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Dustman, milliner and watchcase maker: skilling Australia

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About the research

Dustman, milliner and watchcase maker: skilling Australia

Francesca Beddie, NCVER

This paper was presented at the Professional Historians Association (NSW) Islands of History conference held on Norfolk Island in July 2010. It sought to inject a policy perspective onto the practice of history by demonstrating how an examination of the past can enhance understanding of current issues, in this case the role of skilled migration in meeting the needs of Australia's labour market. It argues that the reliance on overseas workers to address skills shortages has been present ever since the first white settlement of Australia. This has, in turn, shaped attitudes to the governance of vocational education, in particular the notion of an industry-led system.

It was not until the late 19th century that the state started a concerted effort to develop the institutional structures to support local skills development, but even then employers were prone to look abroad for skilled workers. On the other hand, the organised labour movement was concerned from early on about the perceived threat to their jobs of imported labour.

In 1988 economic historian Stephen Nicholas and colleagues undertook a statistical analysis of the convicts who came to New South Wales. Theirs was an important reinterpretation, taking a human capital approach to consider the contribution of convicts and arguing that these were healthy, literate working-class people who brought necessary skills to building the colony.

This paper sets out some ideas that may warrant further investigation by historians, in order to flesh out the story of Australia's skilled migration in the 19th century and how this has influenced the development of Australia's vocational education. It will accompany an historical timeline and timeseries data which NCVER is compiling to help inform contemporary policy development.

Tom Karmel

Managing Director

Dustman, milliner and watchcase maker: skilling Australia

I come to this paper from a policy perspective, and with the view that an understanding of history and more historical inquiry can help build a better evidence base for policy development.

What I have to offer today are tentative ideas about some primary historical research, as well as some historiographical/interpretative questions which may deserve further investigation by professional historians.

The contemporary policy issues that inform this paper are primarily discussion about migration and skills shortages. These are, in turn, pertinent to the reform of the vocational education system in Australia, commonly dubbed an industry-led system: something, I argue, of a misnomer. For it is mainly governments at both the state and increasingly federal level which shape and fund the system, with employer and other lobby groups voicing their views and demands.

I am interested in skills development and attitudes to migration. The question I want to explore is about the influence which early solutions to skills needs—i.e. their importation—have had on our vocational training system.

This exploration can also inform the bigger issue currently under scrutiny in the education world —what we consider tertiary education in this country to be and the relative obligations of the state, industry and the individual when it comes to paying for post-compulsory education. Lurking within all of this is an even bigger concern: the Australian schizophrenia about the place of new arrivals in our society.

On this topic of Australia's skill development, I have drawn on *Convict workers* (1988), which is the work of Nicholas, Shergold and their colleagues. This group of economic historians examined data on 19 711 convicts transported to New South Wales between 1817 to 1840. They set out to reinterpret Australia's early convict history from a human capital perspective. In the course of this work, they laid down a determined challenge to some of the big names of Australian history: AGL Shaw, Lloyd Robson, and Manning Clark, as well as that most popular rendition of the convict story, Robert Hughes' *The fatal shore*. Their main target is the persistent image of the convict stain: the notion that it was a criminal underclass who started the task of building modern Australia.

Nicholas and colleagues' 1988 revisionism appears to have taken some time to seep into other historical research. By the late 2000s, however, it has had a revival. The keynote speaker at the Professional Historians Association (NSW) conference, Dr Tim Causer, has drawn on their approach with his meticulous research debunking some of the myths that surround the convict experience in Norfolk Island. And Babette Smith, too, has taken up the baton against the persistent image of convict Australia as a brutal heritage, and the 'family amnesia' about convict ancestry (Smith 2008, p.45). Another scholar, Brian Walsh, has taken the microcosm of the Tocal estate in the Hunter Valley to examine the system of assignment of convicts to private enterprise.

This study touches most closely on the theme of skills but is more interested in debating the effectiveness of assignment (Walsh 2006, p.72). Walsh finds that on the Tocal estate about half the convicts were deferential and able workers, while the other half were either sent back to government as unsatisfactory or absconded. He does not find evidence of remarkable skills matching, although he does say this is a complicated task because many of the convicts had many skills as a result of their moving from rural to urban or other settings before their transportation (Walsh 2006, p.88)[1].

Walsh observes that the concept of convict assignment as workplace training has received little attention. Nor has the notion of transportation as the first kind of skilled migration been fully treated. This brings me to the title of my paper, drawn from the records of the First Fleeters[2]. From these we know the (alleged) occupations of many of those convicts who arrived in Australia in 1788. Among them were three dustmen, five milliners and a watchcase maker.

