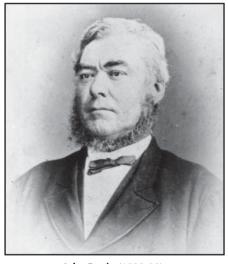# 'Harmony … between the Employer and Employed': Employer Support for Union Formation in Brisbane, 1857-90

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While there has been much research on union formation there has been little analysis of the ways in which employers assisted this process. This paper contends that such support was a precondition for union success in Brisbane prior to the mid-1880s. Employers supported unionism for different reasons, with motives changing over time. Prior to the late 1870s the unions' principal sponsors were the major employers in the trade each union organised. These employers supported unionism because industrial regulation suited their business interests. After 1879 the employers who assumed union leadership roles were largely driven by ideological sympathies rather than financial considerations. Under such leaders the union movement pursued an increasingly independent course.

On 1 March 1865 Brisbane's leading politicians, employers and unionists joined together in attending a ball held to celebrate the inauguration of the eight-hour day movement a few years before. It was a glittering occasion, characterised by 'patriotic toasts' and renditions of 'Rule Britannia'. A place of honour was reserved for John Petrie, Brisbane's principal building contractor, who chaired the festivities. Petrie's role in fostering the eight-hour movement was widely acknowledged. His brother-in-law and foreman, James McNaught, had overseen the first 'shorter hours' meeting in September 1857. In the early 1860s two other Petrie-employed foremen, James Spence and William Murdoch, led the movement. In

John Petrie (1822-92):
Photo courtesy John Oxley Library, Brisbane

recognising Petrie's contribution, one parliamentarian observed that this employer was 'honourably connected with the working classes; one who had done so much for and among the working men in this city'. Petrie responded by calling upon all assembled to raise their glasses to their shared ideal: 'Harmony … between the Employer and Employed'.[1]

Petrie's support for the eight-hour day and building trades unionism was no aberration. From the late 1850s to the mid-1880s (and later in some industries) Brisbane's patterns of union organisation were largely dictated by employer attitudes. Where employers provided support a union's existence was assured. Conversely, if a union faced a solid wall of employer opposition it was virtually doomed from

the outset. Employer support for unionism manifested itself in a number of ways. Brisbane's Plasterers Society, for example, largely owed its existence to James Campbell. A one-time sub-contractor for Petrie, Campbell dominated his trade, employing most of the society's members. He also attended and funded union functions.[2] In more competitive industries, such as retailing, the existence of even one sympathetic firm ensured union survival. In 1890 virtually all the officers of the Early Closing Association (ECA) – a retail workers union which campaigned for shorter hours – worked for Edwards & Lamb.[3] As unions grew in number and size during the early 1880s many entrusted leadership positions to sympathetic employers and business identities. William Galloway, who founded the Trades and Labour Council in 1885, was the most successful example of those who combined careers in both the union and business domains.

The importance of employer support would have been self-evident to any Brisbane unionist who lived in the city prior to the mid-1880s. Union meetings, celebrations and delegations were frequently chaired by employers, or by members of the town's civic elite. When no such dignitary could be found, apologies were in order. In 1869, for example, the workingman who chaired the Eight Hour Day celebration lamented how his social standing made him inappropriate for such an auspicious event, and that he 'would have been very pleased to have some more influential man than himself in the chair'.[4] However, despite the recent revival of interest in the history of Australian union formation, such experiences have been largely ignored. Attention has focused on the decades after 1880, when new models of union organisation – capable of imposing union principles on uncooperative employers – gained a mass following.[5] The preceding decades, when unions constantly proclaimed the 'harmony' that existed between capital and labour, have received scant attention. While the research by Michael Quinlan, Margaret Gardner and their associates has given us a broader picture of pre-1891 patterns of collective organisation (both formal and informal), the factors which determined whether early unions survived or not remains poorly explored.[6] This is particularly the case in Queensland, where studies of union organisation prior to the 1880s are conspicuous by their absence.[7]

A consideration of the ways in which employers favoured union formation is particularly appropriate in a colonial city such as Brisbane. In 1861, the year in which unionism in the city first flourished, Brisbane was home to a mere 6,051 residents. In those industries where unionisation first occurred – building, retailing and metal manufacturing – a handful of employers exercised considerable social and industrial power, giving jobs to virtually all unionised workers. Brisbane's infant unions, by contrast, had few resources. In this context, this article argues, unionism could only survive in those workplaces where it helped the employer achieve a business objective. In construction and metal manufacturing the single most important factor in determining employer support for unionism was the desire to create and maintain skilled workforces capable of undertaking a series of major projects or orders. In retailing the containment of undue competition through industrial regulation was more important. Reflecting the power imbalance between early unions and their employer supporters, unionisation in Brisbane between 1857 (when the city's first labour organisation was established) and the late 1870s largely operated within employer-determined confines. Only in the early 1880s – when Brisbane witnessed

the emergence of larger, more militant unions – did unionism begin to escape from the embrace of the benevolent employers who dominated its formative years. Even this, initially, required the support and leadership of employer-unionists whose business activities allowed them the freedom of action to pursue organising activities without fear of victimisation.

Considerations of Australian Union Formation

Union strength has long been seen as a characteristic feature of nineteenth century Australian society. In 1888, one observer recorded: 'In no other portion of the world are trade and labour organisations so numerous and effective'.[8] The essential truth of this assertion was accepted by generations of labour historians. Favourable labour market circumstances were the obvious reason for this outcome. The period between 1860 and 1900 was, Butlin observed, 'a seller's market for labour'.[9] Over the last quarter century, however, this explanation has been widely questioned. Studies by Fitzgerald, Lee and Fahey, Kelly and others have highlighted the insecurity of nineteenth century life.[10] Many workers were employed on a casual basis. As Ray Markey's masterful account of New South Wales in the 1880s and 1890s indicates, technological change and a re-organisation of production undercut the position of the skilled male worker who was the backbone of craft unionism.[11]

It is now evident that, considered overall, the conditions for nineteenth century union formation were less favourable than previously thought. To what, then, can we ascribe the early successes of Australian unionism and the obtainment of benefits such as the eight-hour day ahead of other nations? One possible explanation is the effectiveness of union organisation. There is no doubt that (as suggested by Markey, Cooper, Cooper and Patmore, Ellem and Shields and others) the dramatic growth in union strength during the 1880s partly reflected the development of more effective peak councils and centralised organising committees.[12] However, such explanations are less useful in understanding the process of union formation before 1880, upon which later efforts were built. Despite the existence of eight-hour committees in all the eastern capitals, Markey notes that prior to the 1880s 'sectional priorities largely restricted joint union organization at an industry level'.[13] The weakness of the union movement's centralised structures was particularly pronounced in Brisbane, which remained without a Trades and Labour Council until 1885.

