years in paid work as single adolescents, usually between fourteen and eighteen years of age, wages typically passed

145 Florence Onslow Dagg to Thomas Mutch, Mutch papers MLMSS 426 Box 5.
146 Newspaper cuttings, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426 Box 15A.
directly on to their parents or male siblings. They entered a black economy after marriage: helping their husbands in downstairs shops, seeking sewing, mending and piece work, taking on washing for small payments. Lacking legal rights to this income, their economic survival was conflated with their marital happiness. Marriage was the defining political institution for Mutch’s correspondents, as well as the prism through which they articulated financial strain, dissatisfaction and ambition.

Unlike their mothers, women who worked briefly before marriage in the 1920s partook in the beginnings of a consumerism not fully established until the 1950s. As Gail Reekie has shown, 1920’s consumerism in Australia was less about acquisition and more about aspiration (“I do a lot of window shopping”, wrote Lydia Gill), what William Leach has called a “culture of possibility.” While not necessarily owning ‘more’, Australian women looked to a future where ‘more’ might one day be attainable. The popularity of works by Marie Stopes, Judge Lindsey and Elinor Glyn testify to public interest in ‘companionate marriage’, as well as a shift in pre-marriage expectations, towards friendship and ‘shared interests’, a new model exemplified in films like The ‘It’ Girl and Grand Hotel. If marriage didn’t have this companionate quality (“hubby and I are almost strangers,” confessed Marion Cross) celebrity made available rituals of intimacy bearing a similarity to romantic encounter. “Listening to you,” Dorothy Joyce told Mutch, it was “like two electric lights had been lit up inside me.”

For Dorothy, Mutch’s role as a political celebrity meant access both to the political reforms

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149 Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8.
he represented (“the things that COUNT,” in her words) and the romance his personality and aesthetic bearing seemed to promise.150

Photography, film culture and the crossover between celebrity journalism and political commentary combined to amplify Mutch’s personality alongside his politics, entwining Labor reforms to do with women and welfare with Mutch’s celebrity. The predominance of ‘personality’ as a psychological idea in the interwar period popularised a way of interacting with individual candidates that encouraged constituents to read and predict political action from the photographs and physical style of individual candidates. Personality and celebrity as applied to representative democracy encouraged voters to emotionally invest in politicians in ways impossible prior to the use of twentieth-century visual media, and for some voters, part of this investment involved replicating cinematic narratives in their political engagement. In this way modern perceptions of personality and celebrity facilitated mass democracy as it was expanding in Australia after the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924. The danger here was the lag between the generalised promises regarding women and the state made in political speeches (like those given by Mutch) and implied through celebrations of domestic life and suburban uplift, and the actual specificities of policy delivered by the Labor or Conservative Nationalist Parties.151 Reform was to come, not necessarily from the intricacies of the political process, it seemed, but from the force of individual personalities within that process.

150 Ibid.
An incongruence between Mutch’s actual power and perceptions of that power among his supporters was nowhere more apparent than in the application of Widowhood Endowment legislation in the late 1920s which gave financial assistance to widows with children but withheld welfare from widows without dependents or with children who were partially employed. The policy was widely regarded by Labor supporters as a failure. Rather than condemning Mutch for the perceived inadequacy of this policy, a policy he had campaigned on in two separate elections, some correspondents sympathised with the harshness and duplicity of political manoeuvring. “Tom is everything well with you?” asked Dorothy Joyce in 1927 “Are you too in search of ‘Truth’ in people in that whirl pool of politics?”

To conflate the opinions expressed in these letters with representations of popular opinion is problematic. Yet these letters provide a way into fault lines running through society at large; to the aspirations of voters in the 1920s when the fulfilment of their aspirations seemed possible for some – social mobility, working-class emancipation, intellectual, romantic and artistic fulfilment – while for others, the realisation of their aspirations only created new restrictions, a new “gethsemane” as Edith Meeks put it. The voters who wrote to Thomas Mutch drew upon new cultural resources to articulate their political engagement. The ways in which they did so shows how commercial culture was connected to the expansion of Australian mass democracy in this period. The very existence of the Mutch archive is testament to the new kind of politics which developed in Australia between the wars. In order

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153 Dorothy Annette Joyce to Thomas Davies Mutch, 8 August 1927, Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 8. See also: 29 July 1927.
154 Letter from Edith Meeks 12 Alfred St Mascot to Thomas Mutch, Thomas Mutch papers, MLMSS 426, Box 51.
to excavate the impact of compulsory voting on Australian society we need to also consider concomitant developments in gender relations and celebrity culture.
Part I

Politics and Promotional Culture

Chapter 3

Factory Workers and Union Publicity in Australia and China

When we change from day to night shift we have to work sixteen hours … Ah! When shall we be treated as the European workers? We may be called the factory animals of the world of darkness.¹

Testimony from Shanghai’s Lungwa factory and from workers in China and India made its way into the trade literature of Australian unions in the 1920s. Sent by missionary and socialist groups across Asia into trade hall offices, quoted in Federal Parliament, read aloud at meetings, re-printed in pamphlets and in trade newspapers, voices from colonial factories ran down the rungs of Labor media, incorporating the localised and often stifled demands of Australian unionists into a world-wide campaign for the ‘dignity of labour’ and the ‘liberation of Asia’. Contained in the scrapbooks of union leaders are the letters which followed these petitions (from Li Hung Ling in Shanghai, Gopal Singh in Delhi) carefully pressing home points of shared Labor principles (a basic wage, a pension scheme) while avoiding racial divides along the empire colour-line.² Without ‘union solidarity’ against the forces of capital, all would become “factory animals of the world of darkness.”

The central role played by trade unionism in the politics of the interwar period has been well established. This chapter re-visits the activities of Australian Trade Unions in the 1920s and 1930s through the lens of promotional culture. It looks at the unexpected ways in which trade

¹ Petition addressed to Dame Adelaide Anderson from workers at the Lungwa cement factory, 13 December, Twelfth Year of the Chinese Republic (1923), Eleanor Hinder Papers, Mitchell Library, MS 770, Box 20.
union media chose to represent unionism to the Australian public during these years. Analysing interwar unionism at this register reveals surprising connections between metropolitan Australian trade unions and Asian anti-colonial protest movements.

Having battled for and won improved conditions for workers in the years before 1916, unions in Australia watched these achievements erode at the end of WW1. In response, workplace leaders organised increasingly desperate and violent strike action: bread riots in Melbourne in 1919, coal strikes in Queensland and police strikes in Victoria in 1923, a seamen’s strike across imperial ports (from South Africa to Perth and Hong Kong) in 1925, a General Strike in England in 1926. Australian strike activity peaked in 1917 with five million workdays lost, nearly ten times the days lost to industrial action in 1913. While strikes tapered off in 1918, they surged again in 1919 and 1920. This level of industrial action was not experienced again in Australia until the mid-1940s.

Running parallel to these industrial conflicts was another form of popular agitation as colonised peoples protested British rule across Asia. In 1919 British troops killed 400 Indian protestors at Amritsar, and in 1925 British police shot into a crowd of Chinese unionists in Shanghai. One unexpected result of the Shanghai shootings was the sudden reaction of some

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4 6.3 million days were lost to strikes in Australia in 1919 alone. See Beasley, Wharfies, p. 53; Brian Fitzpatrick and Rowan J. Cahill, The Seaman’s Union of Australia (Sydney: Star Printery, 1981), pp. 50-59.


Australian factory workers who quickly likened their own struggle against “imperial capitalism” to protests in Shanghai and other parts of Asia. Chinese workers had similar feelings, telling British officials, “Australia is like China, a nation oppressed by the British race.” Unions tapped the resulting global outrage over the Shanghai Incident, fashioning local support for Labor rights out of sympathy for Shanghai. Street deaths in China echoed government brutality towards strikers in Australia, giving the unions an Asian regional mythology through which to articulate the plight of workers. They did so against the shifting sands of Pacific relations, as British moral legitimacy weakened at its Eastern reach, and the bonds of Imperial trade and preferential tariffs for British goods confronted a new economic order. Australia needed new markets and new investors as Britain withdrew but to move forward, outdated attitudes had to be re-appraised; Asian ‘coolies’ were becoming Asian ‘customers.’

While interwar strike action and Pan-Asian self-determination movements have both been the subject of much scholarly scrutiny, the alignment between the two – the affiliations and shared promotional activities linking anti-colonial resistance with unionism – has lain

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between the boundaries of distinct academic fields, and this is especially true for Australian history. Although Heather Goodall and Julia Martinez have recently questioned orthodox histories of Australian union isolationism and xenophobia by tracing cross-racial mateship in the Chinese-dominated Darwin Seaman’s Union and the Sydney Indian Seaman’s Union, the wider impacts of Asian nationalism on domestic Australian politics remains largely unresearched. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynold’s recent work in *Drawing the Global Colour Line* is an exception and has spurred forward historical examinations of the ‘transnational solidarities’ linking Australia to Asia. As Gregor Benton has written in his analyses of Chinese migrant internationalism, scholars are now “having a fresh look at unions and ‘non-white’ labour and finding that there is more to this story than labour racism.” In this chapter I do not argue that affiliation between Australian and Chinese factory workers proves Australian unions supported decolonisation in the 1920s. Rather, by tracing connections between Sydney and Shanghai in what Wang Gungwu has called “the era of labour and socio-revolutionary internationalism” I engage with two main questions. First, how did unions in Australia come to make a case for workers rights which – by spotlighting the treatment of workers in treaty-port China – carried a critique of ‘Britishness’? And second what changes to

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11 Julia Martinez, ‘Questioning White Australia: Unionism and Coloured Labor 1911-1937’, *Labour History* 76 (May 1999), pp. 1-19; Heather Goodall, ‘Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence 1945-47’, *Labour History*, 94 (May 2008), pp. 43-68. This is possibly because Russian or Communist influences on interwar strike action have traditionally held more interest for Labor historians.


distinctions of class and race made this argument possible in an Australian community fiercely proud of empire, which vilified ‘nigger labour’ and refused union membership to the ‘coloured races’? Chapter two demonstrated that promotional culture is a fruitful way into the relationship between politics and gender in the 1920s and 1930s. This chapter turns attention to the connection between class and race and suggests that anti-colonial protest movements taking place in the wider Asian region informed domestic Australian conceptions of class-based inequality. In the process the lives of factory workers in Sydney and Shanghai were temporarily and unexpectedly entwined. Taking ‘publicity agents’ and promotional culture as a way into the culture of unionism in interwar Australia uncovers connections between Chinese and Australian unions and shows how Asian anti-colonial nationalism affected Australian trade unionism in the 1920s and 1930s.

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In August 1925 an Australian in China, “in the course of an afternoon’s ramble” inadvertently walked into the middle of a Hong Kong strike. The Chinese strikers, assuming the man was English and therefore an “imperial capitalist”, detained him under the watch of Punjabi guards.15 On mentioning that he was Australian the man was immediately released, the Chinese declaring: “Australia is like China, a nation oppressed by the British race; we have no quarrels with Australians, but only with the British.”16 The Australian made his way out

15 The British brought Punjabi police to China from India as they considered these men superior police officers. Bickers, Empire Made Me, p. 32.
from behind the strikers’ fortifications and cabled the Department of External Affairs in Canberra with the tale. Australian officials quickly circulated transcripts of his call underlining the words “Australia is like China” with tense, red pencil-strokes.17 Here was a small story articulating larger racial and spatial tension. British-owned and run Hong Kong exemplified the annexing of Chinese sovereign territory by European powers – what was known in China as the “carving of the melon” (gua fen).18 Like other treaty-port cities along China’s coastline (Guangzhou, Amoy, Shanghai, Chefoo) Hong Kong was also a boomtown for European manufacturing. Chinese workers filled factories multiplying in a concession environment favourable to capitalist enterprise, offering plentiful labour, little regulation, low wages and preferential tariffs for British goods. In the mid-1920s strike action was causing regular stoppages, and anti-British feeling was intensifying.19 By declaring affinity with Australia, Hong Kong’s strikers articulated an unexpected strand of Chinese anti-colonial logic; Britain should not only leave China, they argued; Britain should leave Asia, all of Asia, even ‘White Australia.’ Gregor Benton has shown how international alliances across Australasian racial divides sprang from the spontaneous perception by Chinese and other non-Chinese migrants of shared problems in everyday life and work.20 Drawing on Australia and China’s common experience of modern imperialism, unionists in Hong Kong ignored distinctions between different slabs of imperial real estate – ‘dominion’, ‘treaty port’, ‘colony’ ‘concession’ – forming a new basis for building commonality across Asia, and across the cultural and hierarchical boundaries of empire.

17 Ibid.
20 Benton, Chinese Migrants and Internationalism, p. 3.
Between 1925 and 1929 strike violence and government crackdown in Australia appeared to echo a series of dramatic events taking place in China and particularly in Shanghai, allowing union leaders to use Shanghai as a stage on which to dramatise and justify union methods in Australia. On Saturday, 30 May 1925, Kenneth John McEuen, commissioner of police for the Shanghai Municipal Council, received word that a demonstration had been called by student unionists to protest the killing of a Chinese worker named Gu Zhenghong by a textile factory guard.\(^{21}\) A crowd of “several hundred, increasing all the time” swelled on Shanghai’s shopping thoroughfare, Nanjing Rd, stopped outside the front of Wing On department store to hear a speaker, and then headed for the Louza police station.\(^{22}\) The crowd appeared to come to a standstill outside the Town Hall. Missionary Harry Westnidge found himself swallowed in a push of bodies: “They were not going back and not going forward; then there was a shower of pamphlets and papers of all description coming southwards along Chekiang Road. I could see the flags and leaflets being thrown up in the air. This appeared to put new heart in the surge.”\(^{23}\) The crowd continued on and surrounded the station. At this point British police standing inside claimed to hear “Kill the foreigners” shouted in both English and Chinese.\(^{24}\) They reacted and shot into the crowd, killing several and leaving more wounded. Blood-splattered white shirts, taken from the bodies of the dead, were photographed and slid into the pages of papers across the globe, aided by the increasing stretch of media agencies like Reuters and Hassan.\(^{25}\) Further protests broke out across China and this repeated street action attracted the title ‘May 30\(^\text{th}\) Movement.’ An inquiry and public trial ensued, with transcripts

\(^{21}\) Wu Sha yun dong li liao, Historical Materials about ‘The May 30\(^\text{th}\) Movement’ 1925, Shanghai Municipal Archives (hereafter SMA) D2-02-14-154; D2-0-14-19; D2-0-2983-6.

\(^{22}\) ‘Trial of the Rioters at the Mixed Court’, 10 September 1925, Wu sha shi jian, SMA Q192-17-754, p 16, p. 34.

\(^{23}\) Ibid, p. 16, pp. 34-35.

\(^{24}\) Ibid, p. 35. At the height of the May 30\(^\text{th}\) Movement people wearing foreign clothes were liable to have them splashed with acid, or to have insulting epithets written on pieces of paper secretly stuck to their backs. Quang ming Zai Wo men ti ,Chen-Men, p. 278, North China Herald as well, 13/6/1925.

\(^{25}\) SMA D2-0-2980-3
published for popular consumption.\footnote{\textit{Trial of the Rioters at the Mixed Court}, 10 September 1925, \textit{wu sha shi jian}, SMA Q192-17-754.}

\textbf{Figure 3.1} The bodies and the clothes of the ‘May 30\textsuperscript{th} Martyrs’, Source: Shanghai Municipal Archives SMA D2-02-14-154
For most of 1925 China would be the ‘cynosure’ of the world, as the ‘Shanghai incident’ (‘Britain’s biggest catastrophe in Asia since Amritsar’) became a “test for Empire” and international opinion rallied to support Chinese demands for “freedom” and “self-determination.” Public sympathy had been turning against the British presence in China for some time with increased reporting which depicted the colonial Orient as immoral, lambasting treaty-port “Shanghailanders as parasitic and cruel exploiters of Chinese labor and violent defenders of their privilege.” Since 1922, the Young Women’s Christian Association – with Rockefeller money – had been running a successful ‘public opinion’ campaign against child slavery in British-owned factories in China and India. In Australia, the “rising tide of color” would collide with “the rising tide of labor”, as Asian calls for an end to empire were made local, challenging the way unionists conceptualised political action and also what it meant to identify as British and Australian.

In Sydney, Labor members lectured on the ‘Shanghai trouble’, likening the British presence in China to territorial robbery. At one public meeting, a Labor speaker asked the crowd, “How would you like it if someone came and took Sydney off us?” Eye witness accounts of May 30th written by Australian missionaries in Shanghai were passed out by the Young Women’s Christian Association: “Some of the students were weeping and blood was streaming from

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27 Bickers, Britain in China, p. 34.
29 Eleanore Hinder papers 1827-1963, MLMSS 770, Box 20 (34).
their heads and faces … In running pools of blood there were some 10 or 12 boys and men, dead and dying.” Such profound interest was made possible by an already existing belief that British factory managers mistreated Chinese workers. This was bolstered by residual nineteenth-century popular narratives, which figured colonial capitalists as akin to slave owners, practising barbarous acts away from the reforming gaze of metropolitan regulators. Rumors about Indian and Chinese workers abounded: “Indian workers were ‘blown from cannons for British sport’ and ‘Chinese workers averaged one meal a day’; ‘32 million Indian natives had died from starvation’ and ‘British factory owners mixed opium into the food of their workers’. This was ‘so that his loyalty to Britain is quite passingly submissive and he seldom smiles.’”32 There was also the fear that Shanghai illustrated life without unions, prophesying a potential future for Australian workers if union membership continued to erode, and the Bruce Government was successful in their efforts to dismantle wage arbitration.

Beginning in the early 1920s church and union groups linking Australia to the Far East had arranged for descriptions of factory life in Shanghai and other parts of Asia to be distributed in Australia. Labour newspapers sympathetic to international socialism published the resulting reports. In these articles a shared ‘film of empire’ linked Asian and white factory workers against a morally bankrupt British boss. A sense of similarity, of dominion lives lived out in parallel, but very different worlds, could evade thorny questions of race, making it possible for trade union papers to run this news about Indian, Filipino and Chinese factory workers without alienating their Australian readers, or becoming embroiled in a debate over ‘coloured labour.’ As early as 1921 the Northern Standard (the newly established newspaper

of the North Australian Industrial Union) wrote of the “awakening” of Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Filipino workers in a “struggle to free themselves from the shackles of bondage.”

In February 1925 One Big Union ran an article entitled “Two Unionists Beheaded in Public: British Commander orders the Execution of Two Innocent Men.” The article told the story of the night of 19 June 1924, when the drowned body of Edwin C. Hawley was pulled out of Shanghai harbour. Hawley’s corpse was then dragged onto a British gunboat, making its way, as was usual, up and down the wharf side, throwing a conspicuous shadow across Shanghai’s docklands. Assuming Hawley had been “beaten and thrown into the water by Chinese junkmen”, the ship Commander ordered Chinese authorities to behead two officials from the Shanghai Junkman’s Union on the wharves. Without “any investigation” and “after futile protests from a Chinese magistrate”, two union leaders were taken to a beach off the docklands and promptly executed, “a perfect sample of the kind of British justice obtained in China at this time.”

On the side of this article, One Big Union published an illustration that showed ‘money’ in suit and tails, whip in hand, forcing men to jump off the wharves as ‘starvation’ watched on and the Great Wall of China rose on the horizon. These reports were not unusual. Grisly tales of union beheadings sat alongside descriptions of rough British treatment towards Chinese civilians. In April 1925, the Seaman’s Journal reported that a Mr. Gumley of the British firm Butterfield & Squires had pushed a Chinese man “somewhat rudely” off his seat in a tug boat in Guangzhou and had to apologise publicly under threat of a

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33 Northern Standard (15 September 1921), quoted in Martinez ‘Coolies to Comrades’, p. 300.
34 One Big Union, 2 February 1925.
35 Ibid.
strike from all Butterfield & Squires’ workers.\textsuperscript{36}

A string of missionary works and lecture tours launched in Australia in the early 1920s reiterated the argument that China’s struggle against Britain was a humanitarian struggle against capitalism. Adelaide Anderson and Agatha Harrison of the Young Women’s Christian Association toured Australia in 1923 and 1928 calling for “the support of the Australian people in a campaign to save China from some of the horrors [British] people went through during the Industrial Revolution.”\textsuperscript{37} Anderson described,

A situation [in China] that beggared description … factories were developing a 1921 industrial organization with 1800 conditions for men, woman and children … the conditions that accompanied the growth of English industrial history are known to you all, so you can picture China [in all its] hideous spectacle.\textsuperscript{38}

Their speeches were “aimed at rousing [sic] hearers” to “a sense of responsibility” as “We Westerners have so much to answer for. We brought the industrial system [to China].”\textsuperscript{39}

The early twentieth century was the height of the internationalising period of the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Young Women’s Christian Association, called the ‘Y’ movement for short – which saw close ties form between mission work and labor rights advocacy.\textsuperscript{40} At an Industrial Conference in 1923, Australian unions had passed a resolution to cooperate with the ‘Y’: “To organize a publicity campaign through the city and country press

\textsuperscript{36} The Seaman’s Journal, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{37} Agatha Harrisson correspondence, 1919-1925, Eleanore Hinder papers, MLMSS 277, Box 34.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. See also: John Host, Victorian Labour History: Experience, Identity and the Politics of Representation (London: Routledge, 1998).
\textsuperscript{39} ‘The joint Committee of Shanghai’s Women’s Organization: Towards a Regulation of Child Labor in Shanghai’, Bulletin No 1, Eleanore Hinder papers, MLMSS 277, Box 34.
and devise the ways and means by which this can be carried out.”  

George Waite, head of the Seaman’s Union, urged delegates “to discuss the practicality of coordinating forces [with the Y] and to formulate, or take the necessary steps to formulate, a general message for propaganda purposes.”  

The Y Movement had begun as an evangelical mission to urban working classes in London in 1844, with its branches opening in New York in the 1850s, Melbourne in the 1880s and Shanghai in 1912.  

By 1925 the Y operated over fifty city and country outlets in Australia. Between 1922 and 1923 the Shanghai Y was in talks with the Rockefeller Foundation, eventually receiving substantial funding to spend on ‘creating public opinion’ and ‘sympathy’ for the exploitation of labour in China, and to agitate for the ‘reform of International Labor legislation.’ According to one Y pamphlet, “At this moment China is the cynosure of all eyes – and the world is waiting the industrial situation there. A still more significant fact is that Labor in other countries is watching with a growing concern for the people involved.” The Shanghai Y were given $4,487 by the Rockefeller Foundation, $800 of which they spent on publicity and literature, much of which made its way to Australian Y outlets, and also to union offices.

In early 1925 a Sydney welfare officer and factory inspector, Eleanor Hinder, was made a secretary at the Y’s Shanghai office. Known for her work as a welfare officer in department store factories, Hinder was closely involved in Sydney’s Labor world and had written one of the first union pamphlets for female department store workers. Once in China, and right in

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41 ‘Industrial Conference’, George Waite papers, MLMSS 208, Box 1 (3).
42 Ibid.
45 Agatha Harrison correspondence, 1919-1925, Eleanore Hinder papers, MLMSS 277, Box 34.
the mad grit and sprawl of Shanghai’s Zhabei factory district, she kept a grip on her Australian connections through correspondence and by sending home Y pamphlets and photographs documenting Chinese labour conditions. Along with other Australian-born missionaries, she had begun visiting factories in Shanghai in 1923. Dominating a dusty flat area between the Yangtze River and Shanghai’s red-light district, Zhabei was a cheek-to-cheek expanse of flat, mile-long manufacturing sheds and slum-alleys. As Hinder recorded: “The dust was appalling. I noticed that the man who took us around (he has financial interest in the factory) went through the rooms with a handkerchief over his nose and mouth. The workers spend their LIVES in this atmosphere. The scene was unforgettable.” Australia’s Trade Commissioner in Shanghai shared her concerns: “Conditions prevailing are horrifying. Little girls of the tenderest age arrive between 4am and 6am to begin their day shift. Women bring their babies and put them on the mill floor to sleep.” The cause was “western industrialism” which had “gripped the country and is here to stay.”

Factories became well-established illustrations of industrial capitalism in the interwar years. According to Roland Marchland the 1920s and 1930s were the “era of the factory photograph” when corporations “strove to make showplaces of their factories” through the wide circulation of industrial images. During these years corporations more than doubled

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48 Ma Zhang Lin, *Zu Jie Li de Shanghai (Shanghai in Foreign Concessions)*, pp. 240-254; SMA U1-6-111; Q1-5-518.
49 Eleanore Hinder papers 1897-1963, MLMSS 277, Box 20.
their commissions of factory photographs.\textsuperscript{52} The Y in Shanghai adopted this technique for different ends in the 1920s, using industrial photography in their exposés of Zhabei. In November 1924 the Shanghai Y published \textit{The Long Hard Day in China} documenting ‘factory life’ in Zhabei.\textsuperscript{53} Elizabeth Chirstman, of the National Women’s Trade Union League of America organised for the distribution of ‘\textit{Long Hard Day}’ in Britain and America, while Hinder arranged supplies for Australia. Both women targeted Labor and union leaders such as Herbert McDonnell, head of the British Labour Party, and Billy Hughes, former Labor Prime Minister of Australia 1915-1928: “We are sending you copies of ‘\textit{The Life and Labor Bulletin}’ [as well as] \textit{The Long Hard Day in China} picturing so vividly the working conditions … which are so challenging to our Western Civilization.”\textsuperscript{54} Included in the literature were images of very young children:

One is a small boy of ten who was brought in the other morning with his lips torn to ribbons and his jaw almost fractured because after a twelve hour night shift he had fallen against the machinery at four am and he has worked under these conditions since he was a baby of seven. The other is a seventeen-year-old girl who, during a shift of twelve and a half hours, wavered near the flying wheels and had her scalp torn from her head. These are the facts – they hardly sound real.\textsuperscript{55}

In order to gain access to Zhabei, YWCA women enlisted the help of Chinese members who collected and translated the testimonials of workers. In Lungwa cement factory Li Hung Ling and Wu Chien Fu handed missionaries a petition which was also included in Y booklets: ‘We have no seats while we work … When we change from day to night shift, we have to work sixteen hours – four hours more than usual … Ah! When will we be treated as the European

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, p. 274.
\textsuperscript{53} ‘The Long Hard day in China’, Eleanore Hinder papers 1827-1963, MLMSS 770, Box 20 (34).
\textsuperscript{54} Letter from Elizabeth Christman, National Women’s Trade Union League of America to the Shanghai Office of the Y.W.C.A’, 12 November 1924, Eleanore Hinder papers 1827-1963, MLMSS 770, Box 20.
\textsuperscript{55} ‘The Long Hard day in China’, Eleanore Hinder papers 1827-1963, MLMSS 770, Box 20.
workers? We may be called the factory animals of the world of darkness.” The *Long Hard Day in China* and other pamphlets elicited international condemnation of Britain’s role in China, and protest from Labor members in the British Parliament. Hinder reported in the YWCA newsletter, *Threads* that W. M. Hughes, (‘Billy Hughes) from Australia, “both cabled and wrote” along with other Labour leaders from Britain, America, Japan, India, Czechoslovakia and France. She mused that the Y was now leading a “social revolution” in labour rights:

International Action is remarkably new to all of us and the first casting of small threads across the spaces that divide us may seem as futile as the spider’s light filament. But watch them by degrees strengthen into unbreakable bonds. A weaving has started that cannot easily be stopped … Slogans and posters and handbills, in terms people can understand, distributed broadcast at such times, have led to common thinking and engendered a group mind.

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56 Petition addressed to Dame Adelaide Anderson from workers at the Lungwa cement factory, 13 December, 12th Year of the Chinese Republic (1923), Eleanor Hinder Papers, Mitchell Library, MS 770, Box 20.
As Zhabei’s infamy grew, attention moved from factory workers to factory owners, and to the activities of foreign firms based in China. Y publicity quoted British factory managers on the use of child labour: “If we stop employing children our mills will have to close down”; “Children’s hands are peculiarly suited to this work.”59 The emotive linkage of childhood to paid work triggered anti-capitalist critique in Britain and Australia, providing trade unions with a new visual vocabulary (“these atrocities of international imperialism”) in which to

59 Ibid.
describe Australian ‘factory lives.’ Angela Woollacott has shown that for Australian interwar travellers like Eleanor Hinder, class relationships mediated encounters with colonised people because “anti-colonial nationalism helped them to recognise the role of empire in the production of poverty and suffering.” I would add to Woollacott’s argument by suggesting that organisations like the YWCA extended this recognition of the link between poverty and empire to a domestic Australian audience. Attracting a broad spread of devotees, garnering respectable and wealthy patronage and opening outlets and youth halls at an exponential rate, the Y provided a much needed distribution network for Australian unionism and anti-colonial protest movements. Flush with funds, real estate and connections, Y secretaries like Eleanore Hinder, Adelaide Anderson and Agatha Harrisson plugged Australasian trade unions into an immense, international publicity machine with modern communication systems and growing appeal.

It is worth pausing here to consider whether or not Shanghai workers’ stories did, indeed, find a sympathetic audience among Australian readers, and if so – how and why did this happen in the mid-1920s? While such ‘sympathy’ is hard to measure, union newspapers, Labor leaders and Y pamphlets clearly wrote for an implied reader – and the longevity and sweep of Shanghai storytelling across the mainstream press would indicate some sort of positive reception, or at least a sustained interest, in the wider community. By considering the interaction between left-leaning rhetoric on Shanghai and existing political realities we can appreciate why this form of publicity may have been effective in promoting Australian trade

60 Ibid.
unions in 1925.

Migration to the cities and a growth in manufacturing during WW1 meant more Australians were working in factories than ever before in the mid-twenties. In 1921, 34 per cent of Sydney’s population worked in manufacturing, mostly in the smoky crush of the inner city in which factories (342 in one suburb alone) shadowed boarding houses where migrants from the country made do in cramped quarters. Richard Waterhouse argues that Australian workers were slower than their American counterparts to become acculturated to the rhythm of the modern factory, partly because, for many country migrants, the transition from rural to factory work was made very quickly, in the space of one generation. Elsie Harrison remembered her stomach sinking in 1925 when at fifteen she went to work in a stocking factory (Lustre Hosiery) in Darlinghurst because her father had lost his job as a council garbage collector: “I said to a lady when I first got there – how long have you been here and she said ‘two years’ and I said, ‘I hope I’m not here in two years time’… I was frightened.” After three weeks work she got a cut in wages from fourteen shillings and six pence to thirteen shillings and thruppence, but maintained a forty-eight hour week, paying ten shillings board to her parents every Sunday. “It was the beginning of the Depression.”

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64 Ibid, p. 112.
67 Ibid.
Some Australian workplaces maintained genuinely appalling conditions that remained invisible to the wider public. In the shipping industry, sacks of cargo such as wheat, cement and potatoes weighing up to ninety-five kilograms were still mainly shifted on workers’ backs (in cloth bags, not containers); coal and sulfur were moved by shoveling, causing eyes to stream; scratches were irritated by cement, soda ash caused nose bleeds and castor-oil beans produced allergic reactions. Animal hides arrived in Australia rotten and oozing with maggots, and unloading sugar attracted clouds of wasps. Technological advances were not necessarily designed to ease the burden. Melbourne hospitals treated frostbite in the heat wave of 1927 because men worked in freezer holds without protective clothing.

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machines in one Sydney factory caused “dusted lung”, a colloquial term for emphysema.\textsuperscript{70}

It was textile work, however, that developed one of the worst reputations for workplace safety and this was especially the case in Sydney. By the 1920s reports and photographs showing injuries received in textile factories were commonplace in Australian newspapers. As Jessie Viner, a former Joyce Bros employee, told reporters:

> Textile was upstairs. There were shafts and belts under each bench, these were uncovered. One girl had a section of her scalp pulled off when passing one of these belts. One girl’s arm was caught as she was feeding bags into the printing machine … Most of us lost fingers, thumbs.\textsuperscript{71}

Complaints of bad factory conditions coincided with a drop in pay. In what Alan Martin has termed an “employer’s offensive”, further wage cuts and increased hours were introduced across urban factories.\textsuperscript{72} The men and (an increasing number) of women doing this factory work were new audiences for union literature. A sense of slipping living standards led to reflections on an earlier era. As a 1925 Labor election pamphlet put it:

> Years ago when there were no Unions, the condition of the working man and woman were shocking … Women and children worked 14, 15 and 16 hours a day for from 5/- a week to 5/- a month – MERE SLAVES. Many people still remember the awful conditions under which people worked not so many years ago, and the poor wages they received.\textsuperscript{73}

Considering the rapid decline in wages and conditions after 1918, it was not unreasonable for Australian factory workers to think worse was to come, and that workers on the other side of

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, pp. 62, 121, 128.
the world could hold up a mirror to this future. Shanghai’s Zhabei factory district made such reflection into a concrete reality. “A 12 hour day for children” exclaimed one union poster, entitled: “MURDER! An Indictment of Imperialism in China” adding “The struggle of Chinese workers is a struggle against the perpetuation of cooliedom in China. If the [Chinese workers] fail NOW the Australian workers cannot escape from its repercussions in the shape of more unemployment and a lowering of the standard of labor conditions here.”

Resentment towards empire was growing in the Australian Labor movement for other reasons as well. Britain was central to the Australian economy throughout the 1920s and 1930s and decisions made in its distant board-rooms, clubs and stock markets had major implications for Australia, its living standards and its urban make-up. Unionists resented Australia’s role as a ‘vassal state’ in the imperial economy as well as the number of migrants arriving from Britain each year as part of imperial migration programs, “taking jobs from unemployed Australians.” In 1921 alone Australia received 17, 525 immigrants from Britain, a number that increased every year well into the Great Depression. It was time, one Sydney Labor speaker argued, for Australian workers to enter the global economy on equal terms.

Images and stories from Zhabei became metaphors not only for ‘factory life’ but also for China’s relations with Britain and for venal empire trade more generally. The slave-rhetoric implicit in Zhabei narratives expressed the grievances of dominion states seemingly short-changed through preferential tariff arrangements with Britain. Dominion status was a

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77 ‘Newspaper cuttings’, George Waite papers, MLMS 208, Box 1.
characteristically ambiguous imperial invention that recognised various stages of self-government while managing to convey overtones of continuing subordination, usually through economic policy. 78 Thus testimonies and images from a Chinese factory district could expose the more subtle hierarchies of empire for an Australian audience, while at the same time collapsing race into class in an attack on British ‘fat capital’ in Asia. This hitching of national and racial identification to industrial dispute (British capital/Australian Labor, Chinese workers/white bosses) enabled an aggressively parochial labour category ‘the fat boss’ to become a stock figure in Pan-Asian independence movements. Here the British factory boss was a powerful device in the portrayal of a ‘monster’, conveying a gross power imbalance. Such a shift was not without gendered dimensions; Britain as ‘fat’, presented empire as ‘effete, unmanly’ while the colonial worker was ‘taut, muscular, broad chested’ and also Asian. 79

78 Hopkins, ‘Rethinking Decolonization’, p. 212.
Fruitfully tapping into the work of the Y, Union publicity encouraged Australians to sympathise with the victims of Zhabei; to see their own workplace angst not as the result of ‘yellow competition’, but due to financial wheeling and dealing in London at the expense of the Dominions. Shanghai was perfectly placed to enunciate this sense of economic servitude.

As of 1925 China existed in a state of semi-colonial subservience, severely limited in the exercise of its sovereignty by a net of unequal treaties and suffocating tariff arrangements with the major powers; and Chinese intellectuals, like their Indian counterparts, viewed their struggle for self-determination as part of a broader revolt against imperialism. China is “an international playground” wrote Yenching University Professor William Hung in a pamphlet circulated in Australia, “where for more than half a century all sorts of games, all varieties of

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80 Erez Manela, *Imagining Woodrow Wilson*, p. 4. Imperialist countries imposed a series of unequal treaties that opened China to trade by, among other methods, denying China the ability to restrict imports by raising tariffs. When China recovered tariff autonomy in the late 1920s it immediately imposed tariffs to restrict market access. The tariff rate of 1934 was seven times the pre-1929 rate. See Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 1-16.
imperialism have been played.” A country “so controlled and fettered” was “obviously not” free. Britain should proceed to redress “[this] great historical wrong.” If China was a ‘playground’ for the great powers, the dominion state was the ‘plaything’ of British capital – or so argued One Big Union and The Seaman's Journal. I do not wish to imply here that a majority of Australians wanted Britain to withdraw from East Asia in 1925 (this was patently not the case). What will become evident, however, is the impact of Chinese nationalism on the presentation of Australian political ideas and on the Labor Party which chose – for a brief moment in 1925 – to support the ‘liberation of China’ while also arguing the case for an independent Australia.

The Brisbane Affair

We now arrive at 17 June 1925, when the Shanghai May 30th Incident was woven into a Labor attack on Conservative Australian Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce, and on the panoply of empire he had come to represent. As a Commonwealth intimate Australia had lent England a navy cruiser, the H.M.A.S. Brisbane, as part of an exchange program in 1924. The Brisbane and its Australian crew had been assigned to the Admiralty’s China Squad and stationed on the China coast. From 30 May the ship was anchored in Shanghai and later moved to Hong Kong and was present when fifty-two rioters were shot by British troops. Whether or not Australian soldiers were implicated in the killing of Chinese civilians was

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82 Ibid.
83 ‘Newspaper cuttings’, George Waite papers, MLMS 208, Box 1.
85 ‘The Brisbane’, Argus (20 Jan 1927). For a history of British naval intervention in China see: Fitzgerald, Awakening China, pp. 109-114. Fitzgerald notes that the British navy had long signified British civilisation and racial superiority in Asia: “As Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe declared, ‘What are their ports, supplied with a few junks and barks, to our navigation, our merchant fleets, our large and powerful navies?’”
unclear, but specifics became irrelevant. The affair inflated beyond its details, becoming a juncture, a ‘questioning of empire’, which saw trade unions and the Labor party champion Chinese and Australian strikers as national heroes. The Brisbane’s presence in Shanghai and Hong Kong caused a diplomatic crisis as well as a public relations problem for Bruce as it aligned Australia with the British shootings, and with the repression and violence that followed.

Prior to 17 June, the Labor Party had been in the process of objecting to a Bill legalising the deportation of unionists. Bruce had cancelled award wages for Australian sailors on 5 June, and had de-registered their union. British-born Tom Walsh had led strikes in response. Having been imprisoned, he awaited transportation. Departing from their protests over deportation and strike crackdown – but keenly sensing a connected story – Labor frontbenches began to ask questions about what would become known as ‘The Brisbane Affair.’

By allowing the Brisbane to be stationed in Chinese waters, Labor argued, Australia was interfering in an “Industrial dispute, attempting to suppress a strike” and abetting abhorrent “British imperial schemes” in China. Labor’s leader Mathew Charlton spoke of the “endeavour of the downtrodden Chinese to improve their condition, ‘why should Australia contribute to [this] destruction of life?’” Frontbencher Frank Anstey proposed “Australians would be better engaged in supporting the rioters [in Shanghai] than in resisting them.” W. M. ‘Billy’ Hughes asked, “If white larrikins assaulted a Chinese cabinetmaker in Lonsdale Street, would we allow that a Chinese warship that happened to be in port was entitled to

intervene?” Queries as to H.M.A.S. Brisbane’s precise role in the ‘Shanghai Massacre’ stretched over the following month, and the issue attached itself to Bruce until the elections of 1929. He was not helped by regular reports of more deaths in China at the hands of British troops. The Argus and The Sydney Morning Herald swung their political coverage onto the affair, and pressed larger questions – was the “writing on the wall for the British Empire”? Had Bruce’s reverence for ‘empire trade’ and ‘law and order’ – such a powerful and persuasive politic in the early 1920s – made Australia into a draconian state deporting civilians, silencing dissent and abetting the shooting of protestors? Billy Hughes made sure Australian unions felt part of a unified Labor offensive. On his urging, the Australian Workers Union petitioned Bruce: “The AWU representing 140,000 organised workers in Australia views with alarm the happenings in China and demand that the Federal government shall not embroil Australians in Imperialistic Warfare in defense of capitalistic concessions in China.”

Hughes, a passionate devotee of the White Australia Policy and of white race-patriotism was an unlikely conduit for Chinese nationalism in Australia. In 1919 he had been instrumental in keeping a ‘racial equality’ cause out of the Treaty of Versailles. But Hughes had been the recipient of Y publicity since 1923 and his exposure to the Y’s work in China is one possible

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89 To the Director of the Pacific Branch, Prime Minister’s Department, Melbourne, from Major General Commanding H.R.M. Troops in China, ‘China command intelligence diary for June 1925’, Secret JG 533/5, NAA A10915/1/1. See also: ‘Publications – Shanghai Publicity Bureau “News Bulletins”’, NAA A981/PUB78; ‘China- Anti-Foreign movement’ NAA A981/4 CHIN 48; ‘China – Foreign Concessions’, NAA A981/4 CHIN 61.
91 ‘Letter to the Secretary, Prime Minister of Australia, Commonwealth Offices, from John Barnes, President of the Australian Workers Union’, 28 January 1926, ‘China’, NAA A981/4/CHIN 94.
explanation for his new sympathies. Whatever other motivations he may have had, Hughes could hardly have failed to appreciate the opportunity now at his feet. Intruding in Chinese waters, looming over treaty-port docklands, and displaying guns and cannons on its decks, the H.M.A.S Brisbane was talked of as resembling the British battleship Dreadnought, an Anglo-Australian affront to Chinese sovereignty, space and freedom. Like the navy cruisers anchored on Australian wharves during recent seamen’s strikes, the H.M.A.S Brisbane was a ‘deterrent to free speech’, an ‘enemy of the people.’ What Hughes attacked was not the Brisbane or its crew per se, but the indiscriminate and excessive militancy it had come to represent. A militancy on clear display as Bruce’s government troops clashed with unionists on wharves, city streets and at the coalmines.

Labor and union leaders produced a way of thinking about Australia’s historical situation in 1925 from within an anti-colonial frame that they pieced together from observing and linking Australian strike action to events in China. These new visions of cross-colonial solidarity were explicitly intended to subvert arguments which placed empire loyalty before Australia’s national and regional self-interest. That Bruce took Labor’s arguments seriously is evidenced by the flurry of secret telegrams which shot between London and Melbourne over the following months. On 19 June the Australian Governor General cabled London: “My Prime Minister desirous of being kept fully informed of any fresh developments in Chinese situation. He also desires to be notified of any developments in movement of HMAS Brisbane.” The Secretary for Dominion Affairs responded from London but this answer was

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94 Secret: Decode of cabled telegram dispatched by His Excellency the Governor General to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 6 July 1925, 7:30pm ‘China delegation 1925, Position of H.M.A.S. Brisbane’, Commonwealth of Australia, Governor General’s Office, NAA A6661/1/297.
not considered sufficient and on 24 June, Bruce sent another telegram:

In the event of the China Squadron being employed in relation to any action taken by the powers in relation to the disturbances in China a situation of great importance is created in view of “Brisbane” being included in squadron and under command of British admiral.⁹⁵

London replied that Australia had “misunderstood” the agreement, “I am in some doubt whether the attitude of my government … [has] been fully appreciated.”⁹⁶ In yet more telegrams sent in early July, Bruce demanded to be kept better informed of Britain’s plans in Asia through “proper channels of communication, and proper consultation.”⁹⁷ Lord Amery agreed to an inquiry into HMAS Brisbane’s role on and after 30 May 1925, but the report was dragged through bureaucracy, and Bruce did not receive the results until late in 1926. They were perfunctory: “Whilst at Hong Kong H.M.A.S Brisbane was employed on Naval and military essentials, which it was necessary to maintain owing to the strike of Chinese employed by the Navy and Army.”⁹⁸

Almost without exception, the commentary on ‘the Brisbane Affair’ was conspicuous in assuming support on the part of the Australians for Shanghai’s strikers. Clearly, Labor and union leaders at the time felt that popular feeling against the 30 May shootings was strong. This sentiment was put to broader rhetorical use during what Billie Oliver has called “the bleakest years of Australian unionism”, as the Bruce Government introduced yet more anti-union legislation (such as the Beeby award, Transport workers Act or Dog-Collar Act and

⁹⁵ Ibid.
⁹⁶ Ibid.
finally an attempt to ban wage arbitration in 1929).99 Debate over the Brisbane affair gave way to the chaos of a Maritime Strike that crippled the country in mid-1925. At the beginning of August the wage of British seamen was cut by 10 per cent beginning a Seaman’s Strike across the empire which saw over 4000 men refuse to set sail.100 Their clothes and all their other possessions were confiscated upon leaving the ships.101 Through the Commonwealth Shipping Line, the strike spread to Perth, Melbourne, Sydney, New Zealand, South Africa and Hong Kong. Conditions on Commonwealth boats were so bad the line had been given the pseudonym of “the floating slum.”102 The strike extended in Australia from 19 August to 28 November: a total of 102 days.103 On 20 August over 1000 seafarers from Australia and around the empire attended a mass meeting at the Communist Hall in Sydney and voted to strike in all Australian ports until the £1 cut was restored.104

Wages were not the only source of resentment. Sailors wanted to change the way men were chosen for work when ships came into harbour. Free selection pick-ups, “were a humiliating scene. Men numbering far in excess of the number required, often literally stand before the picker appealing with eloquent eyes and gestures to be chosen for the job. It is the nearest approach in modern time to the slave market of old.”105 In early May 1925 Queensland unionists had abolished ‘free standing’ but shipping companies had responded by refusing to use their ports and the Bruce Government had ruled in favour of the companies. Empire Loyalty had been deployed successfully by employer’s organisations during the free standing

99 Oliver, Back from the Brink, pp. 7-60; Beasley, Wharfies, p. 83.
100 Hirson and Vivian, Strike Across the Empire, p. 1. See also: Peter Gifford, No Winners: The British Seaman’s Strike of 1925.
103 Ibid, p. 51.
104 The Argus (22 August 1925).
105 ‘Bowan Branch Leaflet’, Waterside Workers Federation Holdings, Mitchell Library, Q331.87/W.
dispute (also known as the Cairns Rotary strike), linking up perfectly with the pro-British policies of the Bruce-Page Governments and mobilising a jingoistic race-patriotism that divided loyal empire employers from traitorous strikers.\textsuperscript{106} This rhetoric had been difficult for unions to counter, as empire trade and the Commonwealth Shipping line had become bywords for Britishness, and strikers synonymous with ‘Communists.’\textsuperscript{107} But as of August, ‘empire rhetoric’ had lost its traction, unions were united on the ‘Shanghai issue’ and Bruce’s popularity was beginning to wane. In 1929 he became the first Australian Prime Minister to lose his seat at a Federal election.

While the Seaman’s Strike stretched on, Labor union pamphlets and posters portrayed Bruce as synonymous with British shipping interests, an association which stuck firmly when Bruce sold the Commonwealth Shipping Line to Lord Kylsant for £7,500,000. The Bruce family firm, Pateson Laing and Bruce, was an importation company whose goods were often delayed by waterside industrial action. Bruce also had shares in a British shipping company whose profits could be reduced by wharf action in Australia.\textsuperscript{108} He began appearing in Labor publicity next to large boats, dressed in an exaggerated suit, tails and monocle, stopping “Labor” from loading “eggs, wheat, fruit, butter” on deck, declaring airily “The government stands steadfastly for loyalty to the throne.” Meanwhile the King, in coronation robes and furs, yelled across the bow, “Come on Aussie, if you want your produce shifted, you’ll have to pay combine rates.”\textsuperscript{109} Other posters showed titanic cruisers disgorging swarms of British unemployed onto Australian wharfs (Bruce’s Army), while Australian workers streamed

\textsuperscript{107} Beaseley, \textit{Wharfies}, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{109} ‘At the mercy of Kylsant and Inchape’, Voltaire Molesworth papers 1901-1931, MLMSS 398, Box 2.
dejectedly out of a “closed factory.”

In early 1925 Bruce had exploited positive associations in the electorate between the Conservative party and an organic vision of the British Empire:

To-day Australia is being challenged by the organized workers. They seek to disrupt the Empire. They are fermenting trouble in trade and industry. They must be taught to uphold they law. The Nationalists will enforce order amongst these elements.

Such a position was difficult to defend against the backdrop of the Shanghai incident. ‘Law and order’ became a less palatable policy once the ramifications of ‘upholding the law’ were played out in the form of civilian deaths in China. While Australian strikes did not result in deliberate government shootings, militarism persisted. In 1926, a striker and veteran of Gallipoli was shot by a stray police bullet in Perth, and in 1928, seven bombs were set off on Melbourne wharves and at the houses of prominent ship owners, injuring fifteen bystanders.

What does it all mean in ‘these plastic days’?

As we have seen, global linkages were increasingly phrased not in the language of empire, but in the language of a shared oppression under Imperial capitalism. This language divorced ‘imperialism’ from its association with civilisation, benevolence and Britishness – depicting instead an imperialism located in industrialising areas of China. In these locations, empire was embodied in the crude language of a factory manager (“Children’s hands do the work better”) and the angry banners and graffiti of native protests (“Remember the May massacre! Down with Capitalism! Down with the British!”). By giving one side of empire prominence

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110 Ibid, ‘Bruce’s Army: Unemployed, Vote Labor!’
111 Ibid, ‘Bruce plays a dangerous game’.
112 Beasley, Wharfies, p. 88.
in Australian press and public debates, union leaders effectively undermined the moral platform of empire unity from which conservative leaders explained and justified their policies.

Shanghai became, for some Australian unionists, a replica of England in the early years of the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, improving the lives of Chinese workers was a rare chance to ‘civilise capitalism’ at its inception. So argued J. B Taylor, a Peking University Professor of Economics. He stated “If sound work can be initiated in these plastic days of Chinese industrial revolution it may give a new bent to their whole development.” Here was a way to avoid the human cost of early industrialism in Europe while also making solid the oft-lauded ideals of empire; British justice, civilisation, progress and the protection of human dignity. But when it was discovered that many of the worst factories were actually British owned, empire was thrown into a paradox; imperial capitalism conceived as salvation and uplift had brought enslavement, captured in photographs, testimonies and the shocked accounts of foreign journalists and missionaries. In these accounts, the scalps of young woman were torn from their heads as they dozed against looms in sixteen-hour shifts, while the hands of young children were mangled in poorly maintained machinery – all under the watch of British factory managers. Through Shanghai, Australian unionists could conjure the world before unions, and project its horrors graphically and ominously onto a hypothetical Australian future, demonstrating ‘what it will be like’ if Bruce succeeded in his attempts to de-unionise Australian workplaces.

113 Letter from J. B. Taylor, Peking University, Department of Economics to Agatha Harrison, 14 October 1920, Eleanore Hinder papers, MLMSS 277, Box 34.
Subverting the logics of ‘empire marketing’, Australian trade unions revealed the ways in which this Britishness was both a local and global invention, formed betwixt Shanghai and Sydney, wharfs and factories, and dependent on both places for the maintenance of an identity and a purpose. Britishness encompassed English laws and liberty, but also the display of these laws and liberties at the raw edges of empire’s territorial reach. Britons who transgressed these laws in view of the international community tarnished the ‘quality’ and claims of British liberty, and therefore the potency of Britishness as a public relations tool. Therefore an ‘incident’ in Shanghai could alter the fabric of trade union publicity in Sydney, Fremantle or Brisbane, and the use of force on Australian or Chinese protestors could always be read as a statement about empire’s legitimacy. Australia may have been, in Stuart Ward’s words, “first and foremost a British nation” in the interwar years, but this was a Britishness literally and figuratively tangled up in the liberation of Asia.¹¹⁴

Australian Professor J. Merle Davis was ship-bound in 1925, travelling Australasia on a research grant from the Institute of Pacific Relations. He observed the fallout from Shanghai May 30th with something like psychic shock:

I have met numerous pessimists on this trip who talk of Britain’s declining power. Some of her own people say she is doomed. Others affirm that all western civilization is a sinking ship and still others claim that Asiatic industrial and commercial development is putting the ‘hand-writing on the wall.’¹¹⁵

Merle, himself, felt pulled towards his and Australia’s British origin. While it was true that developments in the far east were bound to change history and “swing the centre of world

affairs more and more into the Pacific” he saw no great cause for alarm as long as “Great Britain’s overseas Dominions cherish her best traditions are true to her interests and preserve their fine loyalty.” And after all, “the British ship of state has a great anchor to windward in the economic storm that is breaking on her from out of the East.” Still, Merle, along with other Australian observers, sensed a subtle, indisputable shift of powers:

The whole racial process in the Pacific seems glacier like, vast cosmic forces moving slowly and irresistibly. But I see no solution and less satisfaction in lying down and letting ourselves be flattened out. It seems to me that it is up to human courage and intelligence to face these glacier-like forces and devise new channels into which they can be diverted and controlled and eventually made to serve human ends.\(^{116}\)

Whether the death of a lone textile worker like Gu Zhenghong and the presence of the ‘Brisbane’ in Shanghai during the killing that followed aided the ‘force’ of such a glacier was incidental. Shanghai May 30\(^{\text{th}}\) and the affinity some Australians felt with its victims seemed part of a slow, rolling and inevitable decline, a parting of water as allegorical ships and currents – once so vital in the maintenance of British power – strained the very connections their symbolism and utility had once helped create.