I do not argue that the dustmen were skilled migrants but we must also be wary of thinking the milliners were merely prostitutes by another name, as the mythology of our convict past has suggested. Many were indeed skilled at making hats. The watchcase maker was certainly a craftsman.

The thrust of the arguments of Nicholas and his colleagues is that most convicts sent to Australia were first offenders guilty of petty theft, not hardened criminals. These young men and women were working-class people, whose crimes found them caught up in a global system of forced migration. Once in Australia, the first inflow of single male convicts created an exceptionally high labour participation rate and a unique workforce to build the economy (Nicholas [ed.] 1988, p.8). Moreover, the urban skill bias in the convict inflow was what was needed to get the colony going.

By examining their records, Nicholas et al. argue that three quarters of the English convicts could read and write. If one examines the First Fleet and other records, it is clear that some could sign their name and there are notations on the indents that the person could read.

Take, for example, Sarah Parry: milliner. She was tried at the Old Bailey on 22 February 1786 for assault and robbery and came out on the Lady Penrhyn. I mention her because of a Norfolk connection. She married Joseph Dunnage on 13 February 1788 but was dead a month later. Joseph, also literate, was found guilty of a stealing a glass window from a carriage. His occupation was seaman; his disposition: disobedience. Joseph was sent to Norfolk Island. Our watchcase maker, Robert Sidaway or Sideway, on the other hand, has no signature attached to his file. What is said is that he was described at his death in 1806 as 'a true philanthropist and a valuable member of society, in which he was universally respected'. Such discrepancies point to the need for some caution in interpreting these convict files, and in believing everything the transportees reported about themselves.

Did literacy have any bearing on the decision to transport convicts? I do not know the answer to that. What does seem likely is that health and occupation may have. Nicholas and Shergold argue that only healthy convicts were selected for embarkation on the four-month voyage to Australia. They assert that the 'surgeon inspectors were zealous in their task of choosing only the fit since they were paid, in part, on the basis of the number of live convicts landed in NSW' (Nicholas [ed.] 1988, p.47). The mortality rate for the whole transportation period between 1788 and 1868 was less than 1.8%, whereas in other developed regions of the globe at that time it was 3.2% (Kunitz & Engerman 1992, p.31).

[1] Nicholas and colleagues also note the phenomenon that many skilled convicts had experienced internal migration in Britain; that is, they have already moved from one place—usually a rural area—to the city, in order to find employment.
2 http://firstfleet.uow.edu.au

Higman, whose work concentrates on domestic servants, is more calibrated in his interpretation of the selection of convicts, saying that a sentence to transportation was determined on the basis of crimes and criminal history rather than on occupational qualities. However, the actual decision to transport could be influenced by a preference for particular occupations (Higman 2002, p.71).

A question for further investigation:

What part, if any, did preference for particular occupations play in the actual decision to transport convicts?

Nicholas and his colleagues go on to argue against the popular view of the colony being a place of harsh punishment and deprivation. They say the convict diet was enough to sustain a worker and the average working week of 56 hours was not onerous. Nineteenth-century Australia was a healthy country.

There is also evidence that skilled convict tradesmen such as tailors, shoemakers and blacksmiths were deployed in ways that used their skills—for example in the lumber and dock yards—while gangs of labourers were used to clear land and so on (see also Maxwell-Stuart 2006). Nicholas asserts that a structure of rewards and not the whip was the standard device for extracting work, with two thirds of all convicts receiving one or no floggings during their servitude (Nicholas [ed.] 1988, p.11). This assertion does not contradict findings that those who were punished were subject to increased lashes.

Another historian, Maxwell-Stuart, suggests that in 1836 only 18% of male prisoners in Tasmania were deployed in road parties, chain gangs and penal stations, compared with 53% in assignment to work with private employers. These reinterpretations of the way in which convict labour was organised might even suggest that Alexander Maconochie's notion of 'penal science', which he put into practice on Norfolk Island in the 1840s, was not the aberration we have understood it to be. Other overseers may also have seen the merit in encouraging industry among their convict workers by offering rewards.

Maxwell-Stuart has raised some important questions about the methodology associated with these revisions on the convict story. Can the numbers really give the convicts themselves a new voice? And how do we interpret contemporary accounts, infused by the spirit of 19th century progressivism? There is more work to do to put flesh on the statistical analyses of all those convict records to explain the origins of Australian attitudes to skills development, such as the reliance on the state to foster domestic training and on the importation of skills. We also need more exploration from a human capital perspective of the further waves of migration.3, as well as investigation into how the status of the trades evolved.