A feature of contemporary research on union organising is the emphasis that is placed on employers' anti-union strategies. Much of the recent decline in union membership is attributed to these employer activities.[14] In providing an historical overview of union organising campaigns in Australia, Cooper and Patmore observe that 'union avoidance' and 'union busting' activities of employers … are not just a recent phenomenon'.[15] However, accounts of employer opposition to unionisation, which have become commonplace in recent years, should not cause us to forget earlier periods of co-operation between unions and employers. A substantial body of research suggests that, prior to the Great Strikes of the 1890s, infant unions were often regarded sympathetically by the liberal middle class.[16] As Stuart Macintyre indicates, colonial liberals 'posited a natural harmony of interest between the fair-minded employer and the honest artisan'.[17]

As noted earlier, the most thorough research into pre-1890 patterns of collective organisation in Australia in recent years is that conducted by Quinlan and Gardner

and their associates. This work – which is based upon an extensive data set that records various forms of collective activity (union organisation, strikes, informal organisations, protests and stoppages) – highlights the diverse ways in which workers organised themselves during the nineteenth century. It also emphasises how, taken as a whole, the period between 1851 and 1880 represented one of transition. Whereas prior to 1850 most collective activity occurred without formal union presence, by 1890 this was no longer the case.[18] However, while such research is useful in identifying broad trends it is unable to effectively explain why some unions survived and others did not. Quinlan, Gardner and Akers' contention that 'informal' forms of organisation (non-union strikes, bans, stoppages, petitions) 'can be seen as prefiguring formal organization' [unions] appears, at best, tenuous.[19] Instead, it would appear that 'informal' and 'formal' forms of industrial organisation were often alternatives to each other, and that the survival of unionisation in a particular occupation or location largely depended on contextual factors, of which employer attitudes towards unionism loom large. Framing collective organisation in terms of 'rank-and-file struggles' and worker 'mobilisation' also assumes *a priori* a conflict of class interests as a motivating factor,[20] when such a viewpoint may not have been shared by those involved in the process of union formation.

The belief that unionism was at odds with employer interests certainly differs from the insights gleaned from (now largely unfashionable) research into the institutional history of Australian unionism. These studies reveal how larger employers capable of passing on wage costs (the so-called 'fair employer') willingly collaborated with unions capable of enforcing the same cost base on their competitors. Where unions were capable of imposing standardised employment conditions across an industry or geographic area they were tolerated. When they lost the capacity to do so they were dispensed with.[21] But even such institutional histories have limitations. In particular, they are more effective in accounting for collusion between employers and established unions than in tracing how employer attitudes shaped the process of union formation. It is, after all, one thing for an employer to pragmatically deal with an established union, whereas to proactively support union formation is a very different matter.

Overcoming the 'lion in the way': The Labour Alliance and Shorter Hours, 1857-61

On 9 September 1857, James Spence addressed a gathering of Brisbane 'working men' about 'the adoption of the eight hour movement'. In proposing a reduction in hours from ten (the previous standard) to eight, Spence warned that – 'as with other places' which had moved to an eight-hour day – they had to overcome 'a lion in the way'. This 'obstacle', Spence declared, was the workingmen who placed 'pounds, shillings and pence' above a shorter working day. For, as all understood, the eight-hour day 'being conceded to them' by the employers was dependent upon workers accepting a significant wage cut. Although the size of the reduction was not mentioned it appears to have been one shilling per day (a ten per cent decrease).[22] Employee resistance to the diminution in hours, and pay, was a formidable barrier to collective action. In early 1858 a public letter noted that many workers 'would rather slave on as before if any reduction is to be made in their wages … Any feelings they have on the subject are derived from their pockets'.[23]

To oversee the eight-hour day campaign the Brisbane Labour Alliance was established, the first body purporting to represent workers' industrial interests ever

established in the city. The Alliance was mindful that the shorter hours – which were to apply to unskilled labourers on building sites as well as skilled workers – needed to coincide with re-negotiation of the employers' building contracts.[24] When employers faced delays in securing contract variations the proposed start date for the eight-hour day was pushed back from 1 January to 5 April 1858. By the latter date a 'majority of Employers' had agreed to the shorter day.[25]

The events surrounding the inauguration of the eight-hour movement in Brisbane can only be understood through an examination of the close relationship that existed between the Labour Alliance's leaders and Brisbane's leading builder, John Petrie. Both Spence, and the Chair of the inaugural eight-hour day meeting, James McNaught, were employed by Petrie as foremen. McNaught was also Petrie's brother-in-law (McNaught's father, David, had previously served as the Petrie family's head foreman).[26] It is inconceivable – given the nature of employment relationships at the Petrie business – that they would have acted without their employer's consent. Petrie's employees lived in lodgings adjacent to his homestead and workshops at Petrie's Bight (found at the eastern end of the Brisbane River's city reach). Each morning they were assembled by the call of a bell, rung by the firm's blind patriarch and founder, Andrew Petrie (John's father). Andrew also assured quality by running his hands over completed work, sometimes striking workers with his cane when standards were below expectation.[27] But if the Petrie family ran their business on despotic lines they also shared a genuine belief in shorter hours. Andrew had been a mason in Edinburgh in the 1830s when, as the Webbs record, the Scottish Stonemasons Society 'included practically all the Scottish masons'.[28] The shorter day was an ideal for these workers. John (a devout Presbyterian) always contended that shorter hours were a pre-condition for both individual and social advancement. As he informed the eight-hour day celebration in 1865, he 'had always been favourable to the eight hours movement'.[29]