The globalisation of trade union publicity meant overseas street and strike violence was read in new ways, finding resonances and papering over differences (factional, racial, geographic). Photography and the quickening beat of communication made protests and strike action in far-flung places easier to access – more emotive, more relevant, somehow more ‘shared.’ The behaviour of Europeans in 1920’s Shanghai, “that hotbed of the Anti-Foreign movement in Asia”, had unforseen and unpredictable meanings for the Labor movement in Australia, and

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
for the ways unionism was made appealing to a newly urbanised workforce. Reflecting on Shanghai’s May 30th from an Australian perspective illustrates the normative and political significance of indigenous self-determination movements throughout the twentieth century, at a time when media technologies and political cultures – be they communist, capitalist or nationalist - were redrawning and collapsing the bonds of empire.

The communist/capitalist divide had a relational impact on popular understandings of racial difference in Australasia, and especially on the link between colonialism and civilisation. British factory managers benefiting from the work of children, women breast-feeding while posted at machines, the beheading of Shanghai’s union officials and the turning of guns and battleships on May 30th protestors did not present a ‘civilised’ face for empire. In the struggle to maintain empire, Britain was corrupting Britishness as a progressive force for the greater good, thereby diffusing the arguments of pro-British leaders in the Dominions. This was a battle over how industrialism should proceed in the colonies, and the proper role of British governance in this process. Through such an imaginary, a new ideal of Chinese ‘worker’ was born – a worker not so much in competition with Australians, but in league with them, both oppressed, as it were, by ‘the British race.’ Trade union sympathy for Shanghai shows that Asia was vital not only in constituting Australian imperial identities, but also in their unmaking.

117 Ibid.
Part II

Urban Modernity and Commercial Culture

Chapter 4

Training Salespeople in Department Stores

Much has been written in Australian history about the emergence of modern political and medical bureaucracies, and the technologies of governance and theories of citizenship fostered within them.¹ Histories of commercial bureaucracies are much rarer and, yet, institutions such as department stores employed more Australians than any other workplace in the 1920s and 1930s.² Drawing on the newly opened Coles Myer archive, this chapter investigates how commercial institutions trained Australians to be salespeople. It traces the attempts of managers and industrial welfare experts to mould salespeople to make them as effective as possible and to deal with the unintended consequences that arose from a perceived lack of authenticity and sincerity in the interactions between “apathetic” salespeople and their customers. This chapter also considers the nexus between the institution of orthodox Christianity and the emerging new commercial institution of the department store. Drawing on promotional literature such as staff training manuals, department store colonial-history parades, training pageant scripts and the creative writing of sales-staff, I argue that salespeople can tell us something new about the old concerns and paradoxes of mass culture.

Department stores wanted their staff to communicate sincerely and on a mass scale yet their customers consistently complained that talking to salespeople felt robotic, commercialised and fake. The belief that sales staff had to learn to appear sincere while serving thousands of customers a day generated a large body of prescriptive literature on personal salesmanship. This literature tried to link salesmanship to missionary work, to the project of empire, to settler nation-building and to the pioneer mythology of white Australia. A history of salesmanship tells us much not only about working in modern commercial bureaucracy between the wars, but also about the ways in which modern forms of selfhood were conceived, taught and struggled with in the early twentieth century.

By far the largest retail archive in Australia is the Coles Myer collection acquired by the State Library of Victoria in 2006. Between 1980 and 1990 Myer gradually took over flagging companies such as Grace Brothers, Fosseys and Farmers as well as regional chains such as Penneys, Dalton Brothers and the Western Stores. Along with their premises Myer also acquired their archives, amassing 5000 boxes of uncatalogued material only recently opened to historians.

This chapter uses this Coles Myer archive in particular to trace the tension between ‘sincerity’ and salesmanship, as a mass consumer culture began to develop slowly and unevenly in Australia. Documents preserved in this collection suggest that store managers borrowed church ritual, and particularly the evangelical gospel tradition, to train salespeople in ‘sincerity’ and ‘commercial morality.’ These rituals included biblical pageants, tableaux and

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3 Peter Cochrane calls this development Australia’s belated industrialisation. Peter Cochrane, *Industrialization and Dependence, Australia’s Road to Economic Development 1870-1939* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980).
‘playlets’, theological study groups, the use of biblical lessons in staff manuals, as well as parades promoting the store’s history while also dramatising colonial Christianity and the missionary conversions of Indigenous Australians. Chain and department store managers drew on Christian iconography and storytelling to self-consciously insert their retail empires into the history of white colonialism in Australia and to humanise the experience of working and shopping in what were becoming increasingly rationalised, impersonal institutions.

*The Gospel of Enthusiasm: Salespeople in Australia*

An apprentice saleswoman at Penneys Chain Store in Queensland in the 1930s started her first day of work at ‘register drill’ where she was taught to use the cash register. During her lunch break she was encouraged to send a postcard of the store’s façade home to her family. Gladys Adamson wrote on her postcard that Penneys was “Better than factory [sic].” By afternoon, the training regime intensified. Penneys’ staff manual advised:

> At 3:15 the register drill should cease. It is time to make your new pupil aware of the glamour of her new job. She is to be schooled in the art of smiling and smiling *sincerely*. This is quite a difficult assignment and you cannot trust it to any of your staff. We would be happier to know that this vital part of the instruction was in your hands.

If the sincere smile was reproduced successfully by new recruits, a Penneys’ store manager could reap significant praise from upper management. “The *sincere* smile is more than half your battle and if you can convince the new staff member that she will use it every day because her job is pleasant, then you have done well.”

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5 Coles Myer Archive, State Library of Victoria (hereafter SLV), MS 13468 Box 1505.
6 My emphasis. Penney’s Stores were a Queensland-based chain taken over by Coles in the 1950s. Penney’s Limited Staff Initial Training Booklet, No. 39, property of N. Wall, Penney’s Chain Store papers, Coles Myer Archive, SLV MS 13468 Box 1511, pp. 1-7.
7 Ibid, p. 7.
By the early twentieth century salesmanship training courses were well established in Australia. They took a number of forms, from outback instruction given to commercial travellers and their Aboriginal guides in country towns, to the formal and ritualised staff training courses provided to a mostly female workforce by the big city department stores such as Myer in Melbourne and David Jones in Sydney. The manuals that survive from these training courses chart a growing obsession among managers with ‘sincerity’ in their salespeople. Between 1900 and 1940 ‘sincerity’ was increasingly described as a ‘problem.’

How were department stores and chain stores to mass-produce as many sales as possible, while keeping ‘authentic feeling’ between sales assistant and customer? How to manufacture the “art of smiling and smiling sincerely” when the very act of replicating such a smile might imply a certain insincerity or fake-ness? Salespeople, according to one David Jones manager, were becoming “pleasant robots” and “cogs in vast machines … without thought, without character.” While going through the motions of personalised interaction, shop workers were providing only one-dimensional superficialities. Myer’s staff training manual summarised these concerns in 1935: “This bewildering Age has been labelled with many tags

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the ‘Age of Distribution’, the ‘Machine Age’, the ‘Age of Organization’, all hard and unpleasant sounding names, with a tang of super-efficiency, keen competition and big business … what we want at Myer is an ‘Age of Love’.\textsuperscript{12} For after all, “The Directors from Sidney Myer down loved and do love the customers personally.”\textsuperscript{13} Here Myer’s attempts to make each customer feel a unique connection to Sidney Myer, a department store owner whom they were very unlikely to have ever met before (let alone ‘love’), exemplified a perennial dilemma of mass consumer culture: how to embrace mass society and mass bureaucracy without sacrificing the personal and the intimate?

One solution to the problem of sincerity in salespeople was ‘personal selling’, a salesmanship philosophy based on personal qualities rather than manual skill.\textsuperscript{14} Peaking in popularity in Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, ‘personal selling’ drew on religious education for its moral underpinnings.\textsuperscript{15} Doctrines of honesty, loyalty, service, duty, compassion and sincerity “passed down by the Christian pioneers of colonial days” and applied in commerce would be a bulwark against the commodification of human relations.\textsuperscript{16} Using these vaguely defined religious ‘commandments,’ store managers attempted to harness skill in social interaction, a most unmanageable quality and one far less susceptible to control than manual skill. Grace

\textsuperscript{12} Excerpt from Hilda Gibson, \textit{The Art of Draping} (London: Blandford Press, 1936) Myer Staff Library, used in Myer training courses, Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468 Box 314, 1361.
\textsuperscript{13} E. Lee Neil, Letter Collection, Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468.
\textsuperscript{16} “To the Building of a lasting business must be brought many sterling qualities, the chief among them being honesty, sincerity, prudence,” Nicholas Brash, \textit{Grace Brothers: The Model Store 1885-1985} (Adelaide: Griffin Press, 1985), p. 17.

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Brothers went so far as to have their new employees swear allegiance to a ‘Gospel of Enthusiasm’ on a King James Bible. A number of these bibles survive in a somewhat tattered shape in store archives. But ‘personal selling’ did not solve retailers’ social and commercial problems. Customer surveys conducted from the 1940s onwards registered public distaste for personal selling. Failing to manage this slippery psychological territory, managers in the late 1940s stripped staff training back to basics – register drills, stock management, giving the correct change. By the 1950s personal selling had all but disappeared from training courses. As retailers tried to control personal encounters in their stores they confronted the chaos and indeterminacy of social relationships and the limitations of their own bureaucratic control over these relationships.

Until recently, scholarly studies of department-store salesmanship have been largely limited to labor history. While Gail Reekie’s 1993 book on Sydney’s interwar department stores provided a groundbreaking feminist analysis of mass marketing, it focused more on the production of binary gender difference in department stores than on the making and moulding of salespeople. Recent revisionist work from cultural historians in China and America has widened the scope of department store selling as a historical source. Lien Ling Ling’s latest

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17 Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468, Box 306.
18 Ibid. Susan Porter Benson noted a similar reaction from American customers. See: Benson, Cinderella of Occupations, p. 18.
20 Susan Porter Benson’s Counter Cultures remains the most influential work in this field. While social histories of the department store have provided an important counterpoint to business histories, they have not focused on philosophies of salesmanship. See Bill Lancaster, The Department Store: A Social History (London: Leicester University Press, 1995).
research into sales clerks and department stores in China has shown how new sales philosophies in the 1920s and 1930s not only brought about changes to retailing, but also reshaped city life and urban culture.\textsuperscript{22} Walter Friedman’s work on the birth of salesmanship in America portrays ‘personal selling’ as a continuation of nineteenth century theatrical salesmanship traditions: the “consumption based economy of the early twentieth century originated in the face-to-face selling strategies of peddlers and book canvassers of previous generations.”\textsuperscript{23} This thesis takes salesmanship as a path into everyday modernity as experienced by salespeople and customers in moments of commercial encounter, the sphere Susan Porter Benson has termed “counter cultures.”\textsuperscript{24} But while Porter Benson chose to focus on the internal work cultures of department stores and the implications of these cultures for women’s agency and solidarity, I wish to bring the connection between salesmanship and modern self-hood more firmly into focus. While historians of Australian modernity such as Desley Deacon, Jill Julius Mathews and Richard Waterhouse have long since established that new technology (film, radio, photography) were vital tools in what Angela Woollacott has called the “modern penchant for playing with identity,” none have looked to salesmanship as a site where questions of ‘fake’ and ‘real’ personhood, of the sincere and the inauthentic, were agonised over and constantly played out.\textsuperscript{25}


\textsuperscript{24} Porter Benson, \textit{Counter Cultures}, p. 1.

In his study of corporations in early twentieth century America, Roland Marchland identified what he termed ‘The Lament.’ An oft-repeated criticism of big businesses after the 1890s, ‘The Lament’ was both a nostalgic rumination on the ‘old days’ of social relationships at work (“The old era of personal contact”; “Passing of the intimate touch”) as well as an expression of fear for the future: “the fear that we are so separated by the mechanical and working condition which divide us.”26 According to Marchland, ‘The Lament’ arose in response to the ‘soullessness’ of modern commercial life, “Soullessness often referred to the coldness and aloofness of the giant corporation.”27 The personal relationships that had depended on face-to-face contact were no longer possible in corporations that operated multiple plants or offices, with tens of thousands of employees. Familiar images of massive factories and crowds of uniform office workers (‘the salaried masses’) contributed to popular perceptions of the corporations’ soullessness.28 Workers seemed stuck “in immense machines, oblivious to any connections between their narrow, repetitive tasks and the company's larger operations.”29

Marchland’s ‘lament’ echoes the sociological theory of ‘disenchantment’ postulated by Max Weber. Weber articulated this conceptual framework in his discussion of the ‘disenchantment of the world’, in which he reflected on the decline of spiritual beliefs (the religious, spiritual, magical and wonderous) under the forces of the bureaucratic state.30 Influenced by Weber,

historians have overwhelmingly subscribed to the transformative effect of an increasingly secularised, rationalised and bureaucratised way-of-life that progressively ‘disenchanted’ modern existence. Marchland argues that American business responded to ‘disenchantment’ by modeling working life on family life and especially on family values: “The use of the family metaphor was one aspect of their search for a new mode of communications with their mass of workers that would convey the imagined humanness and benevolence of an earlier relationship.”\(^{31}\) Michael Miller found a similar paternalist ideology at work in Paris’s Bon Marche department store in the 1900s. Family values in the department store served as the “arena for the accommodation of bourgeois culture to the coming of a mass bureaucratized age.”\(^{32}\) Unlike Miller, Marchland argued that business as family was paradoxical, “What family could ‘fire’ its children when expediency dictated?”\(^{33}\) I argue that Australian department stores attempted to balance the ‘disenchantment’ of bureaucratisation by drawing on an older ethics of religious uplift.

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Despite the best efforts of governments to colonise and populate Australia’s rural frontier after Federation in 1901, it was the city that conquered the imaginations of many rural settlers in the early twentieth century. The populations of Sydney and Melbourne roughly trebled between 1880 and 1914 as a result of migration from the country.\(^{34}\) As Angela Woollacott has argued, late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial modernity was connected to

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32 Miller, *The Bon Marche*, pp. 5-1.
33 Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, p. 108.
increased amounts of travelling because “Restlessness and dissatisfaction were central to modernity and were linked to the modern notion that happiness is elsewhere.” Catherine Beatrice Edmonds (Caddie) came from Penrith, then a small town west of Sydney, a “dreary place” that “sprawled untidily at the foot of the Blue Mountains.” Having grown up in tents and “bark huts” while her father laid railway sleepers, she watched her friends one-by-one make their way into Sydney in the 1900s. “I was unhappier than ever when Esther left. She wrote me glowing letters from the city, which, though it was only thirty miles away, seemed to me to be on another planet. Dad threatened what he wouldn’t do to me if I even so much as thought of following Esther.” In order to save her fare she worked at one of the local boarding houses “[a]lways with only one thought on my mind.” When Esther wrote to say she could get Catherine a job as a saleswoman in a fine sweets shop on George St at the foot of one of Australia’s biggest department stores, Catherine walked into Glenbrook and took the train to Sydney. Sophie Biggs from the Cumerangunja reserve wasn’t so lucky. Failing to get work in Melbourne she returned to her family in 1909 to find the Aboriginal Protection Board had resumed occupancy over their land. As half-castes she and her siblings were expelled from the area. This case suggests that for Aboriginal women modernity was limited by the boundaries of whiteness.

35 Woollacott, To Try Her Fortune in London, p. 71.  
37 Ibid, p. 27.  
38 Ibid, p. 28.  
39 Aaron Briggs performs in the Norm O’Connor folklore collection, 1961 sound recording, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, ORAL TRC 2539/32. Andrew Markus’ Governing Savages (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1980), has exposed the exceptionally poor remuneration in any form to Aboriginal workers in the 1920s and 1930s, and their subjection to beatings, and shootings.  
White female labour was in high demand in Australian cities at the turn of the century. As Kay Whitehead has shown, the archetypal occupation for young women with some post-primary education in the early twentieth century was that of the ‘shop girl’ and ‘girl clerk.’

The proportion of women in the commercial, sales and clerical workforce in Australia increased from 10.6 per cent in 1891 to 22.4 per cent in 1921. Workers were needed in the mushrooming service industry: in shops, restaurants, newsagencies, sports grounds, trams, trains, theatres and, by the 1920s, in cinemas. In 1876, Anthony Hordern & Sons department store in Sydney was a small drapery shop down a laneway with a staff of eleven people. By the 1890s, the store employed 500, and by the 1920s total Anthony Hordern employees reached 9,000. According to census data the total number of wage earners other than manufacturing workers employed in Australian department stores increased in the thirty years between 1891 to 1921 from 3,250 to 23,968, with the greatest increase occurring between 1901 and 1911. An estimated 7,000 shop assistants were employed in Sydney’s big stores alone in 1907. By 1910 the largest stores – Myer, Grace Brothers, David Jones, and Anthony Hordern & Sons – each employed between 1,000 and 4,000 workers, and eight stores between

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43 Kay Whitehead, ‘Careers Advice for Women and the Shaping of Identities’, p. 27.
44 Jill Julius Mathews, Good and Mad Women: The Historical Constructions of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 54. The flow of young women into cities to take up work – often referred to as an ‘army’ on the march – was a defining feature of the early interwar years. The single wage earning women had been brought into greater prominence as a result of the decline of women’s participation in domestic service and the opening up of more ‘visible’ white collar work. The rate of participation in the labour market by unmarried women rose to 65.3% by 1921. Sinclair attributes this to a change in attitudes which may have been occasioned by the stimulus of war. This shift hastened the process by which the female workforce became increasingly oriented towards commercial and professional occupations.
47 Tables 18 and 19, Commonwealth Census of 1911; Tables 25 and 26, Commonwealth Census of 1921. Individual store records underline this expansion. For example, the number of employees at David Jones increased from 224 in 1897 to 2,260 in 1919; and Lasseters from 120 in the 1890s to 1,000 in 1910.
them employed over 10,000 workers. This makes the city department stores among the largest employers in Australia in this period.\(^{48}\) The trend continued between 1910 and 1930 with six firms employing a total of 12,500 workers in the 1910s, and five employing 8,300 in the 1920s. The majority of those employed after 1900 were women, who constituted 17 per cent of Australian drapery employees in 1891, but over 50 per cent in 1911.\(^{49}\)

For most salespeople in the early twentieth century, therefore, working in sales meant working for department or chain stores.\(^ {50}\) At the lower end of the retail hierarchy were young workers like Catherine Beatrice Edmonds (Caddie) entering the industry at the age of fourteen or fifteen, often receiving little or no pay at all or a paltry two shillings and six pence per week (for girls) or five shillings per week for boys.\(^ {51}\) Managers were able to extract junior labour at virtually no cost because competition for positions among young people was reportedly so fierce that parents not infrequently offered payment to retailers to take on their son or daughter so that they could ‘learn a trade.’\(^ {52}\) A salesperson’s rate of progress from apprentice to junior sales assistant to senior assistant to head of department or buyer depended

\(^{48}\) Compare with factory workforce statistics in G. P. Walsh, ‘Factories and Factory Workers in New South Wales 1788-1900, Labour History 21, (November 1971), p. 11; Employment figures for individual firms are located in the following sources: Hordern Family papers 1909-1914, Mitchell Library MLMSS 6732; Retail Traders Association of New South Wales Journal, Feb 1924; Aug 1923; Dec 1923; July 1933; Lassetters: Sixty Years and Employer (Written at the request of staff and employees at F. Lassetters & Co., Sydney, 1910); Lassetters: Sixty Years and Employer (Written at the request of staff and employees at F. Lassetters & Co., Sydney, 1910); Mark Foy, The Romance of the House of Foy (Sydney 1935), p. 33; Draper of Australasia, January 1916, p. 10.

\(^{49}\) One government official estimated in 1924 that female department store employees outnumbered men four to one. Draper of Australasia (August 1924), p. 475. As was observed by the 1920-21 Select Committee on Agriculture in New South Wales, the drift to the city was spearheaded by the sons and daughters of small selectors and the struggling migratory farming class (share, wage and tenant farmers) who had become discouraged by prospects at home. The many young rural women who moved to the city in these years did so not only to be ‘respectable’ teachers and nurses, but also to work in factories and shops. See: Kate Murphy, ‘The Travellers’ Aid Society of Victoria and the country girl in the 1920s’, p. 451.


\(^ {52}\) Reekie, Big Stores, p. 117.
on the requirements and good will of the proprietor as much as individual effort. It was not unusual for assistants to remain in junior positions for ten years before promotion.\textsuperscript{53} A male assistant had only a one in ten chance of being promoted to department head in 1907, and a woman’s chances were even slimmer. Elizabeth Walsh, for example, worked for nine years in the ribbon department at Mark Foys at the wage of seventeen shillings and six pence per week.\textsuperscript{54}

Those who were not hired officially by the department stores joined the tentacles of their massive peripheral workforce, consisting of workers living in the slums surrounding the stores’ factories and storage depots.\textsuperscript{55} They were employed as carters, cleaners, dock wallopers and, in some instances, junior sales staff on the selling floor.\textsuperscript{56} In 1920 when he was twelve years old Jim Holloway started work as a cart boy delivering parcels for Grace Brothers: “The reason was that while I was at the convent school in Campsie I had a very [sic] nervous breakdown and had to leave school at an early age.”\textsuperscript{57} His father worked for Grace Brothers’ depot at Lakemba, taking packages from Canterbury to East Hills, and was able to secure a horse and cart for his son.\textsuperscript{58}

Australian department stores were originally drapery shops with one or two live-in apprentices.\textsuperscript{59} Initially, David Jones bought his bolts of cloth from Indian merchants up and

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, p. 222.
\textsuperscript{56} Reekie, \textit{Big Stores}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{57} Letter from Jim Holloway to M. Grace, 25 March 1980, Coles Myer Archive SLV, MS 13468, Box 314. For further correspondence see Box 324.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, Box 314.
\textsuperscript{59} Reekie, \textit{Big Stores}, Table 1.1; \textit{The Romance of the House of Foy} (Sydney: Published in Connection with the Golden Jubilee of Mark Foy’s Ltd, 1935) in David Jones Archives.
down the Murray Darling river system, before selling them from a shop on Sydney’s Battery Lane in 1838. In the period between 1880 and 1900 these shops grew from small, staple drapery lines to “palatial giants” and “universal providers” with buying officers in Europe, China and India. To control prices, drapers also became manufacturers, buying their own factories, marble works, iron foundries and tin smitheries. As they expanded, stores benefited from the nineteenth century innovation of ‘departmentalisation’ – David Jones had nineteen departments in 1876 and 117 by 1910. Those involved in the retail industry began to call the big drapery houses department stores after 1900, but the term was not widely used until the 1920s. A one-price system introduced in the 1880s put an end to the custom of haggling between clerk and customer, and the free-entry policy of looking and browsing replaced the habit of harassing customers until they bought something. To overcome the vast distances between Australian cities, towns and settlements, stores introduced catalogues with illustrations in minute detail: a watch at different angels, a hair ribbon tied seven ways or images of a baby’s cot drawn from all four sides. In 1907 Lassetters published a 1,500 page quarterly catalogue, “a world condensed in a book.” Outback merchant suppliers worried that they could not compete against store catalogues and some recalled their commercial

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60 Boota Mohamed Allam papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 2813. My thanks to Samia Khatun for this reference.
61 Reekie, Big Stores, p. 19.
64 Reekie, Sydney’s Big Stores, pp. 20-21.
65 Benson, Cinderella of Occupations, p. 321.
As I argue in chapter 6, the figure of the bankrupted commercial traveller would become ubiquitous in Australia after the onset of economic depression in 1928. Howard Wolfers estimated that the mail order business of Sydney’s stores comprised 15-20 per cent or more of total turnover, enlarging what William Leach has called “consumer culture’s enchanted circle” to include settlements from Rockhampton to Oodnadatta.

The visible expansion of drapery shops after the turn of the century into massive, multi-storied emporia contributed to the image of the big stores as symbols of Australian wealth, progress and modernity. By the 1920s, in their efforts to attract custom, department stores invested heavily in interior design, adopting such ploys as assuming the trappings of: a zoo (Coles Arcade featured performing monkeys, while Farmers’ entrance was flanked by cages full of parrots); a botanical garden (flower shows, roof gardens, glass houses); a restaurant (complete with gold cutlery and ballet performances); an amusement park (Farmers’ customers could dress as “stone age savages” in faux caves) a barber shop, a butcher shop, a museum, a library, smoking rooms, a post office, a beauty parlour and a concert venue with an orchestra. Architects were clearly aware of the need to balance the imposing look of a store’s massive, tiled or sandstone facade with ornate, luxurious internal decoration. When Buckingham’s department store extended its premises in 1902, the new showroom featured an abundance of windows, including one made of stained glass that lent a “soft and rich”

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68 John Harris Marks papers, SLV MS 11756, Box 1875/14.
70 Ian Fell explored the architecture of modern shop design in his 1928 Bachelor of Architecture thesis for the University of Sydney. Likening department stores to public buildings in which people took a personal pride and sense of ownership, Fell argued that the modern store should conjure up images of dignity, stability and the “promise of fine goods.” It should also “harmonize with the spirit of progress and mass production” that was part of modern civilisation. Ian Fell, ‘Shops: The Architectural Treatment of Modern Shop Design’, BA Thesis, University of Sydney, 1928, chapter 1.
appearance to the room.71 Marcus Clarke’s millinery showroom, opened in 1906 in the firm’s new Railway Square building in Sydney, was decorated in ‘Morris green’ and boasted a lavish distribution of mirrors and a carpet that reputedly changed colour at night.72 Farmers decorated its showrooms in 1918 with large bowls of arum lilies and Iceland poppies, green carpets, rich mahogany fittings and walls lined with mirrors and glass cases.73 To extend this atmosphere between departments Farmers arranged for a walkway to be built and lined with gold-gilt fish tanks and large pots of ferns (known as “Fish Alley”).74 The women’s floors in David Jones’ Elizabeth street store showcased Thea Proctor’s prints and were covered in thick, pale grey carpets “in which the feet sink in as in wild-couched lawns.”75 Interior designers recommended soft colours, pretty furnishings, restful backgrounds and dainty accessories as the most effective way to attract customers into the store.76

72 My Lady’s Journal (March 1906), p. 28.
73 Draper of Australasia (October 1918), p. 333.
74 Coles Myer Archive, SLV MS 13468 Box 192.
76 Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468 Box 192.
Department stores typically occupied three large city blocks with the first block taken up by the store itself, and the blocks behind covered by a storehouse and then a factory.\textsuperscript{77} Having passed through swinging brass and glass doors manned by guides in uniform (“the Leviathan girls”, as they were called at Myer), customers did not see the factory and storehouse behind the elegant interior of the store.\textsuperscript{78} Sales staff came in through a side entrance on the first block, while factory and warehouse staff came in through a laneway. The close proximity of factory and sales staff highlighted the disparities in their pay and working conditions. As one factory inspector put it in 1916: “It is unfortunately true that, in a [place] approached by marble steps between growing plants, one may find in a remote corner a women working in a

\textsuperscript{78} Coles Myer Archive, MS 13468, Box 167.
galvanised iron shed, half suffocated by the fumes which enter from another room.”79 Mary Edwards, a dressmaking machinist employed on piecework by Grace Brothers in 1910, left her job there because she considered she was not being paid sufficiently for her work: “They gave me blouses to make. They were getting 9s or 10s in the shop for them, and from my book I saw I was only getting 9d. That is why I left there … I do not think we were paid sufficient for the coats. I know for a fact that the coats sold for 42s in Grace Brothers and we got 2s 6d for them.”80 This closeness between factory hands and salespeople could also work in the store’s favour. Retailers could avoid paying higher wages to women by exploiting the elevated status of shop work compared with the back block.81 As one male tailor remarked in 1891, tailoresses believed that “putting dresses on and going to a shop is a great deal higher” than being in domestic service or factory work.82

81 Shop Assistants Case 1907 v 43, pp. 582-583.
With their size and staff numbers, department stores like Myer and Anthony Hordern dwarfed the early twentieth century city centre, looming so large over the skyline that they could be picked out by train arrivals, pulling into central stations. For some observers of the time the new department stores were symbols of a negative modernity. Theodore Dreiser, writing about the same phenomenon in the United States, felt they “possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abase the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep.”

Emile Zola wrote that Paris’s Bon Marche department store was a “cathedral for the future”, capturing all “the poetry of modern activity” with “its sprit of action and conquest.” But he also felt these spaces epitomised a

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growing uniformity, a cynical and hard-edged rationalisation of everyday existence. The department store and its army of salespeople had “disenchanted” the city, its quickening business routines taking over from an older, more sedate pace of life: “the department store tends to replace the Church. It marches to the religion of the cash desk, of beauty, of coquetry, and fashion. [Women] go there to pass the hours as they used to go to Church: [to find] an occupation, a place of enthusiasm.” Roland Marchland writes of a “crisis of legitimacy” faced by large capitalist enterprises in the early twentieth century which “had everything to do with their size, with their startling disparities of scale.” Australian anthropologist Herbert Basedow saw reflected in the departments stores’ glassy surfaces: “The selfishness of man” a phenomenon which had “become a necessity in the twentieth century.” Personal interaction lacked “the backing of heart” and “people are blind and prefer to remain blind to all things that do not directly concern them.” Whatever one makes of such negative reactions, clearly department stores were much more than simply a business innovation. They represented a shift in urban public culture and the social forms which bound that culture together.

By 1915 Anthony Hordern was serving up to 30,000 customers a day and stores continued to take on staff in large numbers. Customers began complaining to Horderns managers about “dismissive” service from salespeople. Running parallel to complaints over staff calibre was

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85 Quoted in Miller, pp. 61-65.
86 Marchland, Creating the Corporate Soul, p. 3.
87 Herbert Basedow papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 161 Box 2.
88 “It isn’t a Shop, it’s an Institution”, Anthony Hordens & Sons, New Palace Emporium, c. 1905. Quoted in Reekie, Big Stores, p. 21. Newspaper and shop inspection reports from the 1890s and 1900s depict a grim life for the average shop worker. Shifts went for six days, twelve hours a day and conditions were primitive: gas lighting and poor ventilation created a noxious atmosphere; lunchrooms and lavatories were not provided; chairs and sitting were banned and there were no concessions for sickness or ill health and no time allowed for lunch or dinner breaks, even on night shifts. See: ‘The Shop Girl’, The Bulletin, newspaper cutting in John Anderson’s Letter Book 1879-1880, SLV, MS 9560.
the deskilling of salesmanship as a profession.\textsuperscript{89} Sales work acquired a semblance of glamour in the interwar years, but, as Jennifer MacCulloch and Beverly Kingston have argued, this happened while the job was also becoming increasingly menial, with diminishing responsibilities and opportunities for promotion. “In the early twentieth century knowledge of salesmanship and retailing in all its aspects was being steadily broken down.”\textsuperscript{90} The department store, “by its very structure, segmented the job of selling” and shop work began to seem increasingly like factory work.\textsuperscript{91} “More than any other type of shop, department stores were: ‘[r]esponsible for rigidly preserving the myth of status and privilege surrounding the shop girl while at the same time most surely denying any access to expertise.’”\textsuperscript{92}

Duties were further eroded by the introduction of cashiers after 1917. Originally assistants wrote down sales in ledgers and gave change. Women were favoured for this task. But they were replaced by cash registers; little ability was needed to operate them and they were faster – one girl was able to serve 264 customers in a day.\textsuperscript{93} \textit{The Hordernian Monthly}, Anthony Hordern’s staff publication, described in its November 1923 edition the introduction of the shop tube room where forty girls were responsible solely for giving change.\textsuperscript{94} When department stores entered into competition with the newer chain stores, such as Woolworths (established in Sydney in 1924) they introduced a ‘speeding up’ process whereby the number

\textsuperscript{89} MacCulloch, \textit{The Store is Our World}, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Draper of Australasia} 15, no. 5 (17 May 1915), p. 140.
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{The Hordernian Monthly}, November 1923, Coles Myer SLV 13468 Box 91.
of people entering the store were counted and the total compared to the day’s takings; each girl’s sales were to reach a pre-determined minimum amount.\footnote{Sunday Times (10 December 1922); Shop work was poorly unionised. Explanations for the weakness of retail employees’ unions have often emphasised that a high proportion of salespeople were women with low attachment to the labour force and unions. See: Evan Roberts, ‘Gender in Store: Salespeople’s Working Hours and Union Organisation in New Zealand and the United States’, Labour History 83 (November 2002), pp. 107-130.}

While American scholarship has emphasised the role of corporate culture in the ‘massification’ of twentieth century Western societies, historians of the Australian city have looked to machines and technology for their explanations of antipodean modernity. New machines “mimicked human action”, enhancing speed and efficiency “literally changing the material world and making it modern.”\footnote{Jill Julius Mathews, Dance Hall & Picture Palace, p. 103.} The rapid diffusion of inventions such as the factory time clock, telephone, the Remington typewriter, the hydraulic lift, gramophone, wireless, cinematograph and brick press created, in Jill Julius Mathews’ words, a space “straddling magic and science.”\footnote{Ibid, p. 103; Graeme Davison, The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), p. 131.} The achievements of the machines raised the bar for what human beings could themselves achieve. As Erik Eklund argues, these anxieties were legitimated by factory photographs which captured workers being physically dwarfed by vast industrial edifices.\footnote{Erik Eklund, Steeltown: The Making and Breaking of Port Kembla (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), p. 116.} Mathews shows how these new technologies of work caused widespread anxiety about the mechanisation of human relations, a sense that individuals were beginning to interact in ways that mirrored the machines they were operating.\footnote{Mathews, Dance Hall & Picture Palace, pp. 103-110.} As we shall see, interwar retail managers and industrial welfare experts articulated these anxieties in their observations of ‘apathetic’ salespeople.
Retailers’ new focus on bureaucracy, efficiency and speed in the 1900s and 1910s meshed with a persistent concern that salespeople displayed a disturbing degree of apathy towards their jobs. This apathy, managers believed, was partly responsible for staff pilfering from store funds and stock. In 1908, a theft was reported from David Jones George St store of approximately £400 worth of merchandise (equal to seven years salary for a junior). The initial investigation by the authorities proved futile. In February 1909 a former David Jones employee was found on a steamer that had arrived in San Francisco with about £200 of the stolen merchandise. While the merchandise was removed and returned to Sydney, the former David Jones employee eluded the local police on the wharves of San Francisco, only to disappear and never be heard from again by Australian authorities. Residents who grew up in the inner-Sydney suburb of Glebe in the 1900s remembered shoplifting clubs of young men and women who “would knock on your door in the morning and ask if you wanted anything from the department store that day.”

Jessie Powell and Minnie Munroe systematically stole from their store employer for three years: Munroe stole shoes from Farmers while Powell took dresses from David Jones, and they would then exchange goods. Other gangs of women worked together on premeditated and ingenious strategies designed to deceive detectives. NSW’s first female detective Lillian Armfield regularly arrested shop girls on their lunch breaks “with six handkerchiefs in the pocket of their dresses or worse.” In the 1930s the police uncovered a “stocking ring” at David Jones, and described its method to the newspapers. “One of the girls says to the others ‘I will be behind the stockings counter lunch time and if you come down and buy a pair of stockings, I will hand you over some more.’” Vince Kelly claims that lesbian practices were rife in interwar Australian department stores.

101 *The Sydney Morning Herald* (5 May 1929), clipping in Coles Myer Archive, MS 13468, Box 167.
Vice squad men, under Detective-Sergeant Farrell, arrested scores of young girls who admitted to having received “education in this form of sex deviation” while working in some of the cities biggest department stores. Lesbians, they claimed “sought jobs among a lot of girls for the sole purpose of selecting likely converts to their perversion.”

Between 1916 and 1920 it was industrial psychologists and welfare experts who attempted to explain this rise of theft and apathy in department stores by directly connecting theft to the ‘mental health’ and ‘low-morale’ of salespeople themselves. In 1918, S. Porteous from the Laboratory of Educational Psychology wrote that the three causes of pilfering were “feeble mindedness”, “mob action or imitation” and “adolescence” and prescribed intelligence tests to keep the ‘feeble-minded’ from positions of trust. Bernard Musio, then Acting Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Sydney, argued that pilfering was not mentally or morally weak but rather the result of “failed management destroying employee morale.” He advised shorter hours coupled with higher wages, congenial surroundings and the creation of satisfaction in daily work, all initiatives “which are not philanthropy, but an investment.”

Elton Mayo, the ‘Father of Human Relations’, told David Jones staff in a series of speeches that they were all suffering from “a sort of nervous breakdown.”

Perhaps the most widely-read theories on industrial psychology influencing Australian retail managers after 1916 were those published by Dorothea Proud. After growing up in Adelaide and working in a factory in New Zealand, Proud spent six years (1910-1916) observing

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103 Ibid, p. 80.
factory workers in Australia and Britain before releasing her studies in a book called *Welfare Work*. An instant classic, *Welfare Work* became required reading for senior staff at Myer while David Jones manager Charles Lloyd Jones authored the foreword for the Australian edition (British Prime Minister Lloyd George penned the British version). Proud argued that the scale of the modern workplace had “shattered” the basis of relations between “master and man,” leading to a lack of mental and spiritual vitality in employees. The duties of the old employer had “been delegated to separate individuals; different departments have been created – a buying department, a selling department, a manufacturing department.” She advocated the use of employee welfare offices to recognise the individuality of workers for “after all no one personality can act and react effectively upon twenty five hundred personalities.”

Proud believed that a lack of motivation was a problem common in workplaces staffed mostly by women (such as department stores) because women’s work was more monotonous than that of men and therefore uninspiring and inefficient. She recorded frequent suicides due to nervous depression among women on factory assembly lines. To deal with the monotony of factory work, the modern worker had repressed an inner energy:

> To an outsider who chances to work side by side with habitual factory workers it appears wonderful how they can shut themselves out of their work and shut their work out of their lives so far as they count life. For example, among the ordinary factory girls, curiosity as to their work and their accustomed surroundings appears non-existent; not because it has been satisfied, but because it has not been called into being. Ask an average factory girl in an average factory whence her material comes

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from, whither her product goes and you will probably discover that her ideas extend little further than the next room. It is as though an unskilled worker brought into a factory only a portion of her consciousness.\textsuperscript{110}

To keep women focused on their work Proud recommended activities she had already observed in some factories during the course of her research: Morris dancing, a Shakespeare festival, a machine decoration competition, maypoles in work courtyards, club rooms, staff gardens and regular hymn singing. “[O]verlookers say the work proceeds more quickly when the girls are singing hymns.”\textsuperscript{111} The aim was to engender a “spirit of childhood” glaringly absent, Proud thought, in the average factory girl. “Perhaps this spirit of childhood in them has been dwarfed. The necessity of earning daily bread had loomed so large on their horizon and that of their parents that all activities which are without recompense or reward seem to them poor or purposeless.”\textsuperscript{112}

*Welfare Work* cloaked arguments for dramatic adjustments to industrial work routines within assurances of increased profits for owners and managers. But Proud also warned that welfare programs would not improve productivity unless they were in harmony with the social aspirations of workers: “It is only individual ambition and self confidence that carry a worker into a superior grade.”\textsuperscript{113} Worker apathy was to be attacked “through industry which was seeking step by step to evolve a higher idea of itself.” Workers were to be moulded as ‘personalities’ through the teaching of “ethical or moral or religious ideas of life.”\textsuperscript{114} Proud

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\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, pp. 96-97.\\
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, p. 100.\\
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, p. 100.\\
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, p. 56, 89.\\
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, p. 57.
\end{flushright}
urged managers to look to the Church for inspiration because, “the first welfare officers were clergymen, and many companies still maintain Chaplains.”

In 1919 a young female sales assistant threw herself over the railing of a well-known Sydney department store and having fallen fifty feet, died on the way to hospital. She had been dismissed during an argument with her manager. The incident caused widespread introspection among retailers leading some stores to apply Dororthea Proud’s suggestions. “To cope with the complexities of today,” wrote Charles Lloyd Jones, “we need new traditions in place of old discarded ones.” Edwin Lee Neil, a senior executive at Myer who would become its Managing Director in 1925, blamed a lack of religious law and commercial morality in modern day business. “It is a soul-destroying life – in that so very few men with whom one must associate daily have the slightest idea of Christian life and requirements. They are so selfish, so often unscrupulous, so nearly inhumane, that their standards and ideals outrage one’s sense of honour and fairness and even common decency.” Whether or not religious belief or lack thereof played a role in the suicide, debates over staff welfare in department stores continued into the 1920s, with the Draper reminding employers, “The suicide that started this note would have been looked upon as incredible 24 hours before it happened. It might happen at your establishment any day.”

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115 Ibid, p. 60.
118 A prominent and dedicated Anglican, Neil devoted considerable time to the Church Missionary Society and the Melbourne Bible Institute and was also lay canon at St Paul’s Cathedral, a member of synod and organist at St Hilary’s, East Kew. In the early 1920s he banned the sale of liquor at Myer, and refused Sidney Myer’s request to introduce bridge classes (‘a curse to the community, a gambling source’) in his own store. Stella Barber, Sydney Myer: A Life, A Legacy (Melbourne: Hadie Grant Books, 2005), p. 135.
By 1921 most Australian department stores had included welfare facilities in their plans for extensions or rebuilding. Anthony Hordern, typical of the larger program, planned space for a medical officer and nurse, commerce and salesmanship classes, a library, physical culture classes, a musical society, dancing, sports, a provident fund, and classes in cooking, drama, psychology, literature, hygiene, home nursing and millinery. In a 1922 report revealingly entitled “The Discipline of Freedom”, the David Jones executive declared its intention to eliminate fines and institute a staff training scheme, as well as to continue its half-pay for absence through illness, and provide cafeterias, free medical advice and the services of a matron for its female staff.\textsuperscript{120}

Welfare funds were established by Marcus Clarke in 1917, Nock & Kirby in 1920 and Anthony Hordern in 1923.\textsuperscript{121} Farmers had invited Dame Nellie Melba to launch its welfare scheme in 1919, reportedly the first of its kind in Australia, and hired Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) secretary Eleanor Hinder as its first social welfare superintendent.\textsuperscript{122} The YWCA was already on good terms with several of Australia’s department stores that had contributed to its 1919 fundraising campaign. Charles Lloyd Jones was chairman of the YWCA Publicity Committee and Farmers loaned its offices for bible study meetings.\textsuperscript{123} According to Lucy Taska the efficiency craze that swept Australia during

\textsuperscript{120} ‘The Future Police of the Company’, 1916 in David Jones board minutes BRG 1/32/1.
\textsuperscript{122} Eleanor Hinder papers, MLMSS 770, Box 3; Nikola Belnave, ‘Company-Sponsored Recreation in Australia: 1890-1965’, p. 133.
\textsuperscript{123} National Council of Women of New South Wales Biennial Report 1923-1924; YWCA Sydney, Annual Report 1916-1917, 1919-1920, 1921-1922. Meredith Foley has shown in her study of women’s organisations between the wars that the YWCA took the initiative in promoting welfare schemes for women workers after 1919, and in the training of and support for women welfare workers after 1922. The Association organised a conference in 1923 on the Human Factor in Industry to explain to Sydney employers the principles underlying welfare work.
This period was fortified by the evangelical fervour with which scientific managers espoused promotional culture and its practical ‘scientific’ manifestations, through their constituencies and through popular literature. As a result of this process, the terms ‘efficiency,’ ‘scientific management’ and ‘self-salesmanship’ became widely used. The State played a significant role in promoting new management ideas, including welfarism, as a means of reducing labour militancy and increasing productivity. In late 1918 and early 1919 George Beeby, the Minister for Labour and Industry in NSW, visited the USA and Great Britain to report on industrial conditions in those countries and returned in strong support of welfarism. Further, in 1919 and 1920 the Commonwealth Advisory Council of Science and Industry (ACSI) published reports on industrial cooperation and welfarism, endorsing the adoption of the strategy in Australian industry.

In the 1920s and 1930s retail managers saw welfare programs as an opportunity to hire and create a new type of salesperson. “It is better to recruit salespeople when they are young”

125 Survey evidence of Australian industry collected in 1931 by the social scientist F. R. E. Mauldon seemingly supports such conclusions. While only seventy-six private enterprises were found to have organised welfare schemes, of the larger firms (employing more than 1,000 workers), eleven were retailers and seventeen clothing manufacturers, employing a large proportion of women. The ACSI in 1919 also drew a connection between welfare programs and female workers, advising employers with a predominantly female workforce to focus on organising their social life and recreation, and those with a male workforce to concentrate on improving wages and working conditions. However, Pragnell’s research into David Jones during the first half of the twentieth century challenges feminisation as an explanation for welfarism in Australia. While Mauldron’s findings indicated “the lead taken in welfare by large scale stores which are also their own manufacturers of wearing apparel,” Pragnell found that welfare provision was disproportionately directed towards retail staff at David Jones, while the manufacturing staff members were less likely to be recipients of the various schemes. This is in spite of the fact that the manufacturing workforce was predominantly female and that, even as late as 1938, a large proportion of retail staff was male. As Pragnell argues: “Unlike sales staff, manufacturing staff were not in the public view, counted little for the firm’s public image and had a far more structured labour process” indicating that it was the nature of the work, rather than any tendency towards female labourism that determined the distribution of welfare at David Jones. See: G. S. Beeby, ‘Industrial Conditions in Great Britain and the United States of America’, NSW Industrial Gazette XVI, no. 2 (August 1919), Special Supplement, pp. 85A-90A; Welfare Work, Bulletin No 15, Melbourne 1919. Correspondence, H. B. Higgins to Felix Frankfurter, 1914 and 1915, in the Higgins collection, MS2525, Australian National Library. And see further; Belnave, ‘Company-Sponsored Recreation in Australia: 1890-1965’, p. 133.
wrote an Anthony Hordern’s manager, “[f]or then it is possible to mould them. Older members of staff are more difficult to influence. If we select carefully and reject early we shall not have so many square pegs in round holes.”¹²⁶ Winifred Taylor reported on the store’s successful introduction of intelligence tests that helped determine whether a junior employee was more suitable for stock, office or sales work. Test results could, moreover, bring to light “maladjusted individuals” who could be transferred to other positions “with profit to themselves and to the firm.”¹²⁷ Having had some success in persuading the Sydney Technical College to set up a certificate course in dressmaking in 1919 which channelled trained women workers into the stores’ manufacturing workrooms, the Retail Traders Association of NSW began negotiating with the College to establish classes to educate young men in topics ranging from “Tying up Parcels” to “Staff Control”, “Self Promotion” and “Self Confidence.”¹²⁸ By the 1920s retailers imagined salesmanship less as a process to be mechanised through new technologies (cash registers, automation) than as an emotive encounter laden with the potential for improvement, a balancing act between authenticity and subterfuge (‘be sincere, but cunning’) that could be sculpted and fine-tuned.

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By the 1920s staff manuals taught sales techniques based on personal qualities rather than manual skills. “A retail career has not the ‘slur’ that being a draper used to have,” Myer’s 1925 staff manual assured new employees, “intelligence is key. The salesman who is not

¹²⁸ A call echoed by the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia which proposed that the University of Sydney and other Australian universities set up courses in marketing and salesmanship. Grace Brothers collection in Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1361; Box 904; Box 879.
intelligent enough to sum up the types of customer and make an effort to please them will never make good. They must have the right personality.”\(^{129}\) The Western Stores chain in rural NSW and Queensland introduced their staff manual in the late 1920s by declaring: “We do not offer you just a ‘job’ but a permanent career in retail merchandising. In this business there is a need for men and women who can think.”\(^{130}\) For such people, the manual promised, “opportunities for advancement are almost unlimited.” A version of the same manual produced for senior management qualified this claim: “Of course, the majority of sales assistants will be unsuitable for promotion and such [sic] should not be encouraged to entertain hopes.”\(^{131}\)

Staff manuals changed in form as well as content after the 1920s, acquiring colourful binding, illustrated store histories and photographs of appropriate ‘facial emotion’ and physical bearing. New sections on “Service, Honesty and Loyalty” appeared, interspersed with scripts for sales training playlets and morality tales: “Shops in Jesus’ Time” and “The Prodigal Salesgirl.” The first few pages of Coles’ handbook were covered in awkward biblical references loosely applicable to store life: “The Lord Says Thou Shalt not Steal … Thy Employer’s Time,” and “When Cain killed Abel: Putting aside petty grievances.”\(^{132}\) The introduction to the Farmers’ manual encouraged staff to reach new heights of self-awareness through salesmanship training (“Selling yourself – the Use of confident bearing to control


\(^{130}\) The Western Stores Limited Staff Handbook (owned by F. Sanderson) ‘Selling Guide’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1505, p. 11.

\(^{131}\) ‘Buyer’s Guide’ Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1505, p. 2.

others”) while at the same time mining Shakespeare for store mottos: “Welcome to Farmer’s Staff Manual: To Thine Own Self be True.”

![Figure 4.3 Anthony Hordern and Sons Senior Assistants in classroom, 1933, Source: State Library of NSW Pic.Acc.1274 (v.2)](image)

Staff manuals were incorporated into store ceremonies. New staff at Grace Brothers’ Broadway store in the 1920s and 1930s went through initiation ceremonies, beginning when the company hired welfare officers and opened its Broadway store in 1923. Staff marched into store auditoriums to swear an “oath of loyalty” to Grace Brothers on blue leather-bound Bibles. Senior staff chanted slogans – “Grace Brothers, The Store that keeps Faith” and “Grace Brothers, The Model Store” – while new initiates received their manuals and

133 ‘Farmers Staff Training Manual’ 1920-, Coles Myer Archive SLV 13468 Box 962.
uniforms. These manuals were themselves often covered in slogans. Farmers’ 1923 staff handbook included quotes at the bottom of each page “Life is not so short that there is not time for courtesy” (page 23) and the rather dispiriting “People do judge a book by its cover” (page 47). Coles presented employees with *Ten Commandments of Service* which were to be repeated aloud in front of managers: “Be relaxed, proud and confident”, “Greet customers with a smile”, “Say hello to your customers”, “Be efficient, be friendly, be accurate, be helpful” and “Remember customers’ names” (a tall order considering some staff served over 250 customers a day). Myer’s business training handbook sported a drawing of Rodin’s *The Thinker* with the accompanying gloomy speech bubble: “Whoever is satisfied with what he does, has reached his culminating point – he will progress no more. Man’s destiny is to be not satisfied, but forever unsatisfied.” Coles’ 1927 salesmanship handbook began with five Essentials of Success:

- The judgement of Solomon
- The business acumen of Henry Ford
- The smile of a film star
- The dignity of an Archbishop
- The facility of an adding machine.

The use of motivational slogans in the 1920s was not limited to department stores. Kylie Tennant worked as an advertising scriptwriter for Farmers in the 1930s, but left because she found the work “insipid.” In her novel *Foveaux* she described the inside of the Bross Family Business on the ground floor of a damp and musty Surry Hills terrace house:

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134 Grace Brothers collection in Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1361; Box 904; Box 879. A bible used in these ceremonies is preserved in Box 879 along with the following note: ‘The Bible was used by employees to swear allegiance to Grace Bros on Employment.’

135 ‘Staff Manual’ 1925-, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 386.


137 ‘Myer Training Manual 1929’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 386.

138 Coles Myer Archive, SLV MS 13468 Box 1511.
Bill Bross … was at least determined to look like a businessman. On his big shiny desk he had a notice ‘I am SUCCESS’ and all around the office he had hung mottoes about having just a pleasant smile and thinking of the other fellow and caring for the Greater Things of Life.  

Formal salesmanship training in the 1920s began immediately after initiation, with new staff encouraged to memorise store manuals and store routines: “When you read this little book, don’t try to take everything into your mind at once”, Myer’s manual told staff. “Start by reading the headings and then return to the text … repeat over a fortnight until you know it by heart.” Coles required successful applicants to complete an oral arithmetic test in front of their colleagues upon arrival. Shop girls were told to expect leg cramps and exhaustion in their first few weeks. Myer acknowledged, “Starting out on a new job is not all fun. There are many bewildering moments, especially in the first few days.” Novices had to quickly insert themselves into the store’s “splendid inner routine.” “But we are sure,” Myer concluded “that you will soon feel caught up in the friendly spirit of our store and that the feeling of being a small part of a big machine will be replaced by the knowledge that you are a person in whom we are interested, because you are one of us.” Penneys Chain Store Managers Manual instructed senior staff to put themselves in place of the new employee: “Think back to your first day in business. Can you remember the strangeness of it all? The

142 ‘Coles & Co, Your Store’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 386.
146 Ibid, p. 2.
new smells, the countless strange faces all looking alike, and the jargon of retailing that took you a while to pick up.”\textsuperscript{147}

At her first day at Hillier’s Café in Farmers department store Catherine Edmonds was struck by its pace and intensity. “The shop seemed a fairyland to me: glittering lights, glass counters, waitresses in attractive uniforms, and a ceaseless flow of customers who seemed to me the embodiment of all the people I’d read of in fashion magazines.”\textsuperscript{148} New girls were to observe official and unofficial hierarchies and humbly place themselves on the bottom rung of the pecking order. Shelia Whitelaw entered David Jones sales floor from the Arts Department in 1932 as an extra for the Christmas rush. To her disappointment she was put in the stock room and not on the front counter. “Being a junior it was my duty to go to the stores supply and collect the needed string, paper etc for the day. This interfered with my sales, for being ambitious, I always endeavoured to have a large number of sales in my docket book.”\textsuperscript{149} After a few days she was placed at the front counter: “I literally walked on air.”\textsuperscript{150}

Encounters between salesperson and customer were ritualised in 1920s and 1930’s sales literature. This moment was referred to as “The Approach.”\textsuperscript{151} Mark Foys’ sales staff rehearsed ‘the approach’ in a training playlet performed at store competitions while Myer used a series of posters, “Mya Belle, the perfect salesgirl, is a store figure, and she and her foil Haisy Maisey will appear fortnightly in posters around the store illustrating good and bad

\textsuperscript{147} Penney’s Limited Staff Initial Training Booklet, No. 39, property of N. Wall, Penney’s Chain Store papers, Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468 Box 1511, pp. 1-7.
\textsuperscript{149} ‘A Salesgirl’s First Week’, \textit{Sun & Guardian} (21 May 1934), p. 2.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{151} For example see: ‘The Approach’, Fosseys Staff Guidebook, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 91.
approach manners.”

