

The apprenticeship system at the Workshops

Bobbie Oliver

APPRENTICESHIPS were part of the industrial system that—Australia inherited from Britain. They played a significant role at the Midland Railway Workshops, with some tens or hundreds of apprentices being recruited every year into a wide range of trades. These boys—as they almost all were—were indentured for a period of five years (later shortened) at low pay to learn the intricate skills of the craftsman. In this chapter, we shall see how they were recruited, the types of training experienced by the young men, and the skills that they had to master before gaining their trade certificate. Over time, the skills changed with the introduction of new technologies but the pride in gaining a trade remained. In addition to the ‘official’ rituals were the ‘unofficial’ rites of passage that had to be negotiated: the initiations, rituals, pranks, jokes and other experiences as revealed through personal anecdotes, interviews and memoirs. Some thrived in this huge and dangerous workplace; others merely endured and some did not survive the experience—leaving to find more congenial work, or, in handful of tragedies, losing their lives. But for most who aspired to a trades apprenticeship at the Midland Workshops, ‘getting in the gate’ opened up a vast, new world of opportunity, resulting in a lifelong job if they wanted it, or a skilled trade outside of the railways.

Getting in the gate

My father always wanted me to learn a trade. It was a popular parental ambition in the ‘30s. A ‘trade’ was a manual skill certified by completed apprenticeship indentures. ‘They can’t take a trade off you,’ older people used to tell me. Although I was unsure who ‘they’ were, I felt that if I ‘learnt a trade’ I would attain a level of

power, skill and the respect that goes with being a ‘tradesman’. Above all it was seen as a guarantee of permanent work.¹

Thus wrote Jack Emery, who trained as an apprentice turner and iron machinist at the Midland Railway Workshops during World War II. Like apprentices before and after him, Jack underwent a rigorous selection procedure. After he had completed two years at high school, his father enrolled him in a course at the Perth Technical College in 1939, which introduced him to subjects he would use as an apprentice, such as Technical Drawing. Jack’s parents made a considerable sacrifice to help their son achieve his goal. At fifteen, he was old enough to work on the family orchard, whereas the family had to meet his keep, fares and tuition fees while he studied, but the sacrifice proved worthwhile. Jack was among 749 hopefuls who applied for an apprenticeship with the WAGR at the Midland Workshops in 1939. Applications had to be accompanied by a Birth Certificate or Extract from Birth Entry; a Certificate of Standard of Education; and original testimonials from the Head Teacher of the last school attended, and from another person who knew the boy, each accompanied by a copy in the boy’s own hand writing.² Jack Emery was one of 585 boys whose applications were complete, but he had yet other hurdles to cross: his age and physical size, undergoing an interview and passing a written test.

The Apprenticeship Selection Board advocated that ‘apprenticeship should be commenced as near as possible to the age of 16’, and that the ages of fifteen and seventeen should constitute the lower and upper limits of intake. That left 230 applicants—among whom Jack, about to turn sixteen, was well placed age-wise.³ On the appointed day in

July, the boys reported to the Railway Institute at Midland. Jack brought some models and drawings that he had made at Tech. Each boy was weighed and his height and chest were measured, to ensure that he was an adequate size to carry out the duties of an apprentice. Twenty-four boys were rejected as being below the 5 foot 2 inch height and 7 stone weight limits deemed large enough for the heavy work, with 206 applicants going forward to be interviewed by the Board, for an anticipated thirty-two vacancies. Boys who interviewed satisfactorily were given a written test. Emery passed the interview and the test and was ranked fifth out of seven boys selected as apprentice turners.⁴

Becoming part of an 'industrial elite'

Thus Jack Emery entered the elite world of the skilled industrial tradesman. With his father's signed permission, he became indentured for a five-year period during which, for a minimal wage, he would work an eight-hour day and be trained as a craftsman. From 1901 apprentices' conditions were regulated by either State or Commonwealth Acts, under which the minimum age was lifted from 12 to 14 years and the maximum working week set at 48 hours (except for farm workers and domestic servants).⁵ Tom Sheridan, historian of the Amalgamated Engineers Union (AEU)—one of the unions operating at Midland—observed that it was 'difficult to overstress the significance of apprenticeship'. Training consisted of 'practical instruction and observation on the job...combined with theoretical instruction at technical schools'—a system which was regarded 'as the best means of producing engineering craftsmen'. Furthermore, 'the ancient trappings and jargon usually connected

with entering indentures, and the ceremonies—dignified or bawdy—traditionally associated with a lad "coming out of his time" at the end of the apprenticeship, greatly fortified the pride and sense of separateness or superiority in tradesmen's minds'.⁶ Sheridan emphasised that this was not just 'an anachronistic hangover' perpetuated by such craft unions as the AEU, but a continuing expectation well into the second half of the twentieth century.⁷ These 'ancient trappings' and accompanying traditions were strongly evident at Midland.