Although one of Petrie's employees, Spence appears to have been intimately involved in the family's affairs. Over the years he used these ties to advance his own career. By 1872 he was the proprietor of a prominent building firm and a Brisbane alderman.[30] But if Spence was attuned to his employers' business interests, he was no employer puppet. Throughout the 1860s he was at the forefront of the agitation for (white) working-class advancement, highlighting the need for long-term employment security. He chaired meetings of the Anti-Coolie League. After the onset of the 1866 economic depression he helped launch the Protectionist League, advocating tariffs to foster local manufacturing. He articulated a distrust of free trade principles, declaring that such ideas 'had simply brought the colony to beggardom'.[31]

If personal ties bound Labour Alliance leaders to the city's largest builder there was also a convergence of economic interests between labour and capital in the construction industry. Prior to the mid-1850s the small-scale of Brisbane building work required little in the way of wage labour. However as 1859 and separation from New South Wales drew near there was a proliferation of large government contracts. The most significant of these – the Ipswich Gaol, the Brisbane Immigration Depot and the Brisbane Gaol – went to Petrie. However, his rivals won major municipal contracts, much to the chagrin of Petrie who was elected the town's first Mayor in 1859.[32] These lucrative government and municipal contracts required the recruitment

and retention of much larger workforces. As was the case in Britain, the only firms capable of completing such projects were 'general contracting' firms that could bring together all the 'major trades' (stonemasons, bricklayers, carpenters and joiners). 'Finishing' work (painting and plastering) was let out to large sub-contractors.[33] In Brisbane in the late 1850s general contracting work was the preserve of a handful of firms: Petrie (the largest), Joshua Jeays, J.W. Thompson and W. Fawcett and Co.[34]

The success of general contracting firms rested on their ability to put a large skilled workforce on a project at short notice. The major problem they faced was not one of regulating excess competition (Brisbane's handful of contracting firms faced very little) but rather keeping their workforces together in the period between when one project ended and the next started. An obvious solution was to spread the work out by reducing daily operating hours so that jobs would take longer and demand would therefore be more continuous. This solution worked best if daily wage costs were also cut (the practice of cutting wages in line with reduced hours was also followed in Sydney and Melbourne during the 1850s).[35] While this idea faced employee resistance it commended itself to activists such as Spence. For a ten per cent wage cut the employers were agreeing to a 20 per cent reduction in hours (additional costs were probably passed on to clients). Workers also won continuity of employment. In short, the constant public references to the 'harmony of interest' between labour and capital was, at least in general contracting, more than idle rhetoric. Both parties had much to gain by working together (in a process that could easily be described as collusion) in order to ensure that the most profitable construction projects in the city remained the preserve of a handful of firms.

In 1857-58 it was relatively easy for Brisbane's contracting companies to come to a mutually beneficial arrangement with worker representatives. However, matters became more complicated in the early 1860s. Building boomed as the city's population doubled between 1861 and 1866. New firms entered the trade (one was owned by McNaught, the former Alliance leader). Many of these new firms worked a ten-hour day. The old firms once again expressed concern at the time-frame being set for contracts. In March 1861 Joshua Jeays, Petrie's main rival, declared that he was 'in favour of extending the period for the completion of contracts'.[36] On 12 April 1861, a few weeks after this pronouncement, Brisbane witnessed a revival in the eight-hour day movement. Spence again assumed a leadership role, sharing centre-stage with another of Petrie's foremen, William Murdoch.[37] Spence devoted much of his speech echoing employer concerns about the time set for completing public construction projects. Unless these 'injudicious' arrangements were redressed, Spence argued, workers would suffer insecure employment. Murdoch followed up by again highlighting the need for workers to accept 'some slight pecuniary sacrifice' (a wage cut) in return for shorter hours.[38] When a deputation met with building trades' employers a few days later the proposed reduction in both hours and wages was, as in 1857-58, readily adopted. Indeed, the shorter day suggestion was proposed and seconded by employers.[39]

Employers, Business Placement and Union Formation, 1861-78

In the wake of the April 1861 agreement on shorter hours, unionism flourished in the building trades. While it appears that the Brisbane Operative Stonemasons Society was established during 1858, between 1861 and 1865 unions were also established

to cover carpenters, bricklayers, painters and plasterers.[40] Inevitably, membership of these bodies, and the working of a shorter day, was confined to a relative few. In 1866 only 250 artisans marched behind the banners of the city's five 'eight hour societies' (covering the five building trades listed above). Membership of these societies appears to have been confined to the large building firms and their major sub-contractors.[41] Union dependence on employer support is perhaps most evident in the history of the Brisbane Plasterers Society. Virtually all of the society's members (who numbered around 30 in 1868) worked for the city's largest plastering firm, James Campbell. As Campbell prospered so too did the union. By 1884 he gave work to 200 plasterers. Campbell always attended the union's annual dinner in celebration of the eight-hour day, paying for the cost on alternate years. In explaining the benefits of their association, Campbell pointed to the need for joint action against 'backslider' employers who threatened to undercut trade standards.[42] Such employer support, however, came with a caveat. They were not prepared to endorse union actions that were at odds with their own business interests. When, during the late 1870s, intercolonial unions gained a following in the Brisbane building trade, demanding a 'closed shop' for their members, employers drew the line. Petrie declared that such a move was 'an interference with his liberty as an employer'.[43]

While the larger building firms contained the core of Brisbane's union strength in the 1860s other trades also witnessed attempts at union formation. Success or failure rested on their employers' attitudes. Unskilled workers fared badly. When labourers employed by the town's council applied for a shorter day their bid was rejected. William Pettigrew, Brisbane's largest timber business proprietor, led the opposition.[44] Pettigrew also opposed the shorter day at his own business – despite being Petrie's closest business partner and political ally. Given the demand for timber his business focused on maximising output rather than on spreading out available work. Marchers in the eight-hour day celebration compared his employment conditions to 'slavery'.[45] Campaigns by skilled metal workers for a shorter working week also failed, despite the formation of the Journeymen Blacksmiths Society of Brisbane in February 1865.[46] Brisbane's metal trade was still dominated by a host of one-person blacksmith's shops. The retarded development of metal manufacturing (and metal trades unionism) in Brisbane largely reflected the fact that, unlike other colonies, Queensland's railway system did not begin in the capital. Ipswich claimed this honour. Queensland's major railway workshops and the first branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) were both established there in 1865. By contrast, Brisbane had only one metal manufacturing firm – the Queensland Foundry in Alice Street – which employed more than a handful of workers.[47] This was not a conducive environment for union formation and the Blacksmiths Society soon disappeared.