Central to ‘the approach’ was the salesperson’s ability to reproduce an appearance of happiness and enthusiasm while seeming natural and unaffected at the same time. “It is imperative that the right atmosphere be created,” Pennys emphasised, “Busy, happy, respectful and anxious to please is the right answer, but one jarring discord can ruin it.”

Staff training warned that tiny variances in physical movement meant the difference between failure and success. Myer told employees: “Look the customer in the eye. No matter how pleasantly you smile and greet the customer the effect will be lost unless you look her in the eye. Not staringly. Not boldly. But in a pleasant, direct way.”

Pennesys provided diagrams of correct and incorrect eyebrow and mouth positions. Lopsided, ironic smiles or smiles showing bottom teeth or tongue were identified as wrong. After dedicated practice salespeople were expected to produce a ‘sincere smile.’ On the path to successful salesmanship, Penneys told staff, “the sincere smile is half your battle.”

In her social history of cheerfulness, Christina Kotchemidova argues that the early twentieth century saw a de-intensifying of emotion. Intense emotions became a sign of immaturity, a source of embarrassment and a reason for therapy. As human agency gained in value with the modernisation of society and the rise of individualism, a nineteenth century culture that encouraged outward displays of sadness and distress went into decline.

Kotchemidova links

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153 Penney’s Limited Staff Initial Training Booklet, No. 39, property of N. Wall, Penney’s Chain Store papers, Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468 Box 1511, pp. 1-7.
155 Penney’s Limited Staff Initial Training Booklet, No. 39, property of N. Wall, Penney’s Chain Store papers, Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468 Box 1511, pp. 1-7.
157 Ibid, p. 15.
this shift to new economic forms: “Life in capitalism obliged people to tame their passions in favour of calculating use.”\textsuperscript{158} The introduction of the assembly line by Henry Ford presupposed emotional control, leading to “anger tests” for prospective employees in Ford’s factories. While corporations asked blue-collar workers for no more than anger-control, they held white-collar personnel – salesmen, secretaries, foremen and middle managers – to a much stricter emotional ideal which involved positive feelings and open expressions of happiness.\textsuperscript{159} The rising economy of mass consumption during the 1920s called for “cheerful salespeople careful to avoid provocation of vital customers.”\textsuperscript{160} Fred Schroeder has shown how this valourisation of cheerfulness coupled with improved technology in dentistry produced a “smile aesthetic” in the interwar period. While in pre-renaissance times smiling and showing your teeth was reserved for those who were drunk, mad or bestial, by the 1930s it was linked to social and economic success. As the most immediate symbol of human happiness, the smile became a representational cliché. If a smile could be ‘faked’ then the very act of faking it suggested a departure from the sincere and the real. As Martin Jay has argued, twentieth century notions of ‘authenticity’ are the result of reproducibility and mass production. It was not the original but rather the reproduction, which made the concept of authenticity possible in the first place. The ‘sincere smile’ became authentic only against the backdrop of reproducibility.

Conjuring up a sincere facial expression was only one part of the ‘the approach.’ A salesperson needed to seem authentic during each step of the sale. Eleanor Hinder told Farmers and Coles’ employees to: “\textit{Appear interested} no matter who the customer is. This is

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, p. 12.  
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid, p. 15.  
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, p. 12.
done by raising the eyes as the customer approaches, even though busily engaged, or by walking towards her.”\textsuperscript{161} If an emotional connection was to be made with the customer, it had to happen quickly: “Many customers come into our stores because they expect faster service than elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{162} Myer insisted that smiling should last the duration of a sale, telling staff to imagine they were hosting a party, “Smile, the Customer is your guest. More than that, she is a source of profit.”\textsuperscript{163} Problems arose when salesgirls had to mass sell while also giving individualised attention to each customer, a contradiction store manuals struggled to reconcile. Mark Foys sales book attempted a solution: “Approach promptly and at busy times, when customers are waiting, scatter your smiles.”\textsuperscript{164} Whether or not the scattered smile was enough to ease the impatience of queuing customers was not made clear. Regardless, throughout the interwar years retailers maintained their belief that staff could “…[m]ake each customer feel in turn that he or she is the only person you are interested in at that moment.”\textsuperscript{165} Fosseys 1920 store manual advised salesgirls to serve multiple customers at once while making each feel specially attended to:

Of course in serving at busy periods attend to two or three customers at the one time. With courteous attention to each you can make all three happy and contented. In looking at store life in this way you distinguish yourself from the ‘wrapper’, who merely handles goods – after the customer has sold them to herself.\textsuperscript{166}

At Myer the conclusion of a sale was as practised as ‘the approach’: “Whether the customer buys or not say ‘Thank you’ – not in a sing song, mechanical way, but in a genuinely sincere

\textsuperscript{161} ‘The Coles Girl’, Eleanor Hinder Papers, ML MSS 770 Box 7, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{163} ‘Points of Good Salesmanship 1933’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13486 Box 306.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{166} ‘The Approach’, Fosseys Staff Guidebook, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 91.
manner."\(^{167}\) This final step could not be performative or forced, “You cannot make it sound real unless you *actually mean it.*”\(^{168}\)

When customers inexorably failed to buy despite a salesperson’s judicious performance of ‘the approach’, managers were left grasping for an explanation. A staff memo circulating at Grace Brothers in 1927 found fault with the type of questions salespeople addressed to customers:

> Perhaps the most common drawback to increased sales is negative speech and negative suggestion; indeed far more sales are lost because of this than we may know! Among the more growing examples of incorrect speech is “you don’t want anything else do you?” In the face of such a remark only a miracle can prevent the inevitable ‘NO.’\(^{169}\)

If the salesperson tweaked their phrasing and syntax – even very slightly – increased sales would ensue. “There is a type of question which brings the customer into conversation and at the same time prepares the way for successful sales. It is the type of question which implies a compliment, but lacks none of the sincerity so essential in salesmanship: ‘Which do you prefer Madam? What do you think of these Mrs Smith?’”\(^{170}\) Mark Foys’ sales literature in the 1930s presented failed sales as symptomatic of professional and personal failure, “The salesman who says ‘I can’t understand why she didn’t buy’ is condemning himself as one who does not know half his job.”\(^{171}\) Poor purchase records could become a source of shame and those with low rates of success were placed in ten-week ‘psychology of salesmanship’

\(^{167}\) ‘Service’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 94, p. 32.
\(^{168}\) Ibid, p. 32.
\(^{169}\) ‘Increase your Average Sale, Help Others do Likewise’, *Grace Brothers Store News* (1 August 1939), Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 879 p. 1.
\(^{171}\) Mark Foys Staff Book, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 879 p. 10.
training courses without pay. Here they traced workplace failure back to their own mental inadequacy. “Psychology is an interesting thing to study because it is not about our customers, it is about ourselves, which is perhaps the most enthralling thing we can study – or so it seems.” Myer’s managers’ manual described underperforming salespeople as having gone through a kind of life-crisis: “[T]hey get into a rut. They become stereotyped. They lack spirit, personality, life.” The same manual advised staff to imagine their inner motivation as a boiler system, akin to that found in trains:

Enthusiasm is the force which must forever be to the fore. Enthusiasm is like steam in a boiler. The water in the boiler must register at two hundred and twelve degrees of heat before it becomes steam. The water must boil to generate enough steam to move an engine, to run a train. Luke warm water will not run anything. Enthusiasm is a tremendous power like electricity, it set the current going in you, and moves you with a thrill of pulsating force. Enthusiasm of the highest kind of necessary to move your life engine to success. Let it be your motive power to drive you to greater things.

This view of motivation as an instrumental force interpreted an individual’s inner emotional life as a choice and a potential economic resource, like steam. Enthusiasm here was not an organic feeling in response to external stimuli – rather, this enthusiasm was the result of training and effort on the part of the individual salesperson. Being efficient in an interwar department store meant putting one’s emotions to work. Failing to meet sales requirements came down to a personal failure to harness this emotion effectively.

172 ‘Grace Brothers Management Notes,’ Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 91, p. 1.
174 ‘The Psychology of Selling’ on Monday nights from 6pm to 7pm at The Retail Traders Training Institute, 114 Castlereagh St. The fee for the course is £1. If there were official and professional links between retailing and professional psychology and research these were indirect, if not obscure.
175 Ibid.
One common form of salesmanship training in the 1920s and 1930s was the pageant. Favoured both as a group motivational activity and a publicity tool, commercial pageantry came into its own in the 1930s. Some stores held weekly pageants between 1933 and 1936.\textsuperscript{176} Typically performed in Australia in church social groups, pageants were first written as medieval mystery plays in fifteenth century England.\textsuperscript{177} Australian churches ran pageants for religious holidays like Christmas and Easter while Sunday School children and adolescents practised pageant tableaux as part of their theological curriculum often wearing elaborate

\textsuperscript{176} Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1901, 1501.
\textsuperscript{177} Nikola Balnave, ‘Company-Sponsored Recreation in Australia: 1890-1965’, p. 135.
costumes and carrying home-made props. Welfare officers in Australian department stores began directing pageants in the early 1920s borrowing scripts and costumes from Church affiliated groups such as the YWCA. Story lines were rewritten to include salesmanship training philosophies, melding store mottos (Service! Loyalty! Honesty!) with biblical morality tales. Players recited their parts chiefly in monotone “and their actions were subdued to correspond.” A pageant written by Eleanor Hinder and performed by Farmers’ female employees in 1922 suggests that the labour managers of the 1920s were consciously promoting new values based on commercial efficiency through an older language of religious discipline and moral elevation.

Hinder’s ‘The Spirit of Modern Industry’ opened with saleswomen dressed as Grecian goddesses demonstrating the advance of Modern Industry to an ‘Ancient Shopkeeper, 1860’ (an older salesman in sack cloth who hobbled onto the stage). The shopkeeper intoned:

I worked from Dawn till Dark, in dingy shop
Nor knew what leisure was wherein to grow
The stature of full manhood – Whereby none
May make their fullest Service to their Christian fellows
This world of commerce moves too fast
That I am dazed by sight and sound. Methinks
the world has giddier grown with time
I give you greetings! Pray enlighten me!

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179 Eleanor Hinder Papers, ML MSS 770 Box 7.
183 Ibid, pp. 2-3.
The Spirit of Modern Industry (Miss Davis) proceeded to summon her sister Spirits of Health, Knowledge, Play and Citizenship (Miss Matchett, Miss Court and Miss Hadaway), all dressed in flowing capes and crowned in gold, laurel wreaths. The tableau curtains divided to show saleswomen performing physical culture exercises as the Spirit of Health narrated:

Spirit of Health, I’m called; I strive to work,  
Allied to modern Industry: see how we work, 
Through Service, Play, and Self Promotion, 
To reach the highest standard.\textsuperscript{184}

Next, salesgirls in store uniform marched on stage holding up their sales books. More physical culture exercises followed, accompanied by chanting:

We’re all employed in enterprise to do work  
Mark well what I say  
We’re all employed in enterprise to do work  
Mark well what I say  
And ne’re of it one scrap to shirk  
Ho! We’ll prepare for life’s big work by training well  
To make this land of sun a great, glad land…  
In the name of our Holy Father  
Glory be to God in the highest spirit, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.\textsuperscript{185}

The final tableau in which the whole cast appeared showed the Spirit of Modern Industry holding a cross and overpowering the forces of evil while her sister spirits pointed to the ‘New Light.’\textsuperscript{186} This scene was inspired by Nora Collison’s popular Christian pageant, ‘The Sign of Love’, performed in dozens of churches and Town Halls across Australia between 1930 and 1931.\textsuperscript{187} In Collison’s pageant it was Church missionaries who overpowered the

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid, pp. 3-4.  
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid, p. 8.  
\textsuperscript{187} ‘Magnificent Pageant: The Church through the Ages’, by Nora Collison, The Register (22 October 1928), p. 28; Script of Nora Collison pageant in Coles Myer SLV MS 13468 Box 1501. See also: Nora Collison, ‘Pageant Celebrating the Tenth Anniversary of the Establishment of the League of Nations’, Souvenir programme of
‘forces of evil’ and heralded ‘a new light.’\textsuperscript{188} Judith Smart found pageants common in the YWCA and the Labour Guild of Youth in interwar Melbourne.\textsuperscript{189} Murial Heagney (a member of both organisations) saw pageants as “A means of educating the young people to take up their public duties in the interests of their country … and to enable them to be ready to carry on this work in the future.”\textsuperscript{190} In an article for \textit{Labour Call}, Heagney described in detail the \textit{Pageant of Youth and Health} arranged by the YWCA in Health Week in November 1926. This included a lengthy quote from Miss E.D. Hardie about the importance of “wholeness of life” to the future health of the nation, and the necessity for young people in all sorts of occupations to have opportunities to develop their mind and personalities as well as their physiques.\textsuperscript{191}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{188} ‘Magnificent Pageant: The Church through the Ages’, by Nora Collison, \textit{The Register} (22 October 1928), p. 28.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Ibid, pp. 53-54.
\item \textsuperscript{191} \textit{Labour Call} (25 November 1926), p. 8.
\end{itemize}
Pageants allowed store managers to encourage sales competition through theatrical display. David Jones, Anthony Hordern and Grace Brothers all held “Mistress of the Pageant” elections or, by the 1940s, “Most popular girl competition.” Departments nominated their “most beautiful or popular girls” while all staff voted to decide the winner. “Haberdashery and Kitchenware have requested that their candidates be known as Miss. X to increase suspense until nominees are announced at the Annual Ball.” Winners were also chosen on

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193 ‘Service, Here’s to Ye!’ Christmas Edition 1939, Grace Brothers Staff Journal, Coles Myer Archive SLV 13468 Box 904, p. 1; The Myer Bulletin: Better Selling Number no. 39 (July 25 1933), Coles Myer Archive SLV 13469 Box 3352, p. 3.

the basis of sales records and those with sales below a specified standard were not eligible to compete. Mistress of the Pageant rituals were borrowed from Church formats. Most Church pageants included climactic tableaux featuring the Virgin Mary, usually a young, female parishioner, whose crown was carried by children in the congregation, dressed as angels or heralds. At St Mary’s Church of England at Kangaroo Point in 1933, “the spirit of St Mary’s” (a young women in medieval costume) allowed various community clubs to pay homage to her, while she sat on a wooden throne in front of the altar “[b]etween two glass window tableaux stood the spirit of St Mary’s, receiving floral tributes that were the birthday greetings of her children.”

Figure 4.6 Anglican Church Pageant, Adelaide c1928. Source: State Library of South Australia B 57610.

196 St. Mary’s Church of England, Kangaroo Point. Diamond Jubilee celebrations, 5-12 November, 1933 with St. Mary’s Pageant, devised and written by M. Hamlyn Harris, 1933, State Library of Queensland Collection, 283/943.z.
Figure 4.7 Church of England Pageant, Grafton, 1928, Source: National Library of Australia Pictorial Collection Pic. 5439/2

Figure 4.8 ‘Bride of Christ Pageant,’ Sydney c1934. Source: Sam Hood Photograph Collection, State Library of NSW Home and Away - 8124
Store pageants replaced the Virgin Mary or the “spirit of St Mary” with their most popular girl – “Miss Hordernia” or “Miss Grace.” Grace Brothers held a “Dream of Fair Women” tableau to officiate its Mistress of the Pageant crowning ceremony: “[Chanting] was heard in whispers as the clear musical voice of a girl standing in part of the curtain in measured tones recites: “I read before my eyelids dropped their shade, The legend of a good women.” At Anthony Hordern, Miss Hordernia 1930 – surrounded by ten equally regal attendants – was crowned in a ceremony officiated over by a local church bishop. Although the use of Christian iconography in department store pageants was more rhetorical than literal, store managers maintained that religious teachings, used judiciously in training courses, made for happier, “more fulfilled and therefore more sincere” salespeople.

197 The Hordernian Monthly (4 April 1929), Coles Myer Archive SLV 13468 Box 904, p. 3. See also: Collection of Myer and David Jones Training Manuals 1940-1970, National Library of Australia, NLp 658.386 MYE; Regulations for the Staff of David Jones Limited, National Library of Australia, N 381.1410683 D246.
198 Coles Myer Archive, SLV MS 13468, Box 195.
199 The Hordernian Monthly (4 April 1929), Coles Myer Archive SLV 13468 Box 904, p. 3; ‘The Crowning of Miss Hordernia 1932’, Sam Hood Collection, State Library of NSW.
While the Mistress of the Pageant needed to possess a vestige of salesmanship skill, she was, above all, to be “the most beautiful girl in the store.” Appearance, beauty and deportment were emphasised again and again in store training manuals, and pageantry was well suited to this focus on self-presentation. Coles warned that a single unbecoming salesperson could ruin the sales success of her colleagues: “One untidy, badly groomed or unwelcoming personality in a department can let all the others down and lower the prestige of the whole of that section of the store – therefore – it is up to each of us!” The perfect salesgirl had to look better than her best-dressed customer: “She must have that appearance which awakens envy, NOT PITY,
in the mind of the shopper. Better the desire to emulate than the thought to advise the girl who served her.\(^{203}\)

While training manuals taught ‘personal selling’, in practice store managers preferred a ‘conventional’ look in their employees, and beauty was defined as conformity to a store ideal (“Mya Belle - the ideal salesgirl” in the case of Myer).\(^{204}\) Store uniforms, required in all Australian department stores by the 1920s, added a sleek, streamlined look to the selling floor and allowed managers to initiate staff into a branded identity. Coles’ 1922 staff manual argued that store uniforms were a privilege and a badge of pride: “\textbf{The Coles Girl} is admired wherever she goes and is known in the city by the perfection of her appearance – her dress is black with sleeves.”\(^{205}\)

Shop workers wore their store affiliation out on the street and were told they represented their store even while on lunch or dinner breaks. Salespeople ‘kept to their own’ so that clusters of Penneys’ girls (in pink dresses and white caps) sat on one side of squares and parks, and Grace Brothers’ girls (in black with white lace collars) kept to the other. It was precisely this kind of store loyalty and behavioural uniformity that managers hoped to inspire through uniforms, pageantry and ceremony: “The aim is to arouse the feeling of loyalty to the firm, to enlist the gang instinct.”\(^{206}\)

The \textit{Australian Women’s Weekly} told prospective shop girls in 1933: “the outstanding requirement – apart of course from good character and decent parentage – is good appearance … not to be confused with good looks.”\(^{207}\)

As Whitehead points out, these characteristics were associated with personality and not character, “which is the presentation of the self in ways that attracted others.”\(^{208}\)

Susman argued that personality is an effort to “solve the problems of self in a changed social structure

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\(^{203}\) ‘Staff Journal’, Coles Myer SLV 13468 Box 962.
\(^{205}\) ‘The Coles Girl’, Eleanor Hinder Papers, MLMSS 770, Box 7, p. 3.
\(^{206}\) Dr Eleanore Crosby Kemp, ‘Pilfering by Employees: How to Stop and Prevent It’, \textit{The Draper} (19 May 1922), p. 214.
\(^{207}\) ‘Shop Girls Acclaim’, \textit{Australian Women’s Weekly} (30 December 1939), p. 35.
\(^{208}\) Kay Whitehead, ‘Careers Advice for Women and the Shaping of Identities’, p. 118.
that imposes its own special demands on the self.”

Coping with the demands of a developing consumer society required “complete control over the emotions” in the case of the shop girl, and ‘tact’ in relationships with others. "Quiet efficiency in dress” was recommended to potential girl clerks and they were told that “good looks don’t count for much in a business office, and they should not count. Too much artificiality in the matter of lipstick, jewellery and face powder is not only out of place in a business office, but it is actually offensive.”

Kathy Peiss has shown how new technologies of self-presentation in the 1920s, such as make up, challenged women to be both “natural and artificial at the same time.” Liz Conor suggests this balancing act was closely bound up with concerns over female sexual propriety and that uniforms went some way to ameliorating such concerns. “The Business, Shop and Factory Girls needed to be spatially segregated from the indiscriminate mingling with men on the street that characterized their counterparts, the Flapper and the Amateur, who exchanged sexual favours for leisure treats such as car rides and cinema and dance hall tickets.” But, as Conor argues, “this spatial and sexual segregation was only possible if the different types of urban women could be visually distinguished.”

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210 Ibid, p. 53.
213 Conor, Spectacular Modern Women, p. 59.
Smartness was required of the shop girl as a condition of her employment. Yet uncertainty prevailed about what exactly was conveyed by good looks and attention to appearance.\textsuperscript{215} Some department stores used the teachings of American Pastor Horace Bushnell to justify their focus on appearance. In his bestselling work \textit{Christian Nurture} published in London in 1888 but reprinted in 1916, Bushnell wrote that attention to dress was a spiritual matter, “we find the apostles … giving serious lectures to the disciples upon their dress.”\textsuperscript{216} At Farmers, Coles and Myer his teachings were used in store training sessions:

> Dress and manners, manners and morals, morals and piety, are all connected by an intimate and secret law. A people, therefore, who are careful to appear before God in a well-chosen, modest and appropriate dress – one that is neither careless nor ostentatious, one that indicates sobriety, neatness, good sense, and a desire to be approved by God more than to be seen for men – will avoid barbarous improprieties of any sort. Their manner will express reverence to God. What they express they will be likely to feel; and if they become true Disciples of Christ, and there is greater reason to hope, and their whole demeanour will be more thoughtful, consistent and lovely.\textsuperscript{217}

Using Christian literature to explain store regulations allowed retailers to imbue a spiritual meaning into what was an almost overbearing focus on the physical attributes or deficiencies of sales staff. Bushnell’s writings conflated dress and deportment with an internal emotional self, capable of reproducing on the inside what was being trained and fine-tuned on the outside. Such an overlap between authentic personhood, self-presentation and Christianity had a receptive audience among store managers, increasingly concerned over “apathetic and artificial” sales staff or “pleasant robots” as one Myer manager complained in 1929.\textsuperscript{218}

\textsuperscript{215}‘Beauty is a Bar to Business: In which a Sydney Girl Tells How her Good Looks are a Hindrance’, \textit{Beckett’s Budget} (19 July 1927), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{217}Ibid, pp. 116-117.
\textsuperscript{218}E. Lee Neil Letter Collection, Coles Myer Archive, SLV, MS 13468.
Between 1901 and 1933, 95-98 per cent of Australians declared affiliation with some denomination of Christian faith. That figure fell to 85 per cent in 1933 but remained high until the mid-1970s.\textsuperscript{219} While Catholics were discriminated against throughout the interwar years, big companies like Myer and Grace Brothers hired from a mixture of Anglican, Protestant, Catholic and Methodist backgrounds. Certain stores were more ‘Catholic’ than others. Anthony Hordern preferred Catholic salespeople and some of its senior staff wrote for Catholic newspapers.\textsuperscript{220} Regardless of sectarian difference, department heads could assume many of their employees were churchgoers, even if their affiliation was more institutional than based on conviction. Church social events plugged the lives of salespeople into their

\textsuperscript{220} Hordern Family papers 1909-1914, Mitchell Library MLMSS 6732.
local communities, with Church fetes, dances, prayer meetings and dramatic societies providing opportunities to cement friendships and family relationships.

In some ways, a theological approach to salesmanship training spliced personal and professional life together, encouraging salespeople to link their Christian and commercial selves in mutually sustaining ways. A number of Church leaders were already preaching along these lines. As Rev Thomas Talt of Scots Church Melbourne told his parishioners in 1921: “It is reassuring to note in the world of business many indications of a growing demand for Christian character.”

H. N. Barker of Sir Thomas Rectory in North Sydney argued in 1936 that companies needed Christian principles in order to modernise successfully:

> Capitalism stands at the bar of Christianity and its continuance in the modern world depends upon the extent to which it can bring itself to embody the spirit of Christianity in its aims and organisation, for the principles of our religion are the only matters that are eternal in the world. Through Christian welfare “they may so leaven capitalism with the Christian spirit.”

By the late 1920s a number of churches were using department store facilities for Sunday school groups or Bible study and in 1927 city churches asked department stores to find cast members for its Christmas pageants. But this blending of church and store could happen in more subtle and manipulative ways as well. By the late 1920s retailers were using Christian doctrines to train staff in internal forms of self-discipline and control, so as to better manage the restricted existence and prescribed passivity of day-to-day life in sales work.

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221 ‘Rev Thomas Talt, Scots Church, Melbourne’.
Boredom was often immediately beneath the surface of a salesperson’s dutiful daily routines. From time to time an employee would come forward to make a complaint. A salesman, for example, once wrote to Mark Foys’ in-house newsletter to say he found his work mechanical and his life boring. He had no prospect either for promotion or transfer and he felt trapped. One anonymous poem published by a Grace Brothers employee in 1939 described sales work as ‘unmerciful’:

When the doors are closed and the locks fastened tight; and the cares of the morning are hidden from sight
When the last parcel is packed and the customers served
And you go on your way for a rest well deserved
Do visions of hectic unmerciful days,
Crowd into your mind in discomforting ways?
Does the squeak of a doll still blare in your ears; or the sight of brown paper remind you of fears?

Salespeople wrote of feeling ‘meaningless’ and ‘stationary’ in their jobs. Daphne Stubbs, a Myer salesgirl from Goulburn, published ‘I’d Love to Be’ in the store newsletter on her dreams for life “beyond this dull, routine work.” Foy & Gibson saleswoman Ruth Niethammer wrote in a similar tone in ‘If’, a poem speculating on what her life would have been like had she not gone into sales work. Salesgirl and lift attendant Avis Grant of Myer stuck postcards up on her elevator wall as a distraction from the “boredom, terrible boredom.” An Age journalist who wrote a feature on Melbourne lift girls described Avis’s workplace as “a stark, moving cubicle in a labyrinth… with [a] stool on which to hitch a heel

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225 ‘12:30 pm 23/12/1939,’ by ‘H. L. B’, in Grace Brothers Store News (23 December 1939), Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1505.
226 Daphne Stubbs, ‘I’d Love to Be’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 3352.
227 Ruth Niethammer, ‘If’ in Service: All for One and One for All, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 3352.
228 ‘Going up and Down and Out of Style: How Lifts Changed Melbourne’, cutting from The Age, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1505.
but rarely sit.”

For the journalist, Avis’s collage of postcards represented “promise worlds which seem out of reach in the confines of a lift.” Managers tried to be sympathetic to staff complaints by adding ‘Boredom’ to the topics in official training handbooks and by treating it as a widespread personnel problem. They also devised a series of games and strategies which staff were told to employ when “ennui overwhelmed them.” Grace Brothers’ trainees recited motivational poems in sales classes:

Humour. Just laugh when your nerves have grown tight. 
Many a burden, with laughter, seems light. 
Interest. Don’t let your job bore you. 
Dullness just means that such work is not for you
Sprightliness coupled with self-possessed ease
Helps win success in the struggle to please.

Poetry brought paltry relief from this malaise. Salespeople wanted honest examinations of their situation and concrete measures for structural change. Corporate rhetoric dwelt instead on how things ought to be, especially on how young employees ought to reform themselves through spiritual self-searching and Christian reflection. As one Myer training manual put it:

All of us want to live satisfied, happy, well-rounded lives. Business, while only part of our lives, is necessarily a big part of them. There is only one way to live happy, successful lives, and that is to live to the fullest capacity. One of the advantages of early biblical training is that some of the wisest and simplist sayings ever written stick in ones memory, and one of them comes to me now – “Whatever they hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might.” And the curious thing is that in doing that, we find that happiness and fulfilment has, as it were, stolen on us unawares.

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229 Ibid.
230 Ibid.
231 ‘Enthusiasm and Boredom’, Between Ourselves, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 904.
232 ‘ABC for Sales Staff’, Grace Brothers News (1 June 1940), p. 4.
233 ‘Selling Yourself: The Use of Confident Bearing to Control Others’, in The Retailer of Plato’s Time, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 91.
In his study of bank tellers in Shanghai’s Bank of China between 1911 and 1949, Wen-hsin Yeh found that corporate time felt different depending on where you sat in a bureaucratic ladder, “a rift appeared that separated those at the top hierarchy from those at the bottom. Corporate time, as constructed by those at the top, was continuous and suffused with meaning.”\textsuperscript{234} Time, as experienced by those at the bottom was “truncated and drained of significance.”\textsuperscript{235} While the leaders saw themselves as personifying the institution, the rank and file found themselves depersonalised by corporate conditioning.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4_11.png}
\caption{The perfumery department, Grace Bros, Broadway. Source: Sam Hood Collection 1872-1953, State Library of NSW, Home and Away - 9182}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid, p. 103.
In the late 1920s the problem of employee dissatisfaction was exacerbated when department stores expanded into new, even larger premises. Myer’s 1929 Bourke St store became a gleaming white tower with 1.2 million square feet of selling space.236 “Here is no monotony of stone or cement,” wrote publicist Alan Marshall, “To go shopping in Myer is an adventure, a plunge into a temple of mammon.”237 Unfortunately customers and staff disagreed. Store managers had done their utmost to employ modern concepts of interior design and display and were consequently dismayed to discover that customers found their designs “barn-like”, “bald” and “drab”, with the “barrenness of a storehouse.”238 Salespeople at David Jones’s 1927 Elizabeth St store disliked the use of exposed steel girding and complained that the stairs were like factory fire escapes and the positioning of the lifts forced them to walk a long way from the entrance.239 While promotional material presented the scale of the new buildings in awe-filled descriptions (19 acres of floor area! 17,000,000 business transactions a year! 5,000 employed!) individual salespeople felt swallowed and “lost.”240 Myer’s staff saw their bureaucratic anonymity reflected in the store’s architecture and nicknamed its new manager – a Mr. Steele – “Mr. Stainless” because he “was cold, like the building.”241

236 Collection of Myer and David Jones Training Manuals 1940-1970, National Library of Australia, NLp 658.386 MYE.
239 Gail Reekie, ‘Sydney’s Big Stores’, pp. 243-244.
240 Ibid, p. 244.
By the 1930s training manuals stressed the importance of ‘taking pleasure’ in work.²⁴² Rev T. E. Ruth was hired to train employees at Myer in what he called, “The Smile in the Soul.”²⁴³ Ruth told trainees “Happiness is found in the most ordinary careers. The blue bird is in the

²⁴² Managers’ Guides, Coles Myer Archive, SLV MS 13468 Box 1505.
kitchen.”

His techniques involved getting salespeople to use their “spiritual imagination” to overcome boredom. “See what unfettered imagination can do for you. No film story has more than touched the fringe … no romance more than scratched the surface of sublime possibility.”

Ruth taught staff to distance themselves from their surroundings by reconstructing alternative realities through a series of thought processes.

In the imagination you can reconstruct the entire universe, rebuild it to your hearts desire. You can build castles in Spain and in heaven. … You can wear a crown without carrying a cross in imagination [sic], you can be millionaire and enjoy it more than the poor man who actually is one. In imagination.

Reassuring salespeople who found their mental exertions could not wholly overcome negative emotions Ruth portrayed imaginative thinking as a Christian pastime. “You believe in the Father’s house of many mansions? Jesus sanctions the Ministry of Imagination. The imagination is a pilgrim on earth, and her home is in heaven.” If salespeople continued to feel downcast at work, it was because they failed to tap inner reserves of resilience, “You can find joy in your job if the secret of joy is within yourself.”

This message – that dissatisfaction at work could be overcome through dreams, thoughts and aspirations – could also be found in the pages of celebrity and film magazines, publications popular among young, female working-class readers. Rev Ruth blurred the line between the ambitions of menial and rewarding work by turning the focus inward, away from the material drudgery of daily routine, and towards a landscape of spiritual self-fulfilment.

244 Ibid, p. 9.
One way to inject purpose and meaning into sales work was through the writing of store history (an observation I expand on in chapter 7). Close scrutiny of this history-making reveals the ever-present film of empire moulding storytelling, so that shop workers and salespeople felt themselves to be key figures in the move from a ‘black/backward’ colonial past to a ‘white/civilised’ urban present. In the 1920s and 1930s retailers began scripting narratives welding Australia’s success as a colony to the commercial expansion of its big stores. Farmers required novices to recite historical factoids “In 1854 the 24 feet frontage was increased to 46 feet and soon after adjoining premises were leased with a frontage of 52 feet to Pitt St.”

The Western Store Chain, established in 1915 and spanning townships from Molong to Gilgandra, gave employees a map tracing the Chain’s “progress across the New South Wales and Queensland.” Dalton Brothers began their staff manual with an image of white salesmen shaking hands with Aboriginal men. Store history became pioneer history:

The founder of the firm of Dalton Brothers, Mr James Dalton, arrived in Orange in the year of 1849 and built a store of slabs with a bark roof on the present site, helped to clear the surrounding land of stumps [and] cut sewer drains from the site of the present store to the main channel then called Blackman’s Swamp Creek.

In this way rituals of commercial conquest were entwined with acts of Aboriginal dispossession. Employees were told how store founders had marked out their land with small statements of ownership, “On September 14th 1889, George Edwin Wise established the firm of GE Wise & Co by placing a Shilling coin under the cornerstone of their new building at Wellington NSW.” Retailers used the anniversary of a store’s founding to show an organic

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248 Staff Manual, Farmer & Co 1921, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 386.
250 ‘Dalton Brothers: Orange and District Illustrated’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1505.
251 ‘The J. B. Young Story’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1505. See also Grace Brothers Store News (8 August 1947), Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468, Box 1505.
connection between store, time and place. Myer staff made pilgrimages to ‘Bateman’s Landing Place’ while a Western Store outlet in Molong displayed a slaughtered ram carcass valued at £50 in their window every year. At the end of the week the ram became a headline float in an anniversary parade for the store.\textsuperscript{252}

\textbf{Figure 4.13} Rehearsal for Grace Brothers Gold Jubilee Parade c1935, Grace Brothers 50th anniversary celebrations, Source: Sam Hood Collection 1872-1953, State Library of NSW, Home and Away - 7320

\textsuperscript{252} The Myer Store News (1934), Coles Myer Archive SLV 13468 Box 962; For a personal account of one of these celebrations see E. Phillips correspondence, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1505. E. Phillips worked for the Western Stores in Molong in the 1920s and 1930s. Her correspondence was solicited by a Myer archivist in the 1980s who planned an exhibition of the Western Stores which never took place.
Grace Brothers held their fifty-year ‘Gold Jubilee Parade’ in 1935. Salespeople worked painstakingly for months beforehand on intricate, themed floats as part of a storewide competition between departments with no financial assistance from management and in their own time. The first float, ‘The Steps of Time’, showed a white marbled stairway ascending from the small sun of 1788 through the various periods of Australian history to the “resplendent sun” of 1938. Upon the steps were men and women attired in the fashions of 1788, 1888 and 1938, the latter symbolising “Australia enthroned”, attended by girls represented by Sydney and NSW. The stairway was supported by a series of zinnia-covered arches, in each of which was a letter of the firm’s name. Preceding the float along the route of

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254 Ibid, p. 42.
255 *Grace Brothers Store News* (28 July 1951), Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468, Box 1505 (page numbers too faded to read).
the procession was the Glebe district silver band of 25 bandsmen rising in a silver chariot. A marching party of 200 sun-tanned girls from the Grace Brothers Gymnasium followed the float.256 Nine floats were in the parade, and the first prize was awarded to the Model Story – an elaborate and cleverly designed float entirely carried out in blue and gold – the jubilee colours. Heralds dressed in glittering gold costumes and carrying trumpets, preceded the float, which was drawn along on gold chains. One of the figures on the float was seen to be turning the pages of a store ‘Bible’ – “The Model Story” – on each page of which was inscribed the words – Service, Honour, Integrity.257

Figure 4.15 Float in Grace Brothers’ Gold Jubilee Parade c1935, Grace Bros. 50th anniversary celebrations, Source: Sam Hood Collection 1872-1953, State Library of NSW, Home and Away – 7318

256 Ibid.
Coles had celebrated their anniversary in 1934 with a pageant in Melbourne. Those who attended were told not to applaud and only one of the 200 people taking part in the tableaux spoke, “Yet the shades of expression and emotion were conveyed more delicately with gesture than could have been done with words.”\textsuperscript{258} Double Tableaux were used “for the first time in Melbourne. Scenes from the old world and scenes from the new were acted side by side.”\textsuperscript{259} While on one side Joseph of Aramethea landed with black cowled monks to convert the bearded Celts in skins and hessian, the first Church service in Victoria in 1803 was shown on the other side in a blare of red, silver and blue with sweeping crinoline, silks, satin cherry

\textsuperscript{258} ‘Souvenir’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1511.
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid.
coats and cravats. In another scene St Aidan was shown blessing the Saxons while the conversion of Aboriginal Australians in Anglican missions was shown on the other side. The pageant ended with the formation of the “living Church formed by pyramids by 70 boys.” All of the organisations taking part in the pageant moved through the open doors and 800 people in “dresses of all ages” were seen on the stage.

Christian storylines and values had a complex role to play in the promotion of commercial institutions like department stores. These kinds of commercial displays were about narrating and translating modern demarcations of time, progress and historical epoch so as to link the work of department stores to the project of empire and of nation building. “When one looks at the floats it’s our parades” wrote one Grace Brothers manager, “the sequence of stages of civilization through which our race has passed are immediately apparent.” If modernity is primarily the condition of expecting change or simply the sense of the idea that the present is discontinuous with the past then this kind of pageantry could construct such a break. Aboriginal Australians and other ‘natives of Empire’ portrayed in the parades were instantly transformed into fossils, exhibits of a primitive era. The work of sales staff, on the other hand, became emblematic of a higher stage on the evolutionary ladder.

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260 Ibid.
261 Ibid.
262 Ibid.
263 Ibid.
264 Floats in Grace Brothers Golden Jubilee Parade carried salespeople dressed as Sikhs accompanied by missionaries, as well as a ‘harem’ of women on a float representing Abyssinia or, ‘A’ Be Seein ‘Y’, Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1511.
265 Coles Myer Archive SLV MS 13468 Box 1511.
Frank Bongiorno has talked about a “reluctance on the part of Australian … historians to recognize the role played by esoteric belief and unorthodox religion in the making of Australian modernity.” As Melissa Bellanta has pointed out, there is a growing body of work on the relationship of turn-of-the-century occultism and Theosophy to modernity in both Australian and international scholarship. For Australian history, Jill Roe has written of Theosophists’ desire to discover “a common ground between science and religion.”

Melissa Bellanta has written on the links between religion and scientific farming in Australian irrigation movements at the turn of the century. Both Roe’s work on Australian Theosophy and Bellanta’s work on Christian agriculturalists are evidence that connections between esoteric belief and modernity have been made in Australia. Of the links between department stores, salespeople and religious practice, however, we know very little.

Connections between religion and Australian consumer cultures have not yet been addressed in any major scholarly work. Bridget Griffin-Foley’s 2008 article on Evangelical preachers and commercial radio is an exception. As Griffin-Foley writes, historians of the Australian city are inclined to represent Australia as a secular country without a significant religious culture. This is despite statistics showing that between 1901 and 1933, 95-98 per cent of Australians were affiliated to some denomination of Christian faith. While Michael Cannon

269 As Griffen-Foley shows, since the 1930s and 1940s religious broadcasters had been addressing the ordinary lives and problems of their listeners. This capacity was enhanced by the ability to talk to these listeners live on-air, and a number of religious broadcasters moved into providing formal off-air counselling services. Some of commercial radio’s earlier religious broadcasters had belonged to the tradition of the charismatic or fashionable preacher. Bridget Griffen-Foley, ‘Radio Ministries: Religion on Australian Commercial Radio 1920s to 1960s’, Journal of Religious History 32, no. 1 (March 2008), p. 54.
writes of plummeting Church attendance rates in late colonial Australia – what he calls “the bursting of these chains of ignorance and superstition in the wake of new science” – he also notes rising numbers of Church schools and religious education classes.271 Popular religion (what Elisabeth Elbourne calls “vernacular Christianity”) can provide a way into debates over sincerity and authenticity in Australian colonial modernity.272

In department store archives, we see how interwar sales managers used religious language and ritual as transitional behavioural forms and as bastions of ‘authentic feeling’ in the face of mechanisation, bureaucratisation and rationalisation. Salespeople were at the coal face of a certain kind of institutionalised modernity. Of course, selling did not begin in the interwar period, but a certain type of selling did. The actions of salespeople became strenuously managed so that interpersonal engagement became not organic but something to be learned and practised. The ways in which department stores trained their staff intersected with a prevailing colonial ideology which sought to claim an imperial tradition for the emerging Australian nation by narrating the nation’s past through pageants, parades and store histories. By propagating a history of Australia valorising white settlement and the civilising of Indigenous Australians through mission work, consumer culture contributed to the manufacture of categories of difference in the interwar period and was a conduit for ways of thinking about belonging and community. Focusing on salesmanship in department stores can, therefore, make visible a connection between the economic imperatives of urban institutions in the 1920s and 1930s and the narratives of cultural colonialism at the heart of Australian colonial modernity.

Part II

Urban Modernity and Commercial Culture

Chapter 5
Sensationalist Journalism and Commercialism

In December 1927, a young woman appearing in Sydney’s Darlinghurst court and accused of soliciting was identified by a male witness through holes in her stocking: “I recognise her by a hole in her stocking, which happened through me being a bit careless cleaning my pipe when I was out with her.”1 His testimony, packaged as a bite-size anecdote, and making the rounds of such Sydney newspapers as ‘red-hot’ Beckett’s Budget, Smith’s Weekly and Truth, hardly inspired sympathy for Mrs. X, she of the ruined stockings, nor was it intended to. Like many courtroom narratives circulating through grimy newsprint in interwar Sydney – the kind of weekly used to wrap fish and chips, line barber shop floors and eventually end up blowing through the corners of Central Station or Railway Square – the story of Mrs. X tells us less about the legal lines of right and wrong drawn in her specific case and more about the raw tensions of gender relations and sexual politics which dominated public debate between the wars.2 If Mrs. X had a hole in her stockings, a hole caused by pipe ash, she must have been wearing a skirt short enough that when she crossed her legs, the ash from the gentleman’s pipe fell not on any protective material, but directly on her stockings, her skirt having ridden high above her knees, the ash burning right through to bare skin. It was not while fleeing a violent attacker that Mrs. X tore her silk (her story); it was, rather, her lack of appropriate cover, her willing embrace of a smoky jazz-age scene, her proximity to the gentlemen and his

1Beckett’s Budget, ‘Between the Lines’ (16 December 1927), p. 2.
2Privacy laws prohibiting publishing of divorce court proceedings were not introduced in Australia until 1938 but were introduced in England in 1928. Judith Allen, Sex & Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women since 1880 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 136; Adrian Bingham, Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Monographs, 2004), p. 169.
pipe, which caused ‘holes in her stockings’, allowing the prosecution to undermine her authority in the eyes of the jury (*Beckett’s Budget* advised juries to “be very sceptical about even the biggest certainty” of any women when it comes “to questions of identification and a man’s liberty”). Mrs. X was convicted of vagrancy and sentenced to three months imprisonment. Her husband, an unemployed WWI veteran, informed the press of his sadness and anger over these ‘savage’ holes in my wife’s stockings. He subsequently filed for divorce.

Part two of this thesis analyses the production of commercial culture in three different sites: department stores, sensationalist newspapers and commercial travellers’ associations. This chapter takes the sensationalist press as a key agent in the dissemination of commercial culture. By utilising public debates revolving around these sensationalist newspapers in the 1920s it is possible to investigate Australian responses to ‘commercialism.’ The line between the street and the propriety of the home was a thin one in 1920’s Sydney, and Australians were consistently informed, through political, legal, economic and popular wisdom, that the crossing of this line left them vulnerable to sexual violence and public censure. Like the thin membrane separating stocking from skin, the line between public and private constantly threatened to break and tear, revealing the shame of a family living with a syphilitic father, the doctor with a thriving practice using cocaine to deal with shellshock, the unemployed war hero stuttering through his job interview, the professional women fending off the advances of male co-workers, the battered wife hiding the holes in her stocking from a jealous husband.  

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Despite advances in technology designed to prevent these violations of skin and self (rayon, suburbia, higher living standards, welfare, psychiatry) the savage side of the modern world, what Sydney politician Thomas Mutch called “commercialism”, pressed ever harder at the boundaries; cigarettes hovered over exposed knees, motor cars narrowly missed pedestrians and jazz music in Darlinghurst could be heard in an Eastern suburb’s church on Sunday. Sensationalist commercial newspapers unhindered by privacy legislation and under pressure to increase circulation and profits revealed the ruin of failed marriages, publishing verbatim divorce court transcripts next to advertisements for birth control pills, ‘reducing’ tonic and all varieties of stockings.

As in the case of Mrs. X and her husband, marital relations in the late 1920s were dominated by the legacy of the war; over 60,000 Australian men had died in WWI, from a population of four million, while over half of the Australian male population between the ages of eighteen to forty-five had enlisted. An estimated one fifth of these men contracted syphilis during the war. The legacies of brothels in Cairo, mustard gas on the Somme, and manslaughter in no-man’s-land spilled over into family dinner time, weekend picnics and conjugal relations, so that the domestic savagery which fed papers like Beckett’s and Truth came to echo other anxieties over the breakdown of public morality in the trenches. At a time when Gallipoli and

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6 The Town Clerk’s Files (CRS 52) at the City of Sydney Archives are a rich source of Sydney social life, containing all the complaints sent to Council throughout the 1920s. Between 1925 and 1930, Council received letters of complaint regarding ‘women out in public’, ‘scantily dressed women’, ‘couples inebriated and smoking in Hyde Park’, ‘Motor accidents’ and ‘jazz music.’ Town Clerk’s Files, City of Sydney Archives CSA06689 – CSA06699.


'Anzac’ were still freshly hewn terms, many simply wanted to move on but couldn’t, and the story of the ‘holes in my wife’s stockings’ is as much about war wounds as it is about the breakdown of relationships in post-war society. In most Western countries divorce rates more than doubled after the war, and in Australia they tripled, from 846 per year in 1913 to 3,956 in 1921. Social critics were also excited by related drops in the national birth rate, from 28.6 births per 1000 in 1914 to 16.4 per 1000 in 1934.

Narratives of marital breakdown and female downfall in the interwar period – exemplified in figures like the New Woman and the Flapper – have been exhaustively examined by feminist historians such as Judith Allen, Gail Reekie, Angela Woollacott and Jill Julius Matthews who have firmly established the centrality of women’s bodies in political discourses of mobility, protection and transgression in the interwar years. “Women’s bodies and minds absorbed much of the shock, pain and craziness unleashed by the war experience,” writes Allen, “and only when they broke down in some way in the interwar period did the personal situations of such women emerge, often in the criminal and divorce court.” The rise of sensationalist print media in 1920’s Australia amplified divorce court narratives onto a broader stage, setting private, interpersonal stories in allegories of national crises. Debates over the proper boundaries of modern femininity focused on what women wore, what they were paid, what they read, how they mothered, and worked as codes for other anxieties such as population decline, racial health and increasing rates of divorce and venereal disease.

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9 Inglis, Pastiche II, p. 42.
10 Ibid, pp. 185-186.
12 Judith Allen, Sex & Secrets, p. 131.
Working within these well-worn interwar narratives of sterility, divorce and degeneration, women like Mrs. X acted as a conduit for a relatively undocumented 1920’s debate; the rise of ‘commercialism’ and the perceived imposition of this ‘commercialism’ and accompanying moral economy into interpersonal relations. Elspeth Brown calls this process “the commercialisation of subjectivity.”

Before Mrs. X donned her stockings in July 1927, she must have purchased them, perhaps at a city department store. David Jones alone stocked over twenty Australian brands of stockings in the interwar period – Holeproof, Prestige, Bonds, Lustre were some of the bigger names, and their factories dotted the Sydney landscape in Paddington, Enmore and Petersham. Publicity wars between these companies were fierce and in order to move stock, advertising design had to clearly differentiate a superior and unique product from an increasing number of threatening brother and sister competitors. Such stocking and lingerie design required the semi-naked female form yet the only newspapers willing to print ‘indecent’ pictures of disrobed women hailed from the gutter: Beckett’s Budget, Smith’s Weekly and Truth. Stocking and lingerie companies ran up against what Liz Connor has called marketing’s “cultural paradox”; the tension between the “profit incentive” of modern business ethics and perceptions of public decency, good governance and social order.

This chapter explores debates over the exposure of the female body in advertisements in 1920’s Sydney as part of a larger project concerned with the history of gender relations and commercial ethics in twentieth century Australia. Sensationalist newspapers were among the

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first mass circulated publications in Sydney to utilise commercial photography to illustrate
stories and to advertise products. Photographs of female models began to appear in these
newspapers as early as 1921, and by the late 1920s occupied whole pages.\textsuperscript{17} As Elspeth
Brown has shown, visual images became an integral part of new narrative tropes aimed at
“influencing behaviour through strategies of instrumental image”, a process advertising
agents called ‘engineering the irrational.’ Advertising’s role moved away from education
concerning the product’s merits to creating desires through the stimulation of impulses,
instincts and emotions, a process aided by the development of half-tone photography,
allowing designers to manipulate images and create visual collages, always aiming for “the
psychological moment” to “hook the prospect in the gills of his attention.”\textsuperscript{18} Newspapers such
as Beckett’s Budget took such strategy one step further by combining pornographic
storytelling and divorce court reports with titillating fashion advertisement for female hosiery
and lingerie. The tactics of sensationalist writing and illustration – the appeal to sensory
pleasure and sexual desire – appeared to echo modern innovations in commercial advertising
psychology and, at least in Sydney, debates and criticisms of these two modern media forms
frequently overlapped.

The NSW Minister for Education Thomas Davies Mutch (the subject of chapter 2) attempted
to get Beckett’s Budget banned in 1927. It was obscene images of exposed women in
advertisements and commercial newspapers, Mutch argued, that were ultimately responsible
for tempting Australians into ‘degenerate activities’, spreading venereal disease and
destroying marriages. The impetus to mass market the stocking and mass circulate the

\textsuperscript{17} Reekie, Temptations, p. 142.
Journal (1 February 1928), pp. 94-95.
commercial press conflicted with post-war notions of appropriate female exposure, stirring debate over the impact of commercialism on gender relations and marital fidelity. What impact did the commercialisation of reading have on the behaviour of Australian men and women? When did the profit incentive transgress public decorum? What were commercial ethics in this ‘new moral economy’ and how were they to be policed? Following discussions over the consumption of stockings and commercial papers, and drawing on sensationalist stories of ripped stockings and female downfall, this chapter addresses some of these questions, and interrogates attitudes to gendered deportment and ‘commercialism’ in interwar Sydney.

Using public texts to map social anxieties is always problematic due to the difficulty of recovering a reader’s response. Media historians have long been pre-occupied by an ongoing search for the illusive ‘reader.’ By simply reading about the escapades of Mrs. X, did other women mimic her behaviour, absorb what Thomas Mutch called her ‘immorality?’ The second part of this chapter addresses the ‘reader response’ question by exploring three events – a libel trial, a boycott and a bonfire – which focused public attention around the tabloid press and commercial ethics between 1925 and 1934. When the details (and parts of the transcript) of his acrimonious divorce appeared in the sensationalist press in 1925, Thomas Mutch brought a successful libel case against Beckett’s Budget and was awarded £3500 in damages. The case was widely reported in the Australian media and sparked a series of ‘Beckett’s burnings’ around the country. In Sydney sensationalist newspapers were placed on bonfires by ‘Mutch supporters’ and in Melbourne community groups tore posters advertising
Beckett’s from walls and fences. In the early 1930s a separate set of boycotts saw fashion models protest at runways for lingerie and stocking buyers, “refusing to parade on a raised platform under electric lights and in front of large numbers of men.” As historical moments in an Australian history of consumerism, these bonfires and boycotts are small in scale and slight in ‘evidence’ (statistics are lacking, for example), yet such vernacular local action does provide proof of a sort; the writing, reading and circulation of commercialised texts mattered in the interwar period. Furthermore, individual Australians took action against commercial texts and the perceived intrusion of these texts into their daily lives and interpersonal relationships. Taking ‘anti-commercial’ behaviour at trials, bonfires and boycotts as a kind of readers’ response captures a dynamic too often ignored in histories of print – the fluidity of public texts as they move between complex sites of cultural action (trams, courts, bonfires), with meaning and symbolism dependent on a continually changing set of readers and contexts.