What is clear is that as the colonies got on their feet, the dynamic of a labour market which looked to migration to fill skills gaps was established, although this is an area that deserves more historical inquiry. We do know that as transportation was being brought to an end in the 1840s, employers thought more about how to import skills rather than developing them at home. This is manifest in the schemes that arose as transportation was brought to an end in the 1840s.

Given the gender imbalance in the colonies, female migration became a particular focus in the 1830s. Here, the historians have also moved beyond the stereotypical notion that the women who first came to Australia were whores and low life. Along with Nicholas and Shergold, Deborah Oxley has taken a statistical look at female convicts, concluding they too were talented

3 In *Australia's birthstain* (2008), Babette Smith does trace the stories of hundreds of convicts over the 80 years of convict transportation to Australia, to reveal how most convicts became good citizens whose descendants can be proud of their achievements in building the nation.

migrants, bringing with them over 180 trades, although these were underused in the first decades of the 19th century (Nicholas [ed.] 1988, p.95). The recognition of the need for female talent did, however, dawn. For example, from 1833 to 1837 the London Emigration Committee assisted 3000 free women in migrating to Australia, many of whom proved to be hard and enterprising workers as well as wives and mothers.

> What can the archives tell us about skilled migration in the 19th century? One source that may be revealing is the letters from intending migrants, sponsors, and government agencies housed in the State Archives of New South Wales.

From 1840 to 1900, migrants skilled in mining, steel milling, and maritime trades were also targeted. They came not only from the British Isles, but also from China and the South Pacific. Those immigrants from Guandong and Fujian, as well as from Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia brought valuable knowledge of farming and seafaring that the mostly urban migrants from England lacked.[4] While the first Chinese to arrive after the First Fleet were free settlers, from the 1840s the colonies of Western and South Australia were employing Chinese on indentured labour contracts. New South Wales followed suit and by the early 1850s more than 3000 Chinese were engaged to work as shepherds and in other pastoral and agricultural pursuits. At the height of the gold rushes in New South Wales and Victoria, the Chinese population grew to 60 000 (Jones 2005).

> How much do we know about the skills profiles of non-British migrants to Australia in the 19th century and how did these affect economic development in the colonies?

While in the early days of transportation the bias was towards urban skills, in later times farm workers did also hail from Britain and Europe. For example, shepherds displaced by the agricultural reforms of the 1830s, particularly in the highlands, were amongst those recruited under bounty schemes from Scotland between 1837 and 1842. However, most were artisans and craftspeople: collectively known as mechanics.

This leads me to introduce the next chapter in our exploration of the history of Australia's skill development: the rise of institutions for the education of Australia's native born, which did not begin in earnest until the late 19th century. However, Australia was a very early adopter of the Scottish idea of education for the working man, with the Sydney Mechanics Institute founded in 1833. But even as the state stepped in to build the capacity to develop its own human capital, employers continued to look beyond our shores for the skilled workers they needed.

Their forays into foreign labour markets were strongly influenced by economic conditions. The influx of migrants can be traced in the 19th century and first half of the 20th century alongside booms, droughts and depressions. Although—as is so prominent in the post-World War Two era—there were also waves of what we today call humanitarian migrants. Some of those 19th century political refugees brought with them skills that served Australia's development superbly: think of our wine industry!

The other side of this story is the response of existing workers to skilled migration, which is characterised from early days by the instinct to defend their jobs and to see, rightly or wrongly, imported labour as a threat. Here lie the roots of the White Australia policy but, as Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have shown, this policy was not uniquely Australian. By the late 1870s both in California and Australia, which had soaked up Chinese labour during the gold rushes, powerful

[4] The NSW Heritage website has information about migrant groups, including Chinese, which may warrant further investigation.

labour movements were agitating against the 'coolies'. In both places, the distinction was made between rice-eating and beef-eating men. 'People who can subsist on a handful or rice and content themselves with the barest shelter are formidable opponents of European labour', it was asserted in the Victorian parliament in 1881. Moreover, the:

> ... unfairness of the competition is added to by the intense industry of these Asiatics. They stand in as little need of rest and recreation, apparently, as they do a generous diet or wholesome housing and they consequently offer their service for wages upon which European workmen could not subsist.

What this parliamentarian omitted saying was that these experienced Chinese workers were also the people who kept the steamships moving and the cities supplied with fresh vegetables (Lake & Reynolds 2008, p.32).

What we see today in the tension between developing and importing skills is a story as old as European settlement in Australia. While the faces and complexions in this tug-of-war may have changed, the task of skilling Australia still relies on a mix of homegrown and foreign solutions.

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