If unions grew in the building sector with employer support, and disappeared in the metal trades without it, the fortunes of Early Closing Associations (ECAs) were also closely tied to fluctuations in employer attitudes. While most sectors of Brisbane's retail trade were dominated by small family-run businesses, the large 'drapery' stores were an exception to this rule. These firms concentrated (like modern department stores) on a variety of personal and homeware items. It was these stores that were the principal employers of shop assistants. Between the late 1850s and 1890 an oligopoly of six to eight firms dominated the trade. In the late

1850s the major firms were R. Towns and Co, J. Richardson and J & G. Harris. By the early 1870s the dominant stores were Grimes & Petty and Finny Isles.[48] Reflecting the trade's oligopolistic nature, campaigns to regulate working hours had a long lineage. If all the large drapers closed early then costs could be reduced without a loss of custom. However, if a shop closed while its competitors remained open there would inevitably be some loss of business to its rivals.

Brisbane's first industrial agreement, signed by seven store owners and ten employees on 12 September 1857, provided for early Saturday closing. Among the worker signatories was William Grimes. Like labour activists in the building trades, Grimes aspired to a business career. By 1863 he was a principal in one of Brisbane's major stores, Grimes & Petty. Throughout his career he constantly espoused support for early closing.[49] Once in business, however, his behaviour was initially little different to that of his rivals. In the prosperous early 1860s all of the 'better class of shops' closed their doors at 6pm during the week and at 1pm on Saturday (conditions many did not enjoy again for the rest of the century).[50] However, as the economy slid into recession in 1866, stores stayed opened until after 9pm in a bitter contest for trade. In an attempt to restore some order an ECA was formed in October 1867, only to collapse when owners refused to adopt shorter hours. A Saturday Half-Holiday movement was then launched by the city's leading Liberal politician, Charles Lilley, on 7 June 1869.[51] Supported by all the drapery shops, this initiative stayed in force until 1871 before unravelling. Over the next eight years ECAs were formed in 1873, 1876 and 1879.[52] Each collapsed when employers abandoned their shorter hours' pledge as they competed for late shoppers.

The effects of the 1866 depression, brought about by a London banking collapse, had a profound effect on all sectors of Brisbane's economy – not just retailing. In 1867 the press reported that the 'extremely dull times' had 'thinned' the number of workers, 'weakened their trade organisations, and left them individually and collectively, in a worse position'.[53] However, it is wrong to assert, as Denis Murphy did, that the Brisbane eight-hour movement became extinct during the late 1860s. Nor were Brisbane unions in the 1870s simply 'single issue' affairs that sprang up only 'to die again after the issue was resolved'.[54] While no eight-hour marches were held between 1867 and 1875, celebratory dinners – chaired and supported by leading employers – demonstrated the continuing collaboration between capital and labour in the building trade.[55]

Far from being a lost decade for the union movement the 1870s proved a period of growth and renewal. As businesses failed, and employees abandoned Brisbane for work on the goldfields,[56] the possession of a stable, skilled workforce became more important than ever. By the early 1870s virtually every trade was characterised, as one newspaper observed, by a bifurcated structure. On one side were 'the captains of the craft', who had 'the best workmen' and who, as a result, did 'the most work'. Invariably, these firms paid well, worked an eight-hour day, 'and made money'. On the other side were the 'cheap labour men … the struggling host seen everywhere'. These employers worked their staff longer hours, did shoddy work and lost money.[57] The benefits of holding a skilled labour force together was highlighted when Joshua Jeays proved incapable of completing the construction of Queensland's Parliament building – the city's plum building project. The job went by default to Petrie, the sole employer capable of marshalling the required labour.[58]

In the 1870s the most notable union advances occurred in the manufacturing sector. The metal trades thrived as orders flooded in from the goldfields and the expanding sugar industry. The major beneficiary of this growth was the firm of Smellie & Co, which took over the Queensland Foundry in Alice Street. Employment at the firm grew from 20 in 1868 to 160 a decade later. A number of other foundries, of which Smith, Forrester & Co. was the largest, also set up shop.[59] For such firms, possession of a skilled labour force capable of undertaking high quality work was an imperative. As John Sinclair, one of Smellie & Co's partners, noted in 1879 his firm refused to pay workers on a piecework basis because they were 'afraid of the quality' that would result.[60] Both Sinclair and his partner, Robert Smellie, were known as 'thorough believers' in the eight-hour system (Sinclair even chaired meetings of the Early Closing Association).[61] Such an environment was conducive to union formation, and by February 1875 unions covering blacksmiths, ironworkers and moulders were active on Brisbane's Eight Hour Committee.[62] The 1870s also proved a golden era for Brisbane's male tailors and their union, the Journeymen Tailors Society. Established in July 1866, the union negotiated a city-wide agreement with employers in 1872. From 1875 it joined unions from the building and metal trades in the annual eight-hour celebration.[63] The union's strength reflected the state of the Brisbane clothing trade at the time. Machine work had, as yet, made few inroads. Purveyors of better-class clothing still relied on skilled hand-work undertaken by male journeymen.[64]

While the focus of this article is on union formation in Brisbane it should nevertheless be noted that employer support and sponsorship of unionism was not confined to Queensland's capital. In March 1875 the first major attempt to organise rural workers occurred when the Queensland Shearers Union (QSU) was established in Toowoomba. While over 200 delegates from all over Queensland attended the union's founding meeting the leadership and impetus for action was drawn from Toowoomba's ruling elite. The town's leading political and business identity, William Groom, chaired the meeting, while a Captain Smith, the head of the town's Volunteer Rifle Corps, became its first secretary.[65] However, unlike those Brisbane unions which enjoyed employer support at this time, neither Groom nor Smith actually commanded much influence in the industry that they were attempting to organise. The QSU therefore rested on extremely fragile and unsustainable grounds. It was never heard of again after its founding meeting. It was to be another 12 years before a shearers' union was re-established in Queensland.