The Female Reader

“If you see a young girl on a ferry or tram reading a book with a brown paper cover, you can bet it’s not a volume of Shakespeare.” Reading in a brown paper bag was one of the ways Sydney readers could dodge surveillance and judgement as they travelled to and from work in the 1920s. However, as this quote from Beckett’s Budget would suggest, brown paper did nothing to deflect social criticism; it attracted it. The sight of young female commuters

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22 Beckett’s Budget (16 August 1927), p. 3.
reading on public transport increased exponentially between 1918 and 1930 as women began slowly, unevenly—and controversially—to enter the workforce. Public attention fixed on how and what they read on their journey to and from work. “What is the best way of stimulating a desire to read?” asked The Association Woman in 1924; “first we must develop the habit of reading and it is well known that the great majority of girls read going to and from their work in tram or train … Current tram reading consists of mental poison propagating false, filthy ideas and a distorted vision of life.”

Sydney paper Beckett’s Budget would almost definitely have been purchased and perused in the safety of some kind of paper cover, if only because its front page typically sported a full spread of semi-nude fashion models (Gladys, Mabel, Phyllis, Joyce) in the process of removing stockings or lingerie. Sold in disreputable newsagencies at the back of big train stations (such as Central and Redfern) Beckett’s Budget was part of a larger consolidated press, which also printed titles like the Labour Daily and the Arrow. Media ownership was concentrated in fewer and fewer hands in the 1920s, as printing technology, photography and advertising allowed the expansion of new kinds of media product, sold quickly and cheaply at an ever-growing number of outlets around Sydney (the number of newsagencies and news stands in central Sydney doubled between 1921 and 1925). Media moguls like Ross Packer and Sir Joynton Smith (Smith’s Weekly and the Daily Guardian), Ezra Norton (Truth), the one time owner of the Tivoli Theatre Hugh D. McIntosh who offered up his actresses for ‘modelling work’ (the Sunday Times and the Sun) William John Beckett and J. H. C. Sleeman (Beckett’s Budget) became emblematic of a “changing moral economy.” They brought about

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23 The Association Woman (1 October 1924), p. 2.
the “commercialisation” of Australian society, that was thought to encourage “commercial pleasure” over civic duty and Christian values.²⁵

Commercial newspapers had “hit on a business formula new to national media: sell the paper at less than its cost of production, build a huge circulation and make your profits on advertising revenues. In other words, they were no longer dealers in their physical product, but dealers in groups of consumers.”²⁶ Improved illustration and commercial photography was central to such strategy: “You know how you glance quickly over the pages of a newspaper or magazine?” publicity agent J. H. W. Heney asked in ‘To Illustrate or not to Illustrate?’ in 1929. “Other people do exactly the same and illustrations are used to catch the roving eye … Every advertisement is competing one with the other for attention and they are all competing with the news matter … so the more attractive they can be individually the more chance they have of being seen and noticed and acted upon.”²⁷

For Sydney’s sensationalist press, a combination of divorce court narratives, sexualised illustration and advertising revenue saw profits and circulation increase exponentially. These papers accessed a market space which hovered on the boundary between ‘legitimate’ political news and disreputable exhibitionism, all the while building a reputation for the circulation of new kinds of sexual knowledge through the exposure of conjugal relations in divorce narratives, semi-pornographic imagery and the publication of abortion advice.²⁸ As Judith Allen has shown, the issue of reading material appeared regularly in court case transcripts.

²⁵ Walker, Yesterdays News, pp. 41-42.
²⁶ Connor, Spectacular Modern Woman, p. 111.
²⁸ According to Gail Reekie, “The new sexual knowledge popularised after WW1 was largely created and disseminated through rapidly expanding and more technologically sophisticated advertising industry.” Reekie, Temptations, p. 142.
dealing with sexual misconduct in the interwar era: “Juries were warned gravely that girls whose families read salacious newspapers like Truth or Smith’s Weekly could not be believed as sex offence complaints in such publications could put revolting ideas into their heads.”

![Figure 5.1 ‘End of the Story’ 1931. Source: National Library of Australia Harold Cazneaux photograph collection, 1910-1940 Image 4300228](image)

These newspapers were accused by religious and reform groups of “breaking down in the reader’s mind the distinction between right and wrong” and of “corroding public harmony for the sake of profit.” When a married woman, Alice Dorcas Axtell, gassed herself after reading an article about gas poisoning and suicide in the Guardian, and when Sarah Wayne jumped of the cliffs of Coogee after reading ‘Love’s Sin’, bought for 6d at Central Railway Station, a clear link was drawn in some papers between female behaviour and exposure to the

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commercial media, for “who knows what effect these stories have on the mind of a young girl?”

The late Victorian national morning press, against which the 1920’s commercial press reacted, operated on a narrow definition of what was newsworthy and who its audience should be. The “appearance” of these papers was “as austere as their contents,” with little or no illustration and long columns of Parliamentary Hansard; ideal for “gentlemen in clubs” who “could retire to their smoking rooms at four o’clock and spend two or three hours digesting them.” Women were largely absent from discussion and advertisements were of the trading post variety and limited to the back pages. It was London’s Lord Northcliffe, founder of the first two million selling daily papers, the Daily Mail and the Daily Mirror, who revolutionised attitudes to ‘media’ with the launch of the Mail in 1896. He moved the female reader from the margins to the centre of editorial calculations and privileged sensationalist story telling over political commentary. Introducing display advertising, he accepted generous advertising revenue from the fashion industry and fired his staff when women’s dress pages were accidentally printed in light font. Mirroring events that unfolded decades later in the Australian context, advertisements using images of women in their undergarments provoked uproar in 1898 with letters of protest pouring in from villages and vicarages declaring “we


32 Adrian Bingham, Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain, p. 23.

33 Ibid, p. 23.
cannot have our son’s morals contaminated in this way."\textsuperscript{34} But as Northcliffe’s advertising manager noted, women’s underwear could not be illustrated properly without a female form inside them and furthermore, “we are on the edge of the greatest revenue producer we have yet found.”\textsuperscript{35}

In the aftermath of the war, Northcliff’s second-in-command, a Mr. Tom Clarke, travelled to Australia to advise Robert Clyde Packer on the art of creating a tabloid newspaper.\textsuperscript{36} March 1919 saw Packer’s brainchild, Smiths Weekly unleashed on the Australian public, and by 1927 the paper’s circulation had reached 200,000, triple the figure enjoyed by The Sydney Morning Herald.\textsuperscript{37} The end of the war had left many Australian publicity experts unemployed – men and women responsible for war-time ‘morale-boosting’ propaganda campaigns and conscription advertisements – and Packer took advantage of this human resource, directing expertise once used to encourage sacrifice, duty and thrift into advertisements urging indulgence, pleasure and spending. The business world was intrigued. As was the case in England, copycat papers emerged each pushing boundaries a little further in order to differentiate their product in an increasingly competitive marketplace. William Beckett launched Beckett’s Budget in 1927, a paper which began as a modest advocate of rural Australia (with front page stories about wool prices and prize winning pigs), but became notorious through sensationalist divorce court reportage and pornographic visuals. By 1928 the paper was in trouble with the authorities – entangled in a spiralling number of libel cases, and on trial for obscenity in the High Court – and share holders, mostly from country areas, (Dubbo, Mugga Mugga, Orange) rapidly liquidated their stock.

\textsuperscript{34} W. Smith, \textit{Split Ink} (London: Ernst Benn, 1932), p. 42.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid. p. 43.
\textsuperscript{36} George Blakie, \textit{Remember Smith’s Weekly}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, p. 15.
In 1926, D. B. Know, Professor at Moore College, Sydney University wrote that popular newspapers exacerbated “The acquisitive and secular spirit which dominates our age”, and were “The depths of bad taste and depravity.”

Moore felt that commercialised texts were

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D. B. Know, Moore College, Newtown, Mutch Papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 426/1.
providing irresponsible models of male and female behaviour in order to make money, irrespective of the damage done to civic relations. Although newspapers like Beckett’s paid lip service to campaigns against excessive eating, drinking and sexual indulgence, an unstable world of bodily pleasure lurked just beneath the surface of this publication. Its stories, driven by elaborate plots yet constructed with a dramatic economy that presented characters and problems in the first few paragraphs, were short enough to be read in the very brief periods of leisure available to young working-class wives.39

The visibility of underwear advertisements in commercial newspapers worried social critics, concerned that titillating images of women in newspapers would pollute the ‘weak’ minds of newly literate working-class readers, tempting them into criminal behaviour and sexual violence. By 1931 about 45 per cent of some half a million of Sydney’s inhabitants were classified as working class, living in households with an income of less than £200 a year.

Literacy rates in Australia had reached 100 per cent in 1925. Reading was divided along class lines “They [upper class] read the Sydney Morning Herald, rather than the Daily Telegraph or Labour Daily, the Sunday Sun, rather than Truth or Smith’s Weekly, The Home, rather than New Idea.”40

The 1920s in Australia saw the emergence of a group of professionals who attempted to rationalise the working-class domestic world, “to extend the principles of science and instrumental reason to the operation of the household and to the management of personal

40 Marty Lyons and Lucy Taska, Australian Reader’s Remember (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999), pp. 72-85.
In the interwar years, reproduction, childbirth and infant welfare became bureaucratised and increasingly regulated within departments of health. In the wake of mass literacy part of this intervention involved assessing the impact of new ways of reading and listening in the minds of woman and children. Damousi, drawing on the correspondence of British and Australian psychologists, has suggested that intimate life was in ‘transition’ in the 1920s, “The audience of both the radio and popular magazines was overwhelmingly women and it is significant that at the time when the achievements in science and technology were being valorized, more intimate, personalized forms of communication were emerging in the public arena.” The public and private were evolving alongside new technologies of communication (for “cultivating intimacy”, in Damousi’s words) causing a shift towards private issues being made public, and away from a “nineteenth century culture which rewarded self control and personal discretion.”

Psychoanalysis gained currency among Australian intellectuals, advertisers and psychiatrists after WW1. It was in the treatment of returned soldiers, most notably those dealing with the effects of shell shock, that ideas about neuroses, dreams and defenses were increasingly discussed. Psychiatrists became interested in how environmental and psychological factors played a part in mental disorder, and promoted the ‘confessional’ as a popular mode of expression and treatment.

The mind became not simply the expression of an inner biology – it was also a “passive

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42 Alison Bashford, Imperial Hygiene.
43 Damousi, Freud in the Antipodes, p. 58.
44 Ibid, p. 58
receptor of sensations from the ‘real’ world.” According to Australian eugenicist E. Morris Miller “no child is born bad, nor are interracially bad … the underlying feature is maladjustment.” The desertion of the brain was, in this formulation, the product of a morally corrupt and hostile environment, and not an inherited biological trait. If the minds of working-class people were ‘feeble’ and vulnerable to the environment around them then the commercial press, with its images of scantily clad women in stockings, would encourage violence and depravity in working-class families, carrying the lure and promise of its advertisements, into the sanctity of the home, and into the mind of the unprotected reader. Like the soiled stocking, the ‘feeble minded’ would be corrupted, diseased by their exposure to Beckett’s visions of social depravity and marital breakdown.

Stockings

Stockings and the exposure of female legs, knees and occasionally ‘jazz garters’ triggered intense debate between the wars, but particularly between 1925 and 1929 when, for a brief three-year window, women’s skirts rose above the knee. A trans-national phenomenon, long female legs clad in ultra-modern rayon or shimmering Parisian silk slipped out of motor cars from Beijing to New York and Sydney, squeezed onto trams, marketed an exploding number of branded goods, dominated movie posters, spun on dance floors and sat entwined on the pages of the widely circulated popular press. Both a cause of public outcry and a central

46 E. Morris Miller Papers 1907 – 1971, National Library of Australia, NLA MS 87. Miller drafted the Mental Deficiency Act (1920) and in 1922 was appointed first director of the State Psychological Clinic.
47 Deana Heath and Nicole Moore have both written extensively on the history of censorship and obscenity in interwar Australia. Moore argues, “Perhaps most distinctly it can be argued that the report [of the Australian Literary Censorship Board 1927-1928] located the dangers of obscenity in mass advertising and solidified the role of women as obscenity’s most vulnerable audience in this period.” Moore, ‘Treasonous Sex: Birth Control Obscenity Censorship and White Australia’, in Australian Feminist Studies 20, no. 48 (November 2005), pp. 319-342.
48 I am not trying to suggest that stockings actually functioned in this way in any material sense – only that narratives and concerns centred around women’s stockings echoed larger debates over the impact of mass popular culture on interpersonal relationships, and on the behaviour of Australian men and women.
visual referent for jazz-age glamour, stocking clad female legs were a rallying point for public debates over social change and sexual morality and through the figure of the ‘flapper’ and the ‘New Women’, their position as a visual emblem of the 1920s has been preserved by historians.

For female consumers hosiery was an essential and an important gesture towards respectability, marking a class line between those who could afford new hose and those who were forced to recycle old hose shot through with darning, runs and tears. Australian women wrote pamphlets on ‘Economic Hosiery Mending’, such as Lucie McKinney’s “New Stockings saved from destruction, Old ones rescued to usefulness” and even “drew hose lines” down their legs with black paint, particularly when economic conditions worsened into the 1930s.⁵⁰

The Sydney sensationalist press embraced the exposed stocking as a narrative tool, a shrewd move considering many of these papers had lucrative contracts with hosiery firms like Bonds, Lustre, Banner-K, or Prestige.⁵¹ Lithe flappers ‘shed their silk’ in front page cartoons (“the peeling of the bells”)⁵² while models fastened their garters next to headlines like ‘Unfaithful after 24 years wedlock, George finds holes in Mabel’s tights.’⁵³ In 1925, in ‘The Order of the Garter’, the Sun News Pictorial published a series of letters from “sober minded” ex-soldiers,

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⁵⁰ Lucie McKinney, Copy write application for ‘Economic Hosiery Mending: Quick and Easy, New Stockings saved from destruction, old ones restored to usefulness and other Knits’, NAA A1336, 19745; Farrell, Socks & Stockings, p. 87.
⁵³ ‘Unfaithful after 24 years wedlock, George finds holes in Mabel’s tights’, Smiths Weekly (5 May, 1926), p. 8.
complaining of working girls (“bare-chested hussies”) flashing their garters on public transport, proof that female “nakedness grows more pronounced each day.”\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Smith’s Weekly} in ‘Slow Motion picture of Girl Getting out of her Car’, captured the moment when a young girl exits a motor vehicle, flashing garter and thigh as she slips from the seat to the pavement.\textsuperscript{55}

For *Beckett’s Budget*, the stocking was ideal for both titillative illustration: “the old caretaker still appreciated the seductive curve of a silken carve”\(^\text{56}\), and demonising court room drama “her stockings were sent to a government microbiologist, producing revolting evidence of

\(^{56}\) ‘Human Ant Heaps: Flat Life as it is Lived in Darlinghurst: Wicked Ladies’, in *Beckett’s Budget* (23 December 1927), p. 12.
sexual interest, uncommon in a seven year old girl.”\textsuperscript{57} Stockings worked as short hand for sexual favours and feminine duplicity, the ultimate illustration of ‘lost innocence’ and sexual commerce. White girls in Chinatown, “cigarettes drooping from crimson lips” auction themselves off to older Chinese men for “stockin-money”: “I want a new pair of stockings bad and a girl can’t get a decent pair o’ stockings under four guineas these days,” while travelling hosiery salesman were seduced by intoxicated housewives, after the latest pair of ‘Blackbird Sheers.’\textsuperscript{58} Stockings trigger anxiety in these stories, implying a type of ‘dangerous exposure’ and a failure to protect the innocent and the vulnerable.

In this navigation of stockings as allegory it is helpful to consider Jill Julius Matthews’ conceptualisation of Australian modernity as a “gradual physical and symbolic erosion of space.”\textsuperscript{59} ‘Space’, in this context, represents the loss of physical space between material objects; between the body and its external environment and between people, houses and cars all congested into smaller areas as population growth and urbanisation literally decreased any room to move in the city (Sydney’s population passed the two million mark in 1922).\textsuperscript{60} But it is also a ‘mental space’ between the interior self and the outside world as modern technologies assailed the mind through new pictures, noises, advertisements and commercial psychologies. An assault Miriam Bratu Hansen calls a “sensory onslaught.”\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{57} ‘Revolting Evidence in Sex Cases Causes Judge to Order Women to Leave Court: Shocking Life of an Uncontrollable Child: Two Girls Involved in Another Case’, in \textit{Beckett’s Budget} (26 October 1928).


\textsuperscript{59} Mathews, \textit{Dance Hall & Picture Palace}, p. 90.


\textsuperscript{61} Miriam Bratu Hansen, ‘Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism’, \textit{Modernism/Modernity} 6, no. 2 (April 1999), pp. 59-77.
This perceived loss of physical and mental space has been linked to a re-configuration of class and gender difference. Matthews writes of a general fear of a “half world” where women’s class position and “respectability” could no longer be read so easily from their bodies or behaviour. Commercial popular culture invited women and men to come together in public both to earn a living and to enjoy themselves and it was this changing configuration of public space and the behaviour of its newly constituted denizens that most excited the critics of modernity.62

Commodity culture provided an alternative ‘way of telling’ stories about social morality in the interwar years. The modern world was first made possible in Sydney through the new world of goods; electric lights, department stores, automobiles, dance palaces, gramophones, jazz, pictures, cheap magazines, bobbed hair and rising hemlines – and the new ways of buying them – time payment, hire purchase, cash order, lay by, – all mass produced phenomena which ‘fired the imagination’ and forged new ways of seeing.63 But if these new commodities carried the utopian promises of the modern world (expanding the horizons of ordinary people beyond their immediate environments) did they also function as symbols of its failure and fragility? In the sensationalist press, the torn, soiled stocking (worn by unfortunates such as Mrs. X) constructed modernity as a kind of glass floor; structurally unsound, transitory and inevitably doomed to break.

62 Ibid. p. 91.
63 Mathews, Dance Hall & Picture Palace, p. 10, 104.
On 7 September 1928, a large bonfire was lit in the Sydney suburb of Mascot. On the bonfire, locals placed copies of *Beckett’s Budget*, cigarettes, film posters, advertisements and women’s stockings. Thomas Davies Mutch, NSW State Minister for Education, was responsible for organising the bonfire and gave a speech over the burning debris. This fire, he said, was the response of ordinary Australians to the “commercialism” taking over public life where “every department of the business and social life of the community is dominated by the need to make money at all costs.” Drawing on the comments of prominent Reverend Arthur Rae, Mutch spoke of “the corrosive acid of commercialism which has bitten into our lives where every deed of common humanity is reckoned to have its market price, when a money value is instinctively set upon every decent act of fellowship.” He called the bonfire the beginning of a local movement against the “unholy desire for profit” sweeping the country, as Australia moved towards a ‘commercialised’ society. Mutch saw his local community at Mascot as vulnerable to the forces of commercialism, and imagined the shop front, the advertisement and the commodity itself as a source of disease, playing on the base desires of consumers, and tempting them away from their civic duties as citizens, exploiting “the conflict between a man and himself, between desire and self-denial.” The press reported the bonfire under the heading ‘Thomas Mutch and Anti-Commercialism.’

64 T. D. Mutch Papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 426, Box 15A.
65 Ibid.
66 Mutch drew on three articles published by Arthur Rae in the socialist paper ‘Common Cause’: Arthur Rae, ‘Church and Labor’, *Common Cause* (17 October 1923), p. 3. And consecutively: *Common Cause* (27 November 1924), p. 10; (13 March 1924), p. 16. These articles are kept as loose cuttings in the T. D. Mutch Papers, MLMSS 426, Box 15A.
67 Mutch Papers MLMSS 426 Box 16.
The goods placed on the fire were expensive items for those living on a working-class wage. Mascot was a lower income suburb bordering Long Bay, and many of the families living there were single parent households waiting for spouses to be released from the nearby Long Bay goal. Mascot families were large and predominantly Catholic, surviving on subsistence wages or sporadic government welfare.\(^{69}\) So why sacrifice luxury items on a bonfire organised by a local politician? The following discussion suggests ways to read the ‘anti-commercial bonfire’: as a show of loyalty for Thomas Mutch, as an expression of growing class tension in the wake of violent strikes and riots breaking out across the country and finally as a ‘reader’s response’ to Beckett’s Budget culminating in a show of public concern over commercial ethics and advertising tactics in the Australian public sphere.

Mutch was a Labor party executive, a journalist, senior freemason and a close friend of Henry Lawson.\(^{70}\) During WW1, Mutch had made his name in politics as an anti-conscriptionist, giving passionate speeches in Sydney’s domain park.\(^{71}\) Lawson helped him into NSW State Parliament, supporting his campaign for election in 1917 by advocating “Tom Mutch, a far better man than I am.”\(^{72}\) Tom pasted a map of his electorate (Mascot) into his freemason’s diary and proceeded to woo his constituents, moving street by street, memorising names, finding employment for sons and daughters, organising pensions and campaigning to get delinquent children out of the nearby Long Bay gaol.\(^{73}\) He had married Edith Hasenkam in 1912 but by 1926 they were living separately (in Daceyville and Botany) and Mutch, after conducting a series of extra marital affairs, became secretly engaged to Dorothy Annette.

\(^{69}\) Ibid.
\(^{70}\) T. D. Mutch Papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 426.
\(^{72}\) T. D. Mutch Electioneering Pamphlet, New South Wales General Election, 1917, Mutch Papers, Box 4.
\(^{73}\) Mutch Papers, Box. 15A.
Joyce, a Victorian school teacher twenty years his junior. Edith and Tom divorced in 1927. In 1924 he led an unsuccessful bid for the leadership of the NSW Labor Party, losing to Jack Lang by one vote. When he was made Minister for Education in 1925, he began to work closely with the Parents and Teacher’s Association, and it is in this context that he regularly heard complaints about the tabloid press, and in particular *Beckett’s Budget*.

In 1926 *Beckett’s Budget* launched a controversial advertising strategy stationing agents (their arms heaped with free sections of the paper) outside schools and pasting posters up (replete with semi-nude models and headlines like ‘Girl-of-14-Makes-Serious-Charge-Against-Father’) on trees and telegraph poles in suburban neighbourhoods. By targeting suburbia in particular, *Beckett’s* brought the ways of the commercial city into the world of the emerging, middle-class nuclear family. No amount of brown paper bags could protect the swarms of children being ‘pamphleteered’ by *Beckett’s* salesman on their way home from school and in early 1927 Mutch asked the following questions in the NSW State Parliament:

> Has the attention of the colonial secretary been drawn to the salacious pictures in the publication known as *Beckett’s Budget*? It is a veritable menace to public morals and especially the morals of the rising generation. Will he examine the recent issues of the publication with a review to proceedings being taken under the Indecent Publications Act?

The problem was that by avoiding the serialisation of semi-pornographic novels and by concentrating on factual if carefully selected court reports, *Beckett’s Budget* broke no laws. The only legislative restriction in NSW on the publication of court reports was the First Offender’s Act and there was no privacy legislation regulating the publication of divorce.

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74 Ibid.
court material. Apart from condemning the paper in a Royal Commission set up in 1928, there was little the legislative could do to stop the paper’s (growing) circulation.77

On 16 December 1927, *Beckett’s Budget* responded to Mutch’s attack in parliament with a lengthy article, ‘The ‘Bloke’ from Botany: An Open Letter to Thomas Davies Mutch’, accusing him of alcoholism, political corruption, swearing in front of women and children, practising ‘abominable habits’ in his personal relationships, and of beating his ex-wife.78 “In short Mr. Mutch”, editor J H C Sleeman concluded, “the evidence of your ex-wife proves that you are nothing more than a brutal wife beater.”79 Sleeman refused to name his source in the article but could have easily procured information on Mutch’s divorce from court records, which clearly transcribed Edith Mutch’s allegation that he had, after losing the Labor leadership ballot to Lang on 12 June 1924, come home that night and struck her in the face. Mutch denied this charge during his divorce hearing. He sued the paper for libel and the case went to court in 1928, around the time of the Mascot bonfire. The case was successful and Mutch won £3,500 worth of damages against *Beckett’s Budget*. Mutch’s lawyer E. P. Simpson wrote to congratulate him declaring the case an historic success “… which will have a far reaching effect upon Journals which do not hesitate to blast a man’s character if they think that by doing so they can secure an increase in their circulation.”80

Mutch’s ex-wife Edith was brought down from Brisbane and paid £10 to give testimony during the trial. Editors and journalists, however, barely registered her participation or her

77 There are no reliable circulation figures for *Beckett’s Budget* but Walker has argued that the paper did claim a large readership in the late twenties, stealing a large section of *Truth’s* readership. *Truth’s* circulation in New South Wales fell from 202,398 in October 1927 to 171,333 in March 1929 and “The fall may be attributed to competition by *Beckett’s Budget*,” Walker, *Yesterday’s News*, p. 41.
79 Ibid.
80 E. P. Simpson to T. D. Mutch, 12 September 1928, Mutch Papers, Box. 43.
charges of domestic violence, focusing instead on the place of *Beckett’s Budget* in the lives of Sydney’s citizens and the question of whether or not the paper should be permanently banned. *Smiths Weekly*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* all reported the words of Mutch’s attorney, Mr. Windeyer who argued that *Beckett’s Budget* “had gone further than any newspaper in this country had ever gone and … was a publication that had brought Sydney into contempt in other States.”

As part of its defense, *Beckett’s Budget* drew witnesses from Mutch’s constituency: Margaret Plunkett from Matraville was a married woman who claimed to have heard Mutch utter the words, “I will not drink with those fucking scabby bastards” at the opening of a Soldiers Settlement Hall in Matraville in July 1927 when woman and children were “close handy.”

Windeyer interrogated such witnesses about their reading habits. He pressed Margaret Plunkett to examine copies of *Beckett’s Budget* and in particular an article and illustration entitled ‘Continental Vice and Depravity are Retailed in Sydney’s Main Thoroughfares: La Bell France of King St poses for photos.’ After initially stating that “she saw no filth in the paper” and “took it every week” Mrs. Plunkett admitted to “not liking” its pictures. However, she re-asserted *Beckett’s* main line of defense: that the paper was purely a reflection of the mores and morals of modern Sydney city life. Referring to the front cover of an issue from 4 November 1927, Windeyer asked, “Do you realize that those woman’s clothes are deliberately turned back in order to show their underclothing? Do you think it is a decent picture?” Margaret Plunkett replied, “I do not think it is indecent because you see it in the

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82 Ibid.
trans every day."

Figure 5.5 Beckett’s Budget (4 November 1927), the cover shown to Margaret Plunkett during the trial. Source: State Library of NSW

Weeks after the end of the trial it continued to attract attention in the Australian media. Transcripts began appearing in Smiths Weekly under the headline: ‘5 AM Parties: Short Skirt Craze: KC on Fashion’:

83 Ibid.
Counsel dealt at length with the wearing of long silk stockings and short skirts, and the holding of dance parties until 5 AM ... “If Mr. Mutch is such a lover of decency and is guided only by proper motives why had he not called attention to other papers which publish similar material? Has he even done anything to lengthen women’s skirts? The pictures to which attention had been drawn by counsel are nothing compared to what you see in trams, and do you see anything wrong in that?” Mr. Mack said that it was the people who made the morals of a city, and what was good enough for the public was good enough for everybody. 

*Beckett’s Budget* defence was framed around the ‘wearing of long silk stockings,’ and more generally, the link between female exposure in the press and female behaviour in public space. The ‘morals of the city’ became epitomised in the shiny flash of women’s hose, and with the publication of each new transcript the link between female deportment and commercial tabloids was further reiterated. The unanswered question remained; did reading commercial tabloids create new forms of behaviour, or simply report them?

**Boycott**

On a local level, the boycott of *Beckett’s Budget* led to packed-out town hall meetings (in Richmond in Melbourne, in Daceyville in Sydney), letters to the editor (in the *Argus* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*), the establishment of a citizen’s vigilance committee in Melbourne which tore the paper’s posters from walls, trees and street poles and the bonfire in Mascot where Thomas Mutch spoke of “the corrosive acid of commercialism” eating into the “minds of Australian readers” as they “digest this filthy newspaper.” Peter Coleman, Martin Lyons and Lucy Taksa have presented such behaviour as the inevitable response of conservative sections of the community to a paper which pushed the boundaries of public decency beyond

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84 Cutting from found among T. D. Mutch papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 426, Box 43.
85 Mutch Paper, Box. 15A.
its accepted limits. But little has been said about the terms ‘commercialism’ and ‘anti-commercialism’, which appeared repeatedly in criticisms of *Becketts*.

According to Ben Maddison and Shirley Fitzgerald the word ‘commercialism’ emerged in Australia in the decades that spanned 1900 as both a “discourse through which working class identity was articulated” and an expression of “anti-capitalist anger deeply rooted in the lived experience of commodification.” Australia, in Maddison’s analysis, did not experience ‘mature’ commodity relations until the 1910s; poorly regulated crown lands, scant industrial development, a large rural population and the existence of a semi-rural fringe on the edge of cities meant that a ‘barter system’ of commodity exchange was the norm. “Whether from practical necessity or as a strategy to preserve economic independence, the lives of sections of the population were only partially organised around commodity relations.” Even in large towns, writes Fitzgerald, “most people had their own cows and in the cities, wage workers managed to supplement their income by growing fruit and vegetables and raising poultry.” These specific economic and cultural conditions made the ‘shock’ of modern capitalism all the more potent within working-class communities. Anti-commercialism, argues Maddison, became a form of resistance against market capitalism, particularly in the 1920s when the conservative Bruce-Page administration used ‘business efficiency’ to legitimate free market values.

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88 It is easy to dismiss such analysis as both romantic and nostalgic, pitting an idealised pre-capitalist Australian way of life against the commercialised urbanity of the modern metropolis. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore this economic history in any proper depth. In the absence of a body of scholarship on ‘anti-commercialism’ in Australian historiography, Maddison’s work provides a suggestive framework within which
The 1920s saw a major break in the ritual and language mediating contact between individual Australians and the wider marketplace. Between 1915 and 1929 corporate attention in Western democratic states had shifted from a buyer who was ‘rational, reasonable and male’ to a female consumer who was, in Roland Marchand’s words, “thought to be lazy, emotional and stupid.”

The influence of applied psychology reorientated managers toward an appreciation of the mind as the critical element of consumption, and words like ‘impulse buy’ and ‘sales hypnosis’ became popular terms in sales-speak; understanding the human mind thus went together with manipulating it. As Director of Adshead Rose Publicity, J. H. W. Heney wrote in 1929, “the idea of making people dissatisfied with their lot in life is the reason why advertising is so much practiced,” a psychological process which used scientific means to “hypnotise the prospect so that he becomes oblivious to the fact that he is making a purchase.”

Promotional jingles leapt from streetscapes made busy by billboards and posters. The phrase “I felt like the bird on the biscuit tin”, meaning “left out of something” taken from a famous Arnott’s biscuit advertisement (featuring a large parrot on a red tin), travelled into daily conversation, imprinted so firmly on the brain of Lydia Gill that she was able to sing it back in an oral history interview fifty years later. By the end of the 1920s, supermarket chain stores like Moran & Co were replacing the local grocer and neon lighting allowed for later opening hours and night-time window display (by 1930 Claude Neon has installed at least

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thirty-six coloured neon lights in Sydney). In 1928, St. Kilda City Council opposed a proposal to place a sign atop the city baths on the grounds that “citizens should be able to visit the beach without being annoyed by a sign flashing out an injunction to drink a certain brand of whisky or use a special corn cure.” Behind these modern commercial spaces and the ‘psychologies of selling’ pasted upon them, was a new reading of human motivations dependent on assumptions of sexual instinct and latent desire. As Gail Reekie commented, “in the 1920s sex was used to sell and sexual identity had to be bought.”

It was the application of ‘commercial logic’ beyond the sale and purchase of the commodity that concerned anti-commercialists; the danger, they believed, that the brutal and transitory nature of market values had seeped into interpersonal relations and into democratic institutions, eroding ‘virtue’ and ‘duty’ in the name of pleasure and instant gratification. In her rejection of civic duty and her indulgence of commercial pleasures (smoking, drinking, wearing stockings) women such as Mrs. X embodied this seepage between market values and social morality. Exciting anxieties with her consumption of modern commodities she symbolised the “promiscuous mingling of culture and commerce.” Critics like Thomas Mutch saw the New Woman as part of “a colder, more impersonal … more sterile world,” her ‘modern style’ destroying not only her sexual difference from men (through short hair, boyish figures, hipless dresses) but also the harmony and sanctity of “a familiar, intimate, interior life.”

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93 Ibid, p. 57.
95 Reekie, Temptations, p. 154.
96 Ibid. p. 42.
The use of ‘commercialism’ in attacks on *Beckett’s Budget* allowed for disparate social criticism to be brought together: the impact of ‘stimulating’ advertising on the behaviour of men and woman, the adoption of a new value system structured around business efficiency and the commercialisation of interpersonal relationships, were all epitomised by the illustrations and advertisements used by the paper to increase circulation. By applying a sales strategy which targeted school-aged children, *Beckett’s Budget* forced debate on the consequences of interwar corporate practices and reflection upon the kind of subjectivities produced by these practices. The consumption of sensationalist newspapers became a framework through which disaffected social critics like Thomas Mutch could interrogate and articulate ‘what was wrong’ with ‘commercialism’ in Australia. Through such means they could dispute the value of the market as a barometer of the common good. I argue that these commodities became the platform for Australian resistance to commercial culture and against the broader social changes associated with this culture. Women’s stockings and commercial newsprint were taken up by social critics in a discourse concerned with commercial degeneracy, which constructed a symbolic association between high rates of divorce and venereal disease and the consumption of stockings and sensationalist newspapers. These discourses of commercial degeneracy can be positioned as a popular response to rapid economic and social change; an insight into daily life in the 1920s which makes visible the ways in which large-scale global shifts, such as commodification, are translated into local contexts and understood through everyday experiences, such as what people read and how they dress.
Part II

Urban Modernity and Commercial Culture

Chapter 6

Commercial Travellers

Commercial travellers were salespeople working for manufacturers or traders who travelled over districts showing samples or soliciting orders.¹ There was a rise in the number of commercial travellers in Australia after WWI because government and philanthropic organisations encouraged returned soldiers to join the profession. If we are to consider the place of salesmanship in interwar Australian commerce and culture then the figure of the commercial traveller is central. In a period in which Australia’s place in the imperial system was shifting, commercial travellers were the acknowledged agents of empire, bringing modernity to the fringes of white settlement.² Commercial travelling was assigned meaning as an imperialist activity in business literature and government publications because the commodities circulated by travellers in remote parts of Australia were perceived as securing the domesticity and comfort of settler families. By the early 1920s, business colleges and the Commercial Travellers Association Australia (CTAA) had lent their support to empire settlement schemes designed to further develop and populate Australia’s interior. These schemes coincided with the onset of drought and economic depression after 1927. Rural settlers defaulted on their payments and turned commercial travellers away from their homes. Many commercial travellers declared bankruptcy and some committed suicide. Business colleges, commercial organisations and government agencies rationalised these failures by

¹ The first Australian Commercial Travellers Association was formed in South Australia in 1874. Commercial Travellers Association of Australia, On the Road: The Commercial Traveller’s Guide 1900, Commercial Travellers of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

² For an examination of Australian exploration, and the nexus between the lives of individual explorers and the global market economy, see Julie Evans, ‘Biography and global history: reflections on examining colonial governance through the life of Edward Eyre’, in Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott, eds., Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World (Canberra: ANU ePress), pp. 21-41.
highlighting the inadequacy of travellers’ salesmanship techniques. During the Great Depression, they developed personalised sales training that broke down encounters between travellers and rural settlers into discrete physical and psychological moments in order to increase profits. Some commercial travellers responded by critiquing both the efficacy of this training and the colonial logics underpinning the development of Australia’s desert interior.

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The figure of the failed salesman became ubiquitous in Australian interwar popular culture, especially after the Wall Street crash of 1929. In 1933 at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Perth comedian George Gee played a vacuum cleaner salesman going bankrupt in Just My Luck; while in 1932 in The Travelling Salesman at Sydney’s Majestic, Bob Blake was cast as a corrupt land salesman who perished in the Australian desert.³ In the 1936 Australian feature film Strike me Lucky Mo (Roy Rene) played a struggling salesman “peddling vacuum cleaners, cut-throat razors, books, magazines, taxi-rides and ill fitting suits.” In Little Giant in the same year Bud Costello took on the role of a farm boy who takes lessons in salesmanship from phonograph records and starts off on country roads as a commercial traveller, making and then losing his fortune.⁴ While individual comedians depicted salespeople in their own way, each portrayal had one common element – up-beat optimism in the face of resentful customers. A typical scenario involved a suited salesman knocking enthusiastically on the door of a dilapidated outback homestead only to be met by a motley crew of bedraggled inhabitants. Looking at the salesman’s wares (vacuum cleaners, radios), they remarked...

“Doesn’t look very appetizing, Mister.”

By satirising travelling salespeople in the 1930s, comedians like Mo had, of course, the economic failures of the Great Depression squarely in their sights. Following the Wall Street crash of 1929, unemployment in Australia rose to around 32 per cent. Similar black-humoured set pieces were staged in English and American Depression-era theatres around the same time. A common skit in America by humorist Will Rogers showed travelling salesmen camping out in motor cars with the catchphrase “we’re the first nation in the history of the world to go to the poor house in an automobile” painted on the sides of their vehicles. These jokes manifested themselves in somewhat different ways. In Australia, laughing at the doomed optimism of Australian travelling salesmen was not just about economic failure – it was about imperial failure. Gassing themselves in sedans on the edge of deserts, and slicing their wrists in isolated country hotels, failed salesmen embodied the ill-advised ambitions of European colonialists in remote sections of the Australian frontier. Commercial travellers in the Great Depression made visible the economic and geographic obstacles to colonial expansionism, highlighting the unsuitability of much of Australia for European habitation.

The archival trail left behind by commercial travellers is rich and yet rarely used. This chapter analyses the sales manuals produced by companies such as Electrolux for commercial

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travellers from the 1920s onwards, as well as salesmanship magazines and business college
training lectures. I draw on Rydges Business Journal, an Australian business magazine
published in Sydney between 1928 and 1934, and then from 1934 to 1987 when the journal
was known simply as Rydges; and the archives and publications distributed by
Blennerhassett’s Commercial Education Society of Australasia (formerly the Commercial
Education Society of Australia).7 I also use the extensive archives of the Commercial
Travellers Association of Australia (CTAA). Commercial travellers were not passive readers
of salesmanship manuals and CTAA booster literature: in this chapter I make reference to
diaries, memoirs and comic books written by commercial travellers describing their
encounters with rural settlers and often satirising the literature of business colleges and
training manuals. These narratives challenged the natural colonial order that assumed the
inevitable spread of European civilisation into Indigenous spaces. Instead of civilising
Australia’s internal frontiers, Australian salesmen perished in them.

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As we have seen, by the early twentieth-century a drift of rural populations back to the coastal
cities fuelled anxieties about the failure of Australia’s population to spread itself across the
large, empty spaces of the nation.8 Australia’s emptiness, as David Walker puts it, “seemed a
constant reproach which could only be removed by a population influx.”9 The continent’s
unmanned spaces had been a prime concern for fin de siècle progressives such as the British-
born Australian intellectual Charles Pearson. Pearson’s National Life and Character: A

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7 For more information on Rydges Business Journal and Rydges see: John Perkins, ‘Norman Bede Rydge’,
8 Kate Murphy, Fears and Fantasies, p. 10.
9 David Walker, Anxious Nation, p. 154.
*Forecast* (1893) raised the alarm among Anglo-Saxons about the projected takeover of the globe by the more prolific “black” and “yellow” races. Pearson feared that city life was sapping the physical stamina of populations, causing the decline of the putative independence, heroism and self-sufficiency of the Anglo-Saxon race. Rural settlement schemes were to provide a cure for the malaise of Australian urbanites. Forty thousand settlers were put on the land by Australian governments under the provision of Discharged Soldiers Settlement Acts passed in all states in 1916 and 1917 at a cost of £45 million. Kate Murphy, drawing on Graeme Davison and Marilyn Lake, has recently argued that these anxieties, and the rural settlement imperative in Australia more generally, should be seen as a distinct colonial response to the stresses of urban modernity. Nostalgia for a pre-industrial agrarian past found its ultimate and most contradictory expression, Murphy writes, in this ‘colonial modernity’, where “cherished aspects of rurality” were valued over urban, industrial development associated with ‘old world’ evils. But the gradual erosion of rural populations after 1900 belied Arcadian fantasies of Australia’s future exemplified by E. J. Brady’s 1918 book *Australia Unlimited*. The 1921 census revealed that 43.1 per cent of the population of New South Wales was concentrated in metropolitan areas, as against 35.7 per cent twenty years previously. In rural districts numbers had declined from 30.7 per cent of the state’s

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14 Murphy, *Fears and Fantasies*, pp. 48-49.
15 E. J. Brady, *Australia Unlimited* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1918).
population in 1901 to 22.3 per cent in 1920-21. One of the reasons cited for this drift to the cities was the “drab dullness of the country centres.”

By virtue of their visibility in dwindling rural townships, failed travelling salesman – driving motor cars on bad roads to abandoned settlements – became the focus of an interwar debate over the viability of ‘Australia Unlimited’, and of the economic policies which underwrote it.

Marilyn Lake has called this stage of Australia’s colonisation:

The final phase of the great Australian project to settle the land with a yeoman class, a project which had initially required the dispossession of Australia’s original inhabitants – the Aborigines … For eighty yeas, between 1860 and 1940 vast sums were expended by Australian governments in the promotion of a particular brand of rural development. The Dream began with free selection, continued with closer settlement, and expired in the mire of soldier [rural] settlement [in the 1920s].

Failing to find customers in Australia’s struggling frontier communities, travelling salesmen brought a human scale to imperial economics. The complex ways in which salesmen themselves understood their failure, and how a broader audience interpreted those experiences during and after the Great Depression, allows us a privileged glimpse into the negotiations between colonial and anti-colonial modes of thought at that time. This interplay between popular perceptions of economic failure and a wider questioning of imperial expansionism is crucial to understanding how empire was culturally produced from an antipodean vantage point.

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The Problem of the Failed Salesman

In the 1920s and 1930s there were around 30,000 men employed as traveller salesmen or commercial travellers in Australia. They were described by the NSW Court of Arbitration as “canvassers and travellers including insurance canvassers, employed as salesmen.” Working for such firms as Rawleighs or Watkins, they travelled through Australian rural districts going door-to-door to homesteads and businesses. “These travelling salesmen had a big suitcase,” one country woman told an oral history interviewer in the 1970s, “and when they opened it there was a compartment for everything. They sold soaps, talcs and essences, ointment for everything.” By the early 1930s some households in Victoria were being visited by fifteen door-to-door salesmen every day. Calling themselves “apostles of civilization,” commercial travellers “penetrated the pastoral frontier” forging widespread networks which archaeologist Rodney Harris argues were “a fundamental part of the infrastructure of rural Australia.” Harris’s diggings in Weilmoringle have shown that commercial travellers in the 1920s stopped at Aboriginal camps where native pastoral workers with “money to spare – we had nowhere to spend it” bought soaps, trousers, boots, even insurance. Women in Crookwell in rural New South Wales told local historian Pat Kensit that they remember putting sheets on the line to warn neighbours about the impending visits of such men. Agatha Christie was likewise struck by the ubiquity of travelling salespeople while travelling through Australian country towns in 1922. “Our rooms,” she wrote in her diary, “reek of stale commercial

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25. Pam Kensit, *Top of the Range Women: They were all such Ladies*, p. 28.
traveller.”

In the years following WWI commercial travelling was promoted as a fashionable profession especially for working-class or rural men lacking formal education. Returned servicemen were especially encouraged to consider travelling sales work. “The old Australian idea that sales representatives were people who had been unsuccessful in other spheres of business and industry is as ‘dead as a dodo,’” wrote a correspondent for The Argus in 1923. Aspiring salesmen need only purchase a correspondence course to start their career on the road. “A CAREER IN SELLING! – Do You Want It?” asked an advertisement for the Hemingway & Robertson School of Salesmanship in the Broken Hill Barrier Miner; “If you want a life unfettered by restrictions – a freedom not found within closed walls, a salary much in excess of that which is obtainable in other professions … there is for you a lifetime career in selling.” Such advertisements were part of the booster literature on salesmanship circulating from around 1900 onwards – in the shape of business journals, salesmanship manuals, training schools’ advertisements, correspondence courses, lecture tours and psychological advice columns (‘The Psychology of Salesmanship and the Building of Personality’). Their fundamental message was that anyone could be a travelling salesman if only he followed prescribed methods. “Have a system for everything,” advised Stanley Woodsworth in Success in Salesmanship. Would-be salesmen need only to adopt the scientific point of view recommended by Woodsworth and others to discover “those qualities of body and mind that

build up a strong personality which is capable of persuading and controlling the minds of others.”

But by the late 1920s this genre was counter-balanced by newspaper reports of “failed salesman” and “suiciding commercials.” Economic conditions worsened first with the drop in wheat prices in 1927 and then after the Wall Street crash of 1929. With the advent of the depression travelling salesmen in Australia began committing suicide in large numbers. The statistics on salesmen and suicide in the 1920s and 1930s are not available, but commentators and journalists noted the regularity of these deaths in numerous editorials. Gerald Sayer (38), a car salesman, was found in a sedan in bushland near Scarborough Beach, Western Australia. He had tried to cut his wrists with a razor before gassing himself with carbon monoxide.  

Salesman Sylvan Lewis Hower (24), “quite destitute, in extremely bad health and mentally distressed” jumped from the Sydney Harbour Bridge into Argyle Cut after being refused food relief at Sydney Hospital. Failing to provide for his family of seven, salesman Kenneth Buckland of Toowoomba cut his wrists. “Everyone seems to have been down on me, and I am thinking this world will be better without me, also my wife may be able to get along better, as the Government will have to pay her for the children.” After writing in a suicide note that “his nerves are all upset” Frederick Leslie Finnie, a commercial traveller from Brisbane, was found dead on the Sandgate Railway line. James Henry Scullin (24), a commercial traveller from Sydney with “nerves badly shattered”, was discovered lying on the floor of his room in

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30 Timothy Spears, 100 Years on the Road: The Travelling Salesman in American Culture (Michigan: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 213.
32 “One of the Worst Cases”: Bridge Suicide, Barrier Miner (29 July 1937), p. 3.
34 “Nerves All Upset”: Traveller’s Death: Body on Sandgate Line’, Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, 20 April 1932).
the Carlton Club Hotel in Hobart, “his throat cut from ear to ear.” And in Launceston George Harp took poison after failing to sell radio sets he had purchased from the Gloria Light Company of Australia (‘a woeful story of financial embarrassment and worry’).

In this chapter I am concerned with this moment of rupture. After promoting commercial travelling as an ideal profession for young men, business writers shifted tone in the early 1930s. Business magazines began questioning the validity of settlements in parts of Australia. This interrogation of rural settlement drew on a groundswell of complaints from commercial travellers who felt misled by promotional literature. Later in this chapter I return to the reporting of salesmen’s suicides, using them to explore how the mentally and physically broken bodies of travelling salesmen were read by some public commentators as an allegory for the imperial economic system more broadly. I show how this reporting drew on nineteenth-century antecedents, especially the failed expeditions of explorers like Burke and Wills.

_A Colonial Order: Advice for Travelling Salesmen after WWI_

Aspiring travelling salespeople were influenced by the belief that door-to-door salesmanship or commercial travelling, as opposed to retail salesmanship, would provide them greater freedom and adventure, a stereotype propagated by recruitment advertisements such as that from the _Barrier Miner_ cited above. The readership for salesmanship literature is hard to measure, but we can reasonably assume that many readers were already employed as retail salespeople or business clerks, either in country general stores or in city department stores. Chapter 4 examined how late nineteenth and early twentieth century department store

managers, in conjunction with organisations like the YMCA, generated new forms of prescriptive literature on salesmanship and self-promotion. This prescriptive literature drew on Christian values and colonial ideology to promote a commercial version of the self aimed at easing the artificiality of interpersonal encounters within consumer culture. By the 1920s department store training courses were complemented by business colleges and salesmanship schools (like Blennerhasses) working with the YMCA and the Returned Soldiers League to offer free evening lectures. These lectures were held across the city as well as in growing suburban areas: in missionary offices, Masonic halls, scout halls and churches. The lectures were part of a trend towards the formalisation of training in salesmanship.  

Joe Crimmings from Tenterfield NSW became a commercial traveller to escape working on his parents’ farm in the early 1920s. He left school at thirteen to drive his father’s single blade plough. “I could never blame my parents as circumstances left them no option than to take action and take me from school. However the experience has remained with me for the rest of my life.” When an eisteddfod was held in the town he met a salesmanship trainer in a YMCA tent who played him elocution and salesmanship lessons on a gramophone. By 1927 he had a job with Goodall & Co. Keith Smith, who grew up in Melbourne’s inner city suburb of Richmond, became a salesman after working in a factory in Castlemaine. “They called it ‘Cancermain’ because drainage from the cemetery ran into the water supply and, as a result, 

37 Commercial associations sponsored business colleges and lobbied state governments to establish salesmanship-training certification in universities and technical colleges. The Commercial Travellers Association proposed that the University of Sydney and other Australian universities set up courses in marketing and salesmanship in 1922. Salesmanship was first included in the Sydney Technical College course offerings as a component of the Department of Commerce’s ‘Business principles’ syllabus in 1927. The Salesmanship and Advertising Course, following the principle of sexual segregation established in training schemes from at least 1917, was divided into Course A for male students (a general introduction to Salesmanship) and Course B for female students (with special reference to retail store requirements). A number of topics were common to both courses, including those relating to appearance, manner, voice and personality. See: Gail Reekie, ‘Sydney’s Big Stores’, pp. 150-151.

the town had the highest incidence of cancer in Australia.”39 His job had been to climb inside a furnace and chip away the razor-sharp slag which had built up on the brick lining the day before. He wanted a job in a bank but “This was then the preserve of young men from better-class suburbs like Brighton and Toorak, brilliantined young men from public schools with hair over one eye.”40 He got work in a sign writing shop called ‘The Palace’ but felt himself “a slave like everyone else to the 48 hour week: 8-5, Mondays to Fridays, four hours on Saturdays and no annual holidays unless one was prepared to take them without pay.”41 Travelling salesmanship appealed to him because it offered an escape from this perceived servitude. He decided to sign up to classes in commercial travelling after seeing an advertisement for the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia on a station billboard:

I turned and looked at my fellow passengers jammed in like sardines, tired workers with dull, tired faces, wearing shoddy clothes, second class people with second class expressions in a shabby second-class carriage, looking nowhere, uncomplaining, swaying stolidly with the motion of the train like mindless reeds in the breeze. At that moment, I yearned to travel first class in good clothes … where I wouldn’t have to share a mediocre world with mediocre people.42

Unlike retail salesmanship, which was increasingly feminised in this period, commercial travelling was instrumentally associated with the ‘manly’ attributes of explorers and adventurers. Commercial travellers were, “Missionaries of civilization, and better missionaries of civilization than even the great traders of Phoenicia,” declared the Head of the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia (CTAA) in 1907.43 It was in the interests of business literature to legitimise the activities of travelling salespeople. The association

40 Ibid, p. 49.
41 Ibid, p. 50.
42 Ibid, p. 70.
between civilising, evangelical manhood and salesmanship was, therefore, a deliberate policy to dispel negative public perceptions of salespeople, such as the belief that commercial travellers were a threat to the sexual chastity of white women, a belief which spread widely through rumour. “These travelling salesmen might have played on lonely women a bit,” a Crookwell woman told Pat Kensit in the 1920s. The authors of commercial literature worked hard to present the profession as a noble calling. Rather than deny the hardships of commercial travelling, they affirmed and valorised them, assigning commercial interactions meaning as imperial activities. The commercial traveller, wrote Joseph Hamlet in 1929, “is more than an important trade factor; he is an apostle of civilization”:

He penetrates every city, town and hamlet, bringing the various sections of our common country into greater fellowship, making stupid provincialism impossible. He is a public educator, disseminator of new ideas, an inculcator of tolerance for the opinion of others, which, with the fear of God, is the beginning of wisdom. He binds the people of our various states together with the golden chains of commerce, of mutual interest, which are stronger than sentiment, paramount even to patriotism. He carries into the country the polish of the city, into the city the vigour of the country.