If there was little employer support for unionism in the bush in early 1876, an unusual dispute highlighted middle-class support for 'moderate' unionism in Brisbane. On 1 March the annual eight-hour day celebrations were held in the Botanic Gardens. These festivities were observed from across the river by 180 navvies who were labouring for nine hours per day digging out a dry dock. The contrast between their predicament and that of the unionised workers proved, one report recorded, 'too much for their patient endurance, and suddenly, without warning, they all threw down their picks and shovels, and declared for eight hours a day'.[66] The men promptly enrolled in the Queensland European Labourers Protection Society, a small society established a few years earlier to cover builders' labourers employed at eight-hour firms. Their plight was promptly taken up by the Rev. S. Savage, who orchestrated a campaign that forced their employer to concede the shorter day.

Drawing lessons from the dispute, the press advised that such victories could only be won if unions behaved 'with moderation', thereby securing 'for themselves the sympathies of the public'.[67]

While middle-class support was an important factor in the navvies' victory this outcome was, nevertheless, an aberration. The dry dock was a particularly lucrative government contract, for which the employer had deposited a £6000 guarantee. This placed him in an unusually vulnerable position.[68] Other attempts to form unions in the face of employer opposition invariably foundered, even where they received middle-class backing. In June 1873, for example, the Brisbane Seamen's Union (BSU) was established to campaign for better employment contracts. Its cause was taken up by two prominent parliamentarians, Francis Beattie and George Edmonstone. However, the union soon collapsed.[69] The BSU, given its localised base, could offer nothing to the inter-colonial shipping companies. Nor could it force them to negotiate. The Brisbane Bootmakers Protection Union (BBPU), established in March 1873, initially did somewhat better. Within a few months it negotiated a 'schedule' to regulate piecework. The Brisbane boot trade was, however, in a state of flux. Many boot workers were new arrivals, as was the principal manufacturer, the Sydney-based firm of James Hunter. In 1873 the employers needed skilled workers to fill their work benches. Within a year, however, this had changed as factories switched to Blake sole sewing machines. After losing a strike the union went out of existence.[70]

Employer Leadership: A Final Flourishing and Decline, 1878-90

At the end of 1878 any Brisbane unionists who challenged the precept that employer and worker interests were identical would, after witnessing the largest ever strike in the city's history, probably have revised their opinion. On 22 November 1878 Brisbane seafarers walked off their ships rather than work with Chinese seafarers. Unorganised since the collapse of the BSU, they took this action in concert with their southern counterparts who belonged to the Federated Seamen's Union of Australia (FSUA). The strikers were soon overwhelmed by public support. On 25 November thousands crammed the Town Hall, spilling down the stairways and into the streets. The Mayor and liberal parliamentarians, including Samuel Griffith, lined the podium.[71] A local businessman, William

William Galloway (1840-95):
Photo courtesy Fryer Library,
University of Queensland

Galloway, stepped forward to lead the strikers, becoming the FSUA's Brisbane 'agent'. Initially Brisbane seafarers were signed up as NSW Branch members. (A Queensland Branch was established in 1885 with Galloway as President.)[72] To provide the strikers with money an Anti-Chinese Fund Committee was established, raising substantial sums. In outlining the fund's purpose, one business leader declared: 'our chief object was to show the seamen that they were … really fighting our battle as much as their own'.[73] Confronted with such opposition the employer offered to re-engage the striking seafarers.

The strength of middle-class support for the 1878-79 seamen's strike was a reaffirmation of the ties that existed between capital and (white) labour. But the strike also produced in Galloway a union leader the like of whom the city had never before seen. With his ascendancy the influence of business identities within union councils became explicit. But under his leadership Brisbane's unions also developed effective inter-union structures that reduced their reliance on employer support. These contradictory effects, in part, reflected the fact that Galloway differed from other employer sponsors of unionism, such as Petrie and Campbell, in two important ways. First, Galloway assumed a position of direct leadership in the FSUA, rather than providing support (and wielding influence) from outside. Secondly, he was not an employer of the workers covered by his union. He was instead, in 1879, the owner of an Edward-street oyster saloon located adjacent to the wharves. His initial association with the maritime industry – by 1885 he was running a ship's chandler business – was therefore as a purveyor of food to its workers. Galloway could thus criticise shipping employers without fear. Galloway's capacity for independent action received a boost when he captured control of the Anti-Chinese Committee (now called the Anti-Chinese Coolie League). In becoming the League's Secretary-Treasurer, he gained control of the war-chest left over from the 1878 strike. In 1884 up to £4,000 was still in the account,[74] and Galloway utilised these resources to create a formidable political machine. In February 1884 it was mobilised for the first time when Galloway secured election as one of the alderman for Brisbane's East Ward.[75]

In the mid-1880s the fact that a businessperson was serving as a union leader would have raised few eyebrows. As John Kellett has noted, another employer – James Valentine – held office in the Operative Stonemasons Society in 1887. Other employers were leaders of the Boilermakers Society and Tanners and Curriers Union. Employers were also entitled to membership of the unions representing printers, carpenters, cabinetmakers and builders' labourers.[76] These employer-unionists seem to have typically been journeymen who retained their interest in unionism despite having – like McNaught and Spence before them – gone into business on their own account. Not being wage-earners they could represent union interests without fear of victimisation. They also had greater discretion in how they used their time. Galloway's employment status certainly did nothing to affect his rise through labour ranks. His position as Brisbane's pre-eminent unionist was highlighted when, on 18 August 1885, he chaired the inaugural meeting of Brisbane's Trades and Labour Council (TLC). This assembly elected Galloway as the organisation's foundation President. Another business identity (and Galloway associate), James Boyce, was elected Secretary *pro tem*.[77]

If, in 1885, employers' influence within the union movement appeared stronger than ever, the long era of employer oversight was nevertheless coming to an end. Brisbane, with a population of 73,642 in 1886, little resembled the small collection of hamlets that had existed 25 years before. Most inhabitants were recent immigrants. A majority travelled to work from the suburbs.[78] In such circumstances the close personal relationships that had characterised industrial relations in the early 1860s could not be sustained on any significant scale. Industrially, employers found themselves victims of their own past success. By assembling large skilled workforces the old family firms made themselves targets for large inter-colonial or British-based

unions. In September 1879 an organiser from the British-based Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASC&J) arrived in town. The old Carpenters Union agreed to wind up its affairs after its members were granted ASC&J membership. Brisbane's building contractors quickly found that the ASC&J was not as amenable as the old union. It insisted that the wages and conditions which it laid down were binding on all its members.[79] In Brisbane's metal shops another British-based union, the ASE, also established a permanent presence in 1879. Previously, this union's activities had been largely confined to the Ipswich railway workshops. But in 1879 the Government made a large number of workshop employees redundant. Many found work in Brisbane, taking their ASE membership tickets with them.[80]

If the arrival of unions such as the ASC&J and the ASE was disruptive for Brisbane's traditional pattern of industrial relations, the flood of immigrants who arrived on the city's wharves after 1880 posed even bigger problems. Between 1881 and 1886 Brisbane's population grew by 237 per cent, fundamentally altering social and industrial relationships. Many of these new arrivals were British union veterans. A minority were socialists. Among the latter was William Lane, a 24-year-old journalist who came to Brisbane in 1885. Around Lane there gathered a circle of activists that included Charles Seymour, the Secretary of the FSUA – Galloway's old union. Lane's supporters believed that 'socialism' could be achieved through politics, rather than revolution. But they also argued that the divisions between labour and capital could only be transcended if workers organised free of employer tutelage. In February 1887 Lane published an article in the local press arguing that it was 'unwise to have employers in a society, and folly to permit them to hold positions of trust in one'.[81]

The decisive showdown over the role of employers within Brisbane's union movement came in May 1887, when a motion was moved at the TLC (by a Lane supporter, Gilbert Casey) that 'no foreman, overseer or employer should become a member of the council'.[82] This proposal produced a long and acrimonious debate. It was clear that its proponents wished to exclude not only business identities such as Galloway but also craftsmen venturing into business with one or two employees. They were also taking aim at the foremen who represented employers' workplace interests. Given the history of the Brisbane union movement this was a radical proposal. Brisbane's oldest union – the Stonemasons – led the opposition. James Valentine, the Stonemasons' delegate (himself an employer), argued that it was unfair to exclude those 'who had risen up the ladder'. The motion was, nevertheless, carried by 13 votes to nine.[83] In the ensuing year those employers who retained union tickets found themselves in hostile territory. In June 1888 Galloway was expelled from the FSUA, accused of being a 'blackleg'.[84] As Brisbane unions purged themselves of their employer members, and adopted a more aggressive outlook, the relationship between capital and labour became increasingly adversarial. In July 1890 Brisbane witnessed 'the largest ever' gathering of employers in Queensland's history. Held at the instigation of the recently established Queensland Employers Association, it called upon employers to band together against 'united Labour'. By October 1890 more than 1500 employers had joined the Association.[85]

If, by 1890, the rhetoric of class conflict increasingly characterised the conduct of industrial relations in Queensland it was nevertheless the case that employers and the self-employed, remained central to the strength of the union cause. In the

1890s this tendency was, paradoxically, most apparent in the pastoral and mining sectors – now at the centre of the industrial conflict between 'capital' and 'labour'. In the pastoral industry at least 650 carriers, the vast majority of whom were either small-scale employers or self-employed, were members of carriers' unions based at Barcaldine, Charleville and Hughenden by 1890. These bodies allied themselves with the other pastoral unions in order to regulate cartage rates and contracts.[86] Many of the unionised workers in North Queensland's hard-rock mining operations were also contractors, tributers (who worked a mine under lease arrangements) or small-scale employers rather than employees. This multi-class arrangement remained a characteristic feature of the Queensland mining industry until World War I. In 1912 Ted Theodore vehemently opposed an attempt to exclude small employers from membership of his Amalgamated Workers Association, observing that their expulsion 'would mean the loss of a great many members'.[87]

In Brisbane the continuing employer support for unionism was most apparent in the drapery trade. In 1879 the ECA was, as noted earlier, destroyed when a majority of shop owners decided to oppose early closing. However, the two largest firms – Grimes & Petty and Finney Isles – broke ranks, closing at 6pm on Saturday (most shops closed each night at 11pm). In 1883, Thomas Finney, the principal of Finney Isles, went further, closing at 1pm on Saturday and 6pm during the week. When the ECA was re-established in 1889 Finney became a staunch supporter. During 1890 Finney chided his employees for their lack of support for the Association, declaring that 'they should not think that because they were in an early closing establishment … that they had no duty outside it'.[88] Finney's support for the ECA was partly a matter of principle, but it also suited his business interests. He catered to the needs of society's more prosperous citizens, rather than, as he once observed, 'the servant girls and the working class'.[89] Early closing distinguished his store from his down-market competitors.

In terms of support for the ECA there was one firm – Edwards & Lamb – that went further than Finney. In 1890 this business could not afford to close early. Its customers were the 'servant girls' who Finney showed little interest in serving. This firm's business interest lay in state-enforced compulsory closing. If such a system was introduced its smaller competitors (who gained business when it was shut) would be placed at a disadvantage.[90] To achieve this objective the firm employed Frank McDonnell, the ECA's Secretary, keeping him on the payroll from 1889 until 1896. Technically a 'manager', in practice McDonnell worked as full-time union organiser. On his election to Parliament on a Labor ticket in 1896 McDonnell acknowledged that his industrial and political success was 'due to the action of his employers, Edwards and Lamb'.[91] Once in Parliament, McDonnell fulfilled his former employers' hopes, becoming the most forceful advocate of a Factories and Shops Act. His parliamentary job over, McDonnell engaged – as many other unionists did before him – in a business career, becoming the senior partner of one of Brisbane's iconic retail establishments, McDonnell & East. For unionists such as McDonnell their working experiences constantly reaffirmed the benefits of harmony between employers and the employed.