Here was a transitional ‘new world’ profession capable of bridging both the physical distances between metropolitan centres and rural outposts and also the cultural/temporal gap between colonial exploration and permanent settlement. As a poem published in The Traveller (the official organ of the Commercial Traveller’s Association of Victoria) put it:

To the ‘Men of the Road’ –
For whe’re the intrepid foot of the explorer dares,
Ye follow in his tracks,
Spreading wide the effects and habits of the civilised world,
For Man is ever selfish, seeking but to further his own ends

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44 Minute book of the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia June 1927, Commercial Travellers of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
45 Kensit, Top of the Range Women, p. 29.
And yet his work is destined to fit the general plan
Of Universal Progress.47

Implicit in such promotional writing was a connection between commercial travelling and the
inculcation of civilised/‘white’ ways of living in remote Australian townships. Commercial
travellers enabled settler families to secure the domesticity so central to their claims to the
land by disseminating domestic technologies and by laying “golden chains of commerce”
between white settlements. Adherence to codes of respectable dress dramatised this adopted
‘civilising’ role. With the formation of professional societies like the Commercial Travellers
Association in the 1880s, attempts were made to draw distinctions between commercials and
other, less respectable forms of salesmanship such as hawking or peddling. Despite its
impracticality on dusty Australian roads, dressing in a full suit was stipulated as an official
uniform by 1892 including necktie, hat and a Commercial Travellers Association badge.48 In
the 1900s in Western Australia, members of the Commercial Travellers Association
performed tie-tying ceremonies before leaving their wives and families. Wives stood in a line
facing their husbands either in bushland at the edge of townships or at a local Commercial
Travellers lodge. They then fastened their husbands’ ties en masse, a tradition that persisted
into the 1940s.49 After WWI, a putative association between commercials and a type of
progressive modern manhood was solidified in glamourised photographs and advertisements
showing salesmen in the latest model of motor car, overtaking drovers and peddlers on
Australia’s outback roads.50 In their role as middlemen in the market economy, travelling
salesmen inhabited a highly visual and tactile world – sometimes in places far from urban

47 The Traveller (18 May 1890), p. 4.
48 Collection of manuals for Commercial Travellers 1921-1941, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia,
University of Melbourne Archives 16/7/91.
49 Ibid.
amenities, literally “a geography in the making.” Joined together on a landscape of railroad depots, farmsteads and country stores, travelling salesmen were linked in a wider effort to establish commercial territory in the Australian outback.

Figure 6.1 Commercial travellers in Armadale c1912. Source: State Library of Western Australia b1770046

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By the 1920s booster literature on commercial travelling was entwined with government programs promoting rural settlement. The Commercial Travellers Association of Australia began sponsoring the ‘Big Brother’ farm migrant scheme after 1921. Under Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce there was a renewal of empire settlement and new expansive plans to open up unutilised land. During a hearing for the New South Wales Select Committee of the Legislative Council on Conditions and Prospects of the Agricultural Industry in 1920 entitled ‘What it Means to White Australia’, George Darnell-Smith, a New South Wales Department of Agriculture biologist told the committee:

Australia at the present time is carrying out the biggest biological experiment the

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52 Minute Books of the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia, 1921-1932, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 26/10/27-26/10/32.
world has ever seen – the attempt to keep the continent white – and on the progress of agriculture in Australia depends the success or failure of that experiment … Every farmer large or small who leaves the land for whatever cause, is a factor contributing to the failure of this great experiment. 53

Commercial travellers wrote about themselves as vital to the success of rural settlement. By “carrying the polish of the city into the country,” Rydges Business Journal argued, commercial travellers revitalised rural communities while also “carrying the vigour of the country back into the city.” Such arguments were typically framed through a vocabulary of practical, rural masculinity. The emergence in the early twentieth-century of masculine rural identity as a dominant foundational myth in Australia bespoke anxiety to do with urbanisation. 54 The white rural man was imagined as a bulwark against the Yellow Peril, as well as against Australia’s Indigenous population. 55

By marrying the training or ‘polish’ of modern, urban professionals with the physical world of farmers, drovers and pioneers, advice for aspiring commercial travellers was perfectly positioned to allay or at least negotiate fears over masculine degeneracy in urban contexts. Judith Hilkey’s research into success manuals for travelling salesman in early twentieth century America has shown that these books constituted an important voice in debates over what she calls “the new industrial order.” Salesmanship manuals defined true success as an exalted form of manhood, “a self made combination of virility, character, will-power and self discipline.” 56 For Hilkey, these manuals functioned to aid urbanites in reclaiming a perceived

55 Kate Murphy, “The Modern Idea is to Bring the Country into the City”: Australia’s Urban Reformers and the Ideal of Rurality, 1900-1918’, Rural History 20, no. 1 (2009), p. 120.
56 Judith Hilkey, Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 6-7.
loss of independence and individual sovereignty as mass organisations introduced new
degrees of scale and size into everyday life. By depicting commercial travellers ‘escaping’
urban spaces and ‘conquering’ rural markets, business literature proffered travelling
salesmanship as a profession which re-claimed individual agency from the anonymity of
bureaucracy and office work. Typical advertisements for salesmanship training courses
showed muscular men breaking out from the metal shackles of their desks, super-imposed on
an image of an open road. “The successful salesman!” read an advertisement in Rydges
Business Journal, “Is your son an unbounded edition of Moses and Solomon both?”:

In this age of big business the rewards of commerce are greater than those of all the
professions, hence the very best and brightest minds that commerce can command are
put on the road. There’s where they are needed! The most stupid blockhead may learn
routine duty in a great mercantile establishment, but MEN are sent out in these days of
sharp competition and close margins to extend trade.

In Australia, such a representational mode complemented government policies seeking to
reverse the flow of migrants from the country to the city. Commercial travellers dramatised
sentiments of empire settlement behind political valorisations of rural development. The
iconography of empire and salesmanship came together literally in 1916 when a commercial
traveller was sponsored by the WA State Government to circumnavigate the country “with a
union jack on the front of his car, doing his bit for Empire.” In such a way trade literature on
commercial travelling recalled colonial adventure novels which posited Indigenous space as
disorder, and Western, civilised space as order. As Philippa Moylan and Agnieszka
Sobocinska have recognised, such material also served to allay fears of modernity’s

58 See, for example, Herbert Casson, ‘Better Salesmanship and 12 Tips on Finance’ in ‘Novels Worth Reading’,
60 ‘Circumnavigating Australia, A Commercial Travellers Adventures’, *Western Mail* (3 November 1916).
degenerative powers, by portraying white men as vigorous models of masculinity courageously facing dangers at the edge of the world.\textsuperscript{61} For the authors of sales literature on Australian commercial travelling there was nothing contrived about this seamless combination of imperial ideology and commercial imperatives. The whole point, rather, was that the Australian landscape played host to all the dreams of wealth and progress their imaginations could muster.

In their preoccupation with a potent type of manhood and, by implication, the fear of its opposite – that is, inadequacy, failure, loss of manhood, effeminacy – manuals and literature for commercial travellers suggest one of the ways in which Australians were thinking about the relationship between mass society and colonialism after 1890. Spears has argued in terms of American history that commercial travellers acted as lightening rods for American fantasies and anxieties about involvement in the marketplace.\textsuperscript{62} The significant issue, according to Spears, was not whether the depicted commercial practices were real (salesmen were obviously not missionaries or explorers) but how economic behaviour was perceived, how meaning was apportioned, and the boundaries of consumer culture established.\textsuperscript{63} In an Australian context commercial travellers occupied an especially strange cultural space. Products of an urbanised society, travelling salespeople were presented in booster literature as an anti-urban force. Travelling salesman, therefore, operated as a cultural tool through which Australians could rationalise a highly paradoxical insistence on Australian rurality at a time of increasing urbanisation. Key here was the argument made in magazines like \textit{Rydges} that mass

\textsuperscript{62} Timothy Spears, \textit{100 Years on the Road: The Travelling Salesman in American Culture}, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, p. 61.
society as propagated by travelling salesmen inspired Australians to achieve higher living
standards and, by implication, a higher form of civilisation. Salespeople could contribute to
the evolution of an improved colonial type:

Fifty years ago there was not much inducement for the average man to work harder in
order to have more money to spend. Life was apt to be drab and time lay heavily on
his hands. But times have changed. And the tempo has quickened. Life is travelling
fast. We live harder. And all things considered get more out of life than our
grandfathers did. What has been the cause of the marked and obvious change? Largely
mass production and mass selling … That’s it. Mass selling induces us to strive to get
more out of life. To do something. To be someone. To go somewhere. To live …
Mass selling, that is to say, sincere and truthful selling, is doing more to enable and
enrich our civilization than practically any other human agency. It is acting as an
incentive and a spur to men of the Empire. It is pointing the way to better things; it is
enlarging our horizon and giving us a bright and many-coloured rainbow towards
which to march. It is making us work harder and live harder. It is brightening up life
and increasing the standards of living. What more do people want? 64

Mass selling in magazines like Rydges provided a means to emphasise the potential of the
emerging nation – and at the same time to convince white Australians of the need to take
active steps in its creation through commercial enterprise. As Angela Woollacott has argued
for nineteenth-century settler masculinities, “understandings of manliness forged on settler-
colonial frontiers were woven into political manhood.” 65 Accompanying the excerpt above,
Rydges published fantastic scenes of a transformed Australian interior: waterfalls and dams,
power lines and country towns swelling with crowds. 66 Drawing on a triumphant sense of
colonial modernity, boosters of commercial travelling assumed that Australia could make
itself into whatever it pleased.

Challenging the Colonial Order: Critiquing Salesmen

The economic success of commercial travellers depended on making profit through sales. But by the late 1920s an increasing number of Australian households turned salesmen away empty handed. Celebrating the social benefits of salesmanship was one matter; convincing Australians to buy the goods salesmen peddled from door-to-door, township-to-township, was quite another. Few Australian households had surplus income and an undiversified economy made the country vulnerable to fluctuations in wheat and wool prices, both of which plummeted in 1927.67 Farmers sheared their sheep but there was no market for the wool so it “decayed and stank and burned in dark sheds.”68 Many farmers could not pay the mortgages on their properties, let alone purchase luxury items like vacuum cleaners or radios. Furthermore, a spike in the number of men interested in salesmanship made competition intense.69 “This is an age of correspondence classes,” wrote a female reader in The Sydney Morning Herald in 1924. “One may learn anything from correspondence from medicine to wireless telegraphy, but the most popular subject seems to be salesmanship. One wonders if the whole world will not soon be made up of salesmen.”70

By 1928 residents of Casino in Queensland were complaining that travelling salesmen had become “such a nuisance to country people that legislation was necessary to protect people

69 Commercial travelling appealed especially to returned soldiers looking for employment in the 1920s and the numbers of travellers on the road increased by one third between 1918 and 1928. Minute Books of the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia, 1921-1932, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 26/10/27-26/10/32.  
against these pests.”71 A high rate of failure among commercials was evidenced by an increase in bankruptcy claims from the mid-1920s onwards.72 In 1928 pedestrians in Melbourne reported seeing salesmen living in the pianos they were unable to sell. A salesman from North Sydney summarised the problem in *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

In *Sat Herald* we find under positions vacant no fewer than 38 firms or individuals advertising for salesmen who are offered employment without wages. This brings to our minds very forcibly that we have in our midst hundreds of men who are well educated of good address, courteous and trained in salesmanship, who are being exploited by well known Sydney firms dealing in motor cars, real estate, radios, refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum cleaners and various other commodities, both for industrial and domestic use. The firms pay by commission and the salesmen are expected to finance themselves for travelling and living expenses.73

Commercial travellers were beset by difficult conditions in rural Australia. Maps and sales manuals promised guidance through unknown territory and offered theoretical assurance but little practical help to salespeople driving from town to town, homestead to homestead, sometimes for very long distances. Occasionally salesmen would arrive in a township only to find it semi-abandoned, their guidebook out of date.74 Garages and petrol stations were rare. As Kylie Tennant documented in *The Battlers* the sight of a well-dressed travelling salesman stranded next to a broken-down vehicle became commonplace after 1920.75

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72 United Commercial Travellers Association Accident, Sickness and Insurance Board Minute Books 1927-1932, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 14/6/32-19/2/36.
74 United Commercial Travellers Association Accident, Sickness and Insurance Board Minute Books 1927-1932, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 14/6/32-19/2/36.
archaeological diggings in Aboriginal campsites in northern NSW have exposed the shells of rusted vehicles dating back to this era.\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{The Traveller}, the official paper of the Commercial Travellers Association of Australia, printed stories on “horror towns” where salesmen arrived only to discover the whole population had died from disease.\textsuperscript{77} Or towns where, it was claimed, plagues of mice ate travellers alive if they fell asleep in their cars: “At one place I remember seeing an old fellow asleep in a form in front of a hotel. No one ever saw him again – he was missing and fragments of clothing were found on the form where he had fallen asleep. It was commonly reported that he had been eaten alive overnight!”\textsuperscript{78} Mice got into sample cases and chewed the bone buttons off clothing and left cases of jelly crystals or sacks of cheese emptied of their contents. Edibles had to be transported unrefrigerated and produce didn’t last well in the heat. Travellers reported “hearing sounds like a revolver” only to realise that it was only tomato sauce, “the bottles, affected by the weather, frequently went off like that.”\textsuperscript{79} Rumours circulated by commercial travellers returning from rural districts reinforced existing colonial anxieties about the decline of white settlements in parts of the Australian interior.\textsuperscript{80}

A series of hand-drawn comic books, penned by commercial traveller A H Scott sometime between 1922 and 1933, parodied the conditions described above. Scott worked for Robert Harper & Co, a Melbourne-based grocery distributor which sold grain in various forms:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} Newspaper cuttings from \textit{The Traveller}, 1928-1939, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 1/6/21.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{80} ‘Newspaper cuttings and scrapbook’, 1927-1932, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 14/6/38- 19/2/49.
\end{itemize}
"oatmeal, lentils, desserts, spices, bird seed and stock food." After WWI the company also sold chemicals and pesticides such as Orange Phosphate. Scott travelled around rural Victoria and NSW for Harpers, drawing comics at night while staying in commercial hotels. These comics circulated at Harper & Co smoke nights and among fellow commercial travellers. One of Scott’s comics, entitled ‘Around the West with Gray or Where’s Gray’s Motorcar?’ told the story of E. H. Gray, a mythical commercial traveller who left Melbourne in a motor car to take “Robert Harper & Co Silver Starch and Pioneer Orange Phosphate to the Wild, Wild West.” On the road he meets “villagers” who – alarmed by the site of his motor car – “head to the nearest pub there to faint.” Just outside Parkville, Gray’s car passes a “Country Girl who immediately dropped her wares and made a terrific dash towards the township where she immediately spreads the alarm of the invasion of the Russians.” Villagers armed with pitchforks and chewing bits of straw later chase Gray and his wares out of town.

Scott’s comics also throw light on another aspect of the life of commercial travellers in rural Australia. Further sections of the comic show Gray arriving at an Aboriginal camp where women nurse babies in lean-tos hung with jam tins. “After leaving a bottle of the drink which he explained was better than fire-water, he put on full speed lest the jealous hubby might return.” Here Scott’s comic represented commercial travelling as sexual conquest, a trope that postcolonial scholars have identified as a major theme of Western imperialist

83 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
writing. Anecdotal evidence suggests commercial travellers did seek sexual encounters with Aboriginal women. Ruby Langford Ginibi recalled commercial travellers stopping at the camp in which she lived up until the 1930s. They left behind “Sunshine milk tins, which were called pannikins” that Ruby and her mother used as cups and also to wash. Joe Crimming’s father, also a commercial traveller, told him stories of encounters in Aboriginal Camps, “I still remember some of the words he knew such as ‘Walla Walla’ meaning rain and ‘Budgeree’ meaning bad.”

90 Newspaper cuttings 1916-1941, Commercial Travellers Association of Australia Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, 1/6/78.
91 Ruby Langford Ginibi, *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, p. 8.
Figure 6.3 ‘Around the West with Gray or Where’s Gray’s Motorcar’, Manuscript in Robert Harper & Company Ltd Collection 1896-1982, University of Melbourne Archives, 89/110, Box 4
Figure 6.4 ‘Around the West with Gray or Where’s Gray’s Motorcar’, Manuscript in Robert Harper & Company Ltd Collection 1896-1982, University of Melbourne Archives, 89/110, Box 4
Throughout Scott’s comic, Gray and his motor car deteriorate. He navigates swamps, which splatter his car with mud, and deserts which cover it in dust. Snakes become entwined in his
tyres. He encounters lost gangs of unemployed men, driven mad as “Eljiah taken to the desert again.” 93 Eventually his car breaks down in a desert littered with the skeletons of livestock, “He was a long way from everywhere and the sun was hot and after about a week even Silver Star Starch and Pioneer Orange Phosphate failed to rouse his dropping spirits.” 94 The last page of Scott’s comic references the fate of explorers Burke and Wills. Scott drew Gray’s skeleton lying next to abandoned bags of Orange Phosphate and Pioneer Starch. “And now somewhere in the Australian desert there is a little heap of bones and bottles which would perhaps pay some enterprising bone and bottle merchant to collect.” 95 At the bottom of this final page Scott drew a crowd viewing a declaration on a Melbourne streetscape which read: “£100 reward for information as to the whereabouts of our motor car traveller and kid who set out to western deserts in March last.” 96 By depicting Gray as a doomed explorer Scott presented commercial travelling as an impractical and perilous profession. Scott’s commercial traveller gets stuck, bogged down, lost, attacked. His suits disintegrated and his maps were useless. Far from conquering the desert, he became physically and mentally “wasted” by it. 97 This notionally humorous satire contained a far more sombre message. Commercial travelling was unviable. Colonial nationalist visions of modern development in the Australian desert – what Prime Minister Alfred Deakin had called a “triumphal march of progress into the Australian interior” – were illusory. 98 Beyond Australia’s cities and townships lay an expanse of space hostile to Europeans. These were, indeed, “dead lands.” 99

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
Economic Failure as Imperial Failure: Explaining the Failure and Suicide of Salesmen

The problem of the ‘failed salesman’ became even more acute after the onset of worldwide economic depression in 1929. Already affected by sharp drops in wool and wheat prices after 1927, the Australian economy was especially vulnerable to the shock waves sent through global finance systems by the Wall Street Crash.¹⁰⁰ In April 1931 rioting broke out in central Sydney when three firms, in response to an approach by the government, agreed to hire 200 apprentices in commercial travelling. Two thousand responded to the advertisements and the clerk who was taking the names of applicants outside Sydney’s Town Hall was mobbed. His table was smashed before police charged the throng with batons and forced them back. Fighting “like wild cats” the applicants surged onto the street blocking traffic. “Boos, catcalls and filthy language greeted the arrival of police reinforcements.”¹⁰¹

For those already employed in the profession the likelihood of bankruptcy increased after 1929 as hostility towards door-to-door salesman grew. Rydges began printing tips on “survival in salesmanship” beneath images of blindfolded men stumbling through deserts towards a “sunrise.”¹⁰² Rydges also ran stories of vengeance attacks against the companies that employed salesman. In 1929, for example, Rydges reported the story of salesman M C Mallon, who allegedly responded to bankruptcy by trying to blow up his company’s office with a bomb planted in an elevator.¹⁰³

Although part of a broader global conflagration, the Great Depression was understood in Australia through the prism of imperial finance. Public anger among sections of the Australian community was directed against “imperial capitalism” and “imperial financiers.”

Australia’s established coloniser – Great Britain – had been withdrawing financial investment from the region since WWI. At stake were swaths of small farms scattered over Australia’s frontier and funded through high-interest loans from Britain. After 1929, the federated Australian states were struggling to pay interest on these loans. The speed and efficiency with which the British demanded loan repayments from Australia after 1929 undermined a fundamental claim of colonialism: that the European race, as well as its culture and systems of political administration were thriving in Australia and that colonial tutelage helped to raise an inferior people to a higher standard of civilisation.

Australian newspapers began publishing articles which connected the deaths of commercial travellers to a larger trend of suicides caused by the Great Depression. Business literature also reported these deaths. A number of these cases have been cited above. On 7 November 1929, metropolitan and regional newspapers carried news of the suicide of James Henry Scullin, a commercial traveller from Sydney who had arrived in Hobart on 25 October complaining that he could not sleep. On a Saturday morning at quarter past nine blood was observed trickling into the yard from the bathroom on the first floor of Hobart’s Commercial Hotel. An attempt was made to enter the room but the door was locked. After the police arrived they discovered Scullin’s lung on the floor, his throat cut form ear to ear both arteries and the windpipe being


severed. A bloodstained razor was found lying in the lavatory basin.\textsuperscript{106} “The deceased was a returned soldier and came back from the front with an artificial right arm and nerves badly shattered. He was travelling for Gillard Gordan Ltd.”\textsuperscript{107}

This theme of the physical and mental deterioration of salesmen continued as suicide numbers increased. In 1929, Gerald Sayer, a car salesman was found in a sedan motor car in bushland near Scarborough Beach, Western Australia. He had tried to cut his wrist with a razor before gassing himself with carbon monoxide.\textsuperscript{108} Newspapers made much of the “desolate” setting of Sayer’s suicide, and the ways in which his “lonely death” reflected a “lonely life” spent on the road, driving through “barren lands.” His death provided graphic testimony that “Salesmen are powerless over their destinies … the empire has failed them.”\textsuperscript{109} Richard White and others have written about a popular culture of imperialism that developed in Australia in the interwar period. By the 1930s a related culture was developing around failed salesmanship. The 1930s alone yielded at least ten films featuring travelling salesmen in lead roles playing tragic, corrupted characters. Mostly silent and now out of print, films such as \textit{Confidence} and \textit{Sunset Legion} depended on the salesman’s mobility for plots evoking mistaken identity and cheap commercialism. In theatrical comedies such as \textit{Just My Luck} the failed salesman became an actual figure rehearsing the failure of the rural settlement dream.\textsuperscript{110} Like the comics penned by E. H. Scott, these texts drew on colonial tropes with gothic plots featuring ill-fated explorers and escaped convicts.

\textsuperscript{106} ‘A Tragic Death: Commercial Traveller Commits Suicide: Victim to Insomnia’, \textit{Advertisier} (Monday 7 April 1929), p. 4.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{110} Timothy Spears, \textit{100 years on the Road}, p. 3.
Business colleges, commercial organisations and government agencies ascribed the bankruptcies of commercial travellers to their poor salesmanship technique. In a series of articles and training manuals published between the late 1920s and early 1930s, Rydges Business Journal and Blennerhasset’s Commercial Education Society persistently blamed inferior salesmanship for the large number of suicides among commercial travellers. In 1928, Rydges ran a survey asking 200 rural families about their experiences of door-to-door salespeople. The “biggest problem was the indifference of salespeople” the magazine asserted. According to the survey “the cause of nearly HALF the loss of customers was INDIFFERENCE – slack, half alive sales people … The dead eyes – the lazy drawl – the slow hands – the heavy feet – that is what drives customers away.” Salesmen, Rydges declared, had become “listless,” “nervous” and “feckless.”

According to some, part of the problem was a perception that sales talk was over scripted. As Ruth Leigh, a housewife from rural Victoria, complained in a Rydges article, ‘Salesmen that Ring my Doorbell,’ she was sometimes bothered up to five times a week by young men using “that machine gun salesmanship taught in commercial schools.” Rather than convincing her to buy, salespeople caused her to despair for the “future of the race … Men have lost their independence and originality and have become merely a mechanical contrivance.”

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Parks, lecturer at *Blennerhassett’s Business College*, called this “the Human Factor.” He urged struggling salesmen towards self-reflection: “SUCCESSFUL SELLING depends on your MENTAL ATTITUDE. There are many salesmen who do not realise that fact. They are negative minded. They are full of self-pity. They are pessimistic. They believe that trade is bad and getting worse.” Salesmen who spoke of an economic depression sabotaged their sales through pessimism:

They read the bad news in the daily press and read about it with their Fellow-Depressionists. ‘Another smash?’ They say ‘What next?’ ‘Another year like this will finish us’ ‘yes, Mr Smith our trade is going to the dogs’ ‘Mind you the worst is yet to come’ and they call themselves Salesmen!’ They are TRADE KILLERS! CUSTOMER WRECKERS!

In such a formulation salesmen foiled their chances at success from the outset through nervous body language and hesitation. Especially to blame were salesmen who questioned the likelihood of their success. The ‘but-if-perhaps’ salesmen, according to Wilson-Parks, created an atmosphere which “always repels, weakens confidence and makes successful selling – impossible.” Salesmen who complained of their failure, were “peddler’s of pessimism” and “a liability – never an asset to a firm.” Success, for Parks and other lecturers at *Blennerhassets*, was a matter of physical and emotional control. For them, more was at stake here than simply the profits made from individual sales. “Nothing but better salesmanship” Herbert Casson, author of *The Art of Customer Findings and Better Salesmanship*, wrote in *Rydges*,

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“will pull Australia through the next ten years. We must sell more goods. Sales must be created.”¹¹⁹

*Rydges* provided examples of successful salesmen who had found prosperity despite difficult economic circumstances.¹²⁰ R. B. Burnett, *Rydges* claimed, could sell £1000 worth of furniture in one week. This was because Burnett could ‘imagine’ his customers’ innermost desires: “I study every customer. I go slow at first, until I know what the customer wants. I create a desire for the furniture; but I never try to oversell.”¹²¹ Alex T. White, a commercial traveller for Griffin Shave & Co, encouraged a similar practice. He argued that commercial travellers needed to make their customers “feel unique, special – an individual. He sees the crowds swarming on to crowded trams and trains. He notices the envious looks of car-less mortals as he sweeps in comfort past the swarming tide of humanity that overwhelms trams, trains and buses in frantic rush for home.” White likened his sales technique to a kind of mesmerism or magic show, “The customer is now in a practically hypnotic state. After the approved method of hypnotising you have held a bright object before his eyes.”¹²² For White, salesmanship involved “the psychological analysis of all mental acts – attention, desire and effort.” He assured his readers that if a salesman was able to assert control over each moment of the sale, “a big salary would ensue.”¹²³

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¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 9
¹²³ Ibid, p. 94
Focusing on the techniques and physicality of salesmanship allowed the authors of sales literature to evade the most obvious reason for traveller bankruptcy – economic depression. Customers without money could not buy. Yet a 1934 article in Rydges advised, “A Smile is like the armour of Achilles. You may often come up against a prospect who meets you with objection after objection, each presented with a smile. He is most exasperating. There is the power of a smile used as armour against you.” Such a rejection should not mean an end to the sale. “The defensive smile has one vulnerable spot. The arrow that finds it is made of the same stuff – a smile. The only way to prevail over a smiling prospect is to smile also. Out smile him if you can.” The use of humour was advised in this key moment. “If possible make him laugh. Though his smile may indicate perfect self-control a laugh may dissolve that control.”124 In such a formulation, salesmanship became de-contextualised from its economic context and re-imagined as a battle of wills: “You smile as you find the weakness in his argument and show him the better way. You smile as you realise this had added to your knowledge and provided you with another weapon. And when next you use that weapon, you smile.”125 Apart from facial expression, a successful approach also required correct vocal tone. A “raspy voice” might “ grate on the ear” while mumbling betrayed a “lack of intestinal fortitude.”126 A strong handshake was crucial, “To offer a flabby, listless hand gives a very bad impression indeed.” As Rydges put it “Shake hands as if you meant it and are glad to do it, but don’t try to pull a person’s arm out of the socket as some people do.”127

125 Ibid, p. 971.
127 This advertisement read: “Business Men! At Your Next Dinner. You will be silently judged unless you pay particular attention to your clothing.” SUNLIGHT LAUNDERIES, Rydges Business Journal (February 1932), p.
A Sales Manual for Electrolux Salesmen, published in Australia in 1927, broke the sales process down into discrete psychological moments between salesman and customer. The sale began in the car or at the entrance to a house or property, where the salesman was encouraged to repeat motivational phrases read aloud from the first few pages of the manual. “Sell ’Em Happy,” the manual began, featuring a large love heart embossed with the words “A large [heart image] wins big rewards. Sell enthusiastically. Think ‘It can be done’ If the ‘other chap’ can do it then ‘I can do it.’ Then THINK BIGGER. I can do it better than the ‘other chap.”’128 Once at the door of a customer, salesmen were to repeat the following verbatim:

REMEMBER! EVERY WOMAN HAS GOT TO CLEAN HER HOME EVERYDAY. WHY? To get the dirt. To make the home ‘livable’ in and also look nice. To prolong the life of furniture, carpets etc. To keep up ‘appearances.’ THERE ARE ONLY TWO METHODS OF CLEANING. By hand – wasted time, hard work, dirty work, drudgery, nerves/ By Electrolux – cleans quicker, cleans easier, cleans more, cleans better. You must believe enthusiastically that this is your message to your prospect! When you know these claims by heart and can say them clearly and with confidence begin the sales explanation. Your job is to get every prospect to THINK like you. LEARN TO SPEAK-CLEARLY-SLOWLY-CONFIDENTLY PROVING OUR CLAIMS.129

But before the sale could begin, the salesman was to check the facial expressions of his customer. The manual gave three examples of female facial expressions. The first two [a frown and a tired smile] were marked WRONG! The final face [a beaming smile] was marked RIGHT! If this facial expression was apparent after the door was opened, salesman could begin the sales pitch “talking about women in a sympathetic way” and about “the trouble you know every women has with Home Cleaning.” They were then to “paint word pictures.” The

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105. The full quotation reads: “Business Men! At Your Next Dinner. You will be silently judged unless you pay particular attention to your clothing,” p. 267.
129 Ibid.
first picture was to be a “black before-Electrolux picture” and the second was to be a “bright after-Electrolux picture.” Precise phrases were provided “You must repeat these exact words before you proceed.” The thorny problem of ‘price’ was illustrated in the manual as a bulging head, with a hooked nose hovering around the face of the female customer. Using his ‘phrases’ the salesman was then shown beating the ghost down with his ‘fists.’ “You can now ask for the order” the manual urged “Say this with a SMILE. THEN remain ….SILENT!” [actual size of lettering]. Success was certain, the manual promised, if the salesman followed these steps exactly.

Figure 6.6 Harry Jackson, ‘Manual for Electrolux Salesman’, Sydney 1927, NAA A1336/16468.
Figure 6.7 Harry Jackson, ‘Manual for Electrolux Salesman’, Sydney 1927, NAA A1336/16468.
Customers’ accounts exposed the futility of sales manual procedure when the prospect was simply unwilling to buy. In ‘Now the Customer is Wrong?’ journalist John White described how one Sunday night “a listless young man with a sad face and lack-lustre eyes,” arrived in the middle of family dinner. He had brought a vacuum cleaner with him, “a model which, it had been made arrogantly and brutally clear, we did not wish to buy.” The salesman then “squatted dejectedly on the carpet proving with his little metal sucker that my wife was a very careless housekeeper.” Not long after he departed having succeeded “signally in not having sold a vacuum cleaner.” And Joseph Write from rural Victoria was irritated by a vacuum cleaner salesman:

He would not allow me to utter a single word! When he got through he produced an order form requesting my signature and a deposit for one of his machines. My retort courteous was ‘We already possess one!’ He fell limp and then asked me why I did not tell him beforehand.’ His desire to make sales was admirable but his method appalling. The salesman had no originality, he was merely a mechanical contrivance.  

Such complaints about salespeople in the Australian press undercut booster literature that linked salesmanship to successful and assertive masculinity. These criticisms were amplified in public debate by a growing number of vignettes on the topic of salesmanship appearing in magazines and humour pages. Female customers complained that travelling salesman appeared “nervous and strained.” Why can’t salesmen “be like cavemen?” asked ‘Country Girl’ in 1929:

All nice girls love a cave man. There are plenty of men around and not a cave man in the whole bunch! There are some who sell us soap, or candy, or car tickets, or a course

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130  ‘The Customer is Wrong?’ *The Courier Mail* (8 February 1937).
in salesmanship or etiquette. Some sell land — where no one wants to live. Some drive a locomotive, and some a bargain … When we meet him we find out his favourite perfume and hair oil. Some have muscles. Most haven't and cover them with coat padding! Where is that hero of romance, that trampler of hearts?¹³²

A pervasive subtext of depression-era commentary on salesmen concerned ways in which commercial failure was written on the body. “High pressure business leaves its mark on the nervous system,” Rydges reported. The “speed and hustle” which motor cars had introduced into the daily life of a commercial traveller was cited as one of the reasons for this “high pressure” existence. Rydges and Blennerhassets encouraged physical fitness as a way to counteract the strains of commercial travelling. Beginning from the early 1920s, their associated publications and business college materials carried advertisements for “body culture” classes at the Lagridge School of Physical Culture or The Gentleman’s Gymnasium. “In every phase of life and especially in modern business, physical fitness is at the back of EFFICIENCY. The really efficient man is he who can put in the physical effort at the crucial moment.”¹³³ As Katie Wright has argued, at this time businessmen were thought to be particularly susceptible to physical and mental weaknesses.¹³⁴ Commercial travellers were represented in business literature as akin to frontier colonists endowed with the physical strength needed to navigate the Australian outback.

In ‘Salesmen I have Met,’ Joseph Hamlet argued that the ideal salesman could be identified through what he called a “keen sense of white man’s squareness” and a “tenacity to interest”:

I met a salesman who was every inch a man, who stood four square to all the winds that blow. Handing me his card he represented the National Cash Register Co Ltd. Briefly his gentlemanly demeanour coupled with his worldly knowledge of the goods he sold, his apt comparison of values and prices, his forbearance in often trying circumstances, his tenacity to interest and ability to produce results, indelibly impressed themselves upon me. In short his keen sense of white man’s squareness was worthy of a better age, and although I thought at the time that I could perhaps have done without his machine, I purchased one and never regretted doing so.  

Conversely, the inferior salesman was meek, bashful and lacked ‘originality.’ If a salesman could display endurance and fortitude in the face of rejection or hostile custom then, Hamlet implied, success would come. Without the requisite ‘manliness’ to convince a customer, the same sale could just as easily be lost:

Next by contrast I met the meek and mild gentlemen who displays his goods and quotes prices – one who relies upon the reputation of the firm he represents and the prestige of his wares. He is troubled with what is sometimes termed being bashful, reserved and is known among ‘Knights of the Road’ as an Order Taker (perhaps) and never at all likely to become a Successful Road Angel.  

‘Prestige’ in such a scenario was not so much the prestige of a brand name, but rather a masculine prestige, a projection of entitlement and confidence that Ann Laura Stoler has associated with colonial constructions of whiteness. Stoler has argued that the performance of prestige sought to project the racial and cultural superiority of whites over colonised people and thus justify European domination. In interwar Australia, the ‘prestige’ of commercial travellers (inhabiting, as they did, the commercial edge of the rural frontier) was described as

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136 Ibid, p. 422.
a “white man’s squareness” coupled with a “forbearance in trying circumstances.”

Success, therefore, was a measure not only of commercial tenacity, but also of colonial manhood.

A regular contributor to both the Blennerhassett’s Lecture Series and to Rydges Business Journal was Henry Tasman Lovell, appointed McCaughey professor of psychology at the University of Sydney in 1929 and the first professor of psychology in Australia. Lovell suggested that salesmen could improve their chances of success by harnessing an inner passion for work or “personal Force” which would also translate into greater physical stamina and vitality. In his lectures at business colleges and his articles for Rydges, Lovell decried “negative thinking” in salespeople because it “whittled down their personalities to wretchedness and meanness.” He identified a number of urban ‘types’ especially vulnerable to this malaise:

The man of intelligence and initiative doomed to spend his days in routine tasks; the man of limited capacity, painfully conscious of his inferiority, struggling vainly to accomplish what is beyond his powers; the man of independence and reserve, forced to feign servility and to assume an unnatural affability towards those whom he despises; the timid unassertive man, daily at the mercy of those whom he should command; the excessively scrupulous man, whose duties constantly involve him in agonies of moral conflict: these are but a few familiar examples of incompatibility between the characteristics of the worker and the requirements of his world.

For Lovell failed salesmen posed a risk to Australia’s societal cohesion:

When the maladjusted salesman fails as he often does fail to achieve material prosperity, that failure aggravates his discontent, and may affect both his own being and that of his defendants. The man who is harassed or irritated by his work in the factory or office is not likely to be serene in his home. He may acquire a permanent

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139 Henry Tasman Lovell papers (1893-1958) P. 31 SERIES 2, University of Sydney Archives.
140 Ibid.
141 ‘Psychology: Its Application to Modern Business’, Prof H. Tasman Lovell, Blennerhassett’s Institute
attitude of bitterness that will poison all his domestic and social relationships, making himself as great a burden to himself as he is to others.\textsuperscript{142}

He prescribed principles through which salespeople could reach not only new heights of profitability but also of ‘happiness.’ To counteract the depression brought on by the business failure experienced by so many during the depression, Lovell prescribed “enthusiasm - an elixir which vivifies and renumerates.”\textsuperscript{143} Salespeople, Lovell argued, must not only do their work, they must \textit{like} their work. A lack of enthusiasm in work-life, he warned, led to degenerative disorder: “Like a machine which has ceased to function as its maker intended, there is a straining and jarring in the individual’s ‘mental works’ and ultimately often a mental breakdown.”\textsuperscript{144} “The mind which does not possess ‘enthusiasm’ staggers helplessly amid a chaos of particular things, events and persons … This is why the nervous, feckless person must always fail.”\textsuperscript{145}

Underlying these arguments was a pervasive concern with the effects of economic depression on the racial vigour of Australia’s male population. Not enough young Australian salesmen were achieving success; worse still, some appeared physically weakened by their efforts. As Judith Hilkey has argued, in sales literature a “lack of enthusiasm” was a euphemism for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} ‘Psychology: Its application to Modern Business’, Prof H. Tasman Lovell, Blennerhassett’s Institute; Henry Tasman Lovell papers (1893-1958) p. 31 SERIES 2, University of Sydney Archives.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Lecture today given by Prof H. Tasman Lovell. ‘The Meaning and Value of Personal Efficiency’, Pamphlet from ‘La Salle Extension Institute Ltd’ ‘affiliated with La sale Extension University, Chicago USA’ Dalton House, 115 Pitt Street, Sydney NSW, Henry Tasman Lovell papers (1893-1958) p. 31 SERIES 2, University of Sydney Archives.
\item \textsuperscript{144} ‘Psychology: Its application to Modern Business’, Prof H. Tasman Lovell, Blennerhassett’s Institute.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Publicity expert Arthur O. Richard echoed Lovell’s ideas in a 1931 \textit{Rydeg Business Journal} article, “Man, it has been said, is made of clay and flame. The danger to the race is not that there is likely to be a shortage of clay, but that there may be a famine of flame. Enthusiasm will make the race stronger.” Lecture today given by Prof H. Tasman Lovell. ‘The Meaning and Value of Personal Efficiency’, Pamphlet from ‘La Salle Extension Institute Ltd’ ‘affiliated with La Salle Extension University, Chicago USA’ Dalton House, 115 Pitt Street, Sydney NSW, Henry Tasman Lovell papers (1893-1958) p. 31 SERIES 2, University of Sydney Archives.
\end{itemize}
depression. Arthur Richard and Lovell designed their lectures at Blennerhassetts as homily, advising dispirited salesmen to make themselves succeed through inner determination:

Man has invented substitutes for many things, but no Ford or Edison has found a substitute for the flame of enthusiasm – the fiery zeal that gives men the strength to move mountains. I would like to see a statue reared to Enthusiasm, a statute designed to give fire and vigour to man’s eagerness for higher attainments. It is intense love of work – deep-rooted passion – which makes men fit to handle the complex problems of life and gives them the strength to conquer hardships. The greatest obstacles to the development of that latent ability which every man possesses are indifference, insouciance, lack of fervour.147

A paradox at the heart of the business literature was the fleeting nature of most commercial encounters. According to a salesman interviewed by Rydges Business Journal, the life of the modern travelling man “is a series of quick commercial contacts, a panorama of hustle, a touch-and-go proposition in which he must impress his personality upon the trade with almost the quickness of an instantaneous exposure of a Kodak.”148 In Australia many of these transactions were preceded by long stretches travelling between remote towns and homesteads only to be met with a flat rejection upon arrival. Fostering ‘dash’, ‘passion’ and ‘vigour’ in these encounters was difficult when most customers were unable or unwilling to buy.149 In dramatising the importance of systematic effort, however, early twentieth century sales experts rarely acknowledged this irony. To do so would be to highlight the contradiction inherent in travelling salesmanship at a time of economic depression.

146 Hilkey, Character is Capital, p. 76.
Mark Peel argues that societal investments in behavioural codes of masculinity are made most visible when compromised. Struggling Australian salesmen breached these codes in two ways: by displaying physical deterioration in outback environments and by dramatising a lack of individual agency (becoming a ‘merely mechanical contrivance’) in their dealings with their customers. For Lovell and Richard, ‘weakness’ in Australian travelling salesman was to be counteracted not through therapy or rest, but through action. If salesman were to succeed in the outback, they must acquire the necessary attributes of manliness required to impress country people. As Kate Murphy and others have argued, interwar Australian progressivism contrasted the feminised “domestic man” in opposition to the valorised “lone hand.” “This image of a physically vigorous Australian manhood was linked to the open, rugged spaces of the Australian bush, in contrast to the feminised, decadent urban world of the effeminate Englishman.”

Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson and the authors of the Boys Own Annuals as well as other writers glorified “strenuous life” on the frontier and helped mould this vision of masculinity.

During the 1930s commentary on salesmanship in Australian business literature intersected with international concerns over the degeneration of masculine physique under modern living conditions. Progressives such as Lovell and Richard condemned the perceived artificiality and mechanistic character of urban life. Urban degeneration reflected fears that mass migration to cities and large towns would result in the deterioration of the white race. Kate Murphy has identified an intellectual climate in interwar Australia known as vitalism, which “recognised

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151 Kate Murphy, Fears and Fantasies, p. 25.
152 Ibid, p. 25.
the power of the irrational or spiritual in man” and hoped “to harness … it as a creative, positive force in social planning.”

Vitalism also incorporated principles of efficiency and scientific management. “The problems of industrial capitalism could be counteracted, progressives argued, by utilising the values of continuity and regularity, functionality and rationality, administration and management.” As far as salesmanship was concerned, progressives, as we have seen, used ‘enthusiasm’ to connect eugenic ideas of physical strength and stamina to an internal vitalism and ‘passion’ which could be wielded instrumentally, and in the service of profit. The language of scientific management and efficiency gave progressives a vocabulary through which to spread the everyday experiences of salespeople onto a wider imperial canvas.

E J Creasey, a senior commercial traveller from Melbourne, published a series of articles in *Rydges* that drew connections between bankrupted commercial travellers and the harmful effects of mass culture on the ‘vitalism’ of Australian men:

> The fact that a young man’s financial resources are in most cases strictly limited leads him to embrace salesmanship courses of the ‘cheap and nasty’ variety, which will probably strengthen the idea he has picked up in the office. Herein he learns when to offer the prospect a friendly hand, when to smile, at what stage of the interview to produce a cigarette case. He will be impressed by the ‘scientific nature,’ of the work by such terms as ‘psychological moment’, ‘periods of maximum sensibility’ and with the suggested method of hypnotising the prospect so that he becomes oblivious to the fact that he is making a purchase. The textbook will tell him how to ‘cultivate a

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154 Murphy, *Fears and Fantasies*, pp. 28-29.
155 Ibid, p. 28.
156 Ibid, pp. 28-29. See also, Graeme Davison, ‘The Exodists: Miles Franklin, Jill Roe and the “Drift to the Metropolis”’, *History Australia* 2, (2005), p. 35.
personality’ which it describes as the beginning and end of salesmanship, and as the foundation upon which all successful selling must be based.¹⁵⁸

‘Personality,’ once it became ‘instrumental’ lost its ability to be used for profit:

What is the veneer of this character called personality? The Latin word PERSONA means primarily a mask. It is derived from PER (through) SONARE (to sound). In ancient times the actors wore masks and they were called PERSONAE because the words sounded or were uttered through them.

If we cannot enter the spirit of selling our particular ‘line’ or if we can’t put our heart in our job, then no matter how much we know of the manufacturers sales talk or the ‘techniques’ which the text books supply our efforts are meaningless and dead. The impression we are likely to make upon the prospect is much the same as that left upon an audience by the efforts of a persona singing a beautiful song in a monotone without spirit or soul.¹⁵⁹

By training young Australian men to repeat ‘textbook’ lessons and mimic ritualised sales behaviour, business colleges and ‘personality’ experts were corrupting the very ‘spirit’ which made successful salesmanship possible in the first place:

The necessary equipment for a salesman is tact, diplomacy and fearless candour and he must discard as unnecessary and superfluous insincerity, deceit and guile. A successful salesman must have honesty as a starting point – sincerity as a compass – the love of truth as a guide – and common intelligence as a staff upon which to lean.¹⁶⁰

The key was authenticity in delivery. Without this, a salesman was doomed to failure:

[I know of] a typewriter salesman [working in rural Queensland], who, if judged by popular standards, would be considered an exceedingly poor salesman – in fact he might be regarded as an utter failure. When talking normally his delivery is quite belaboured and when in the presence of a prospect he stutters considerably. His address is not pleasing and he attires himself after the fashion of a farmer in town. He has however a vast amount of energy and common ‘horse sense’ and his enthusiasm which breathes sincerity is expressed in actions rather than words. As one listens to his


¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 344.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 345.
story told with constant repetitions and numerous ‘and ers’ one senses the sincerity and purpose from the effort he makes and he secures our confidence."161

A preoccupation with authenticity and sincerity in this period was probably not restricted to Australia. In Australia this preoccupation with authenticity was bound up with the ways in which the geographic spaces of colonial settlements became the forums for modern concerns usually associated with urbanisation. The complaints of rural customers about Australian salesmen reflected wider fears concerning the inability of Australian men to make rural settlements work.

The idea that success in travelling salesmanship was a matter of method, training and perseverance was severely strained in the wake of commercial travellers’ suicides and the popular culture that developed around them. The optimistic individualism expressed in salesmanship literature competed with the harsh prognosis of critics of Australia’s economic health. A sharp change in the tone of business literature after 1929 reflected these concerns. “Is modern civilization a sham?” asked salesman Joseph Hamlet in October 1933. “Is it not making men less men but more machines? Does it compare with the free and easy life of old when a man was considered more of an individual and less as part of a community?”162 Reading the mentally and physically broken bodies of Australian salesmen as an allegory for imperial failure, Hamlet questioned Australia’s investment in the inevitability of colonial ‘progress.’

Here in Australia we boast – with or without reason – that we have the best government ever established by man – have made the most rapid progress every witnessed by the world; but are our people happier, better, truer, braver than before we

161 Ibid, p. 347.
progressed as we have done? Do the people of this Southern World find life sweeter, better worth the living in this twentieth century than they did in the last quarter of the nineteenth century? No! In God’s name, no! Progress! Our boasted progress is turning God’s great world into a machine, making men manikins who dance, not of their own volition but because the showmen of Empire pull the strings. The individual withers and the world is more and more becoming a vast iron machine in which the soul is stunted, the heart shrivelled, and the God like entity man, is made but part and parcel of a great engine that is rolling with headlong spread – whither? When man was a ‘barbarian’; but he was at least a responsible entity, the architect of his own fortunes, the moulder of his own destiny.  

As Timothy Spears has shown for American history, modern salesmanship’s emphasis on cooperation and rationalisation conflicted with broadly held notions of individualism, autonomy and freedom. In Australia, critiquing salesmanship in the wake of the Depression also involved questioning Australia’s dependence on Britain and on trade with Britain. Understood in this context, the travelling salesman was the focal point for a structure of feeling that encompassed far more than anxiety over a changing economy; the failure of the capitalist system was also a failure of the imperial system. As ‘Spectator’ wrote in ‘What’s Wrong with Australia’ in 1929, “Due to Britain’s war and to other causes the false prosperity caused by the local spending of literally hundreds of millions of loan money every individual in this community increased his standard of living and indulged in luxuries absolutely beyond his true means.”

The other day a friend of the writer was conversing in a motor car salesroom when the salesman pointed out a farmer (one of our colonists), who was paying an instalment on an expensive limousine car. The whole of his savings had gone to pay the deposit and he was experiencing great difficulty in meeting the instalments. And this is not an isolated case, mad as it may seem.

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David Walker has suggested that the Great Depression proved a turning point in the development of a stronger critique of ideas that Australia had unlimited capacities.166 “Through the 1930s there was a growing insistence that Australia should acknowledge more realistically the qualities of its colonising performance.”167 Debates among geographers in the 1930s led to a greater appreciation of the forces behind urban growth. W D Forsyth’s *The Myth of Open Space* argued that twentieth-century populations would be drawn back to centres of economic opportunity “to centres of metropolitan power rather than to remote colonies.”168 Forsyth dates the realisation that a dramatic change in the pattern of settlement was underway to the period of the Great Depression.

As with discourses of nationalism and progress, debates about territorial expansion in interwar Australia were carried on with reference to male bodies. Commercial travellers exemplified the intersection between masculinity and imperial expansion because it was through the suicides and bankruptcies of commercial travellers that many Australians learnt about the erosion of white settlement in the Australian interior. The defeat of the commercial travellers by the Australian landscape and by economic depression in rural areas destabilised the belief that outback conditions produced superior Australian men. Their experiences ‘on the road’ troubled the set of colonial logics underpinning rural settlement schemes. The ways in which business literature tried to rationalise the experiences of commercial travellers makes visible the tensions produced in Australian colonial ideology by the Great Depression and by shifts in the imperial financial system in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The boosters of commercial travelling had, in the 1920s, promoted the positive impact of commercial

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168 Ibid, p. 166.
travelling as an occupation in empire settlement. This claim was undermined in the late 1920s and early 1930s as the spectre of failed salesmen became increasingly difficult to explain without highlighting wider problems within rural settlement schemes. The promoters of both empire settlement and salesmanship training schemes came under attack for misdirecting Australian men into the wrong kind of economic endeavour. In these ways failed travelling salesmen embodied the conflict between the cultural projection of imperial ideas onto the Australian landscape and their economic impracticality.
Part III

Rural Geographies and Chinese Empires

Chapter 7
Chinese Shopkeepers and Salespeople in Australia

As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, urban modernity in interwar Australia has been largely associated with white Australians and with British and American cultural influences.¹ This chapter shifts the ground by turning to the archives left by Chinese shopkeepers and shop workers. It argues that the capitalist processes which generated commercial development in Australia’s cities were interwoven with Asian traders and Asian economies. Department stores sent their buyers to Japan and China; David Jones bought cloth from Indian merchants.² Chinese stores serviced Australian rural settlements, and Australia’s markets were stocked with fruit supplied by Chinese Australian plantations in Queensland and Fiji. Examining Australian history through the eyes of salespeople brings this community of Chinese traders, shopkeepers and shop workers into view. By the 1930s, many had built retail empires and opened department stores in Asian port cities such as Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore. These buildings became important symbols held up by such nationalists as Sun Yat Sen as proof of China’s advancement relative to the West.³ After 1949 Chinese communist propaganda represented these same department stores as emblematic of a corrupt and

² As Joan Hellegers shows in her biography of Adeline Keating, buyer for Myer in Japan and China between 1918 and 1939, the big department stores sent their buyers to Asia as early as 1915. Joan Hellegers, Against the Current: The Story of Adeline Keating (Melbourne: Dent, 1987). My thanks to Samia Khatun for passing on her knowledge of connections between Indian merchants and David Jones.
decadent European colonialism. Networks formed by Chinese retail empires, therefore, allow us to view economic and cultural reverberations between China and Australia in the early twentieth century. These reverberations had real effects on the articulation of nationalism, colonialism and anti-colonialism in these two countries. While Chinese shopkeepers in Australia were increasingly represented through a racial lexicon which labelled them as ‘Asian’ and ‘undesirable’, in China Chinese Australian retail chains and the commodities they sold were considered too ‘white.’ In Shanghai and Hong Kong boycotts of ‘the Australian stores’ became the focus of Chinese anti-colonial resistance and anti-Western sentiment in the 1920s and 1930s (a point I develop further in chapter 8).

Following the mobility and financial pathways of the Chinese shopkeepers and their Chinese employees who built these department stores suggests a greater role for geographic and commercial links to Asia in the evolution of Australian modernity. The promotional culture they left behind in archives across Asia and Australia allows us to see how commercial exchanges between Chinese shopkeepers, shop workers and their customers were also cultural exchanges that could lead to the interchange of trans-colonial knowledge. These exchanges allow us to re-orientate the perceived Anglo-American origins of Australian consumer culture towards Asia, thereby acknowledging in greater depth the influence and agency of Chinese shopkeepers and shop workers. They also reveal the ways in which economic exchanges contributed to the manufacture of racial categories and cultural difference.

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In the decades following WWI, department stores in Sydney and Melbourne tried to open chains in remote parts of Australia. As part of this initiative Grace Brothers sent Ernestine Hill to Barron Creek in the Northern Territory in 1938 to see how shopping was done on the “fringes of white settlement.” She described a place where the commercial rituals of the modern city were distinctly absent:

> It is quite true that there are no summer sales nor Friday specials to look forward to at the nearest tin store; no picture show unless there should be a small town within that hundred miles; and, owing to the atmospheric variations of the bed of that old-time inland sea that stretches between them and civilization, wirelesses are few, with more static than song.

In this land of “petrol and jam-tin showers” face-to-face shopping was often to be found only at the Chinese stores such as Jack Mah’s in Tingha or See Poys in Innisfail. Long a feature of far-flung Australian townships, Chinese shops sold more than “just the necessities.” They also provided white station and mission women with a small number of urban luxuries: mass-produced clothing made in city factories and bolts of cloth marked with the latest prints.

While Hill celebrated the accessibility of modern goods “at this periphery of the Empire”, she worried over a strange flattening out of imperial and racial hierarchy. Chinese storekeepers, she observed, also sold to a non-white clientele. The result was an unsettling uniformity of dress and style: “At any moment one may meet a Koepanger of the pearling fleet in a Bulgarian sleeveless jumper one had believed exclusive, or a lubra in a gay model that mirrors

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5 Ernestine Hill, ‘The Way the Other Half Lives’, *Fashion Festival by Farmers* (Winter 1938), Coles Myer MS 13468, SLV, Box 156.
6 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
one’s own.” Aboriginal servants availed themselves of the same makeup as their white mistresses: “[T]he half caste girls are avid for powder and lipstick purchased in the Chinese stores which they apply with a generous hand and startling effect … every camp has a chipped mirror.”

Sydney and Melbourne have typically been the focus for researchers interested in the history of Australian mass society, consumerism and urbanisation, so Barron Creek is perhaps an unexpected place to take a thesis concerned with these themes. But while the city may have stood as the ultimate symbol of colonial modernity for Australians in the early twentieth century, this modernity was constructed against perceptions of what life was like in less developed parts of the country (and, indeed, of the world). As Arif Dirlik remarks, colonial peripheries such as Barron Creek “point to the fundamental importance of viewing modernity in terms of relationships.” It was precisely on colonial frontiers such as Barron Creek that notions of the ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’, the progressive and the traditional were being measured and judged. Questions surrounding commodities helped form these categories. As Ashis Nandy has shown, commodities in settler societies became ways of displaying the variety and reach of imperial power. In the words of Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh, “Concerns about appropriate clothing expressed the colonial imagination of domination” and inversions of dress and style were especially destabilising because they highlighted the ability

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10 Ernestine Hill, ‘Jam-Tin Showers’, Coles Myer MS 13468, SLV, Box 156.
of the colonised to appropriate and transform the culture of the coloniser.14 Angela Woollacott and Liz Conor argue that for white Australian women in the 1920s and 1930s, “Aboriginal women – bush dwellers – represented the antithesis of their own urban, modern and increasingly sexually autonomous selves.”15 Interwar nation builders persistently depicted Aboriginal people as failing to achieve modernity and thereby “disqualified them from the modern scene.”16 If Aboriginal women and Pacific Islanders could access the same forms of modern life as their mistresses and masters at Chinese shops, then how were distinctions between the advanced and savage, the civilised and the backward to be maintained and made visible?

When Ernestine Hill recorded the activities of Chinese storekeepers in Barron Creek, she was witnessing one side of a vast and obscured network of Asian merchants in Australia, a cartography of people and goods sometimes called “the sandalwood empire.”17 Long before any British interest in Australia, its northern shores were enmeshed in trading relationships that linked it with Asia.18 Having reviewed the body of research into the question, Regina Ganter and Peta Stephenson estimate that interaction between Asian merchants and Aboriginal people began as early as the sixteenth century when Makassan boats arrived on the Cape York Peninsula looking for sea cucumber, sandalwood and pearls.19 There is little doubt

17 William Liu papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 6294/6.
18 As Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton have written of the Indian Ocean, “Europeans were latecomers to this cosmopolitan commercial world and their arrival caused little concern to the Jewish, Gujarati, Tamil, Malay, and Chinese traders who dominated the bazaars and shipping routes of the region.” Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 10.
19 Regina Ganter, Mixed Relations, pp. 4-13; See also: Peta Stephenson, The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia’s Indigenous-Asian Story (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007); Dorothy Shineberg, They Came for
that by the middle of the eighteenth century contact was regular. As Ganter points out, pre-colonial contact between Aboriginal and Asian traders has only recently been the focus of national historical inquiry and is “still hazy and riddled with mysteries.” This chapter examines the lives and fortunes of Asian shopkeepers and salesmen in Australia at the tail end of this history, showing how consumer culture was also a conduit for colonial and anti-colonial ideology. It therefore traces the creation of colonial networks of Asian settlement, trade and families, and the pathways forged by these networks through East Asia and the Pacific in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The past decade has seen steps by historians in New Zealand to use studies on Asian migration and Asian cultural influence to challenge traditional frameworks of New Zealand national historiography. The signs of this challenge are also emerging in Australian historiography, and Australian historians have acknowledged that Asian migration to Australia has a long and important history. A recent issue of *Australian Historical Studies*

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22 Anthony Webster sees maritime commerce as a unifying factor, even before the arrival of the European imperialists. He stresses the important role of maritime trade in connecting the islands and cities of south-east Asia, creating a coherent geographical zone which was identified by Indian, Chinese and Arab merchants engaged in commerce with the region. “To the Indians and Arabs, Southeast Asia was the ‘land below the winds’, to the Chinese ‘the Southern Ocean.’” See Anthony Webster, ‘The Development of British Commercial and Political Networks in the Straits Settlements 1800 to 1868: The Rise of a Colonial and Regional Economic Identity?’ *Modern Asian Studies*, (May 2010) p. 4.


It is now well established that by the 1920s and 1930s the White Australia Policy had constricted the flow of people and goods from Asia. What is less well documented is the role of Chinese businesses in sustaining Asian-Australian connections despite the White Australia Policy.\footnote{A. C. Palfreeman, \textit{The Administration of the White Australia Policy} (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967) p.3, 5-7, 11-13, 86; C. F. Young, \textit{The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia} (Richmond: Mitchell Press, 1978), especially chapter 2 ‘Chinese Labouring Classes and Merchants’, pp. 35-59. See also: Sophie Loy-Wilson, ‘Peanuts and Publicists: Letting Australian Friends know the Chinese Side of the Story in Interwar Sydney’, \textit{History Australia} 6, no. 1 (2009), pp. 1-20.} A rich cache of Chinese-language business archives provides evidence of these commercial connections in the interwar years.\footnote{See for example: ‘Kong Sing Family Tea Merchant Collection,’ Chinese Australian History Museum Acc. 1322567, especially receipts relating to customs (Box 112). There are other important collections also held at the Chinese Australian History Museum as well as the autobiographies of Chinese Australian businessmen held at the Shanghai Institute of Historical Research and Taiwan’s Academia Sinica.} As John Fitzgerald has recently shown in \textit{Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia} (2007), businesses like Wing On & Co and Hong Yuen & Co began as Chinese corner stores in Innisfail, Tingha and Inverell but grew into companies with outlets, emporiums and department store chains stretching from Fiji to...
Singapore, Sydney, Macau, Shanghai, Perth, Jakarta, London and Hong Kong. By the early twentieth century northern ports like Cooktown and Darwin did more business with Hong Kong than with any other Australian city. Chinese Australian companies integrated with Indigenous general merchants in other parts of Asia, such as Oriental Stores Ltd in Thailand, Rangoon’s Burmese Favourite Co, “the leading native firm of general outfitters,” or the Straits Settlement Buan Soon Lee & Co established in 1915 by Chinese who gained their experience in Malaya. In this chapter I show that storekeepers in Australia depended on these companies for a steady supply of labourers to work as sales clerks and salesmen. More importantly, Chinese Australian retail chains became integrated into the economies of rural Australia and metropolitan China concurrently. Examining these retail empires and the itineraries of the individuals and goods within them can reveal what Frank Trentmann has called “globalization at the margins.” The resulting tension between Australia and Asia, nation and region, causes a certain unravelling of nationally defined political space, and a reconstruction of places in terms of desired trading realities.

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33 Kate Bagnall has advanced research into this field in her work on relationships between white women and Chinese men in southern Australia between 1855 and 1915. See Kate Bagnall, ‘Golden Shadows on a White Land: An Exploration of the Lives of White Women, Chinese men and their Children in Southern Australia, 1855-1915’, PhD University of Sydney, March 2006. While this thesis traces the lives of a number of Chinese Australians involved in shopwork, she does not take these workers as her focus.
In the 1950s, after their businesses in Shanghai were seized and nationalised by Mao Ze Dong’s Communist regime, a number of Chinese Australians published biographies charting the glory days of these companies before confiscation.36 Ma Wenhui wrote that his father, Guo Le, “had lived through several lives.”37 Targeted by a labour recruiter in Zhongshan village in South China in the 1880s, he had spent months as an illegal passenger in the hold of a ship, not knowing where he was going, and occasionally blinded by a hessian sack placed over his head when the ship was in port.38 Coming to Australia via the Pacific and through the indentured labour system Guo worked as a ‘coolie’ on plantations and as a miner before opening a small market garden at the back of his shack in southern Queensland in the 1890s.39 He worked eighteen hours a day, for twelve and a half shillings per week, which he saved, so that two years later he purchased a barrow from which to hawk fruit and vegetables.40 In 1900 he pooled his money with other hawkers and opened a small store that he called Wing On & Co.41 Hiring Aboriginal workers from camps on the edge of mining towns, Guo set about building a small empire.42 Eventually he imported fruit, vegetables and large quantities of tea from China and the Straits of Malacca (1000 chests at a time) while also exporting bananas


39 Robert Irick believes the word ‘coolie’ has been wrongly associated with the Chinese word K’uli, meaning ‘bitter labor’ or ‘bitter strength’, Robert Irick, Ch’ing Policy Toward the Coolie Trade 1847-1878 (Taipei: Chinese Materials Center, 1982), p. 98.


and sandalwood. By the 1920s Wing On outgrew Australia, opening plantations in Fiji, Nauru and Tonga, and factories in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Eventually the business turned into a department store chain with high-rise stores marking Asia’s treaty-port skylines from the 1920s onwards.

When Communist soldiers raided Wing On department stores in Shanghai in 1949 they found that most salespeople on record had Chinese Australian connections, tracing their working lives back to the Pacific or Australia. Older clerks even had blue circular tattoos on the backs of their hands, physical testimony to their link with the era of indenture. This lingering heritage of ‘cooliedom’ structured the life stories of Asian shopkeepers in particular ways. Guo Le, his son concluded, was just like Australian department store owners Anthony Hordern or Sidney Myer. Having risen from hawker/coolie to business magnate he epitomised “enlightened progress.” His life was lived in transit from “a primitive origin to a utopian end.”

Ma’s vision of his father’s life shows how densely a certain idea of history as indicative of progress/development became part of the storytelling about Asian Australian storekeepers, salesmen and their businesses in the twentieth century. Wing On’s past became, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “beads of sequential time” strung together on an inevitable path.

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43 Ibid, p. 52.
44 Daisy Guo Autobiography in Dong Feng Pei, ed., *Shanghai de Feng Hua Xue Yue (Shanghai Memorabilia)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Historical Press, 2008), pp. 307-320. Ibid, p. 83, pp. 197-198. The Guos established Wei San Knitting Factory and Yongan Textile and Cotton Mill (1920), sending young relatives to America and Europe to study Western engineering techniques. The family also established Yongan Fire and Marine Insurance Company (1915), Wing On Life Assurance Company (1925), and Yongan Commercial and Savings Bank (1932), in most principal cities in China. See Denise Austin, ‘Kingdom-Minded People’, pp. 120-130.
towards progress “like a rosary.” To unpick these histories, and to somehow view the imagined geographies within which Asian storekeepers functioned, it is necessary to map the indenture system and its effects.

**Indenture and Shop work**

The Asian indentured labour system dates from the seventeenth century when Chinese merchants established settlements in Southeast Asia to produce commodities such as tin, gold, pepper, sandalwood and sugar. Among the earliest of these settlements was the autonomous city-state of Haitian on the coast of Cochin China (now southern Vietnam) established by a Cantonese pirate called Mac Cuu in 1690. Haitian was one of a dozen Chinese émigré commercial ports that sprang up around the Chinese ‘water frontier’ of coastal and island Asia over the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Trans-Pacific trade links expanded with the establishment of European settlements such as Sydney in 1788 and the conquest of California by the United States in 1846. Sydney traded sandalwood with Canton for tea, rice and other commodities, although the earliest Asian trader recorded in Sydney was in 1818.

Discoveries of gold in California, the Klondike, New Zealand, Australia, Malaya and South Africa in the 1850s and 1860s swelled the populations of ports such as Malacca, Haitian and Penang. Although slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century a variant survived through indenture and took many individuals long distances to work on coolie lines. Indenture allowed merchants to graft onto the traditional slave trade of the region and coolie labourers became a valuable economic commodity for countries such as America, South Africa, and

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49 Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*, p. 43.
Australia. They also found their way to the less lucrative, but inviting, islands of the Pacific: Hawaii, Tahiti, New Caledonia, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Ocean Island, Nauru and Samoa. On these islands bursts of activity by handfuls of pioneer settlers and merchant adventurers formed a hotch-potch of trading posts and penal settlements. Fitzgerald estimates that by the eighteenth century 4000 -10,000 Chinese labourers boarded Chinese vessels every year bound for port cities in Southeast Asia, the Pacific and Australia. Webs of Asian recruitment networks melded with the needs of European colonial expansion. Dorothy Shineberg found that European explorers employed Chinese indentured labourers as early as the eighteenth century. Officially these men (and they were almost always men) were hired as ship cooks or carpenters, but – in some cases – also for their ability to grade, cut and judge raw sandalwood or “wooden gold” for the Chinese market.

Most labourers entered indenture through travelling contract agents paid to fan out through poorer regions of China and India in search of potential recruits. Proximity to a colonial city meant more exposure to the recruiter. Guo Le – future founder of Wing On & Co department store – was recruited in Chuk Sau Yuen, a small village in the Xiangshan district, predominantly inhabited by rice farmers supplementing their income with sales of vegetables, fruits and fish. The village was no different from thousands of other rural villages except for its closeness to Macau, the earliest Western enclave in South China. Visiting their hometowns during Chinese festivals, the inhabitants of Macau aided recruiters in their work by keeping

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53 Marg Neale, *We were the Christmas Islanders*, p. 22.
the villages informed about life and opportunities in the colony and overseas. By the late nineteenth century, stories of nefarious agents and their recruiting practices had spread widely, and songs in the vernacular were sung from village to village warning people against the recruiter. Agents were accused of targeting women on religious pilgrimage: “They offer to escort her to her relations or to show her some sacred shrine but lead her to a coolie depot instead.” If the recruiting agents kept a woman absent from her husband for more than one night, she grew ‘tainted’ through exposure to the depot and could not be taken back into the family home. “A woman would feel instinctively her fate was sealed and would give up any further efforts to get free.”

In 1915, Australians C. F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson were sent to China, India and Fiji by the Commonwealth Government to investigate coolie lines in the Pacific. Interviewing recruits in portside depots they:

… came across many cases where the indentured coolies informed us, with every appearance of truth, that they were quite unaware of their real destination, until they found themselves tossing and sea sick in the Bay of Bengal or the South China Sea … There have been tragic cases of actual suicides occurring on the high seas.

Pearson and Andrews found that young people in Asian port towns felt themselves part of a larger, entangled imperial structure, and that their aspirations for mobility within this structure made them vulnerable to indenture: “Sometimes an agent finds a raw youth fresh from school, with a smattering of English education, and a boyish desire for adventure”, Pearson wrote.

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60 Ibid, pp. 9-11.
“He [the agent] pictures to him [the youth] employment in Fiji or Thursday Island, as a teacher on fabulous rates of pay – if only the agreement is signed.” It was not simply the poor who fell victim to the storytelling of travelling agents: “We were startled to find in coolie lines young [men] of high caste and education whose whole appearance showed [they] had no business in such a place.”

Storekeeper Lee Yeung was hired as labourer for Christmas Island in the 1900s. An oral history interview conducted with Lee Yeung by local teacher Marg Neale on Christmas Island in 1975 recorded his story. At twenty three he was signed to labour contractor Ong Boon Tat: “I went to this man and he put a mark [tattoo] on my hand to show that I belonged to him.” Like many in south China, Lee had gone to Hong Kong to find a job before being shipped to Singapore by a middleman. There he was “stowed” and sold on to Boon Tat who sent him to Christmas Island although Lee was not informed of his destination: “The men had a sack over their heads so they could not see which place they are going … They had no identity and no trace.” The ship was dirty and Lee was held in a holding room with ten people, one straw mattress, no light and little food: “They fed us only canned beef and some sardines.” Once on Christmas Island with its “green trees, zinc roofs, Chinese shrines and rusty metals all over the place” he was handed opium: “You could register as an opium smoker and the government supplied it every day.”

Phosphate Company, quickly discovering that indenture had its own hierarchy: “Us people

65 Marg Neale, We were the Christmas Islanders, pp. 40-41.
66 Ibid, pp. 41-43.
68 Ibid, p. 41.
with the mark on our hands were different from the other workers … They used to call us Mai Chee Chai, like a ‘slave’ like being sold.” Boon Tat provided food for his own coolies and took fourteen dollars of their twenty-eight dollar pay in return. As there was no banking system, money was placed in metal cylinders and buried in the jungle where Lee often escaped to find crabs and game to ward off beri beri. Coolie food was cooked en mass and not replaced until the bottom of the pot was visible, sitting for days and swelling with the bodies of bats and rats attracted by the exposed mixture. In 1904, according to Lee, 600 of the 2400 labourers contracted for one year’s work on Christmas Island had died of beri beri or malnutrition. After 1910 beri beri was controlled but was soon replaced by opthalmic and other eye disorders.69

By the early twentieth century some indentured labourers were writing home detailed descriptions of their ordeals.70 Some of these were made into posters and glued to the walls of Chinese and Indian towns. In 1905 Cheng Wing – who worked on a banana plantation in Samoa – wrote to his uncles in Hong Kong who then distributed his letters along shopping thoroughfares and in local parks. These posters created a political stir in China and Hong Kong, resulting in the British colonial secretary in Hong Kong demanding a report from British consuls in the Pacific and northern Australia.71 For those who survived indentured labour in places like the New Hebrides, shadows from the experience would cast themselves in good and bad ways over the rest of their lives. Friendship and brotherhood societies formed during indenture, along with the knowledge of farming, produce and shipping routes that long years spent on plantations provided, were a boon to some when they started life as freemen in

69 Ibid, p. 23.
70 ‘New Hebrides – coolie labour’ NAA A11804/1921/93.
places like Darwin, Cooktown and Innisfail. For Asian shopkeepers in Australia, these networks allowed them privileged access to trade routes, placing them in a position both to interpret and use the tangled and ancient lines of connection linking Australia to the Pacific and greater Asia. At the same time, as I show in the next section, the extremes of plantation living left their mark, leading some shopkeepers to employ the same brutal practices with their own shop workers which they themselves had experienced, and eventually escaped, on plantations as younger men.

Storekeeping

Escaping ‘cooliedom’ was difficult; gambling or opium trapped many in cycles of debt and addiction.\(^72\) For those labourers who successfully started new lives, such as Guo Le and Lee Young who opened stores in Australia, indenture became “an imagined map of destinations and sufferings – more or less distant from home villages, more or less harsh in the conditions of plantation life”, which imprinted itself upon the memories and consciousness of those who had escaped.\(^73\) As Sunil Amrith has shown, large personal and familial debts and the cultural power, even hegemony, of the system, kept labourers closely bound to their employers and very often immobile. Nevertheless, there is evidence that, once the practice of indenture ceased to be effective in the Pacific and parts of northern Australia, information about wages and conditions on different estates did travel widely.\(^74\) News of better conditions elsewhere was exchanged in the local coffee shops that lined the roads winding through the plantation.

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\(^72\) Some Chinese labourers killed themselves to clear gambling debts. Chim Soo on Tahiti who did so in 1869 is now an Atimaono martyr, and various Chinese associations ceremoniously go and pay respect to him at his tomb on All Saints day at the Chinese Cemetery. Many Chinese had serious opium addictions, and secret societies were accused of smuggling and distributing drugs. In 1920 the Chinese Commissioner and several employers noted that many Chinese worked just to maintain their addiction. Ben Featuna’i Liua’ana, ‘Dragons in Little Paradise’, p. 41.


\(^74\) Ibid, p. 248.
territory; some of these coffee shops and general stores were owned and run by enterprising plantation workers. In places like Darwin, Thursday Island or Fiji “these streets of all nations” were places for “Chinese, Japanese, Samoans, Aborigines, Indians and half-castes to live all mixed up together” and where Chinese shops supplemented the meager rations handed out by contract agents.

Storekeeping meant liberation from plantation work but was difficult to achieve. On Christmas Island, Lee Keung (whose ultimate aim was to be reunited with his family in Queensland) tried to open a banking service and a store for his fellow coolies, but was thwarted by labour contractor Boon Tat’s tight hold on Christmas Island’s commercial geography. In addition to recruiting labour Boon Tat ran chains of general stores (Kong si) selling food and opium. Prostitutes were shipped from Boon Tat amusement parks in Singapore, and available for six dollars a night at the ‘White House’ for those with status and money (half a month’s pay for the tattooed coolies). His name was even embossed on the island’s toilet cisterns.

In the late nineteenth century significant populations of indentured laborers made their way through the Pacific to Australia to work as miners. Between 1842 and 1942 an estimated fifteen million people travelled from China to countries in the Pacific, including about 75,000 to Australia. Of these, a third travelled through Sydney. In the Pioneer Valley near Mackay

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77 Peter Cahill, ‘The Chinese in Rabaul – 1921 to 1942: Normal Practices, or Containing Yellow Peril?’ pp. 72-91  
78 Marg Neale, We were the Christmas Islanders, p. 43.  
80 Michael Williams, Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta Qiaoxiang, p. 259.
workers were drawn from more than seventy Pacific islands (including New Caledonia, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea); and in Darwin between 1878 and 1909 Asian workers easily outnumbered Europeans.\textsuperscript{81} Jeremy Hodes observed that by 1877 there were an estimated 17,000 Chinese living near the Palmer River, constituting about ten per cent of the entire population of Queensland.\textsuperscript{82} For Chinese – banned from purchasing land – market gardening, hawking vegetables and shop keeping were some of the only professions available outside plantation and mine work.\textsuperscript{83} The presence of Asian diggers on the goldfields increased demand for Chinese goods such as rice, tea, silk, eggs, porcelain and ginger.\textsuperscript{84} Successful hawkers opened general stores and Chinese shops became a common feature of mining town existence.\textsuperscript{85} These early enterprises were makeshift constructions: calico tents, slab huts, tin shacks – often with cabbages or Chinese vegetables sprawling out from the back garden, nourished in hot, dusty environments by threads of Chinese-style irrigation lines which in places are still visible today. The South Australian census of 1901 showed 400 Chinese working in market gardens and 120 as shopkeepers and assistants.\textsuperscript{86} There was, in practice, very little difference between commercial encounters in Chinese stores and those playing out in the myriad general stores run by white Australians throughout Australia. The

\textsuperscript{81} The Chinese represented over sixty per cent of the non-Aboriginal population in Darwin in 1881 and over seventy per cent ten years later, to fall back slightly at the turn of the century. From then on the Chinese population declined to under forty per cent in 1911 and to twenty-five per cent in 1938. Henry Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricornia}, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{82} cited in Stephenson, \textit{Outsiders Within}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{86} My thanks to Emma Dortins for this reference, ‘Chinese Mining South of Adelaide River, Tributes granted to Asians; Item 36, Playford-Warden, Indigent Chinese fossickers; item M610A Umbrawarra Proclamation - objection by Miners’ Association to Chinese, Department of Northern Territory – mines branch (Commonwealth),’ Northern Territory Archives (hereafter NTA), Fl41 1913-1925; Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricornia}, p 111.
fact that clear differences were noted between ‘Chinese’ and White stores indicates that colonial racial categories were projected onto commercial exchanges.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, white Australians were increasingly creating a racial difference between Chinese and white general stores. They noted that what distinguished Chinese-owned stores from the many European-run shops were the Asian goods among local produce, signs in Chinese characters, and incense-cloaked statues to gods and goddess (Guan Yin, Goddess of Mercy; Kong Ti, God of Long life) above or behind the counter. Elsie Masson, travelling through Cairns, Mackay and Cooktown in the 1910s, saw Chinese shops which were “invariably dark, smelling of incense and musk” and where “youths lent against verandah posts smoking long pipes” next to “polished bamboo seats on which old Chinese lean and smoke, their knees drawn up to their chins.” Here Elsie Masson’s narrative represented Chinese shopkeepers as racial others, disconnecting Chinese shop workers from the productive work of the community. Elsie was not alone in depicting Chinese shopkeepers through imagery associated with drug use and addiction (many narratives include pipes and smoking in their descriptions). Such depictions implied Chinese shops were places of leisure and indolence. In reality many townships depended on the Chinese stores for their supplies.

Ah Moon’s store in Port Douglas was known for mango and rice wine which Moon distilled covertly in wooden tubs, while at Leon Chong’s in Ruby Street, Tingha sales clerks slipped

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tobacco and opium into the mining tools supplied on credit over the counter.\textsuperscript{89} At Sun Wah’s at the mouth of Cooktown harbour customers entered a doorway to see stacks of clay jars – the ashes of Chinese miners waiting to be returned to their ancestral villages.\textsuperscript{90} Jack Lowe in Cairns imported mother-in-law eggs from Macau, some of which, upon arrival, were found to be broken and oozing black, syrupy, liquid opium onto the sand of Trinity Beach in Cairns.\textsuperscript{91}

While most descriptions of Chinese shops in Australian towns are written by white Australians, there are a number of sources written for or by Chinese shopkeepers themselves. These include a Chinese English phrasebook for Chinese hawkers and shopkeepers kept at the Chinese Australian Museum in Melbourne (mentioned in the introduction to this thesis), as well as the diary of shopkeeper Taam Sze Pui, owner and manager of Se Poy’s General Store in Innisfail, which I discuss below.\textsuperscript{92} While non-Chinese perspectives emphasise the exotic and the whimsical detail of Chinese retail spaces, Chinese perspectives focus on the practicality of commercial exchange. These accounts also reveal that many shopkeepers feared being attacked by their customers. The selection of phrases in a Chinese-English phrasebook imply that violent encounters between Chinese shopkeepers and their customers were frequent.\textsuperscript{93}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{89} Henry Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricornia}, p. 114.
\bibitem{90} \textit{Cooktown Herald} (4 May 1921), p. 3; J. H. Binnie, \textit{My Life on a Tropic Goldfield} (Melbourne, 1944); Hector Holthouse, \textit{River of Gold: The Story of the Palmer River Gold Rush} (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967), p. 146; Bones were usually returned through Hong Kong’s Tung Wah hospital, Michael Williams, \textit{Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta Qiaoxiang}, p. 260.
\bibitem{91} ‘Arms & Liquor Traffic (later opium) between Australia and the New Hebrides’ NAA A6661/413.
\bibitem{92} English-Chinese Phrasebook,’ unknown provenance (c1860s-1890s), Chinese Australian History Museum Collection, Item no: 1985.14. My thanks to Sophie Couchman for bringing this phrasebook to my attention. Taam Sze Pui, \textit{The Life and Work of Taam Sze Pui}, self-published (Innisfail, 1925). The manuscript of this diary is available at the James Cook Library, University of Queensland.
\bibitem{93} English-Chinese Phrasebook,’ unknown provenance (c1860s-1890s), Chinese Australian History Museum Collection, Item no: 1985.14.
\end{thebibliography}
The success of operations like those of Jack Lowe and Ah Moon depended on attracting and maintaining local European as well as Chinese custom. Even in areas where ‘Chinatowns’ sprouted around Chinese shops, Asian populations in Australia were never big enough to keep Chinese businesses afloat on their own. This was not the case in America. Chinatowns in California and New York sprawled over many blocks, and housed substantial communities of Asian migrants who in turn sustained businesses that catered solely to them. Asian storekeepers in Australia had to make sure their business appealed beyond the stream of Chinese migrants passing through town. To do so they created sophisticated delivery services. The stores, early on, provided home delivery even to the most isolated stations and sent hawkers and Afghan cameleers on long journeys to ensure goods arrived safely. As Janis Wilton has shown, hawkers were some of the few visitors families on outlying farms received. The Chinese stores tapped into this demand and were able to advertise and market their goods and services in the process – they eventually had delivery trucks with signs advertising their store’s name in bright yellow or red. The small scale of Australian Chinatowns and the isolation of Chinese stores on Australia’s mining frontiers led to what Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben have called a “creolisation” of sales culture and store life. In Cooktown in the 1900s, “English stores sold Chinese tea; Chinese stores sold Birmingham hardware.”

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97 Ibid, p. 104.
Chinese shops employed Aboriginal labour and used Indigenous knowledge to find hidden pathways through the bush when delivering to customers on the remote edges of towns and settlements. In Mulgrave in North Queensland in the 1880s Indigenous Australians were “very useful to the Chinese shopkeepers who have so many difficulties to contend with, in a country so much broken and covered with dense jungle.”\textsuperscript{100} Cathie May found that Chinese employers paid higher wages to their Aboriginal workers and “treated them much better than their white counterparts,” while Henry Reynolds argues that: “Aboriginal people in Queensland showed a distinct preference for work with the Chinese.”\textsuperscript{101} In the 1890s German missionaries recorded the casual incorporation of the Koko Yimider people into the urban economies of Cooktown.

The wife of the clerk of the court is calling one black girl, ‘Come on Annie, quickly, its Saturday, I have a lot of work for you today, you have to sweep all through the house for me.’ ‘Tobacco, missy, just a little bit!’ Afterwards Annie, as much as you like, afterwards, but now get on with it. And elsewhere Long Ah Kong, the jovial plump Chinese, is beckoning to a black lad, while carefully tucking up his long plait: ‘Billy, lad, come and sweep my store for me. I’ll give you a lovely watermelon!’\textsuperscript{102}

Despite being prohibited from employing Aboriginal workers by amendments to the Queensland \textit{Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act} of 1897, many Chinese continued to do so beyond the view of government regulators.\textsuperscript{103} In 1911 seven Chinese storekeepers and numerous trades people in Darwin protested to the local government: “Many of us have had the blackboys in our employ for years and have always treated them well and the boys do not want to leave us. This will work a great hardship on

\textsuperscript{100} Aborigines often became directly involved in mining itself. Women used bark dishes in the process of yandying ore to separate tin from other rock and dirt. Quoted in Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricornia}, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{101} Cathie R. May, \textit{Topsawyers, the Chinese in Cairns, 1870-1920}, (Townsville: James Cook University Press, 1984); Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricornia}, p. 76.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Church News}, no. 28 (1896), p. 41.

\textsuperscript{103} Peta Stephenson, \textit{Outsiders Within}, pp. 62-64.
Their solicitor argued that they were “as fit as the average European to employ natives.” Lily Ah Toy and her mother ran a vegetable shop in Darwin’s Cavanagh Street in the 1910s and 1920s where they sold salted mustard cabbage and ham choy to Japanese, Timorese and Spanish pearl luggers and Indigenous Australians: “Old Spider, a six-foot tall Brinkin man from Daly river” near Kakadu. Chinese shopkeepers often intermarried with local women. Larry Ahlin was born in 1927 as the son of Laurrie Wynwylkba (Jinjakba), a Jawoyn Aboriginal woman, and Wong Ah Lin, a Hakka Chinese hawker and salesman recruited in Singapore for the construction of the Darwin-Katherine railway. Wong Ah Lin settled in Katherine as a storekeeper and saddler in the 1930s and then moved to Pine Creek. Shortly afterwards, Larry and his sister (Wong Ah Lin’s children with Laurrie Wynwylkba) were forcibly removed from the family and taken to a mission despite being covered in coal and hidden in a local Aboriginal camp for protection.

The diary and autobiography of Taam Sze Pui, owner and manager of Se Poy’s General Store in Innisfail, is the only known existing personal account of a Chinese Australian storekeeper bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Having arrived in Australia for the Palmer gold rush in February 1877, Taam opened Se Poys in 1885. He abandoned mining quickly: “to search for gold was like trying to catch the moon at the bottom of the sea.” He kept a diary as a document to leave for his four children – all named after English royalty or local

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104 Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricornia*, p. 76.
106 Wong Ah Lin is mentioned in the following file: ‘Arms & Liquor Traffic (later opium) between Australia and the New Hebrides’ NAA A6661/413. Penny Edwards and Shen Yuanfang explain these connections by suggesting that the Chinese shared with Aboriginal people a strong sense of attachment to the land, belief in ancestral spirits, an appreciation of herbal medicines, a sense of identity and naming patterns that were intimately tied to one’s age and familiar rankings and the acceptance of polygamy and the intervention of elders in arranging promised marriages. Penny Edwards and Shen Yuanfang quoted in Peta Stephenson, *Outsiders Within*, p. 65.
107 Taam Sze Pui, *The Life and Work of Taam Sze Pui*, self-published (Innisfail, 1925), pp. 12-34
108 The late Mr Taam Sze, unpublished ms, James Cook Library, Queensland.
rivers (Victoria, Ida, Johnson, Herbert). The store remained in the family well into the 1950s, and since 1981 has been the site of a Coles supermarket. Born in 1854, Taam was from the rural community of Ny Chuen, Nam Hoi district, Guangdong, where – like many – he had heard rumours that “in Australia gold could be picked up from the side of the road.” After travelling with his brother and father through Hong Kong and the Pacific he arrived in Queensland in 1882 and went to work on a sugar plantation on the banks of the Johnson River near Innisfail. His brother was working in Cairns and Sz Pui moved to Mourilyan where he joined a collective to open a general store. Rumours of impending native attack led the owners to shift the store to Innisfail in 1885.

The business employed many Chinese, both family members and other Australian-born Chinese (mostly from Thursday Island) often as a matter of honouring promises of support for the younger members of other Chinese families. Aboriginal workers were also part of the business, acting as guides for Taam’s hawkers and, later, his delivery drivers. “There was always a lot of distribution to do either on horseback or by cart and sometimes it was overnight journey pushing a trolley on the railway line to Mena Creek near Mourilyan and Silkwood.” Taam’s wife arrived in 1897 to join him in the store where he taught her English. Language skills would become vital to See Poys’s survival.

As the White Australia Policy gradually restricted Asian investment, trade and travel, Chinese storekeepers from Rabaul to Madang and Darwin were forced to do all business in English

111 ‘Chinese Shopkeepers’, *Cairns Post* (7 June 1937), p. 3.
and produce account books using Romanised script. Language was just one of the ways in which the lives of Chinese shopkeepers were incorporated into the homogenising mechanisms of imperial regimes. Taam’s children learned to greet customers in English as well as Greek, Italian, Spanish and Chinese, eagerly picking up phrases from Victor Hugo’s learn-to-speak books. As most retail custom was conducted in English, the children of Chinese shopkeeping families – who literally grew up in the Chinese shops run by their parents – quickly lost their ability to speak their native dialect. By the time she arrived in Shanghai in 1919, Daisy Guo, the daughter of a Chinese shopkeeping family from Victoria, spoke only English.

Figure 7.1 ‘Crossing the bar into the Johnstone River at Innisfail c1902.’ Source: Bertie Family Photographs, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland Pic. 5564.

114 Daisy Guo Autobiography in Dong Feng Pei, eds., *Shanghai de Feng Hua Xue Yue (Shanghai Memorabilia)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Historical Press, 2008), pp. 307-320.
As Chinese stores expanded in the early twentieth century, their owners started acquiring land for plantations and for large-scale market gardening. Small plots were slowly melded together to become significant acreage. This was especially the case in the banana industry, where ex-coolies from the Pacific and northern Australia found themselves owning and running their own banana plantations in Fiji and in the humid valleys of central Queensland (under Tamborine Mountain or in Inverell Valley).\textsuperscript{115} When harvested, the bananas were taken down creeks and small canals on sampans to be loaded on locally made junks for the journey to the Cairns wharf; around fifteen junks worked in Trinity Bay and along the Barron River.\textsuperscript{116} After 1900, Taam exported bananas all around Australia from his shop in Innisfail, making over £3000 per month.\textsuperscript{117}

Following the success of banana plantations in Queensland and of a Chinese banana trade association formed in Melbourne in 1909 Chinese companies opened in Australian cities.\textsuperscript{118} “Round the harbour may be seen Chinese shops,” wrote British journalist Phillip Gibbs of Sydney in 1903, “with their curious signboards hanging outside, like a street in Hong Kong.”\textsuperscript{119} Gibbs depicted Chinese shop workers as underemployed and suspect – a parasitic group of men and boys cluttering Australian urban spaces. He watched knots of Asian and European delivery boys passing time:

\textsuperscript{115} ‘Location of Chinese and Japanese Shops. Market Gardens, etc – Includes Boarding Inspectors’ reports, lists of Chinese and Japanese business owners and addresses in the Fortitude Valley, Newstead and Woolloongabba areas 1936-1938, NAA BP234/1/SB1937/2472; ‘New Hebrides’ NAA CP285/2 Bundle 1/B.
\textsuperscript{116} Henry Reynolds, \textit{North of Capricornia}, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{117} Taam Sze Pui, \textit{The Life and Work of Taam Sze Pui}, self-published (Innisfail, 1925), p. 51.
like street loafers. Little groups of these people, some of them young and sturdy fellows who ought to be hard at work, and others old and ragged men, … lounge at the street corners, with hands in their pockets, pipes hanging out of their mouths, and hats tipped well over their eyes … They seem to be “always waiting for something to turn up,” like one of the characters of Charles Dickens, but this something never comes.  

The commercial success of Chinese enterprises was at odds with the descriptions of Chinese business life provided by European witnesses like Gibbs. George Wing Dann Chen and his three brothers leased one hundred acres of land near Noosa from where they ran the banana wholesaling company Wing Young & Co established in 1924-25 at 139 Little Bourke St. George’s daughter Mabel and her husband David set up the David Wang department store. Tropical fruit proved to be a difficult business. Often bananas rotted in humid, badly ventilated ship holds or were piled on deck where they were subject to pilfering. The Cairns Post noted one occasion when Melbourne wharf labourers had to use pumps to remove the remnants of a shipment of Cairns bananas from the hold. The pressure of space at Victoria Markets in Melbourne or Paddington Markets in Sydney compelled a number of wholesalers to establish businesses and storerooms outside the market area. Melbourne’s Banana Alley on Flinders Street was a series of vaults built in the 1890s under a viaduct for the Port Melbourne railway line and was found to be ideal for banana storage. The Wing On ripening rooms were in the basement of the Wing On building, sending pungent smells through the floorboards. Underneath customers’ feet bananas ripened with the help of raw gas. For some companies this proved to be a lethal combination and resulted in a number of explosions and at least two fatalities until methods for ripening were improved. The tropical fruit

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120 Ibid, pp. 60-61.
122 Ibid, p. 82.
123 William Liu papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 6294/6.
124 Ibid, p. 84.
industry was just one of the ways in which Australian urban and rural economies were moulded by Chinese commercial networks sourcing produce from Asia.

While banana and sandalwood plantations increased in size, so too did the premises of Chinese shopkeepers. Bark shacks and weatherboard houses were knocked down and replaced by Victorian-era emporiums with decorative turrets and dates of origin etched on brightly painted facades (“On Gay’s Fortune Store, Hill End, 1899” or “Paul Su’s, Mackay, 1901”). As Richard Waterhouse has shown, general stores in country towns became markers of progress for colonists, proving the sustainability of white settlement and the stability of town life in the face of hostile climates and Indigenous populations. Heather Goodall and Allison

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Cadzow argue that colonisers sought to recruit Nature to bring authority and certainty to their newly imposed control over land and people. In the 1910s and 1920s country stores were beginning to write pioneer histories, putting up plaques to ‘founders’ and nineteenth-century photographs of the store withstanding floods and cyclones. Town fairs and parades were used to produce a sense of progress and place and to “illustrate landmarks in Australian history.”

In Carlton, Melbourne, in 1933 floats included “an English cottage resembling the original home of an early pioneer and another representing a country store fashioned of bark.” Daltons General Store in Orange in 1922 told customers via a mounted plaque on their shop counter: “In 1849 a young man named James Dalton came to Orange and built a shop of slab and bark. There was only one building in the settlement at the time … we now benefit from the firm foundations laid by the pioneers who managed to survive in business.”

Arjun Appadurai argues that these history-making practices – tying a place to a specific kind of past – are part of a larger process he calls the “illusion of permanence.” As Appadurai writes, “the temporary nature of [colonial] physical spaces shoots the project of producing locality through with a constant under text of anxiety … the project of the production of locality is an effort to work against the constant corrosion of the present, both by change and by uncertainty.” In colonial modernity this anxious history-making was bound up with the

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127 Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow, ‘Salt Pan Creek: Rivers as Border Zones within the Colonial City’, in Devleena Ghosh, Heather Goodall and Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, eds., Water, Sovereignty and Borders in Asia and Oceania (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 190.
128 ‘Early History and Foundation of the Western Stores 1889-1963’ Coles Myer archive, SLV, MS 13488, Box 1505.
130 ‘Early History and Foundation of the Western Stores 1889-1963’ Coles Myer archive, SLV, MS 13488, Box 1505.
“arrogant conceit” of the imperial project but also with the “ordinary things which people seek constantly to create” in volatile situations. For European and Chinese shopkeepers, the accoutrements of storekeeping and the scripting of store histories were some of Appadurai’s “ordinary things.”

Like their white counterparts, Chinese storekeepers wrote histories which exemplified this “production of locality,” weaving their own store history into the pioneer legends of Australian settlement popular in the 1920s and 1930s. The fact that these histories are absent from white settler narratives – despite the fact that the Chinese stores performed the same function as white general stores – reveals the racialising of retail spaces in the interwar period. As Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie have recently explained, pioneer storytelling was structured around “battles with the land.” The early settlers won their heroic status through their successful war with a chaotic and unpredictable environment. They subsequently “secured the admiration of the later generations who inherited the fruits of their labour.” Tracking the gradual improvement of town architecture and infrastructure provided one way to visually narrate settler progress. By accident of longevity, Taam Sze Pui related in his diary, See Poys’s store became an accepted icon of settler survival and was declared a “pillar of commerce in Innisfail.”

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133 Ibid, p. 46.
135 Ibid, p. x.
the store had the telephone number ‘3’ after the police and fire departments.\(^{138}\) Pictures of this store would later hang in gilt Art Deco entranceways of palatial Shanghai department stores, although Taam’s store has only recently become part of Innisfail’s local history.

In Melbourne some Chinese businessmen used urban space to mark their contribution to the emerging Australian nation, remodelling local temples to resemble Edwardian mansions – two storeys high, flat-fronted and surrounded by a colonnaded veranda. In one case, in the interior decorations they fused traditional religious iconography with self-representations of the globetrotting businessman. John Fitzgerald has analysed this iconography in *Big White Lie*: “Above the figure of the god Kwan Ti (Guangdi) in the main hall stood a large bas-relief of two Chinese gentlemen dressed in top hats and tails with their arms outstretched encompassing a circle, in a profound sense a symbol of eternity but in a more profane sense the compass of their imagined trading world in the early twentieth century.”\(^{139}\)

As Asian storekeepers reshaped the landscape of Australian towns, their success was also changing the social and physical geography of villages in south China, India and the Pacific. By the early 1900s storekeepers like Taam had enough capital to buy plantations in Fiji and the New Hebrides, as well as to build houses and ancestral shrines in their home villages.\(^ {140}\) In 1908, Taam sent his wife and four children back to Zhongshan county in Southern Guangdong “to pay respects to the ancestors” and build a two storey family terrace, which combined European and Chinese architectural styles through the use of white Grecian-style

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\(^{139}\) John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*, p. 185.

\(^{140}\) The late Mr Taam Sze, unpublished ms, James Cook Library, Queensland.
columns on balconies and Chinese dragon motifs embossed above doorways. Soon ‘Shekki’ houses like Taam’s were spotted around the hills in southern Guangdong; an estimated ten per cent of all villagers lived overseas, mostly in Australia or Hawaii. A Hawaiian visitor to Zhongshan in 1884, the Rev Damon of Hawai, was startled when out walking: “from village to village … men looked up from their work in the field or ran out front of their shops to greet us in English or Hawaiian.” In the 1890s it was said of Hang Mie in the neighbouring county of Liang Du that one third of the village was returned from Sydney.

Hang Mie, like many villages in Zhongshan’s Tang Mountains, was connected to remote Australian towns in an imagined spatial geography maintained through letters, goods and money. Asian shops in the outback acted as the porthole between migrants and their families, places linking Australia and Asia through chain-like relationships of commerce and culture. Storekeepers in Fiji would pass on letters from storekeepers in Darwin and Christmas Island in the same boxes that carried bananas, sugar or tea. Sometimes letters arrived soaked in the juices of the fruit with which they travelled, or covered in the dusty, stained residue of dead mosquitoes and fruit flies. These webs of communication and capital, although fragile and vulnerable to damage and misadventure, held families together even when fathers spent long periods away from their wives and children in Australia. Chinese shops in Australia became meeting and greeting places for Chinese from the same district, and for sending letters and

141 Ibid.
142 Michael Williams, ‘In the Tang Mountains we have a Big House’, East Asian History 25/26 (June/December 2003), pp. 85-112.
143 Quoted in Michael Williams, ‘In the Tang Mountains we have a Big House’, East Asian History, 25/26 (June/December 2003), pp. 85-112.
144 Ibid, p. 85.
money between home villages and Australia, working their way through stores in Sydney all the way back to China.145

Shop workers

Triumphant tales of the success of Asian Australian businesses could obscure another side of store work left unarticulated in ‘pioneering’ shop histories. The writings and oral testimony of those on the lower rungs of store hierarchy bring into view the networks of Asian shop workers who staffed Chinese shops. Complete exclusion of Asiatics under the auspices of the White Australia Policy was never practicable and one of the main ways Asian migrants could move between Australia and Asia was through commercial networks anchored in shops, stores and retail chains. Storekeepers sponsored new staff and vouched for their character.146 In the 1920s the Japanese Takasuka family were allowed to bring relatives into Australia because their ancestors had grown Australia’s first commercial rice crop and had supplied rice throughout Australia. Exemption Certificates were issued annually and businessmen like William Liu from Wing Sang & Co used the prestige of their companies to request exemption visas for smaller stores in places like Innisfail and Townsville.147 Categories for exemption included: overseas trade (to promote trade between Australia and Asia), students, assistants (to assist Asian businessmen by providing a specialised skill) substitutes (to take over established businesses), and tourists.148

145 ‘Kong Sing Family Tea Merchant Collection,’ Chinese Australian History Museum Acc. 1322567, especially receipts relating to customs (Box 112).
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
Figure 7.3 Letter from William Liu of Wing Sang & Co to Mr. Peters in the Department of External Affairs written on behalf of Henry Lum Mow of Lum Mo & Co Townsville c1938. Source: William Liu papers MLMSS 6294/6.
Arthur Go Luck Chan came to Australia in the 1890s after his father was indentured to Jack Lowe, a shopkeeper in the mining town of Tingha:

The shop was a general store owned by a Chinese who came from the same village as us. He became very rich having this shop at Tingha, the general store. He was able to sell things to the miners and so on – made a great fortune. He owned nearly half the land in Tingha I think. My Father, during the depression days, found a job with him. But he treated us very badly, being rich. I remember once he was scolding us that we were village pigs and no roots in Australia whereas he has got three sons who were born in Australia. And even smoking a cigarette, the length of a cigarette, he could figure things out and make 5000 pounds, just like that, just boasting how easily he could make money … And yet he treated us virtually like slaves I would say I would use that word. And he was so strict, very stern. Even to this day I shudder at the thought of him watching me sweeping the floor, watering the bare floor with a watering can and if the water was not properly sprinkled he would go crook saying that the dust would rise and he even watched me how I use a broom and so on and so forth. They were dreadful days. I’d fear the daybreak over the window.149

Their sleeping quarters were a tin shed in the back of a warehouse with a galvanised iron roof. When the sun came out in winter the frost melted, wetting their clothes and bedding, while at night icy frosts came through the galvanised wall lowering temperatures to below freezing.150

They worked seven days a week and long hours each day and so had little knowledge of an Australia beyond the store premises. Arthur’s abiding memory of Tingha was the dusty view onto Ruby Street through the shop’s doorway. He was only allowed to leave the counter to burn sandalwood incense sticks on the porch.151 Once every month he watched pigs and cattle make their way down this street to the abattoir at number thirty-one. It was a melancholy

151 The practice of burning incense outside Chinese shopfronts was common. See: ‘Darwin Chinatown Steeped in Oriental Tradition of Long Service: it is now Faced with Demolition’, Adelaide Advertiser (26 February 1938), p. 11.
ritual that became a kind of calendar, letting him know the month was ending. Eventually he made contact with shop clerks in the store opposite:

I was thinking of how do I get out of this Hellhole. The only Chinese friend I made was the one across the road who was also the same age as me and was working. Every morning about half past six or so he would be getting out of his shop to go and buy milk and he would cross the road and I would wave to him.

Jack Lowe’s influence in Tingha made any kind of escape difficult. Lowe gave money to the local hospital, was honoured by the TownMayor and well respected by his customers:

My friend’s boss would not hire me. My boss was very powerful. Even the postmaster general or the bank manager had to rent houses from him and when he disliked having electricity introduced to Tingha so the people would continue to buy kerosene from him, no electricity was installed.152

Trying to extricate themselves from Lowe in the 1910s, Arthur and his father started writing to Chinese shop workers in other towns. They sent letters to friends in Bundara suggesting they form a partnership and petition the Australian Government to allow them to run a fruit shop – but this plan came to nothing. These letters eventually made their way back to Lowe who terminated their employment without paying outstanding wages.

The Chinese employed at such shops as Jack Lowe’s, Kwong Sing and Hong Yuen invariably came as family members, near or distant, or through a Chinese network which extended from Sydney north through NSW and into Queensland.153 Most were single men, either unmarried or with wives back in China. As Harry Fay’s future son-in-law Tom Loy recalled of his initial employment at Hong Yuen in Inverell during the

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153 Interview by Ann McGrath with Lily Ah Toy, NTA, Northern Territory Oral History Project, NTRS 226 TS 1(1-2).
mid-1930s:

We didn’t work any set hours but we worked for about seventy hours a week. On Saturday we’d be weighing up and on Sundays bottling up – the honey and Metho and shellite and benzine. Sometimes we’d work on Wednesday and Friday as well. Upstairs [above the shop] there were about five of us living. In the house out the back, another seven or so.\(^{154}\)

At Kwong Sing & Co, Percy Young framed and hung on the wall some Chinese proverbs demonstrating the values he exhorted his employees to follow. Under the heading, “Work hard and save money,” these included homilies such as “When men are born they all want to be wealthy but you have to learn to be satisfied with what you have in your daily life” and “If you are poor it is because you are lazy. Work hard at your business and never complain of hardships.”\(^{155}\)

The remembered world of far away villages affected life in the shop. Arthur Go Lock Chang’s boss justified mistreating his shop workers by referencing his own hardship at the hands of their relatives:

Because he said that when he was working in the village for my Grandfather – he was working on a Chinese primitive gadget inside the shops to take the husks off the rice by using your foot power, put your foot down and up, lift thus down. He was working even at night with the oil lamp on and so on.\(^{156}\)

After the Changs were fired in Tingha, they travelled south to Inverell, sheltering in banana and sugar plantations on the way. In Inverell they approached a Chinese woman called Ruby

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\(^{155}\) Ibid.

Fay who was connected through her brother, William Liu, to the Wing On fruit empire.\textsuperscript{157}

Through Ruby, Arthur got work as a shop assistant and shop worker at Charlie Yee’s fruit shop in Inverell. There he was treated better but worked longer hours and did heavier physical labour:

I had to carry banana cases from Queensland, truckloads, unload them and open them up and take all the ripening ones out and put the green ones back and carry them into the heating rooms, stack them roof high over night to be heated by the kerosene lamp, the next morning opening a door and bringing them all out again, opening them up again for ripening. It was heavy work and every week there would be two or three truckloads from Sydney and Brisbane to be unloaded. Pumpkins, big potato bags full, just like camels you have to unload them from the truck with your back.

He lived in a shed adjoining the shop and shared this space with twenty other European, Aboriginal and Chinese men. Occasionally Afghan hawkers came and shared his sleeping quarters during the fruit picking seasons. The heat and crush of bodies was made worse by an overpowering smell of rotting produce:

At the same time is was also unhygienic because of the rotten fruit and tomatoes and oranges going green, potatoes going rotten, pumpkins and so on. We had to wash them out and sort them all these insects would crawl into our nostrils.\textsuperscript{158}

Finally in March 1942 came his ‘liberation day’: “My liberation came through Pearl Harbour, they [the Australian Government and Jack Lowe] couldn’t deport me.” He went to Sydney only to find a new form of ‘indenture.’ Due to family ties he was obliged to work in his cousin’s fruit shop: “I had bad acne – my cousin used to say when they were having a bad day that my acne drove the customers away.” He worked seven days a week. “Here I was liberated but not because of my cousin who comes from my village but because of feudal


relationships I had to work for her. And she pleaded with me, she was pregnant, I could not leave them, they depended on me to keep the shop going. This feudal tie and the indenture tie still bound me.”