Conclusion

The Australian union movement has been much studied. But its emergence as a significant and permanent feature of industrial life in the three decades after 1850 is still poorly understood. For many decades labour historians simply attributed the peculiar strength of Australian unionism to labour shortages. As these were most pronounced in the various skilled craft occupations (most notably construction) it was there that unionism first gained a solid footing. Such an explanation, however, does not survive careful scrutiny. Craft workers, including those in construction, were in an unstable labour market, subject to cyclical and seasonal variation. Prior to the late 1880s even those unions that survived for any length of time typically lacked the resources to engage permanent officials. Many unionists aspired to become employers, and were frequently successful in doing so. If the 'traditional' explanation for union formation is flawed, then more recent efforts also appear deficient. Research by Quinlan, Gardner and associates highlights the importance of 'informal' forms of worker organisation (informal protest) prior to 1890. However the link between such activity and successful union formation is, at best, unclear. Various institutional histories do emphasise the economic collusion that occurred between established unions and larger employers in many trades. But the process of actual union formation is generally portrayed as a 'heroic' struggle, in which unions constantly battled to make headway against intransigent employer resistance.

It is arguable that the principal shortcoming of most accounts of mid-nineteenth century union formation is their tendency to view this process as one centred on a constant struggle between capital and labour, 'rooted in a structural conflict at the point of production'.[92] There is no doubting the fact that, in most nineteenth century workplaces, employers did view unions in a hostile light. However, as this article has demonstrated, this was hardly a universal viewpoint. In Brisbane at least (which was Australia's third largest capital) many employers actively sponsored union formation. Indeed, such employer support was the principal precondition for trade union success prior to 1880. While unions were constantly established without such support, or in the face of actual employer opposition, such bodies invariably proved short-lived.

If employer support was, until the mid-1880s, essential for union formation and survival in Brisbane the nature of this sponsorship varied. Between the late 1850s and the late 1870s the employers upon whom long-term unions depended for their survival were invariably the major employers in their particular trade. In construction, the metal trades, tailoring and (intermittently) retailing the principal employers publicly backed major union campaigns, most notably the shorter-day movement. They attended, spoke at, and even paid for, union functions and festivities. They also advocated union membership amongst their employees and, on occasion, encouraged or paid (or at least permitted) their managers and foremen to undertake leadership roles within the union movement. While such support allowed the nascent union movement to slowly garner strength it also constrained its independence. Employers expected the unions which they supported to act in ways that were in harmony with their business interests. This began to change in the late 1870s as employers and business identities of a different sort began to assume a union leadership role. Unlike the union movement's initial sponsors these employers were not large-scale employers of labour within the trade that

their union organised. Driven, it appears, by ideological attachment to the cause of labour rather than business self-interest, they were either small-scale masters who had risen through the ranks or business identities whose economic activities lay in other spheres. William Galloway was by far the most significant of these employer-unionists, leading the seamen's union during the early 1880s and founding the TLC in 1885. As Brisbane's union movement grew in size and assertiveness, however, these union leaders found that they had outlived their time. By 1890 the relationship between capital and labour in Brisbane was increasingly characterised by conflict, rather than harmony. The passing of the era of employer sponsorship and leadership should not, however, blind us to the contribution of these early employer supporters and advocates to the union cause. It was upon the foundations they laid down that the union movement's subsequent achievements were built.

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Endnotes

*   This article has been peer-reviewed for *Labour History* by two anonymous referees.
1.   *Brisbane Courier*, 2 March 1865, p.2. Also, *Moreton Bay Courier*, 12 September 1857, p. 2; Dimity Dornan and Denis Cryle, *The Petrie Family: Building Colonial Brisbane,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992, pp. 121-24.
2.   *Brisbane Courier*, 1 March 1868, 2 March 1878, 3 March 1884, p. 5.
3.   'Testimony of William Taylor', Report with Minutes of Evidence of Royal Commission into Factories and Shops, 1891 (RCFS), Government Printer, Brisbane, 1892, Q. 4055.
4.   *Brisbane Courier*, 1 March 1868.
5.   See the special edition of *Labour History*, no. 83, November 2002. An overview of changing attitudes of labour historians to the issue of union organising is found in: Rae Cooper and Greg Patmore, 'Trade union organising and labour history', *Labour History*, no. 83, November 2002, pp. 3-18.
6.   Michael Quinlan and Margaret Gardner, 'Researching industrial relations history: the development of a database on Australian trade unions 1825-1900', *Labour History*, no. 66, May 1994, pp. 90-113; Michael Quinlan and Margaret Gardner, 'Strikes, worker protest and union growth in Canada and Australia 1801-1900', *Labour / Le Travail*, no. 36, Autumn 1995, pp. 175-208; Michael Quinlan, Margaret Gardner and Peter Akers, 'A failure of voluntarism: shop assistants, the Early Closing Movement and the struggle to restrict work and trading hours in the Colony of Victoria 1850-1885', *Labour History*, no. 88, May 2005, pp. 161-178; Gordon Anderson and Michael Quinlan, 'The changing role of the state: regulating work in Australia and New Zealand', *Labour History*, no. 95, November 2008, pp. 111-132.
7.   The only attempt to cover union formation in Brisbane from the 1850s is John Moran, *March of Progress: A History of the Eight Hours Demonstration in Brisbane (Beginnings to 1900)*, John Moran, Ashgrove, 1989.
8.   John Norton, 'Introduction', in John Norton (ed.), *The History of Capital and Labour in All Lands and Ages*, Oceanic Publishing Co., Sydney and Melbourne, 1888, p. viii.
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10. Jenny Lee and Charles Fahey, 'A boom for whom? Some developments in the Australian labour market 1870-1891', *Labour History*, no. 50, May 1986, pp. 1-27; Shirley Fisher, 'An Accumulation of Misery?', *Labour History*, no. 40, May 1981, pp. 16-28; Shirley Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp: Sydney 1870-1890*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982; Max Kelly, *A Certain Sydney*, Doak Press, Sydney, 1978.

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13. Markey, *The Making of the Labour Party*, p. 153.

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17. Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1991, p. 112.