Arthur’s father had come to Australia from “the terrible violence of plantation society” only to find his employer applying the logic of the plantation world in his own shop culture. If the main social distinction in slave society were between slave and freeman, then Arthur and his father were permanently indentured to Jack Lowe. Theirs was not an isolated case. Visiting Darwin in 1913, anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, the Commonwealth Protector of Aborigines, saw clear class distinctions within the Chinese community, with better-off merchants and storekeepers who had sufficient money to travel to China and many poorer Chinese who struggled to survive working in a variety of labouring jobs.

Accounts of Asian shop life written from the shop worker’s perspective are rare. Customers of Chinese shops in the early twentieth century were more aware of the owner than they were of his or her shop workers. Growing up in “the village of Bondi” in Sydney’s hinterland in the 1920s, John Kingsmill met Chinese shopkeeper ‘Elsie’ whose business “stood on the corner opposite Les Osgoods’s grocer.” Elsie “had been here since the gold rush days” and “must have been brought here from China or somewhere in Asia.” Occasionally Kingsmill would glimpse shadowy figures at the back of Elise’s premises, but was mostly unaware of other people in or around the store:

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159 Ibid, p. 28.
If you glanced through the connecting door of the shop down the hallway (stacked with fruit boxes), you could sometimes see one or the other of an old Chinese couple. They never came into the shop except to make it look tended and would immediately retreat to fetch Elsie if you walked in and found them there. They couldn’t speak a word of English. They might have been those tiny figures in some market garden before the bending got too much for them.163

The Chinese shopkeeper appeared as a type of benign folk character in numerous interwar memoirs, innocuous and stripped of class or sex. In inner-city Brisbane in the 1920s Kathleen McArthur met “John Chinaman, the green grocer … a much loved generous man.” He gave his customers blue and white ceramic bowls for Christmas, filled with ginger and pickled fruit, and always had “a happy, laughing, smiling face.”164

Asian shop workers, existing as they did in an unregulated netherworld of family and village connections, were easily invisible to regulars like John Kingsmill and Kathleen McArthur. Tracking the shop workers’ experiences goes some way to exposing what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “the diverse and enchanted life worlds” of the modernising colonial workplace. Behind prosperous Chinese shopfronts were the mechanisms of Asian merchant and labour networks which kept these enterprises staffed and supplied with adequate stock. Translating histories like those told by Arthur Go Lock Chang into the pioneer legends of Australian small towns or the everyday ritual captured in interwar memoir means bartering between two different kinds of history. Chakrabarty argues that this tension and translation between colonial sources and story (coloniser/ colonised, worker/ manager) shows “the condition of

possibility for the globalization of capital across diverse, porous, and conflicting histories of human belonging.”

While storekeepers like ‘Elsie’, John Chinaman and Jack Lowe were held in high regard in some Australian country towns and city suburbs, others were the target of an increasing hostility. In parts of Queensland the very success of the Chinese appeared to confirm the failure of the European colonising venture. Their claim to the land lay not only in the power of the temples that dotted the landscape, but also in the shape of the landscape itself, which their labour had transformed from scrub jungle into the ordered rows of plantation monoculture. The construction of small shrines on banana and sandalwood plantations affirmed an alternative imaginative geography connecting the plantations with the world of Chinese villages. Thursday Island was intended as a white administrative settlement with restrictions on native residents, but the Europeans were always in a minority. In 1920 the island’s 700 Asian residents outnumbered the European population, not including other ethnic groups like Pacific islanders. By the 1930s most shops on the island were owned by Chinese and Japanese. Visitors to Broome in northern Australia in the 1930s, where “The landscape becomes a brutal, livid line which cuts like a knife wound across the gentle sea”, were unsettled to discover empty and windblown European residential districts in which Chinese shops and Aboriginal camps provided the only signs of settlement:

The European residential quarter, through which we first passed, consisted of separate scattered units withdrawn behind garden and veranda blinds in large blocks of land and without much cohesion. Corrugated iron, the ruination of picturesque effects in Australian backblocks architecture, was the chief material used in the local hotels and for the buildings of the native quarter, huddled together on each side of a wide and

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dusty street down near Dampier Creek. But even here there was no sign of animation. The place seemed deserted save for the Chinese shopkeepers blandly awaiting customers and the few native children playing in the roadway.  

From the 1890s white storekeepers in Australia began agitating for a boycott of Asian shops. In Sydney and Melbourne a mounting public campaign accused Chinese residents of holding a monopoly over the city’s fruit and vegetable markets, while in Queensland’s Halifax district locals complained that “the Chow is the boss storekeeper” flaunting his success in front of locals by driving his delivery cart loaded with Aboriginal workers, his “dusky loves.” Chinese shopkeepers sat at the centre of a racial and economic border seepage, visual proof that Australian nation-building was entwined with Asian markets. These links between Australia and Asia, personified so clearly in the figure of the Asian shopkeeper were, in Catherine Hall’s words, “never neutral, not simply a chain of connection … they were mutually constitutive, in which both colonised and coloniser were made.” When, in 1886, a night school was set up for Chinese students in Queensland, a protest meeting was called where it was declared that the Chinese “already knew too much for the good of the whites in the territory” and if they were educated they would completely supplant all clerks and professional men. Journalists at the Northern Territory Times warned readers to be wary of “the Jews of Asia”: ‘Ch’ien, ch’ien, ch’ien [money, money, money] is the real Chinese God. At home or abroad the Mongols are a race of shopkeepers. Buying, bartering, exchanging and selling is the order of their everyday life.” In practice, there was very little

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169 ‘Through the Sugar Districts’, The Worker (5 January 1901).
171 Henry Reynolds, North of Capricornia, p. 117.
difference between the ways in which Chinese and white storekeepers conducted their business. White boycotts of Chinese shops in the early twentieth century were one of the ways white racial identity was asserted in culturally diverse colonial environments.

Facing racially-based obstacles to investing in Australia, Chinese Australian businesses spread their money and aspirations along a chain of ports stretching from Rabaul to Singapore and Shanghai. Entrepreneurs from the Sydney fruit and vegetable markets were the most significant of all international Chinese investors in Shanghai before the communists took the city in 1949. Firms which began in Australia came to own and manage two of Asia’s largest textile enterprises, several hotels, banks and insurance companies.173 For Chinese Australians living under the White Australia Policy, department stores in Shanghai and Hong Kong (and the companies behind them) became, in effect, embassies and enabled goods and workers to flow between Asia and Australia despite the tightening of immigration and customs restrictions.

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Frank Trentmann reminds us that there are moral-ideological histories hidden in the Anglo-centric story of the industrial/consumer revolution: “It has its roots in a material civilizing project dating back to the very period it is seeking to explain.” Ordinary people should consume. Their desire for more goods would make them work harder. Idleness would give way to enterprise and initiative. Wealth, manners and civilisation would all improve.174 In Asia’s imperial outposts in the 1920s and 1930s department stores provided a way to apply

174 Frank Trentmann, ‘Crossing Divides’, p. 197.
and measure Western standards of progress and civilisation. In Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore skyscraper shop-towers were read by Chinese and Western commentators as a portent of future development while the behaviour of native customers was carefully watched for signs of ‘primitive manners’ or ‘increased civility.’ The availability of stock proved a new global connectedness while large clocks marking time over labyrinthine store bureaucracies and routines brought corporate organisation and promised increased efficiency and productivity. Young migrants from the country clamoured for jobs in the new stores for the, “Salesperson is the vanguard in the development of modernity … In the Department stores of the civilized countries all the sales clerks are well educated and well trained.”175 As sales manager William Liu wrote to John Sleeman in Sydney in 1935, visiting department stores in Shanghai, “gives a picture of an ancient land being re-born into modern civilization – birth pangs are painful but the end when it is reached will be glorious.”176

By the 1900s some Asian shopkeepers in Australia had accumulated sufficient capital to open their own department stores. As I wrote in chapter 4, the period between 1890 and 1930 was the hey-day of these institutions, when companies like Wannamakers, the Bon Marche and (in Australia) David Jones and Anthony Horderns monopolised city space with sprawling industrial complexes. With their scale, speed and hive-like activity department stores seemed to many at the time an appropriate metaphor for modernity itself. The visible expansion and success of the stores after the turn of the century contributed to a public perception of department stores as symbols of national wealth and progress. Across the Western world and

in its eastern outposts, the department store was a product of clearly definable social and economic conditions born out of nineteenth-century industrialisation.\textsuperscript{177}

By the 1930s Wing On & Co department stores in Shanghai and Sincere & Co in Hong Kong (both of which originated in remote Queensland townships) were hosting Australian trade delegations to Asia, such as the 1935 goodwill mission led by Attorney General John Latham.\textsuperscript{178} But by shaping themselves as symbols of Western modernisation in Asia, the stores risked becoming synonymous with British colonialism itself; in Shanghai, they were known mockingly as the “Australian stores.”\textsuperscript{179} As the following section shows, the role of Chinese Australian department stores in treaty port Asia posed a problem for their managers; how to pioneer new forms of ‘modern life’ and ‘civilised living’ without being seen to ape the West?\textsuperscript{180} How to adapt Western ideas of selling and consumption without appearing complicit in the colonial project? As one Chinese moderniser explained: “What we throw away the West adopts and improves; and what they reject, we seize and are entrapped by.”\textsuperscript{181} In addressing local concerns about neo-colonialism, Asian Australian managers reflected back on their own memories of shop work, town life and customer relations in remote Australia – places like Tennant Creek, Broome or Hill End. In doing so they tabulated their own impressions of Australian modernity.

\textsuperscript{178} Sir John Latham papers 1932-1942 NAA A4311/744/7. See also: Xianshi gongsi ershiwunian jingguoshi (The 25-year History of the Sincere Company) in \textit{Xiangang Xianshi gongsisi} (Hong Kong: Sincere Press, 1924), p. 1; ‘Ma Yingbiao’ (1975), in Liu Shaotang, ed., Minguo renwu xiaozhuan (Brief biographies of republican figures) 17, (Taipei: Zhanjji Wenzhu xuehanshe).
\textsuperscript{179} ‘Humanities Salon: Cities – Shanghai: Colonialism, Cosmopolitanism and Chinese Modernity’, Dr Yiyan Wang and Dr Yi Zheng in conversation with Prof David Goodman, 30 September 2010, Sydney Law School Foyer, University of Sydney; Daisy Guo Autobiography in Dong Feng Pei, ed., \textit{Shanghai de Feng Hua Xue Yue (Shanghai Memorabilia)} (Shanghai: Shanghai Historical Press, 2008), pp. 307-320.
\textsuperscript{181} Graham Healey and Chushichi Tsuzhki, eds., \textit{The Iwakura Embassy 1871-73}, p. 221.
As department store sales clerks and shop assistants became increasingly visible in treaty-port streetscapes, social commentators seized on salesmanship as emblematic of modern living.

“The salesperson is the first job of modern enterprise” wrote author Mao Dun after visiting Wing On in 1927.\(^\text{182}\) Wing On’s head manager, Guo Le, watched salespeople on the floors of Wing On’s growing number of chain stores, weighing their behaviour on a “scale of backwardness and progress.” Shop assistants in Shanghai were worse than in Hong Kong, he wrote, but better than in Japan and this was due to “backward character and lack of training.”\(^\text{183}\) In the 1930s he hired Australian salesmanship expert Dr Frank Warren to lecture Wing On staff on “tactfulness.” Warren’s theories melded eugenics with etiquette training and self-help: “Just as some people are physically deformed, so do some people have a disposition and mental outlook which is deformed,” he told an audience of around 300 salespeople in Hong Kong in 1935, “But in view of the miracle performed in straightening out the ailing today, let us also believe that one’s disposition can be improved.”\(^\text{184}\) The key, according to Warren, was the repeated learning of new forms of professional gesture and bearing: ways of smiling, shaking hands, and extending greeting: “People have, through various experiences and proper training, been melted and remoulded into an entirely different type, with a new and proper mental attitude. Tactfulness can very definitely be taught and developed.”\(^\text{185}\)

Chinese Australian department store chains were interpreted as allegories for Asia’s advancement relative to the West. “The average Occidental is inclined to think of Shanghai as

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\(^\text{182}\) Author’s translation. Quoted in Lien Ling Ling, ‘Richang shenghuo de quanli changyu: Yi Minguo Shanghai baihuo gongsi dian zhiyuan weili’ (Everyday life as an arena of power relations: department store clerks in Republican Shanghai), p. 138.
\(^\text{183}\) Denise Austin, ‘Kingdom-minded People’, p. 35.
\(^\text{185}\) Ibid
something primitive if not semi-civilized,” the *China Weekly* observed. “Very often the city is associated with wheelbarrows and junks and that sort of progress.” Devleena Ghosh and Paul Gillen have shown how interwar colonialism shaped debates about modernity with both colonisation and modernisation generating the notion of an opposition between modernity and tradition. "Modern people were ‘civilised’, their natural environment was the city, and they were powerful, wealthy and aggressive, insincere, indifferent to the sacred, and suspicious of hierarchies.” Conflicting readings of department store standards in Asian treaty ports as backward or advanced, clean or dirty, savage or street-wise reflect the precarious distinctions between colonial sites in Asia.

By the late 1920s growing anti-colonial feeling in Hong Kong and Shanghai became focussed on sites of ‘Westernism,’ places such as “the Australian stores.” The patriotic May Fourth Movement of 1919, targeting imperialism as an assault on China’s national and economic sovereignty, resulted in boycotts against imported foreign goods (Western and Japanese) which were on sale at Sincere and Wing On’s stores. The Australian stores were forced to close in Shanghai for a part of June 1919, and their employees organised against the management. Sincere’s Guangzhou store was destroyed by fire in 1921, possibly by arson, and the continual political disturbances of that year forced the closure of both the Guangzhou and Nanning branches. Both emporiums faced fierce opposition from increasingly organised workers and students. When the stores kept their doors open during the May

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186 Wing On Company files, Shanghai Municipal Archives, File No. Q223-2-43, Q225-2-79, Q225-3-21, Q225-3-22, Q225-3-23, Q225-3-26.
188 Ibid, p. 53.
189 Vivian Chow, ‘China in Revolution’ (Broadcast Lectures) *United China*, 1.11 (October 1933), pp. 456.
Fourth Movement with the encouragement of the British consulate, they were confronted for the first time by their workers who forced management to respect the strike. Six years on, in 1925 boycotts of British-made products caused major problems for both companies since these goods were their most important imports.

In 1936 Chinese Australians Choy Chong and Choy Hing set up the Sun Company, Asia’s fourth and last Chinese Australian department store chain. After a magnificent head office was built for the firm on the waterfront in Guangzhou, which still dominates the Pearl River Bund to this day, a department store was planned for Shanghai’s Nanjing Road. Unlike its predecessors Sincere and Wing On, whose ornate facades festooned with cherubs now seemed anachronistic to the emerging nationalist sentiment, the Sun store was planned as a statement of streamlined modernism with “Chinese characteristics.” Sun publicist William Liu had grand visions for the store’s role as a diplomatic mediator between East and West, dubbing it “The Show Window of China.” Every step of the design process was imbued with the self-conscious need to ‘Chinafy’ the project, to negate rumours that Sincere and Wing On were really fronts for European neo-colonialism, homogenising and corrupting Asia’s city dwellers with their decadent Western goods and rituals. As one publicity release from 1935 assured locals, “Instead of putting money in expensive European towers the

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company is expending large sums of money in developing service for the buying public through especially trained salesmen and by courteous attention to the wants of the customers.\footnote{198}

Although the Chinese are the oldest shopkeepers in the world it is only within very recent years that they have developed the art of assembling in one building most of the products necessary to supply the wants of the individual and also it is only very recently that a trained corps of clerks have made shopping a pleasurable past time.\footnote{199}

Rather than install the roof gardens-cum-jazz-studios capping Sincere and Wing On’s stores, William Liu designed a “pagoda roof” for Sun. Avoiding Western-style cupolas, the pagoda would weave Chinese tradition into the store’s façade and onto its roof, snaking up and around the tube-like shape of the building.

It would lend Chinese character to the structure … we would extend the pagoda arrangement as already planned for the roof down to the ground. In other words, in the minds of a large part of the populace of Shanghai the Sun Company’s store would become identified as the pagoda store giving it very distinctive individuality.\footnote{200}

Liu advised the setting up of a museum of Chinese and Asian handicrafts on the top floor.\footnote{201}

The museum was intended for the “display and sale of commodities representing the skill of handicraft artisans” because “no country in the world produces a greater variety in larger quantities or more artistic handicraft than does China.”\footnote{202} Skilled peasant craftsmen from Shanghai’s outlying villages would be brought in to make the museum’s exhibits: giant porcelain pots, bamboo baskets, carved sandalwood figures of deities using wood from

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\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item Hazel de Berg interview with William Liu, ORAL DeB1903-95, National Library of Australia, (February 1978), p 14907.
\end{itemize}
Western Australia.\textsuperscript{203} Ironically, the very Chinese handicrafts that would eventually fill the Sun museum’s dusty cabinets were being mass-produced in Sun’s many factories on the banks of Shanghai’s Suzhou creek and in bigger operations in Fiji, Hong Kong and Nanning, leaving many “village artisans” unemployed.\textsuperscript{204}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.4.jpg}
\caption{Sun Department Store with Sincere in the background on right c1930s (Liu’s pagoda never became a reality) Source: William J. Liu - Papers, 1907-1983, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 6294.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{204} William Liu papers MLMSS 6294/6.
The Sun handicraft museum was about narrating and translating modern demarcations of time, progress and historical epoch. “When one looks at objects displayed in its museum,” wrote one Sun manager, “the sequence of stages of civilization through which a country has passed are immediately apparent to the eye and are apprehended directly by the mind.” If modernity is “primarily the condition of expecting change” or “simply the sense of the idea that the present is discontinuous with the past” then the Sun museum constructed such a discontinuity. Items selected for the museum’s displays were instantly transformed into fossils, tools of a primitive era while the new, advanced goods offered for sale on the store’s carpeted floors reinforced the museum exhibits’ obsolescence. Exhibits carried dates on shiny brass plaques and were organised in order of ‘advancement’:

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205 William Liu papers MLMSS 6294/6.
206 Devleena Ghosh and Paul Gillen, Colonialism and Modernity, p. 86.
No country has ever sprung into existence fully formed. The weaving of the pattern in the nation’s fabric is always done in a certain order. The knowledge acquired by those who precede is passed on to those who succeed; the understanding achieved by earlier generations is handed down to later generations; and so we move forward by degrees. This is what is called ‘progress.’

Although the museum’s implied emphasis was on a utopian future in which “Asian technological advancements will be equal to the West,” the museum’s plaques were quick to assure patrons:

… Progress does not mean discarding what is old and contriving something which is entirely new. In the forming of a nation, therefore, customs and practices arise whose value is tested by constant use, so that when new knowledge arises it does so from expiating sources, and it is from these sources that it derives its value. Nothing is better than a museum for showing clearly the stages by which these processes happen. When one enters this museum and sees these ancient artefacts, one feels directly the effort and hard work of the people of the time [when they were made]. When one recognises the finesse and the skill of their craftsmanship, one feels how idle and unwilling to employ their talents to the full are the people of today. And when one sees the stages by which progress has been achieved, one feels how much hard work must still be done in the future. These emotions stir the heart and mind to study well and cannot be suppressed.

Defining itself away from Western and colonial narratives of development, the museum’s plaques presented modernity as universal. To embrace modernity did not mean compromise with colonial ways but rather progress: past and present were given their full meaning in the museum by the prospect of a “better future,” which “it is our duty and destiny to bring into being.”

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207 William Liu papers MLMSS 6294/6.
209 Ibid; Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh, Colonialism and Modernity, p. 62.
The designer of the museum, William Liu, saw it as a means to increase the store’s profit by connecting Sun Sun to the modernisation of China. This involved telling the story of the Sun Sun company from its beginnings in rural Australia to its expansion into metropolitan China. For Liu, the store’s Chinese-Australian links were part of its appeal. But when the museum was opened customers saw these connections as further proof of Sun Sun’s association with European imperialism and with “Westernism.” By the mid-1930s, it was known derisively as the “Australian store No 1.” The Sun Sun store was eventually boycotted in the 1930s by anti-colonial nationalists. I discuss these boycotts at more length in the following chapter.

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In the late nineteenth century, a large number of Chinese indentured labourers travelled to Australia through the Pacific. Some established general stores, mostly in rural townships. Their knowledge of Asian geographies and the networks they formed when working on plantations helped many Chinese shopkeepers survive and flourish as shopkeepers in Australia. Chinese shopkeepers employed Indigenous and Chinese shop workers and expanded their premises to include tropical fruit plantations. Shopkeepers like Taam Szu moved between China and Australia so that country towns like Tinhga and Innisfail were linked to villages like Zhongshan in South China through commercial and personal ties. Stores such as Wing On & Co and Wing Sang & Co opened warehouses and shop fronts in urban centres like Sydney and Melbourne and purchased plantations in Fiji and other parts of

212 William Liu papers MLMSS 6294/6.
the Pacific. In the early twentieth century these companies created commercial networks between Australia and China and facilitated the movement of people and goods along these networks even after the establishment of the White Australia Policy in 1901. These networks resulted in cultural as well as commercial reverberations in Australia and in China. Chinese storekeepers in Australia provided a canvas onto which white settlers projected their constructions of racial and colonial difference. The ‘Australian stores’ in Shanghai became symbols of colonial decadence and the focus of Chinese anti-colonial nationalism. A serious treatment of these retail empires illustrates the ways in which rural Australian geographies were integrated into Chinese commercial empires, with consequences for both Australian and Chinese forms of national differentiation.
Part III
Rural Geographies and Chinese Empires

Chapter 8
Australians and Commercial Encounters in the Shanghai Municipal Police Files

In late 1934 a small fire broke out in an attic in Shanghai. Firemen would later testify in court that the fire was caused not by the usual gas leak or faulty wiring but rather by the presence of “elaborate equipment for manufacturing and selling narcotics.”\(^1\) After seizing large amounts of opium, along with cocaine and heroin, police sought out the responsible party. On 9 January 1935, an Australian, a Mrs Johnson, was charged in “one of the most sensational cases in Shanghai’s criminal history.”\(^2\) Emphasising the seriousness of the case, the prosecution pointed out that 114 Chinese had recently been executed in the area for a similar offence under the newly promulgated narcotic suppression laws. By virtue of her British citizenship Mrs Johnson escaped an equal sentence. Instead, she was deported – back to Australia, the destination of much of the opium she had been selling since 1933.\(^3\) Chinese newspapers reported that Mrs Johnson had gone back to “that place where the British sent their prisoners after the American War.”\(^4\) As Australian unemployment figures rose in the wake of the Great Depression, the “descendents of these prisoners” were making their way to China to find work.\(^5\) *The China Critic* reminded its readers that Mrs Johnson was just one of thousands of Australians in China in the 1930s. Asian treaty ports were part of the everyday

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geography of many Australians because they were on established imperial shipping routes and could be reached relatively quickly and cheaply. To these swelling numbers of Australians in treaty ports, The China Critic had the following message: “To them we say ‘Go home and scatter all your white man’s pride to the wind and remove your immigration discrimination against Asiatics and cultivate your goodwill for the Chinese people before you come to do business here.’” Australians must accept that “It is not for you to reform us, though you may think it is a ‘white man’s burden.’”

Much is known about Australian attitudes to Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. Little, however, has been written about how Asian populations viewed Australians. Australian salespeople and their commercial encounters in Shanghai provide one register through which these viewpoints can be excavated. The commercial activity of Australians was of more than passing interest to Chinese readers. The case of Mrs Johnson was not just yet another example of the hypocrisy of imperial rule dispensing harsh punishments to Chinese residents and lenient sentences to Europeans. Nor was it simply proof that white Australians dealt in opium as commonly as did their Chinese counterparts. Rather, Mrs Johnson’s contraband stood for, in Anna Tsing’s words, the “awkward, unequal, unstable and creative interconnection across difference” that occurs when economic transactions take on

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8 The seminal text remains David Walker’s Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999).

cultural significance.\textsuperscript{10} Sitting at the nefarious end of a network of goods and people moving on ships between Shanghai and Sydney, Perth and Manila every week, Mrs Johnson’s opium unstitched the façade of Australians’ national boundaries, its “great white walls” and its isolation from Asia.\textsuperscript{11} At a time when the White Australia Policy barred Asian migration to Australia, her trading exposed the divergence between the “fixity celebrated by nation-builders and the hyperactive movement that was at the heart of the economy and culture of the colonial world.”\textsuperscript{12} If Australians wanted to trade in Asia, and many economists thought Australia’s recovery from economic depression depended on selling Australian goods in the Eastern markets, then how could Australian claims to racial superiority, economic protectionism and cultural isolation be sustained?

The final chapter of this thesis argues that the presence and behaviour of Australian salespeople and traders in Depression-era Shanghai contributed to the development of Chinese anti-colonialism, thereby shaping how some Chinese thought about the relationship between class and race within the British Empire. Conversely, the reporting of Australian behaviour in Shanghai in Australian newspapers recast the ways in which Australians understood inter-colonial exchanges and their essential role in making Australian modernity and industrialisation possible. In recent years historians have begun interrogating connections between anti-colonial movements and the economic dislocations of the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Minutes of the Nations Advisory Committee on Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous Drugs, Minutes of the twelfth session, held at Geneva from 17 January to 2 February, 1929, Geneva (League of Nations: 1929); Joseph W. Esherick, ed., \textit{Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity 1900-1950} (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000).
\textsuperscript{13} Aric Putnam, ‘Ethiopia is Now: J.A. Rogers and the Rhetoric of Black Anti-colonialism During the Great Depression’, \textit{Rhetoric & Public Affairs} 10, no. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 419-444; “‘Blackbelt Millenium’": Rhetorical
Ann L. Foster’s work on the United States and Europe in Southeast Asia (1919-1941) has shown that the Great Depression served as a catalyst for numerous uprisings that challenged the colonial order. Large numbers of plantation workers from Java, Sumatra, Borneo, India and China lost their livelihoods after the price of rubber, rice, sugar, kapok, pepper and coffee fell by up to 50 per cent.\(^\text{14}\) In Nghe Tinh in Vietnam and in Saya San in Burma, protracted rebellions, involving thousands of people, began in 1930 and lasted until 1932: peasants staged demonstrations in front of the homes of French and British landowners, burnt down such symbols of power as pagodas and *dinh* (village communal temples), and intimidated local officials into relinquishing power.\(^\text{15}\) More than 1,300 rebels were killed by British troops across Burma’s twelve provinces and a further 125 were hanged by the British imperial government for their participation.\(^\text{16}\) Similar rebellions occurred in the Caribbean and in Africa between 1930 and 1932.\(^\text{17}\) Aric Putnam has demonstrated the domestic reverberations of these links for African Americans in Harlem, whose political culture became imbricated in African anti-colonial responses to Europe’s Great Depression.\(^\text{18}\) Pioneers of Indian Ocean historiography such as Sugata Bose have likewise established links between the Great Depression and anti-colonial nationalism in India.\(^\text{19}\)
While a link between Asian anti-colonialism and the Great Depression in Australia has not yet been made explicit, there is a changing historiography which positions interwar Australian history in a trans-national and trans-colonial frame. These new histories are especially attentive to global connections and knowledge transfers. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds show that the intellectual currents shaping racial inequality spun round the globe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that colonised peoples – from Australia to the United States, the Pacific, South Africa and India – responded to and shaped these currents. Fiona Paisley’s recovery of the trans-national context of interwar Australian feminism through the *Women’s Pan Pacific Congress* has equally emphasised the importance of global connections. Angela Woollacott has traced the increased mobility of Australian women travelling between Australia and London in the 1930s seeking work, sexual freedom and personal fulfilment. Colonial experiences of modernity were constituted in such interaction, Woollacott argues, with implications for the reproduction of racial hierarchy: “Whiteness travelled both discursively and materially between Australia and Britain, and its meanings were always reconfigured in these circulations.” Being colonial, being white and being modern in the 1930s, therefore, was a trans-colonial experience, understood by comparing and contrasting London and Australia, colony and metropole. Margaret Allen has uncovered the letters of Indian men, formerly resident in Australia, seeking to return to Australia after the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901. The fact that they were barred from doing so, she writes, reveals how white Australian expectations of mobility contrasted with

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the constructions of Indians as having no right to mobility.23 “The mobility of modernity,” she concludes, “was reserved for those deemed white.”24 Jill Matthews and Richard Waterhouse have made equally compelling arguments about the circulation of individuals and texts (magazines, jazz, dance styles) between America and Australia in this period. Indeed, as Matthews has written, Australian ways of being modern “never fit neatly within the boundaries of the nation continent but flow into and merge with the great international movement of things, people and ideas that was at the heart of the modern world.”25

This scholarship has done much to challenge nationalist histories which evoke an image of interwar Australia as a fixed and stable closed place, a “quarantine culture” as John F. Williams called it.26 More can be done, however, to explicate the link between economic and cultural change in colonial contexts of the 1920s and 1930s. Tony Ballantyne has suggested that one key tool for understanding this is the “question of circulation.”27 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have demonstrated the usefulness of “circulation” as a model for decentering Eurocentric histories of racial discourse.28 Ann Curthoys has drawn attention to the need for a broader vision of migratory flows in Australian history that encompasses trans-national

23 Margaret Allen, ‘Shadow Letters and the “Karnana” Letter: Indians Negotiate the White Australia Policy, 1901-21’, Life Writing 8, no. 2 (May 2011), p. 188.
25 Jill Matthews, Dance Hall and Picture Palace, p. 2.
interconnectedness, what Sunil Amrith has called “an archive of mobility.”

How did imperial regimes, global capitalism and modernity collide in the first half of the twentieth century and how can Australian history contribute to a better understanding of this process?

Following white Australians travelling to Shanghai during the Great Depression, and the fate of the goods they peddled, provides but a small step in this direction. These journeys can go some way to balancing histories that emphasise the often thwarted attempts of Chinese migrants to enter Australia, rather than white Australian desires to migrate to China. As Kate Bagnall has argued, there is a need to reimagine the migratory relationship between Australia and China through models which take into account the actions of white Australians “who maintained strong family or business connections with the Chinese communities in Australia or with those in China itself.”

While Australian missionaries and tourists in Asia have received much attention in recent scholarship, salespeople, labourers and traders have not. This gap points to a tendency in Australian history to assume that white Australians travelling to China were motivated by non-economic concerns such as religious calling, family-ties or a desire for adventure. Chinese migrants, on the other hand, are consistently depicted as travelling to Australia for materialistic reasons only; Australians in Asia were travellers and missionaries, Chinese in Australia were ‘coolies’ or labourers.

Although labour and economic perspectives have been integral to the study of the Great Depression, most Australian histories have tended towards a localised approach, with key

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questions revolving around political radicalisation and class-war in response to poverty.\textsuperscript{31}

While much has been written in Australian history about Communism and anti-British feeling during the Great Depression (through the rhetoric of Jack Lang, for example) few studies have reflected on the geographic reverberations of Australian unemployment for the wider Asian region.\textsuperscript{32} Histories of the Great Depression in settler societies have tended towards a careful rendering of the economic hardships of the white working class at the expense of the racially marginalised; Aboriginal workers, for instance, or treaty-port Chinese.\textsuperscript{33} Such an approach obscures the violence of colonial power just as it exposes the “dehumanising effects of the capitalist system.”\textsuperscript{34} Inara Walden and Victoria Haskins have shown how, during the depression years, Aboriginal girls as young as twelve were forcibly taken from missions to work as domestic servants in the city, often for paltry wages that were largely withheld by the State.\textsuperscript{35} In the same vein, Raymond Evans and Joanne Scott have exposed Aboriginal slavery on Queensland cattle stations during the depression. An official examination of fourteen


\textsuperscript{34} Lowenstein, \textit{Weevils in the Flour}, p. xi.

pastoral stations around the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1935 found that only one employee among fifty-eight Aboriginal women and children was being paid anything akin to ‘wages,’ while at Babbiloora station (near Augathella) inspectors witnessed Aboriginal children being horsewhipped and fed from slop-buckets. That many white Australians experienced severe hardship during the Depression is beyond question, but the ways in which their poverty had ripple effects for Indigenous people is rarely examined in the existing literature.

The circulation of poorer Australians around Asian port-cities in the 1930s had clear effects on native populations. Depression-like conditions were felt in Australia from 1927 onwards. Thousands of unemployed left their communities to find work elsewhere as economic strain worsened and Australia experienced the worst effects of the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The number of Australians in treaty-port China grew so significant that by 1934 the Lyons Government was forced to issue an official warning, dissuading Australians from travelling there without first having obtained employment. The British Consul-General in China had reported to the Commonwealth that “unemployment amongst British subjects in Shanghai [was] so serious, that persons who were contemplating going there from Australia in search of work should be warned not to do so.” Stowaways from Australia had been arriving in Shanghai but no work was available for them. The position had become desperate “owing to the number of British subjects already in Shanghai who are unemployed.”

36 Raymond Evans and Joanne Scott, ‘‘Fallen Among Thieves’’: Aboriginal Labour and State Control in Interwar Queensland’, p. 117.
Government asked the Lyons Government “to do what it can to stop Australians proceeding to China.”

By the mid-1930s an Anzac relief society had been established in Shanghai and Hong Kong “with the object of assisting Australians, particularly those who were destitute … providing them with their return passage money to Australia.” Its founder, Mr Pete Eardley, “warned Australians to think deeply before leaving for China on the prospect of securing work.”

We are not used to thinking of white Australians as sojourners, moving between Australia and China, but in the 1920s and 1930s they did, in significant numbers.

One result of this migration was the generation of a substantial archive in the files of the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) force. By 1930 Shanghai was the fifth biggest city in the world and its police force was substantial. Formed in 1854 by British Land Renters living in Shanghai under the extraterritorial provisions of the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing (the so-called ‘Unequal Treaties’), the SMP was administered by the British-run Shanghai Municipal Council.

Isabella Jackson argues that the SMP was the most potent symbol of British imperial authority in Shanghai’s changing political landscape in the 1930s, where “Britain’s formal and informal empires constantly overlapped and intersected,” and where American and Japanese influence was on the ascendancy.

Thanks largely to the recent work of Bickers and Jackson, we now know a lot more about the men and women who staffed the Shanghai Police Force, the “deskwallahs” or “servants of empire,” as Alan Lester and David

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40 ‘Not Wanted, Australian Stowaways, Warning from Shanghai’, Cairns Post (3 January 1934), p. 5.
44 Isabella Jackson, ‘The Raj on Nanjing Road: Sikh Policeman in Treaty-Port Shanghai’, Modern Asian Studies (forthcoming 2012), p. 1. I am grateful to Isabella Jackson for generously sharing the manuscript of her article with me.
Lambert have described them.\textsuperscript{45} The SMP was comprised of British, Sikh and Chinese officers with rates of pay defined by ethnicity, not aptitude.\textsuperscript{46} While Sikh constables were recruited directly from the Punjab, from 1885, Chinese constables were principally from northern China, local men being seen as inferior. British recruits were brought directly from England.\textsuperscript{47} As the numbers of destitute Australians in Shanghai grew in the 1920s and 1930s so too did the number of files on Australians in the ‘special branch’ files of the SMP archives. The special branch of the SMP was charged with providing an orderly environment for Shanghai's foreign trade and commerce. Carrying out its duties required “the timely gathering of information on areas of potential instability that might threaten Shanghai's economic development and political calm.”\textsuperscript{48} The period covered by these files extends from 1894 to 1945 and the special branch dossier files, which date from 1929 to 1945, provide the most extensive coverage.

European claims to sovereignty under the treaty port system were tenuous and unclear, and British extraterritoriality in Shanghai was no exception. With the end of the Opium War in 1842, Shanghai began a 106-year period of foreign occupation, described as ‘semi-colonialism.’ European powers leased or were ceded land to the city’s north and west, laying the base for what was to become known as the International Settlement and the French Concession. Recognisably European settlements with distinctively Western architectural

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\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, p. 5; By 1930 there were 511 European officers in the force, 691 Sikhs and 3,477 Chinese.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p. 9.
}
features evolved rapidly, eventually overwhelming the old Chinese city. The original intention was to exclude Chinese and other foreigners from this area, and the first set of land regulations in 1845 prohibited the native inhabitants from selling or renting land or houses.\footnote{China- Foreign Concession NAA A981/4 CHIN 61; ‘China’ NAA A981/4 CHIN 80 PART 2; ‘Trade with China,’ NAA A595/2 BT1923/1195.} Foreigners, however, claimed the right under Article 8 of the Treaty of Bogue to rent land on the same terms as the English so that the British settlement became occupied by foreigners of all nationalities.\footnote{China- Foreign Concession NAA A981/4 CHIN 61.} The number of foreigners grew rapidly in Shanghai, reaching 100,000 by 1930.\footnote{Betty Peh-T'I Wei, Old Shanghai (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 26.} While Chinese were initially excluded from the International Settlement, by 1915 more than 620,000 were living there.\footnote{Byrna Goodman, ‘Improvisations on a Semicolonial Theme, or, How to Read a Celebration of Transnational Urban Community’, Journal of Asian Studies 59, no. 4 (November 2000), p. 892.} Although it was by no means implied in the text of the treaties that the foreigners should be allowed to set up their own municipal administration in the areas set apart for their residence, “the convention was firmly implanted and had been acted upon during two-hundred years of intercourse at Canton, that the foreigners should be responsible for managing their own affairs.”\footnote{China- Foreign Concession NAA A981/4 CHIN 61.} From this same idea sprang extra-territoriality, a slippery diplomatic invention and derogation of Chinese sovereignty. The establishment of a police force on Chinese territory and in the presence of treaties whereby the Emperor of China had guaranteed protection to the strangers within his gates was recognised by international law to be “a step strictly speaking untenable.”\footnote{Goodman, ‘Improvisations on a Semicolonial Theme’, p. 892.} Shanghai was not a colony like Hong Kong, but the Chinese in Shanghai were treated like colonial subjects.\footnote{Bickers, Empire Made Me, p. 40.} European communities in Shanghai justified the existence of institutions like the SMP with arguments anchored in the urban landscape; the Europeans had “made Shanghai” they argued, and now
European forms of governance, like the police force, helped keep the city stable through a commitment to “law and order” and the delivery of “a higher standard of living.”

Special branch officers from the SMP began surveillance on some Australian suspects from the 1920s resulting in a rare glimpse of the day-to-day life of these men and women through urban streetscapes, into cabaret bars and up staircases to (what were often quite derelict) boarding houses. Within the pages of these files are newspaper cuttings spanning publications from London, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Durban and Melbourne in both Chinese and English. This chapter examines SMP files concerning Australian salespeople, traders and their associates only. Restricting examination to this group of Australians whose commercial encounters failed facilitates serious treatment of commercial encounters between Australians and Chinese. What I suggest is that these commercial encounters had the potential to influence Chinese and Australian perceptions of colonial and racial difference. These encounters can show us how economic exchange led to trans-colonial knowledge transfer.

It is worth pausing here to comment on the somewhat ambiguous distinction between ‘Australians’ and ‘Britons’ in the interwar years. Historians have established that most Australians identified themselves as ‘British’ in the first half of the twentieth century. “In-so-far as they were members of a ‘white’ Dominion,” argues Lachlan Strahan, “most Australians in Shanghai still saw themselves as Britishers.” How, then, were local Chinese or SMP officers to distinguish an ‘Australian’ from an ‘Englishman’? While some Australians might have been unwilling or unlikely to call themselves ‘Australian’, SMP officers took a different

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57 Lachlan Strahan, Australia’s China: changing perceptions from the 1930s to the 1990s (Hong Kong: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 102.
view, clearly identifying suspects as Australian, and not British. They were not alone. Other sections of Shanghai’s population (White Russians or Jewish refugees for example), and for the purposes of this chapter, the local Chinese majority, regularly drew distinctions between Britons and Australians. Some Australians, including for example Victorian horse salesman Rex Phillips, arrived in Shanghai as ‘British’, but later identified as Australian after being excluded from British social circles where he was referred to as a "mafoo" (a stable hand). The ways in which the word ‘Australian’ was invoked in these cases highlights the crucial role played by class divisions in the construction of colonial categories, as well as the politics of location in the generation of colonial cultures. Privilege and whiteness in Shanghai were never exclusively racial prerogatives. Chinese newspapers for example, in their reporting of Mrs Johnson’s arrest for narcotics dealing, were quick to point out her Australian-ness and the convict associations of this Australian-ness (“that place where Britain sent her prisoners after the American war”).

There has been much debate among scholars as to the proper definition of British imperialism in China. Chinese historians have traditionally used the Maoist/Marxist definition of ‘semi-colonialism’ but some have begun recently to reconsider the nature of semi-colonialism in China’s treaty ports. Ruth Rogaski has coined the term hyper-colony for the treaty port of

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59 Ibid.
60 Ibid, p. 102. See, for example, Bryna Goodman, ‘Improvisations on a Semicolonial Theme, or, How to Read a Celebration of Transnational Urban Community’, pp. 889-926.
Tianjin. “Tianjin’s status as a hyper-colony,” she argues, “placed Chinese urban dwellers under the gaze – and sometimes the control – of several different imperial powers. At the same time this condition offered the Chinese a perspective on several variant models of urban modernity and colonial ideology.” By invoking the term ‘Australian’ and by rejecting Australian goods, Chinese locals in Shanghai allow us to view the complexity of Indigenous agency in a “hyper-colonial” context. This use of the term ‘Australian’ further reveals how national categories of difference functioned against and in the service of colonial categories. Fan’ti Fan has suggested the term “cultural borderlands” as a way of formulating the overlap of conflicting nationalist, colonial and cultural categories in Chinese treaty port contexts. “As historical investigators we should not leave such conventional categories as East/West and Chinese/European unexamined,” Fan argues, “[f]or these were not fixed entities, but products of boundary drawing and power negotiations among historical actors.” Therefore, when historical subjects employed such cognitive categories as Chinese, Australian or white to classify themselves, Fan argues, we should ask how they defined these categories and how these categories became stabilised in a particular historical context.

As we shall see aspiring Australian salespeople in Shanghai found their claims to racial and cultural superiority highly disputed. So too was the ‘modernity’ of the goods they had for sale. Chinese newspapers depicted Australian goods as poor quality, ‘backward’ and

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62 Ibid, pp. 11-12.
64 Ibid, p. 229.
Some Chinese consumers refused to buy Australian products, citing the White Australia Policy as a form of imperialist humiliation directed towards Chinese citizens. For some Chinese journalists in Shanghai, invoking the category of ‘Australian’ denoted convict characteristics and criminality and was a form of anti-colonial critique against British imperialism. Reports in Australian newspapers about the difficulties experienced by Australian salespeople in China were critical of Australian attitudes towards Chinese migrants and argued that Australian modernisation and industrialisation depended on trade with the East. Rumours circulated by salespeople themselves, both in Shanghai, and on their return to Australia, made their way into government memoranda, alarming policy makers bent on conquering ‘Eastern markets.’ The existence of these dispersed archives, in both Australia and China, provides a means by which I can address one of the pervading tensions of empire in interwar Australia: the relationship between working-class aspirations for social mobility and the exclusionary and discriminatory practices of white settler societies. The conflicted encounters of the individuals I trace through these archives suggest that the relationship between being modern and being colonial between the wars was co-constituted in Australia and Asia. The impact of Australian activities on local Asian populations highlights the need to “reintegrate national postcolonial histories into a broader imperial framework.”

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Phyllis Dowling was a country girl who some thought, “would never do much good.” She was seventeen and had come from Condobolin to Sydney. She first stayed with her sister at Lindfield but moved to a boarding house at 98 Victoria Street, Woolloomooloo. On 16 September 1916, two older women, Maud Nicol, aged 36, and May Camps, 27, were charged with conspiracy to procure Phyllis to become a common prostitute. Nicol had met Phyllis for lunch at the top of William Street and there had outlined their plan. The ‘Changsha’ was about to leave for Shanghai and she hoped Phyllis would agree to go aboard, to join the household of one Miss Hooper in Shanghai, where “wonderful and rich times” were promised.

Long before the Great Depression, the clandestine movements of aspiring Australians like Phyllis Dowling linked Australia and treaty port Asia in a commercial network from below, often invisible in official diplomatic accounts of the period. Steamship services between Australia and Asian entry ports like Shanghai dated back to 1831, although regular passenger services did not begin until the 1850s. By the 1920s the three best-known steam ships moving between the Australian East Coast and China were the Taiping, the Changte and the Changsha, memorialised on advertisements, post cards and posters to be found pasted on street corners of Woolloomooloo or behind glass frames in Shanghai hotel lobbies: “A-O Lines, ‘Changsha and Taiping,’ Australia-Manila-Philippine Islands – Hong Kong-China-Japan.” While many Australians may have feared an invasion of ‘yellow’ workers from China in the 1920s, there were a great many who had no such concerns travelling there

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71 ‘A & O Liners “Changsha” and “Taiping”’, postcard c1930, State Library of Victoria, H95.53/7.
themselves, legally or otherwise, especially to prosperous port towns like Shanghai. For those Australians in contact with wharf labourers such as brothel madams like Maud Nicol and May Camps, information about the movements, cargo and personnel of the Changsha and Taiping were easy to procure, and stowaways on these routes were common. The tangle of streets that spread upwards from Australian wharf-districts (Woolloomooloo in Sydney, the Docklands in Melbourne) were dotted with popular brothels, the destination of some of Mrs Johnson’s narcotics which came off the Changsha in 1933. French and American sailors working on the Sydney-Manila-Shanghai-Kobe route in 1932 told journalist Henry Champly that they regularly helped women get to Shanghai. 72 “They’re ex-shop girls and ex-typists,” Marcel B told Champly, “[These] women, I know how to talk to them.” 73 For anyone interested in making the journey, interwar Shanghai promised adventure and escape but also economic opportunity. “Girl’s Million Dollar Job,” read an article in The Sydney Morning Herald in 1927, “girl bank clerk who reached Sydney on Saturday in the liner Eastern, has just come from a job in Shanghai where she earned £37 a month! She did her shopping in suitcases!” 74

73 Ibid, p. 166.
As Marilyn Lake and Kate Bagnall have shown, Australia’s early nation-builders feared potential contamination – physical, cultural and commercial – brought about by interactions between white Australians and Asian peoples. But like many of the possibilities set up by settler colonial nationalism, these nation-builders could not control the unpredictable ways in which commercial relationships took shape post-Federation. Raelene Frances’ work on prostitution and the White Australia Policy has revealed how Australian authorities used their arbitrary power under the policy to not only control the movements of racial others but also women deemed to be prostitutes, proof of “the increasingly narrow definition of White

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Australia between the world wars.”

As Frances has shown, officials were shocked at the number of women connected to prostitution rings who moved in and out of Australia in the 1920s and 1930s, some on their way to Shanghai.

Rumours of work in Shanghai circulating in wharf districts intersected with more official information about treaty port Asia provided by business magazines like *Rydges Business Journal* and in monographs published by the *Institute of Pacific Relations*. *Rydges Business Journal* in particular had a wide circulation and was available at Salvation Army Halls, employment bureaus and YMCA offices in Australian cities and townships. As David Walker has shown, the early twentieth century saw calls for the development of a marketing culture in Australia, sensitive to the changing tastes and requirements of Asian consumers and able to tap into the fascination with the close and alluring Eastern Markets. A sharp rise in unemployment in Australia after 1927, when the price of wool and wheat plummeted, made the exploration of these new “frontiers of trade” all the more pressing.

There is “a wave of optimism regarding the future of Australia’s commerce with the Far East,” wrote John Shepherd in his 1939 Institute of Pacific Relations monograph *Australia’s Interests and Policies in the Far East*. The Australian Government set up a Federal Advisory Committee on Eastern Trade in 1928 and sent Sir Herbert Gepp, founder of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the government’s chief advisor on

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76 Raelene Frances, “‘White Slaves’ and White Australia: Prostitution and Australian Society’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 19, no. 44 (July 2004), pp. 185-200.
industrialisation and modernisation, to Hong Kong and Shanghai. In 1930, H Gordon Bennett joined a cacophony of voices in *Rydes Business Journal* urging Australians to try their luck in Asian treaty ports: “The treaty ports of China are not only residential; they are distributing centres for foreign trade,” Bennett told readers. He described “privileged conditions for Australians” in cities where guidance from white colonists was not only welcome but needed. “Under foreign guidance railways have been built, mines dug, factories opened and companies formed.” As Maud Nicol and May Camps assured Phyllis Dowling before she boarded the Changsha, ‘wonderful and rich times’ awaited.

![Figure 8.2 ‘Scene on a Wharf in Shanghai 1920-1930.’ Source: Bishop, Joseph and Family Collection, University of Melbourne Archives UMA/1/4545](image)

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81 ‘Australian Trade with China, the East & the Pacific Islands General’, NAA CP703/5/23/A5131.
83 Ibid, p. 104.
Even in the depths of the Great Depression, freighters and passenger vehicles were constantly coming and going from Shanghai: they entered China by the mouth of the Yangze then turned into the Whangpoo River, around which the city sprawled.\textsuperscript{84} Shanghai in the 1930s was a confusing place “with the most complex system of local government imaginable.”\textsuperscript{85} Its physical layout, social composition, industry and government structures were all products of China’s encounter with nineteenth-century imperialism. Before the Western incursion in the nineteenth century, it was a modestly prosperous country regional capital with a growing importance as an entrepot in the interregional trade with Jiangnan – a fertile, wealthy region south of the lower reaches of the Yangze River in which Shanghai itself was located. Physically, it was a small, walled town which had no room to accommodate the foreigners who were permitted to reside there from 1842, following the Opium War. The foreign powers, therefore, leased or were ceded land to the city’s north and west, laying the base for what became known as the International Settlement and the French Concession. Recognisably European settlements with distinctively Western architectural features evolved with remarkable rapidity, eventually overwhelming the old Chinese city in size and importance.\textsuperscript{86} Spatial divisions within the city reflected colonial hierarchies and were enforced on the basis of race. These racially defined barriers were stronger in Shanghai than, for example, in Sumatra, and were reinforced by social and sexual taboos.\textsuperscript{87} For over sixty years, before June 1928, most Chinese were barred from Shanghai’s parks, administered by the Shanghai Municipal Council. Rumours circulated that one sign outside Huangpu Park read “Chinese and Dogs Not Admitted,” an insult which took on particular potency in translation as the

\textsuperscript{84} Antonia Finnane, \textit{Far from Where? Jewish Journeys from Shanghai to Australia} (Carlton: University of Melbourne Press, 1999), p. 37.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, p. 58.
phrase ‘dog’ (*gou*) already had racist overtones in Chinese, having long been used by Han Chinese to deride members of ethnic minorities.\(^8\)

The population of Shanghai at large, including the foreign concessions, was overwhelmingly Chinese, but the Chinese themselves were a highly diversified group. True natives of Shanghai were rare. This was pre-eminently an immigrant city, and the Chinese clustered in occupational and residential groups characterised by regional origin and dialect. The wealthy merchants were typically from Canton and Ningpo; the rickshaw drivers, street girls and gangsters were more likely to be from districts north of the Yangze. The former lived alongside wealthy foreigners in the French concession, the latter alongside poor foreigners in Hongkew – in the northern part of the International Settlement – or further away in Chapei, which was under Chinese local government. These ‘poor foreigners’ were mostly White Russians rendered stateless by the Bolshevik Revolution or Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe. As Robert Bickers has argued, the Chinese were quite alive to the quasi-colonial pecking order in Shanghai, and some learned to “scorn the stateless white Russians and Jewish refugees who were no better off than many of their poorer compatriots.”\(^9\) Joining this awkward population of ‘poor foreigners’ during the 1920s and 1930 was a rapidly expanding community of Australians.

While Depression-era Shanghai was, indeed, a city in which to buy and sell, it was also a place in which the act of sale and purchase was riddled with subtle colonial and anti-colonial meanings. The successful development of Shanghai’s commerce and industry, and society

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and culture, required engagement, cohabitation and dialogue between Chinese and Western elites in the city. But by the 1920s and 1930s, boycotts of foreign ‘imperialist’ goods by Chinese student and union groups were growing increasingly common. An emerging consumer culture defined and spread modern Chinese nationalism through the National Products Movement or *Guohuo Yundong* which saw popular boycotts of Japanese and British products significantly damage the commercial operations of major foreign companies like the British-American tobacco company. China was not the only country to attempt to nationalise its consumer culture in the early twentieth century. The *swadeshi* and non-cooperation movements in India (1904-8, 1920-22) were also directed against imperialist rule. During the height of the National Products Movement in the 1930s, merchants who sold “the national products of foreign devils” *Yanguizi de Guohuo* regularly had their shop windows smashed by radical student groups like the Iron and Blood society. Karl Gerth argues that popular nationalism in Republican-era China moulded a consumer culture by applying the categories of ‘national’, ‘foreign’ and ‘imperial’ to all commodities, creating in effect ‘treasonous’ and ‘patriotic’ products. Such categories, Gerth suggests, had eugenic and racialised overtones. One participant in the Women’s National Products Year of 1934 suggested that Chinese women who bought foreign goods should be labelled prostitutes because they degraded their bodies by ‘consuming’ imports.

Karl Gerth and Ruth Rogaski write of the National Products Movement as part of a wider “moral fear” in China to do with perceptions of a “Chinese deficiency” resulting from the

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92 Ibid, p. 5.
93 Ibid, p. 3.
view that the Chinese nation was the ‘Sick Man of Asia.’ These views were most potently expressed in the New Life Movement which aimed to “regenerate” the Chinese people through the acceptance of commitment to a code of behaviour based on the Confucian virtues of Li (propriety), Yi (uprightness), Lian (integrity) and Chi (shame). These virtues found their practical application in all aspects of people’s everyday lives, such as their choice of food, clothing, shelter and activities. Proponents of the New Life Movement sought to improve Chinese sanitation and public manners in urban space (“spitting and burping in public” for example) making explicit a connection between “orderly manners” and a strong Chinese nation capable of resisting imperialism. Politicians involved in the New Life Movement worried that trade deficits and “new western consumer lifestyles exemplified by opium dens and addicts” perpetuated the image of China as backward, becoming a barrier to development and national “strength.” Intellectuals feared the loss of sovereignty implicit in the growing foreign dominance of the commercial economy. The New Life Movement and the National Products Movement of the 1920s and 1930s articulated a grammar of modernity and citizenship in China which found material form in boycotting British and ‘Empire’ products, and adhering to strict codes of behaviour in public areas.

Australians were thus arriving in China in large numbers at a time of heightened sensitivity among local Chinese over consumer choice, and a growing belief that Western commodity culture in Chinese treaty ports symbolised lost sovereignty. The promoters of the ‘Eastern

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95 Ibid, p. 40; Ruth Rogaski, Hygienic Modernity, p. 11, 302.
Markets’ in Australia were accurate in their depiction of treaty port Shanghai as an economic hub. What their enthusiastic calls to trade failed to acknowledge however, was the intensity and strength of Chinese anti-colonial feeling in Shanghai, increasingly expressed through the agency of Chinese consumers. The boosters of Asian trade in Australia implied that Australian salespeople in China would be welcomed as civilisers. Not only would their labour be valued, one Rydges Business Journal argues, it would be a form of “commercial intelligence.”99 “There is no commercial education in China – we can bring it,” wrote J R Hinterland in 1931.100 As Phillipa Levine has reminded us, “Colonial assumptions about the west’s role, or more literally, the British role, as modernisers, and about the Orient as a corrupt and degraded backwater shaped around opposition” are fundamental to appreciating European imperial intervention in China.101

It is impossible to know if these optimistic visions of commercial triumph had in any way influenced the decision of one Allan Willoughby Raymond to migrate from Australia to Shanghai in search of work. Born in Melbourne on 27 February 1909, Raymond’s SMP file dated his arrival in Shanghai to 1929, but precisely when and how he arrived there from Melbourne is unclear.102 In the early 1930s he lived in a boarding house near Bubbling Well Rd in Shanghai where he rented a room with an Australian piano player named Harry Kerry,

aged 46, who was mostly unemployed but worked in various local bands playing in “cabarets, cafes etc.” In 1930 Kerry already had a police file for drunken behaviour and non-payment of debts. “He indulges in alcoholic bouts from time to time and is quite unfit for work on these occasions,” police noted in Kerry’s surveillance file. “He is now unwanted for bands and can only get employment as a solo player.” The boarding house in which Kerry and Raymond lived enjoyed a poor reputation among both local Chinese and European residents. SMP officers called the Kinvig boarding house on 30 Weihaiwei Rd “[a] disgraceful, unsanitary institution and a hotbed of gambling and Bolshevism.” Its owner, Marion Maud Kinvig, was born in Sydney on 24 December 1878. She came to the attention of the SMP after “attempting to conduct the premises as a gambling establishment.” SMP police officers noted her possession of a British passport issued at Batavia on 15 February 1928 and her arrival in Shanghai from Java in February 1930. Marion Kinvig was just one of many Australians identified by British police constables during the SMP crack-down on gambling in 1929.

The presence of these Australians and the ways in which they lived could make the British-dominated administration’s hold over Shanghai’s International Settlement seem increasingly fragile. Australians had to tailor their poverty to Shanghai’s high costs, often transgressing

103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
108 Jackson, ‘The Raj on Nanjing Road’, p. 11.
the norms of the broader white community: marrying or cohabiting with Asian, Eurasian or Russian women; living in Chinese housing; and working with or for Chinese. In contrast to British India, the Shanghai Municipal Council was ill-equipped to deal with problem populations of whites. Distressed British subjects could be shipped home, criminals could be deported to Hong Kong after serving their time and dismissed policemen could be refused their superannuation unless they took it back to Britain. However, poverty and destitution could not be hidden.\textsuperscript{109} A series of interviews conducted by Antonia Finnane with members of the Shanghai Jewish community who were evacuated to Australia during WWII document the conditions experienced by some Australians in Shanghai’s boarding houses. These were often crowded. This was due in the first instance to the poverty of the inhabitants. “On the ground you would find dead babies wrapped in these bamboo mats,” Hilda Weininger remembered. “There were beggars without limbs. For me it was a terrible experience.”\textsuperscript{110} Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Shanghai had one of the highest rates of exposed street corpses in the world. Christian Henriot’s research on the Shanghai Municipal Council’s morgue files found that over 5000 bodies per month were picked up off Shanghai streets in the early 1930s. “These figures and these numbers show that there was almost no way for an ordinary Shanghai resident during these years to escape the view of dead children and adults lying in the streets or alleyways.”\textsuperscript{111} Kitty Brodtmann’s neighbours were a Chinese family of eight, all living in one room. Paul Wagenberg had a Chinese friend who worked in a rice shop, whose job was to stand behind the bars protecting the front of the shop and poke people away with a stick so that only one customer was served at a time. In return for this service he was allowed to sleep

\textsuperscript{110} Antonia Finnane, \textit{Far from Where: Jewish Journeys from Shanghai to Australia}, p. 116.
on the shop counter at night, but his mother and siblings all slept on the street.\textsuperscript{112} Australian horse trader Rex Phillips did not tell his family in Melbourne about his living conditions until they had improved: “I am much more happy these days because I have got a district, and the best District in Shanghai at that, namely:- Bubbling Well. It’s a clean district with good class work.”\textsuperscript{113} The combination of war in Europe and the Great Depression meant that many whites in Shanghai began living in similar urban conditions to the Chinese majority, complicating the class and labour dynamics of the city. The Kinvig boarding house was no exception and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Chinese slum districts.\textsuperscript{114} One of the reasons SMP police could distinguish Australians from other whites was because Australians congregated with other Australians in well-known boarding houses, like the Kinvig residence. Boarding-house living solidified an association between Australian urban dwellers in Shanghai and criminal activity.

Allan Raymond’s early attempts at trade met in failure. He tried to sell imported Australian goods to Chinese local shops but this business never succeeded. We can only speculate as to why this was. Significant anti-imperialist boycotts of British goods occurred in Shanghai in 1931. Karl Gerth argues that these boycotts were the most visible – and the most violent – manifestation of anti-foreigner sentiment in China at the time.\textsuperscript{115} Li Jianhong, a participant in the boycotts, described his feelings in a National Products Movement pamphlet in 1925, “Chinese history is replete with humiliations at the hands of foreigners … indeed, in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[\textsuperscript{112}] Ibid, p. 117.
\item[\textsuperscript{113}] Papers of Rex, Clarence and Madge Phillips, 1924–1946 Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia, MS 9942.
\item[\textsuperscript{115}] Karl Gerth, \textit{China Made}, p. 126.
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commercial affairs, not a day passes without the continuation of evil hegemonic policies
directed against China.”  
Shopkeepers were urged to tell customers who asked for imported
products: “I’m sorry, we don’t have foreign products, we only have national products.”  
The 1930s was not, therefore, an ideal time to begin selling Australian goods in China. “There is
not a house in Asia that is sympathetic to Australian produce,” declared trader J. B. Suttor,
“Australia has an awful name in China … In Shanghai the Australia trade is shrinking.”  
Files in the National Archives of Australia, containing photographs of Australian goods being
readied for export to China and Japan, are informative. Australian dried fruit was arranged
to look like the various symbols of the British Monarchy or in a Union Jack formation. Fruit
tins were labelled “White Peaches of Empire” and also displayed the Union Jack. Taking their
cue from the iconography popular at Empire Exhibitions, these labels extended the theatrical
pageantry of Empire into a trans-colonial consumer culture. The didactics of this theatre were
about power, and the ways in which the power of empire “could reach out over distance, can
have permanence even without presence” as when “the Tamil coolie quenches his thirst with
an emptied British milk tin, or the naked piccaninni clutches a milk bottle made in Leeds.”
In this way the labels of Australian-made products were potentially offensive to Chinese
customers and used symbols increasingly associated with the very imperialist processes
Chinese consumers were in the process of boycotting.

117 Karl Gerth, China Made, p. 127.
118 ‘Trade and Finance, Australia’s Awful Name’, Western Mail (30 November 1922), p. 17.
119 ‘Advertising, Subsidies to Industries for Advertising’ A2489/1/1920/3344.
Commercial encounters between salesmen such as Allan Raymond and Chinese traders were structured on various levels by economic rituals which concealed the operation of colonial power behind the fiction of an exchange between equals. Under the conditions of colonial governance in China, commercial encounters between whites and Chinese were never simple financial transactions. For many Chinese, by the 1930s, these exchanges symbolised their humiliation under imperial rule. While established European, Japanese and American traders may have been aware of these dynamics, newly arrived Australian traders were not. When Australians moved to Shanghai, they brought with them a dense set of derogatory cultural stereotypes about China dating back to the gold rushes of the 1860s and perhaps earlier. As Marilyn Lake and many others have argued, the racism provoked in such settler societies as
Australia by Chinese migration was virulent, resulting not only in restrictions on Chinese immigration to Australia, but also the proliferation of anti-Chinese cultural tropes and ways of thinking. In some ways, a large part of identifying as an Australian nationalist was synonymous with identifying as anti-Chinese. So we can perhaps assume that salesmen like Allan Raymond would likely have presumed his superiority over local Chinese in ways unhelpful to any business venture.

After Allan Raymond’s import and export business failed, he sought out increasingly menial forms of employment. But manual work was also hard to find. Shanghai had a large, unskilled labour force. It was rare for Europeans to be able to compete successfully with the poorly paid Chinese in the Shanghai labour market. Jewish refugee Paul Wagenberg, who would later settle in Melbourne where he was interviewed by Antonia Finnane in 1998, was clearly surprised by the sight of one young man, “a white man – white was a big thing of course as compared to the Chinese: everybody was racist – and he was going round and round pulling a stone mill all day long, grinding coal into dust from which later briquettes were made.” This was the lowest form of labour, equivalent to grinding rice, which among the Chinese was performed by those of the lowest social class. Unable to find work in European companies, Raymond sought employment in Chinese businesses. From 1932 to 1935 he was employed by Chinese businessman Jacob Wong of the Shanghai Marble Co on Jin Kiang Road as a foreign salesman and correspondent.

123 Antonia Finnane, Far From Where?: Jewish Journeys from Shanghai to Australia, p. 82.
124 Ibid, p. 82.
In 1935 Wong moved his business to 437 Singapore Rd but dispensed with the services of Raymond. However, he allowed Raymond the use the address and he established a firm known as the Metropolitan Marble Co on the premises. “Raymond acted in the capacity of broker and took orders and commissions for stone work some of which he failed to fill although receiving the money in advance. By 1937 Raymond’s business was practically non-existent and he had accumulated a number of debts including unpaid chits at the Shanghai Race Club where he was a member and ardent race follower.”¹²۵ Police wrote of his “spendthrift nature and his fondness for luxuries, insofar as whenever he brought off a good business deal he would squander the money on gambling and pleasure seeking. In this respect there have been occasions when his client’s money became indistinguishable from his own.”¹²⁶ He went to Wusieh where he took over the job of protecting a Chinese factory there. He was next heard of in Hong Kong “where after an incident connected with the running of a pony at the Macau Races which was witnessed by the Stewards of the Hong Kong jockey club, Raymond was warned off the Course at Hong Kong.”¹²⁷ He subsequently returned to Shanghai where he was homeless for a time before applying for funds at the local office of the Anzac Relief Society.

SMP biographies and surveillance files wrote the lives of Australians in Shanghai into a ‘tragic narrative’ or a ‘narrative of decline.’ Reports on Australians were peppered with a logic which assumed the predictability of Australian business failure, financial distress and moral corruption once immersed in treaty port life. These narratives tell us more about British

¹²⁶ Ibid.
¹²⁷ Ibid.
attitudes to the category ‘Australian’ between the wars than they do about the lived reality of Australians in Shanghai. For the various authors of Allan Raymond’s surveillance file, Australians had a penchant for criminality.”

128 Australians were often an embarrassment for SMP constables “inevitably losing” when gambling or boxing or “predictably drunk” and out of work.129 As their lives unfold in SMP files, Australians are presented as out of place in Shanghai and as symbols of the weakening of white power in the East. Such anxieties were also reflected at higher levels, in the correspondence between the Australian Government and the British Government over a possible ban on Australians entering Shanghai in the 1930s.130

Raymond was one of many Australians to experience downward social mobility after his arrival in Shanghai. Uschi Hirche remembered unemployed Europeans patronising her father’s tailor shop on Hongkew: “They were very poor. If they had a suit that got shiny, they couldn’t afford to buy a new suit. They had to reverse it, inside out. And we always said, ‘I’m sorry’ when they came back with the suit: ‘That hasn’t got a third side. That’s the end of the suit.’”

131 SMP Police noted a worrying propensity among Australians to slide into criminality. Jack Boyle (alias Nick Boyle), a native of Newcastle “sponges on his friends for support and sometimes takes part in boxing matches, invariably losing,” wrote DSI Laurier in a Special Branch report in 1937.132 After his ‘import and export’ business went bust, Boyle worked on

128 Ibid.
130 ‘Commercial Intelligence, China’, NAA A11804/1/1927/47.
131 Antonia Finnane, Far From Where? Jewish Journeys from Shanghai to Australia, p. 86.
the Shanghai & Hongkew wharf for a time. However, he was discharged from this position "owing to malfeasance." Police reports show he was brought to Shanghai’s central police station for being drunk and while there overnight kicked through a portion of the wire netting of the detention cell. Later, at the insistence of the Anzac society, he was sent to Hong Kong for the purpose of joining the Royal Navy but he appeared before the Naval Authorities there in such a drunken state that he had to be sent away. “Boyle is a waster and habitual drunkard and practically unemployable”, wrote DSI Laurier. “He has no fixed abode at present and is believed to be sleeping out, or in cheap Chinese lodging houses … During his stay in Shanghai he was associated with the worst element.”

By 1932 the ‘problem’ of Australians in Shanghai was the subject of correspondence between British and Australian authorities. The British Government hoped to stem the tide of Australians into the city by requesting Australian authorities to issue an official warning. It wasn’t only that Australians were becoming increasingly burdensome on the police and consular bureaucracies; as recipients of white privilege, Australians also threatened to undermine its power. Unemployed Australians in the city exposed some of the contradictions inherent in imperial rule. Unlike resident Chinese, Australians could lay claim to some of the highest institutional rights to mobility and commerce the city had to offer. Using their passports they could enter any of the city’s European concessions freely, and could trade at a lower tax rate than Chinese locals and stateless Europeans. Eddie Welham, who moved to Melbourne from Shanghai’s Hongkey Jewish Ghetto in 1941, remembered the strange case of

Ibid.  
Ibid.
Eddie Moyhing whom he met in a British camp in Shanghai after the Japanese invasion in 1939. “Eddie Moyhing, who is Chinese, absolutely pure Chinese. So you say to yourself, how come he’s in a British camp? It was because his father was born in Australia: he might have been a descendant of the gold miners. His father being born in Australia, he had an Australian passport. In those days Australians held British passports, highly prized.” The flow of Australians into Shanghai in the thirties posed significant challenges for the imperial authorities – at a time when mobility within Empire, and between ‘white man’s country’ and other colonial sites, were contested issues. How to manage working-class Australians who washed up in the world of treaty-port China was a complex issue.

The case of Jack Edward Ivers illustrates this broader dilemma. Ivers was born in the small settlement of St Armand, Victoria in 1905. He arrived in Shanghai about September 1926 from Sydney, and soon earned for himself the reputation “of being an absolute waster.” He was also suspected “of being a pimp.” After his import and export business went badly he did not obtain any regular employment and in March 1927, applied at the local office of the Anzac Relief Society for assistance. Arrangements were made to send him back to Australia and a passage was booked for him to Hong Kong on the S. Rwaltapindi. However he failed to embark when the vessel sailed. Ivers then began a relationship with a Russian prostitute named Mrs Pelagine L Kovenko. He lived with her for some time but on 4 August 1927 the couple argued. Four soldiers interfered and Ivers was evicted from the premises. He was later

137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
arrested on a British Supreme Court warrant and charged with five cases of obtaining money by fraud and false pretences. He was found guilty and was sentenced to be kept in custody until he was put on board a vessel bound for Australia.

However, he did not remain away from Shanghai for any lengthy period:

On 26 January 1928 he was arrested on North Szechuen Road for carrying unlicensed firearms. He appeared before the British Court on 27 January 1928 and was sentenced to one month’s imprisonment with hard labor, the pistol and immunities found in his possession to be confiscated by the SMP. Upon his release from prison Ivers again became associated with Mrs Pelagine L Kovenko, and as he was unemployed he lived on money supplied to him by her. Mrs. Kovenko at that time was an inmate of a brothel at 2 Fearson Road. In October 1927 she became one of the licenses of the premises but did not change her mode of living. She was trying to marry Ivers hoping that by doing so she would be able to enter Australia with him.

During June 1928 Ivers and Mrs Kovenko made applications to marry at the British Consulate General in Shanghai and went through a form of marriage some time later. Ivers obtained one or two minor jobs but again applied to the Anzac Society for assistance. He was sent to the ‘Crystal Hotel’ 37 Seward Rd where he resided for a period at the expense of the association. In Sept 1928 Ivers who has recently registered himself at the British Consulate General in Shanghai applied there for a passport for himself and his wife. A report of the characters and activities of Ivers and his wife was sent to the British Consulate General by the SMP and on the strength of this report a passport was refused Mrs. Ivers. Ivers obtained passport on Sept 24 1928 with a paragraph inserted by the Acting Consul General that it should not be made valid for the British Empire. British authorities were clear that they did not want “this type of person” to be in possession of British citizenship. A memo requesting that Ivers and his wife were to be stopped from entering the British Empire was forwarded to the HM Minister in Peiking. Before the circular had time to take effect, however, Ivers applied for a passport for himself and his wife at Mukden and Harbin and was granted passports in Harbin on 12 October 1928 for himself and his wife. Ivers returned to Shanghai after this and his wife later returned to the USSR.

In 1934 evidence was produced in Shanghai that at the time that Mrs Pelagine L Kovenko went through a form of marriage with Ivers she actually had a previous husband thus making her marriage with Ivers bigamous. On the strength of this the British authorities in Shanghai considered the marriage nullified and Mrs Kovenko immediately lost her British nationality and any rights and privileges she may have enjoyed as the wife of a British subject. In August
1934, Ivers applied to the Salvation Army in Shanghai for assistance, stating that he had been discharged from the Customs Service for excessive drinking. He received assistance from the Salvation Army authorities and in September 1934 obtained employment with Messers Mollers Ltd. He left their employ in May 1935. His movements for the next year or two are rather obscure until July 13 1937 when he obtained a position as a Second Officer with Messers Butterfield and Swires Ltd but was discharged for excessive drinking on July 5th 1938. He again applied to the Relief Society for assistance in Feb 1939.\(^{139}\)

Fears of anti-British and Communist activism in the 1930s meant closer surveillance of those suspected of seditious activities with the formation of an Australian Section in the Criminal Investigation Department in the 1930s. Ivers’ file was produced in part by this section. The British shared intelligence about Australians across imperial networks which spanned the empire. Records were kept of Australians leaving Shanghai and detailed biographies were compiled on the background of Australians applying for work for the SMP. Webs of empire were also evident in the consular network which shaped concern over events such as Mrs Johnson’s conviction for narcotic manufacture and sale in 1934.

Much was made in Ivers’ file about his relationship with Mrs Kovenko and how, for long periods of time, he lived from her income. Descriptions of Australians as childlike and dependent on wives, mothers, prostitutes or local women proliferated in SMP files. Concern over a perceived deficiency in Australian masculinity and the corruption of this masculinity once in the Far East was a hallmark of such biographies.\(^{140}\) In 1938 the biography of one

\(^{139}\) Ibid.

Sidney Frank Hearne was circulated between British consulates in Shanghai and Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{141} Hearne, an Australian, was born in Kobe, Japan where his father had been a hotel manager. His childhood was partly spent in China before travelling to Australia and serving in the Australian military forces. “Accompanied by his mother he travelled from Sydney to Shanghai on the \textit{SS Nellore}, arriving on 10 October, 1938. He is described by a fellow passenger as completely under his mother’s influence.”\textsuperscript{142} Hearne’s conversation “indicated that his mentality is more like that of a child than a young man.”\textsuperscript{143} On 10 October 1938, Hearne applied for a position on the Shanghai Municipal Gaol Staff (“with the help of his mother”) and was given the usual educational test but failed to qualify, “his spelling and grammar being very poor etc.”\textsuperscript{144} Hearne’s relationship with his mother, and Ivers’ relationship with Mrs Kovenko were here reflective of a broader problem; the dependence of some Australians on charity and welfare while in Shanghai and the strain they placed on imperial British administration.

By taking menial jobs and engaging in criminal enterprise, Australians like Ivers and Hearne troubled colonial hierarchies that linked poverty and squalor to native populations and wealth and success to resident white populations, especially Anglo-Saxon populations. Concurrently, the circulation of Australian products carrying empire iconography solidified the link between Australians and empire-building. For Henry Champly, the spectacle of Australian criminality in Shanghai’s cabaret bars was of serious concern. He wrote of establishments with “Queen Ann chairs and red carpets” where “yellow men with three chins” mixed with Australian

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
prostitutes: “Yes, indeed, those great world-teachers of virtue, the Anglo-Saxons of every sect, have taught the little Chinese coolies that Australian women – are the most debauched women on the earth.” At a time of increasing anti-foreign and anti-imperial sentiment in China, Australian behaviour in Shanghai threatened to upset the foundations of British claims to sovereignty: urban improvement schemes, law and order and morality. As Henry Champly wrote in *The Road to Shanghai* in 1932, “If the Whites, in colonial countries, could show themselves superior to all carnal and moral failings, then it would be easy enough for them to correct the abuses and outrages of the native.”

By directly requesting that Australians stop moving to Shanghai for work, British authorities signalled their anxieties over the impact of Australians on ‘white prestige’ in Shanghai. Australian bureaucrats with interests in the Eastern markets were similarly concerned by the reports from the SMP about Australians in Shanghai, as well as rising ‘anti-white’ sentiment in China more generally. Sir Herbert Gepp requested information on the treaty port system from the British authorities. Gepp, President of the Australian Board of Trade and Chairman on the Australian Development and Migration Commission, wrote to Sir Austen Chamberlain enquiring about “Article II of the Treaty of Nanking – for [Australian] Trading Purposes.” He was told that:

> The actual position in regard to foreign settlements in China does not seem to be clearly understood in Great Britain. Only a few months ago a prominent politician speaking in the House of Commons, expressed the opinion that it was not surprising

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145 Henry Champly, *The Road to Shanghai*, p. 12.
146 Ibid, p. 131.
147 Commercial Intelligence, China, NAA A11804/1/1927/47
148 China- Foreign Concessions NAA A981/4 CHIN 61; Tiensin British Committee of Information, Memorandum No 1 Foreign Settlements and Concessions in China NAA A981/4 CHIN 19
that there was agitation in China “when the external powers took forty-nine Chinese
cities giving them no share in the government of these cities.”

By 1929 the problem of Chinese anti-imperialism in the treaty ports led the Shanghai
Municipal Council to invite Judge Feetham, of the South African Supreme Court, to come to
Shanghai and “study the seeming paradox of a large group of Chinese residing on Chinese
soil under foreign government.” In light of the Feetham report, the case of Tsing dao
(Qingdao) attracted considerable attention in Britain and China. Qingdao had been placed
under German control in 1897 and was considered ‘a model city’ and a testament to the
virtues of European governance in China. After the city was restored to the Chinese in
1922, British authorities claimed, it had fallen into ruin. “Not only have the local Chinese
authorities [in Qingdao] since violated every undertaking into which they entered in respect of
foreign participation in the municipal administration, but they have since been doing their
best to ruin the port.” The British criticised the Chinese for cutting down £30,000 worth of
trees, neglecting to dredge the wharves and harbours, and allowing thick deposits of dirt and
coal dust to cover the sidewalks and streets. Qingdao today, they concluded, “is rapidly
deteriorating and this would be the fate of any foreign concessions or Settlements which
might be given back to the Chinese.” In this way the British countered Chinese anti-
colonialism through examples taken from the urban environment which, they believed,
demonstrated a British ability to administer public space and public behaviour in a ‘civilised’
and ‘orderly way.’

149 Ibid.
150 Report of the Hon Mr. Justice Feetham to the Shanghai Municipal Council (Shanghai, 1931), Vol. I, p. 5,
151 China- Foreign Concessions NAA A981/4 CHIN 61; Tiensin British Committee of Information,
Memorandum No 1 Foreign Settlements and Concessions in China NAA A981/4 CHIN 19
152 Tiensin British Committee of Information, Memorandum No 1 Foreign Settlements and Concessions in China
NAA A981/4 CHIN 19.
153 Ibid.
At the same time anti-imperialist nationalists in China demanded foreign concessions be returned to Chinese administration. “Foreigners are not satisfied each day unless they have extracted more concessions from China,” wrote Li Jian Hong in 1925. 154 A series of reports prepared in 1923 by American consulates across China observed the links between foreign humiliations of China and a growing sense of anti-imperialism. 155 A report from Ji’nan, the provincial capital of Shandong, for instance, concluded that aggression on the part of foreigners “arouses feelings of intense antagonism and opposition and a sense of injustice, humiliation and degradation suffered at foreign hands.” 156 The report also observed changing attitudes among children, who now brazenly called foreigners “foreign devils” and are not “rebuked or checked by their elders.” 157 On the eve of a boycott these reports also noted that this environment was undermining the ability of foreigners to do business in China. 158 Travelling through the Chinese countryside in the early 1920s, Australian saleswoman Beatrice Thompson confirmed these reports in her letters to the Australian authorities. She had twice been captured by local Chinese when marketing “perfumery and cosmetics” in outlying villages. 159

Arguments countering Chinese anti-colonialism and justifying Britain’s imperial presence in China on the basis of urban development and civility were reflected in the letters written

155 ‘Changing attitudes of the Chinese towards foreigners in China’, (Ji’nan, 28 March 1923) CRDS File 893.4974.4.
156 ‘Changing attitudes of the Chinese towards foreigners in China’, (Chifou) 1923.4.7) CRDS File 893.4972.
157 CRDS File 893.4973 (Hankou 1923.4.2), pp. 2-3.
158 Ibid.
159 Copy from The Peoples Tribune (Feb 1936), newspaper cuttings in the Beatrice Thompson papers, NAA Box 29 1948/732 SP 104/1.
home by Australians in Shanghai and in popular literature. “The real China is nowhere like [the treaty ports]” wrote Champly in *The Road to Shanghai*. “It is drab plain and poor. I know of only one place in Asia which achieves the cleanliness, the style, and the gaiety of that pseudo-China of the cinema. It is in English territory.”¹⁶⁰ Horse trader Rex Phillips told his family in Melbourne, “The British BUILT Shanghai and the Chinese want to take it off the British.”¹⁶¹ He responded strongly to the views of Chinese Australian businessman Louey Pang, who had advocated Shanghai’s return to China in the Australian press:

That cutting about Louey Pang which you sent made me want to have five minutes with Louey. He says that China is now a MODERN country, and able to govern herself etc etc. Last year when Louey was in Shanghai he stayed at a big Chinese owned and managed hotel, Wing On’s by name. After stopping there a few days he moved to a foreign owned and managed hotel, The Palace by name, and when I asked him why he moved he said, “Oh the Chinese are too dirty for words, besides they make such a hell of a din.” Now dear Louey thinks so much of the ‘modernised’ China which he spouts about from Australia, the best example he could set is to come and live in Chinese territory. Its just this Louey Pang is just an ordinary example of the vast majority of Chinese, a lying, oily, twister. PS Wing On’s is considered the best Chinese Hotel in Shanghai.¹⁶²

Central to such arguments was not only Britain’s architectural and institutional presence in treaty ports like Shanghai, but also the behaviour of Britons – and by extension, Australian Britons – in these spaces. Invasion and dispossession in settler societies had long been justified on the basis that Indigenous populations did not use the land productively. Rightful occupation of the land was connected to perceptions of ‘development’ and progress. Arguments about Chinese misuse of Shanghai’s resources figured native Chinese as dependent on Europeans for their living standards, health and hygiene and urban improvement schemes. The category of ‘Australian’ complicated such colonial binaries. If

¹⁶⁰ Henry Champly, *Road to Shanghai*, p. 120.
¹⁶² Ibid.
Europeans were the authority on civilised settlement, why were white Australians abandoning their homes in ‘Ao Zhou’ and – in an inversion of the colonial order of things – travelling to China for work? And why, once in China, were they so patently unproductive and unsuccessful in their labours? In order to fully explicate the weight of these contradictions in 1930s Shanghai, we need to consult interwar Chinese attitudes towards ‘Australia.’

Reports about Australia appeared frequently in the Chinese press in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1928 *The Eastern Magazine* or *Dongfang Zhouzhi* ran a feature article tracing Australia’s history since British colonisation. Australia was a country sustained on “the agriculture of sheep” or *Mu yangye* , the article read, and was a “British colony” populated by “nothing more than prisoners.” Australia had run free elections since Federation in 1900 but Britain still “dictated policy.” Inherited criminality was common in this Chinese press coverage of Australia. Chinese responses to Australia in such publications as *The Eastern Magazine* laid bare the absurdities of European claims to civilised attributes based on race. They juxtaposed the superior attitudes of the British in China with the “peasant ways” of “Australian prisoners.” Here was a view of Australians through Chinese eyes bordering on the satirical. Australia was a “retrograde nation” or *tuihua minzu* and Australian nationals lacked *guanzhan* or “civility.”

165 Ibid, p. 47.
These articles were published in the shadow of debates over Australian prejudice towards Chinese immigrants. The issue dominating Chinese coverage of Australia from the 1920s on was Australia’s immigration restriction legislation. The Immigration Restriction Act (IRA) of 1900 confirmed and extended a number of policies and laws existing in the pre-Federation Australian colonies. Inherent in these policies was the belief that Australia was rightfully a “white man’s country” and the IRA was to keep “aboriginal natives of Asia, Africa and the Pacific” out.167 In 1934 The Eastern Magazine [東方周知] ran an article entitled ‘Australia as a Coloniser’ highly critical of the policy while in 1933 The Global Half-Annual Journal or Huan Qiu Xun Kan [還球旬刊] criticised the “aggressive racial prejudice of Australia’s immigration restriction laws.”168 Australians, the journal argued, were willing to go to violent lengths “in order to maintain the purity of the race, unity or their civilization and of White Australia.”169 Chinese diplomats wanting to travel to Australia were often “refused passports.”170 The result of the White Australia Policy, the article argued, was a lack of trade with Asia and therefore a slow rate of economic development in Australia coupled with high unemployment.171 “They think we are all opium users,” complained a Chinese soccer player who had travelled to Australia as part of a specially arranged tour in 1928; “our rank in their society is very low.”172 Australian race prejudice towards Chinese, the soccer player argued, forced Chinese in Australia to live a degraded existence. Encountering local Chinese had been a “humiliating” experience, “The most painful thing is that the Chinese Australians do not

172 ‘What I found in Australia because of the Game’, Shanghai Municipal Archives D2-0-1471-67, p. 56.
have knowledge. They are lower class Cantonese.”173 Thus Chinese attitudes to Australians in
the 1920s and 1930s – and, for the purposes of this thesis, Australian traders and salesmen –
were filtered through a Chinese knowledge of Australian history.

Chinese resentment over the White Australia Policy was brought to the attention of Australian
trade officials in 1931 when Chinese newspapers in Shanghai published a translation of an
article from the Australian newspaper Smith’s Weekly entitled ‘Hard for a Brisbane Girl to
Work.’174 Based on the author’s visits to a number of department stores in Brisbane, the
article argued that Australian unemployment was caused by Asian imports: “our girls want
work and are not likely to get it if the vogue of importing ready-made frocks from Shanghai
is persisted in.”175 While Australian women languished in poverty – Smith’s Weekly argued –
Chinese merchants were growing rich by importing goods into Australia: “The unemployed
Brisbane girl has the satisfaction of knowing that Slit Eye in Shanghai is getting a nice,
comfortable living by exporting frocks to Queensland if that is any consolation.”176 The
author of the article claimed to have observed customs procedures on Brisbane wharfs and
discovered that no precautions were taken with regard to disease in dresses brought in from
China. But since the introduction of second-hand clothing from China was “strictly prohibited
… this was an admission that disease might lurk in Oriental imports. Brushes of all kinds are
not allowed in.”177 Upon visiting Brisbane’s department stores the author was told by

174 Australian Trade with China, the East & the Pacific Islands General, NAA CP703/5/23/A5131; Letter from
V. J. Palstra 18 June 1931, Far Eastern Representative Salesman, Shanghai, to Mr Moore, Premier of
Queensland Commerce- China NAA A461/9/1323/1/5.
175 Letter from V. J. Palstra 18 June 1931, Far Eastern Representative Salesman, Shanghai, to Mr Moore,
Premier of Queensland Commerce- China NAA A461/9/1323/1/5.
176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
salesgirls that gowns come in regularly from Shanghai and were simply unpacked and sold, despite “being handled by eastern factory workers.”

[Money] is spent in giving a living to Misses Ah Chum and Low How in Shanghai, but the girls who spend what little money they have in Brisbane stores are cut out that much work.

Once translated, ‘Hard for a Brisbane Girl to Work’ circulated widely in Shanghai. Australian salesman Mr V J Palstra, resident of Shanghai, wrote to the Australian Government in protest: “It is a matter of regret that such an article should be published.” Palstra warned of a general boycott of Australian goods in China if the government did not intervene:

Unless we manage to retain the goodwill of the Chinese there is not a hope of us securing for Australia her rightful position in this market. It is quite within the realms of possibility that the incident I have just detailed to you might have a serious effect on Australian trade in this country. In the past boycotts have been started on account of lesser happenings. If the Chinese chamber of commerce get hold of the facts for instance there would be an outcry against things Australian. The Chinese resent very strongly any suggestion of inferiority.

The factory in question, Palstra pointed out, was run by Chinese but staffed by Australians. Dr N H Kung, the Minister of Commerce and Industry in the Chinese Nationalist Government asked his officials at the Waichiaopu (Foreign Office) to take the matter up through the Chinese Consul General of Australia. The affair occurred in the context of broader resentment in China over the White Australia Policy. In November of the same year, the Australian Prime Minister was questioned on the subject in the House of Representatives. A Mr Green, a wheat

178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid; Memorandum, Department of Markets, E. J. Mulvany, Secretary, 20 November 1931 Australian Trade with China, the East & the Pacific Islands General, NAA CP703/5/23/A5131
181 Letter from V. J. Palstra 18 June 1931, Far Eastern Representative Salesman, Shanghai, to Mr Moore, Premier of Queensland Commerce- China NAA A461/9/1323/1/5.
farmer, informed the prime minister that Chinese workers were refusing to unload Australian flour on Chinese wharfs, part of a general boycott of Australian goods:

Has the Prime Minister seen a newspaper report that because of the discrimination against Chinese goods by the Commonwealth retaliatory measures against imports from Australia are being taken by the Government of the Chinese Republic? If so what steps does the Commonwealth government propose to take? There is more than a threatened boycott of Australian goods; Chinese traders are refusing to handle them. If the position in the East does not improve our natural market will be closed against us. It is within our power to remove the conditions to which China objects. £1000 of Australian wheat rot on the wharfs of Shanghai!182

We can read this event as part of an extended commercial encounter between Chinese workers and consumers and Australian traders and government officials. Within the encounter Australian attitudes towards Chinese products (in the first instance, dresses from Shanghai) were conflated with Australian ‘race prejudice’ more generally. Talk of diseased dresses and brushes on the bodies of Australian women made a commercial relationship into a racialised and sexualised relationship whereby using Chinese products was akin to being ‘touched’ or ‘infected’ by a Chinese factory worker. In this way, Smith’s Weekly drew upon common tropes surrounding the sexual exploitation of white women or ‘White Slaves’ by ‘Yellow Men’ or as Henry Champley put it, “The initiation of the coloured people into the extraordinary charm of the White Venus.”183

The encounter was complicated by the circulation of the Smith’s Weekly article among Chinese readers in Shanghai who were probably aware of the growing problem of Australian criminality in Chinese treaty ports. At moments like this, Australia’s encounter with Asia

182 House of Reps, 31/8/1931, Australian Trade with China Commerce- China NAA A461/9/1323/1/5; Australian Trade with China, the East & the Pacific Islands General, CP703/5/23/A5131; Publicity. NEI Australian News for China A457/1/G532/4.
183 Champley, Road to Shanghai, p. 117.
must be viewed from the bottom up – the lives of men like Jack Ivers and Alan Raymond
must be made to speak to larger historical problems of processes. Their presence in Shanghai
exposed the operation of colonial power in ways especially provocative to local Chinese.
Firstly, their ability to come to Shanghai demonstrated an ease of mobility off limits to native
Chinese, not only within empire, but also within their own city and country. Secondly, their
behaviour exposed the double standard of the British justice system as it operated in Chinese
treaty ports; Australian opium smugglers were allowed to return home, while Chinese caught
in possession of the drug were liable to be handed over to Chinese authorities and executed.
Finally, while Chinese products were represented as ‘inferior’ and diseased in Australian
popular newspapers, Australian products were sold to Chinese consumers in packaging that
celebrated the very ‘White Australia’ Chinese citizens were banned from entering. By
refusing to unload Australian wheat on Shanghai’s wharfs, Chinese workers gestured to the
very colonial paradox of trading with an Asian nation on the one hand, while simultaneously
excluding its citizens on the other.

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In 1894, in the pages of the Launceston Examiner, R. H. Maeburn painted a picture of Asia as
a salesman’s dream-land for white colonists: “I know for a fact that an enormous trade is done
with the native races of Southern Asia in European goods,” he wrote. “The growing
population of those cattle-less countries are now reared on milk procured from cows fed on
Swiss pastures. The Burmese mother quiets the family hopeful with French sweeties when he
howls, and the Tamil coolie quenches his thirst out of the emptied milk tin.”184 For Maeburn,

white products in the East ‘nourished,’ – both literally and figuratively – the child-like natives of savage frontiers whom he depicted as passive recipients of European help and European settler paternalism. However, Maeburn observed, nowhere on this scene was an Australian article to be found, “The spirit of protection that wraps our country in the pall of commercial depression and death would never allow reciprocity with those favoured regions, and under no other conditions could a trade be possible.”185 While Maeburn’s fantasy of South Asian Indigenous cultures suffused with western goods was perhaps exaggerated, his frustration at Australia’s economic disconnection from Asia echoed arguments which would be raised with the same irritation 30 years later, during a second economic depression.

By the 1930s Australians returning to Australia from Asian trading posts were voicing similar critiques. Australia is the “weakest link that binds Empire together” wrote Eldred Pottinger in 1928, “and must get a better understanding of the Asian people … in Asia there is a growing feeling of ‘the East for the East’ and a reluctance to regard the white man as necessarily superior in civilisation, learning, or religion.”186 Writing in Australian newspapers, salesman returning from China wrote of their problems setting up a trade. Australians “seem to think that anything was good enough for the East,” wrote Geoff Heath after returning from Hong Kong.187 Major G. A. Adock was of the view that, “We have tried to market our goods in the East without the most elementary investigation.”188 Rex Phillips found his import and export business foundered when Australian customs officers slit his Chinese-made horse saddles to look for opium, “When one hears about such acts as that being done, one begins to wonder if

Australia isn’t a good country to be out off.”

Thus between the 1890s and the 1930s, a shift in power relations took place in Australian commercial encounters in Asia with some Australian salespeople acknowledging the agency of Asian consumers who boycotted Australian products for cultural and anti-colonial reasons.

This chapter has examined how colonial assumptions about Indigenous inferiority were variously reproduced and undermined in the lives of Australian salesman in interwar Shanghai. Chinese attitudes to Australian goods and Australians, as revealed in Chinese-language representations of Australians and Australian history, and British SMP attitudes to Australians as evident in existing special branch biographies and surveillance files, allow us to view this process at the level of commercial encounters played out in semi-colonial China. The existence of these trans-colonial archives, in both Australia and China, raises questions about the causal connection between working-class aspirations for social mobility and job security during the Great Depression and Chinese awareness of and resentment towards the exclusionary and discriminatory practices of white settler societies. These archives also demonstrate the ways in which commercial encounters between Australian salespeople and local Chinese in Shanghai were open to resistance. The explicit voices of salespeople are absent due to a lack of written records left by salespeople themselves. It has been possible, however, to convey some of the response in China to their presence. What has been achieved here is an exploration of the ways in which salespeople exemplified overlaps between Australian and Asian commercial and colonial spaces in the 1920s and 1930s. Migratory histories of Australia typically assume white desires to ‘protect’ Australia’s borders and Asian

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189 Papers of Rex, Clarence and Madge Phillips, 1924–1946 Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia, MS 9942.
desires to cross these borders from Asia into Australia. This chapter has demonstrated the need to question scholarly investments in ‘Destination Australia’ through a problem population of white Australians in interwar Shanghai.

Despite a wealth of scholarship on Australian travel to China, little if any research has examined the transference of white Australians as workers into China. Itinerant salespeople and traders provide useful archival trails for historians in this regard. Precisely because commercial encounters operated under a fiction of equal exchange, they made European racism in these sites more visible. It was through these encounters that the reality of race-based inequality took its starkest form. White Australian ‘convicts’ were privileged as traders in Shanghai while local Chinese, no matter what their class or social standing, were not. ‘Whiteness’ in these circumstances looked hollow and based on little more than a fiction of inherited civility. Chinese resentment towards white colonial privilege was also manifest in Chinese responses to Australian products as Chinese consumers exercised their agency by boycotting Australian merchandise. In turn, Australian public debate over trade in the East was influenced by this rejection of Australian goods in China. By using Chinese language sources to examine Chinese attitudes towards Australians in interwar Shanghai, we can begin to acknowledge the constitutive role of non-Western agency and knowledge in shaping domestic settler histories.

As this thesis has argued, viewing Australian modernity through salesmanship reveals hitherto unexamined links between Australia and the wider Asian region in this period. A large underclass of Australian salespeople saw Asia as a commercial frontier – part of a European imperial web of which Australia was but one part.
Reading aspects of Australian interwar history ‘from China’ allows for a re-orientation of Australian history away from British settler ‘origins’ and towards a trans-national frame of analysis that makes visible reciprocal flows of trade and culture between Australia and other imperial sites in Asia. Such a frame contributes to the recovery of global connections that shaped how Australians experienced modernity. Australian nation-building coincided with migration and trade between Australia and Asia and it occurred alongside attempts to control this spread of people and goods. The result was a tension between the borders valorised by nation-builders and the chaotic mobility of individuals and commodities. This divergence – captured in the reverberations caused by Australians in Depression-era Shanghai – helps make visible the weakening of the colonial order between the wars.
Conclusion

In the early 1990s Chinese historians in Shanghai began a series of oral history interviews with residents living in the city in the 1920s and 1930s.\(^1\) They wandered up high-rises, into the art deco homes of the old French concession now owned by China’s rich and into decrepit apartment blocks, known locally as ‘boat houses’, because they were cramped and damp and, after the nationalisation of property under the Communists post-1949, housed up to four families in one room.\(^2\) In one of these, they met ninety-five year old Daisy Guo, the granddaughter of Chinese Australian Department Store owner Guo Le, whom we encountered in chapter seven. The interview they conducted with Daisy was published in Mandarin in *Shanghai de Feng Hua Xue Yue (Shanghai Memorabilia)* in 2008.\(^3\)

Daisy Guo’s interview illustrates the central concerns of this thesis. Her life story, as told to Chinese historians, demonstrates how trans-national commercial exchanges take on dense cultural meanings in ways productive for historians. Daisy was ethnically Chinese but was born and raised in Australia. She went to Shanghai from Melbourne in 1919 when she was in her teens. She spoke no Chinese upon arrival in China, having only heard snatches of the language in Melbourne’s Chinatown, or spoken by her grandfather’s shop workers. Her parents – descendants of gold miners from different parts of south China – spoke in English. She arrived in Shanghai after her grandfather Guo Le’s company, the Wing On Company, opened a department store on the water’s edge. The family lived in mansions and travelled to Europe once a year. Daisy rode horses, wore silk and fox fur. In Australia, Wing On products

\(^1\) Dong Feng Pei, ed., *Shanghai de Feng Hua Xue Yue (Shanghai Memorabilia)* (Shanghai: Shanghai Historical Press, 2008), pp. 307-320.
\(^3\) Ibid, pp. 307-320.
(bolts of cloth, tins of ginger, produced in factories in the Zhabei district) were packed onto trains and into vans and distributed to the most remote country towns to sit on the shelves of general stores.\textsuperscript{4}

After her marriage Daisy owned and worked in a clothing shop where she sold high-end fashions and also exported dresses to Australia. Meanwhile, hearing that the Communists might win the Civil War with the Nationalists, her husband buried a revolver under the tree in their front yard. Someone saw the burial. When the Communists did, indeed, take over the city Daisy’s husband was led away to prison, where he died. Daisy, herself, was placed in a re-education camp for “enemies of the people.”\textsuperscript{5} During humiliation sessions at the camp in the 1950s she wore a dunce cap and placard with characters on it she could not read, accused of crimes she could not decipher for her Chinese was still rudimentary; she had run her business mostly in English.\textsuperscript{6} Her Australian roots and her links with Wing On department stores aligned her with ‘capitalist imperialists’ and singled her out for harsh punishment. In the 1980s Australian descendant’s of Daisy’s family, the Guo family, met for reunions and raised money for a Chinese Australian history museum in Melbourne, where her family’s story featured among other stories of successful Chinese-Australian trading families.

Daisy’s association with Chinese-Australian commercial exchange was written into Chinese and Australian national narratives in particular ways. In Australia, her story is bound up with

\textsuperscript{4} Data on this trade is lacking. Indeed, statistical information on the movement of individuals and commodities between Australia and Asia in the interwar period has fallen outside the bounds of this thesis and constitutes an area of future research.

\textsuperscript{5} ‘Humanities Salon: Cities – Shanghai: Colonialism, Cosmopolitanism and Chinese Modernity’, Dr Yiyan Wang and Dr Yi Zheng in conversation with Prof David Goodman, 30 September 2010, Sydney Law School Foyer, University of Sydney.

\textsuperscript{6} Wing On Company files, Shanghai Municipal Archives, File No. Q223-2-43, Q225-2-79, Q225-3-21, Q225-3-22, Q225-3-23, Q225-3-26.
the restrictions placed on Chinese-Australian business under the White Australia policy. In Chinese histories of Shanghai, her life and connection to the Wing On retail empire is associated with a perceived Chinese-Australian collusion with Western capitalism and imperialism during the treaty port era. These reactions to Chinese-Australian commercial practices tell us much about the strange ground between commercial and cultural change and the ways in which salespeople and promotional culture embody this change. In rural Australia, Chinese shop keepers taught their children English to cater to Australian customers. They used phrasebooks to ease cultural divides across the counter. The phrases they chose to learn indicate how violent these encounters could occasionally become. In Shanghai, Chinese-Australian companies responded to anti-colonial boycotts through a nationalist promotional culture – changing the iconography of their buildings and introducing Chinese heritage museums. Meanwhile, Australian department store managers reacted to their customers’ complaints by training staff in sincerity and Christian morality, and commercial travellers memorised sales manuals which they were trained to recite to their rural customers. Commercial institutions reacted to the changing social dynamics around them in order to secure their business and increase profit. The ways in which they did so demonstrate the interconnectivity of economic ritual, political practice and cultural performance.


8 Dong Feng Pei, ed., Shanghai de Feng Hua Xue Yue (Shanghai Memorabilia) (Shanghai: Shanghai Historical Press, 2008), pp. 307-320; ‘Humanities Salon: Cities – Shanghai: Colonialism, Cosmopolitanism and Chinese Modernity’, Dr Yiyan Wang and Dr Yi Zheng in conversation with Prof David Goodman, 30 September 2010, Sydney Law School Foyer, University of Sydney

This thesis has used salespeople and promotional culture to study processes that shaped the emergence of colonial modernity in Australia between 1920 and 1939. In doing so it has traced these individuals to other imperial sites in China. The writings of salespeople and the archives of institutions for which they worked reveal a more dynamic and geographically expansive view of this period than has previously been documented in Australian scholarship. Further, they demonstrate the need to position Australia in a trans-national geography that takes into account the messiness of cultural and economic links binding Australia to the Asian region and to global networks. They show that individuals’ aspirations for mobility in a newly federated settler society often came into conflict with nation-building and empire-building policies such as rural settlement, immigration law, tariff restrictions, industrial arbitration, and empire trade agreements. Following the ‘smiling professionals’ into factories and rural towns, on board boats bound for Shanghai, into Chinese shops and up and down the elevators of department stores provides a counterpoint to national histories that depict Australian society in the interwar years as inward looking and isolated. This variegated material is bound together by promotional culture. I have shown how Australians in the interwar years translated ideologies of industrial efficiency and mass democracy into their everyday interactions and personal aspirations both at home and at work. I have also traced the ways in which promotional culture encouraged some Australians to engage with Asia in new ways. This shift can be viewed at a number of levels: through the migration of Australians to interwar Shanghai to look for work or through the response of the Australian union movement to Chinese anti-colonialism. The point is not that promotional culture was the cause of this engagement, but rather that it allows us to view hitherto unexamined Australian and Asian...
connections in the 1920s and 1930s and that when we do so, assumptions about Australia’s isolation from Asia at this time are problematized. I do not offer a comprehensive study of these connections but I do suggest they are significant.

Information flows made possible by the YWCA between Australia and China changed the forms through which Australian unions promoted industrial action. Australian traders in Shanghai became part of Chinese conceptions of European imperialism. Interrogating the promotional writing through which voters came to know of politician Thomas Mutch exposes connections between mass cultural forms such as film magazines and movie theatres and the uptake of compulsory voting. Anxieties over mass communication between salespeople and their customers in department stores indicate how the scale of modern bureaucracies demanded new conceptions of ‘the individual’ while also re-making colonial-era narratives of empire and nation-building through religious discourse and to suit a commercial purpose. The promotional literature used by commercial travellers in the Great Depression make visible the tensions at the heart of the colonial project of rural settlement, as farmer after farmer in Australia turned salespeople away and closed the gates to their properties, declaring their efforts at settling the land a failure. The oral testimony of Chinese shop workers including Arthur Go Lock Chang in Ruby St Queensland speak to the existence of a sandalwood empire of Asian traders and storekeepers operating alongside official Australian trade networks and despite anti-Chinese immigration laws, well into the 1920s and 1930s. It is through the testimony of such individual salespeople that we can begin to unpick the complex threads that stitched colonial modernity together.
Furthermore, researching salespeople and promotional culture in interwar Australia consistently leads to non-English language archives. Even in institutional archives such as those collected by the Coles Myer Corporation or the Australian Timber Workers Union, agreements with Japanese toy factories or letters from Indian unionists exist alongside English-language correspondence. What can historians make of these sources? Such sources have not featured in studies of Australian ‘modernity’ although historians of nineteenth-century Australia have long noted the role of Asian migration on the Australian ‘frontier’ or in the formation of white, working-class identity in settler colonies. Commercial archives and periodicals have much to offer Australian historians. For these disparate archives do not fit easily into one historiographical field. Rather, they suggest productive connections between fields such as urban history, economic history, colonial history and transnational history.

Here I have suggested that these sources, whether English or not, can be productively read through the lens of promotional culture. Theories of personal efficiency, self-salesmanship and promotional strategies, as they were applied to the lives of individuals, were cultural reflections of the economic shifts brought about as colonial-era institutions modernised in the interwar period. These economic shifts were intimately tied to global and regional trade and commodity chains. Promotional culture was prescriptive and linked success to mobility and the circulation of commodities: information on the personal lives of politicians, photographs of the bloodied shirts of unionists killed during Chinese anti-colonial protests, newspapers, film magazines, vacuum cleaners, dried fruit arranged in the formation of a Union Jack. Commercial literature like *Rydges Business Journal* urged its readers to travel door-to-door, or town-to-town as well as port-to-port, in the Eastern markets. Studying the awkward and uneven ways in which individuals tried to apply these ideas to their personal and professional
lives uncovers how individual aspiration motivated trans-colonial connections, forging economic pathways sometimes counter to the wishes of national policy makers.
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