18. Michael Quinlan, Margaret Gardner and Peter Akers, 'Reconsidering the collective impulse: Formal organization and informal associations among workers in the Australian colonies, 1795-1850', *Labour / Le Travail*, No. 52, Fall 2003, pp. 137-180; Anderson and Quinlan, Changing role of the state, pp. 111-132; Quinlan, Gardner and Akers, Failure of voluntarism, pp. 161-178; Quinlan and Gardner, Strikes, worker protest and union growth, pp. 175-208; Quinlan and Gardner, Researching industrial relations history, pp. 90-113.

19. Quinlan, Gardner and Akers, Reconsidering the collective impulse, pp. 171, 178.

20. Ibid., p. 139.

21. Discussions of 'fair employer' support for colonial unionism are perhaps best described in, James Hagan, *Printers and Politics*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, pp. 59-60, 74-76, 89-90. Also see Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963, for descriptions of how employer 'vends' in the coal industry worked with coal mining unions in the Hunter Valley in order to maintain high coal prices. While in printing and coal the alliance between established unions and the 'fair employer' was well-established in the nineteenth century in other trades, such as road transport, such alliances did not emerge until the early twentieth century. See, for example, Bradley Bowden, *Driving Force: The History of the Transport Workers Union in Australia 1883-1992*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, pp. 36-37; xvi-xvii.

22. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 12 September 1857, p. 3. The figure of one shilling for the reduction is given in, 'Editorial', *Brisbane Courier*, 4 March 1868.

23. 'Letter to editor by Yacca', *Moreton Bay Courier*, 31 March 1858, p. 2.

24. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 12 September 1857, p. 3.

25. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 9 January 1858, p. 2; 31 March 1858, p. 2. The extension of the shorter day to unskilled workers is outlined in, *Moreton Bay Courier*, 18 April 1861, p. 2.

26. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 9 January 1858, p. 2; Dornan and Cryle, *The Petrie Family*, pp. 121-22, 111.

27. Dornan and Cryle, *The Petrie Family*, pp. 111-12.

28. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *A History of Trade Unionism*, Longmans Green, London, 1902, p. 153.

29. Dornan and Cryle, *The Petrie Family*, pp. 10-11; *Brisbane Courier*, 2 March 1865, p. 2.

30. *Queenslander*, 3 August 1872, p. 4.

31. *Brisbane Courier*, 17 July 1862; *Queenslander*, 20 April 1867.

32. Dornan and Cryle, *The Petrie Family*, pp. 119, 138-39.

33. An excellent account of the emergence of the general contracting system in Britain is found in Richard Price, *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour 1830-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980. For Australia, see Alice Coolican, 'Solidarity and sectionalism in the Sydney building trades 1886-1895', *Labour History*. no. 54, May 1988, pp. 16-29.

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36. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 21 March 1861, p. 2.

37. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 13 April 1861, p. 2. Murdoch's role in Petrie's business is discussed in an obituary published in *Queenslander*, 28 August 1869.

38. *Moreton Bay Courier,* 13 April 1861, p. 2.

39. Moran, *March of Progress*, p. 28.

40. *Brisbane Courier*, 4 October 1861, 17 October 1861, 11 March 1865, 3 March 1865, p. 2. *Queenslander*, 3 March 1865. Joe Harris claims that the Stonemasons Society was established in January 1858. See, Joe Harris, *The Bitter Fight*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1970, p. 30

41. *Brisbane Courier*, 3 March 1866, 3 March 1873.

42. *Brisbane Courier*, 4 March 1868, 3 March 1884, p. 5, 26 November 1878.

43. *Brisbane Courier*, 23 May 1879.

44. *Brisbane Courier*, 14 April 1863.

45. *Queenslander*, 3 March 1865.

46. *Brisbane Courier*, 11 March 1865.

47. Bradley Bowden, 'A Time "the like of which was never before experienced": changing community loyalties in Ipswich, 1900-12', *Labour History*, no. 78, May 2000, pp. 71-93; *Brisbane Courier*, 11 March 1865, p. 3.

48. *Moreton Bay Courier*, 12 September 1857, p. 3; *Brisbane Courier*, 1 January 1877.

49. *Brisbane Courier*, 1 January 1863, 11 July 1876.

50. *Queenslander*, 4 May 1867.

51. *Queenslander*, 25 May 1867, 2 November 1867, 12 June 1869, 21 August 1869.

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54. Denis Murphy, 'Queensland', in Denis Murphy (ed.), *Labor in Politics: The State Labor Parties in Australia 1880-1920*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1975, p. 129.

55. For eight hour celebrations see, *Brisbane Courier*, 3 March 1868, 3 March 1873, p. 5; *Queenslander*, 6 March 1869, 2 March 1872, 3 March 1874.

56. In 1869 a founder of the eight-hour movement, William Murdoch, died from a gunshot wound on the Gympie field. *Queenslander*, 28 August 1869.

57. 'Editorial', *Queenslander*, 6 March 1875, p. 4.

58. Dornan and Cryle, *The Petrie Family*, pp. 144-47.

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62. *Queenslander*, 13 February 1875, p. 3.

63. *Queenslander*, 14 July 1866, 6 March 1875, p. 2; 'Testimony of John Beck', RCFS, Q. 8094.

64. 'Testimony of John Beck', RCFS, Q. 8118-19, 8123.

65. *Toowoomba Chronicle*, 18 March 1875; *Brisbane Courier*, 27 March 1875, p. 5.

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67. *Queenslander*, 11 March 1876, p. 26.

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78.   'Editorial', *Brisbane Courier*, 1 March 1879, p. 4.
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80.   'Testimony of Robert Smellie', Select Committee on Railway Workshops, Q. 962
81.   *Daily Observer*, 26 February 1887. Also Kellett, Australian Labour Federation, p. 135.
82.   *Daily Observer*, 1 June 1887.
83.   See Kellett, Australian Labour Federation, pp. 135-36 for a fuller account of this debate.
84.   Federated Seamen's Union of Australia (Queensland Branch) Minutes, 10 June 1888, 21 June 1888.
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90.   'Testimony of Thomas Edwards', RCSF, Q. 2281, 2220.
91.   *Brisbane Worker*, 28 March 1896.
92.   Stuart Macintyre, 'The making of the Australian working class: an historigraphical survey',
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