Even the apprentice's introduction to the Workshops on his first day had a curiously ritualistic aspect. Bob Wells, a car and wagon builder who began his apprenticeship in 1964, recalled:

[The new apprentices] were spoken to by the Master of Apprentices for an hour or so; they were then taken to the various shops where they were to work [and]...were introduced to the foreman who introduced them to the sub-foreman. The sub-foreman would then take them and place them with a tradesman in the case of the metal trades—or with [one or two] tradesmen in the case of the building trades. So [the apprentice] would start work with them on [his very] first day.⁸

\ Despite its somewhat archaic title, the position Master of Apprentices (MOA) involved tasks equivalent to modern-day public relations and human resources positions. The MOA visited schools with displays of photographs and information about the various trades, and talked to prospective applicants for an apprenticeship. He took a major role in

interviewing and selecting applicants and had oversight of the training of all apprentices at Midland. Lastly, he examined the boys before they completed their apprenticeships. Only three men ever held this position at Midland: George Groves, Ted Holdsworth and Bill Kirkham, all of whom were mechanical fitters by trade.

After the MOA, the foreman was the new apprentices' first contact with the workforce. The foreman, who occupied an elevated office above the factory floor, was usually promoted to this position when in his fifties, and was selected on the basis of both trades skills and his ability to manage workers. According to Neil McDougall, an apprentice fitter in the 1960s, 'Within the first five minutes, he'd put you in your place. He told you where you were, who you were, who was the boss, and what he'd do if he caught you doing anything wrong.'⁹ The foreman allocated each new apprentice a place of work and introduced him to the sub-foreman who in turn placed him under the supervision of a tradesman. Junior workers excepted, apprentices were indisputably at the bottom of the hierarchy. This seems to have been most pronounced in the experience of Steve Smith, an apprentice boilermaker in the 1970s, who found that some of the older tradesmen expected to be called 'Mister', although many younger tradesmen skipped these formalities and permitted their apprentices to call them by their first names. Smith particularly recalled two boilermakers, John Jenkins and Horrie Henderson. He remembered being 'severely reprimanded' by Jenkins for referring to him as 'Johnny'. Furthermore, Smith was told to walk behind his tradesman and next to the labourer (not in front of him). At the end of every working day, he had to get two buckets of water, warm them up using the steam injector



Only three men held the position of Master of Apprentices in the Midland Workshops' 90-year history: they were (left to right) George Groves, Ted Holdsworth and Bill Kirkham. *Courtesy of Bill Kirkham.*

from the boiler, and place them down for his tradesman to wash himself. After the tradesman, the trades assistant washed in the buckets; the apprentice washed last.¹⁰ Others who trained at the Workshops prior to the 1970s have strongly denied ever having seen evidence of this type of hierarchy; even Smith did not clarify whether some of these practices were part of his 'initiation'.¹¹

Apprentices' reactions to this status system varied considerably. Jack Emery revelled in the romance of being a member of 'the trade elite'. On his first day at work, he was given a 'shiny, well-worn brass disc with the number 2249 stamped on it,' which he hung on a board in the Machine Shop. The Machine Shop itself was:

a fairyland...with row upon row of milling machines of all sizes: shapers, slotters, grinders and lathes everywhere. I felt that I had joined an army of men who were men and I was one of them.¹²

Almost 60 years later, he could still remember the names, faces, personalities and roles of all of those men with whom he first worked. Others, however, found their introduction to this vast and dangerous workplace an

overwhelming and intimidating experience, as the recollections of three apprentice fitters from the '50s, '60s and '70s respectively illustrate. For John Hagarty, the Workshops were like 'Dante's inferno':

...with soot black floor, filth and age old grime covering everything, blinding coke fires belching acrid fumes in the blacksmiths' hearths, oil fired furnaces pumping out great amounts of heat, steam hammers crashing and banging on red hot steel, assailing the ears, and stinking, salty sweat stinging the eyes, rendering the workers' clothes almost unapproachable to the uninitiated. And so it was, and there was I, reality having caught up with me; this was how I became a workingman.¹³

Neil McDougall recalled his experience a decade later:

...On that first day, probably the biggest thing was walking, walking the slow mile, because we were taken by the [Master of Apprentices]...down to the Fitting Shop. Now the Fitting Shop from the gate was really on the last block so it was a long walk. That's all new to you; you'd never been in the place. There were 3,000 men, there were 900 apprentices...[Y]ou were taken into this huge shop, where there are things going on, where there were 150 men...all working, and you were taken down through walkways [where] it probably took you a week to find out how to get out of the place... You were taken up [to] the foreman, who in those days was a little tin god, who had his office up above everyone...¹⁴

In 1970, Dave Hicks had a similarly 'overwhelming' experience, recalling the Machine Shop as a daunting place where 300 workers operated 'all these machines that you didn't understand', and the 'industrial-type environment' gave one a sense of 'being chucked into a whole new world'. Nevertheless, he 'soon became accustomed to it and accepted it and learnt.' The poor working conditions, however, left an indelible impression upon Hicks, motivating him to become active in his union (the AMWSU—subsequently the AMWU) in order to fight for change.¹⁵

Learning a trade

The system that Emery entered in 1939 had undergone little change in almost four decades except that, in 1926, changes to the *Industrial Arbitration Act 1925* resulted in apprentices being registered in the State Arbitration Court and being required to serve a three-month probation at the commencement of their apprenticeship, which was counted as part of the five-year training period.¹⁶ Each boy's training included a half-day each week in classes at the Railway Institute building, studying Mechanical Drawing and Mathematics. New boys were examined upon entry and those, like Emery, who had studied a pre-apprenticeship course, were given the option of entering a higher year. While some boys saw the classes as a waste of time, Emery was inspired by the career possibilities that study opened up and, with other like-minded apprentices, he enrolled in 'the magical Engineering Diploma course' at Perth Technical College.¹⁷

Overall, the emphasis was on practical training in all aspects of the trade. Frank Bastow, who commenced as an apprentice boilermaker in 1939, explained:

It was [a] brilliant system; you worked in every section of your trade; You'd be moved right around...I started on the [locomotive] tender [for] six months. Then you might go up into the boiler section and you'd do six or eight months there. Then you'd go to the flanging section. That was hard work, the flanging area.¹⁸

Thus, by the end of his training, Bastow could build the smoke box, the boiler and the tender of a steam locomotive.¹⁹ Emery, likewise, moved around the Machine Shop, progressing from a basic stud milling machine, which machined square heads on the tops of boiler studs, to a capstan lathe, which manufactured bolts, and later to a motor lathe, which made complex parts for petrol-powered machinery.²⁰

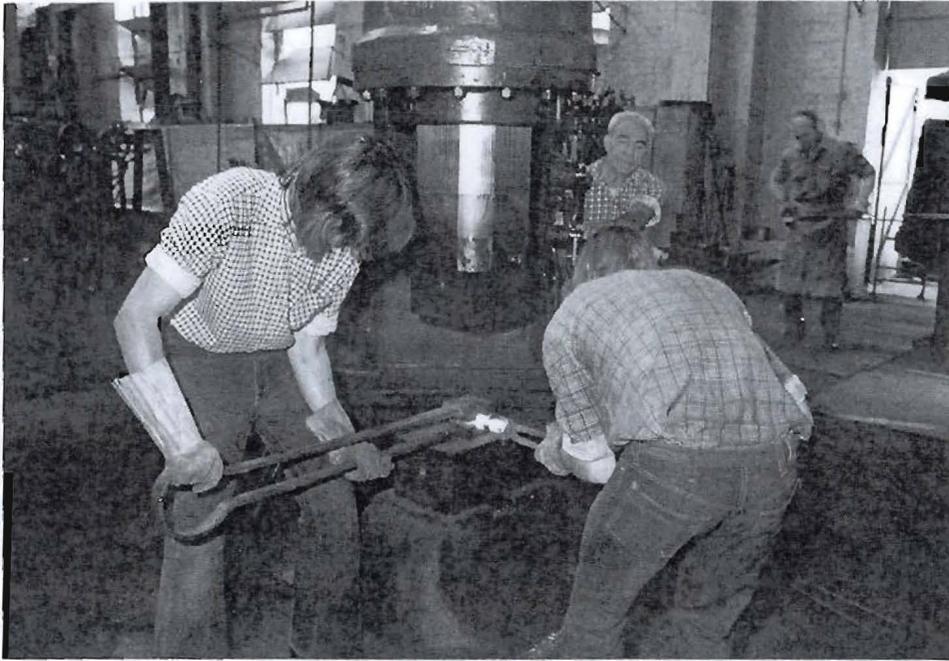
Apprentices spent part of their time at country centres, such as Northam, Geraldton or Kalgoorlie, where they encountered different types of work and varying conditions. They also learned the importance of gaining a reputation as a competent tradesman. Bill Kirkham remembered repairing broken-down locomotives in the Goldfields:

You'd have hot bearings or hot boxes...or broken con rods or pull rods and you had to make this locomotive safe, repair it on site if you could—and nine times out of ten you did. Otherwise, you would have to call to have it towed in. If you had to have it towed in it [put a dent in your reputation] because you had given in—that was the way.²¹

The requirement that apprentices spend part of their training at running sheds in rural areas ceased being compulsory in the 1950s but

many continued to take the opportunity of broadening their experience. Boilermaker Steve Smith had unhappy memories of three months in Narrogin in the 1970s doing 'basic maintenance work'. He endured appalling accommodation—an old, windowless goods wagon served by one power cord and furnished only with a bed and a chest of drawers—and ostracism as an 'outsider'.²² Unlike Kirkham's experience of learning to improvise in the Goldfields, Smith felt that his sojourn in Northam added little to his trade skills.

Even in the 1970s, the methods of training were those of an earlier era, with an emphasis upon apprentices learning chiefly by watching their tradesmen. A comparison of the experiences of two apprentice blacksmiths, Don Underdown in the 1950s and Dave Moir in the late 1970s, shows how little training methods had changed. According to Underdown, 'you just blundered along on your own'. An early task was learning to drive a steam hammer, which the apprentice was expected to master in about a week and 'then you're on your own'. The apprentice stood by the hammer 'not quite at attention but the next best thing to it. I believe in the early days they did stand to attention at the hammer.' When the blacksmith indicated he was ready, the apprentice lifted his hammer so that the white-hot metal object could be placed underneath, and he would drive the hammer to forge the metal into the required shape. 'And God help you if you hit too hard and mucked it up; you'd get a belt across the ears. It was no use going to the boss and saying "he hit me" because when you came out they'd be waiting for you and they'd hit you again.'²³ Moir's first task also was to master the steam hammer:



Apprentice blacksmiths and a hammer driver operating a drop hammer in the late 1970s or early 1980s. *Courtesy of Dave Moir.*

The first couple of weeks you had to be with this guy and you just had to stand there and watch and look...and he told you about it and [then] you got to actually put the little grease thing in and grease up the ram on it and towards the end of the first week he'd let you put a block of wood under it and give it a bit of a tap and so by the time you come to the end of the fortnight you're able to hammer out a bit of metal...²⁴

Thus, the emphasis was on the master and the pupil—the tradesman trained the apprentice to his way of doing tasks, although Moir's account suggests a gentler method of training than Underdown had experienced. The competencies for each trade were set out in a *Syllabus of Training for Apprentices*. In the 1940s, the period of 'hammer driving' for first year blacksmith apprentices was reduced to a maximum of three months, and 'simple forging and plain welding of iron and steel'²⁵

were added—possibly to avoid a practice of setting an apprentice to a monotonous task and leaving him to perform it for long periods.

Until the 1980s, the examination of skills still required knowledge of steam as well as diesel locomotives. Making his own tools was an important part of an apprentice's training; their quality was a hallmark of his ability. According to turner and iron machinist Ted King, an apprentice during the 1950s, 'the apprentices who finished their time with a poor tool box were usually fired rather than kept on.' Apprentices who showed aptitude were encouraged to make such complex tools as tension wrenches, radial arm bench drills, sanding machines and tyre levers, and they also indulged in the illegal activity of producing 'foreigners'—objects made in work time with WAGR materials, which were then smuggled out for private use.²⁶ 'Foreigners' are discussed in more detail in Ric McCracken's chapter (Chapter 9). Don Manning, a trade skills examiner for the AEU from 1963 to 1970, always told his apprentices to make a good job of their tools, so that 'you wouldn't throw them away later on'. Manning thought that this practice probably ceased because inexpensive Japanese imports enabled apprentices to buy their tools.²⁷

Reforming the system

Reforms to the apprenticeship system resulted from external as well as internal factors and were introduced slowly at the Workshops, yet their overall impact was profound. One of the first was to secure a better pay rate. In 1954, when the unions went to the Arbitration Court to secure a better wage, WA apprentices received £2/9/4 per week (or 20 per cent

of the Basic Wage) in their first six months, rising to 95 per cent of the Basic Wage (£11/14/2) in their fifth year. The Court submission stated that they 'were the lowest paid juvenile workers in the Commonwealth'. Many did not earn enough even to cover board and lodging. In comparison, first year apprentices in the NSW Railways earned 28 per cent of the Basic Wage, plus a loading. The rate claim sought a new scale beginning at 35 per cent of the tradesman's rate—not the Basic Wage—which would result in a weekly income of £5/5/6, more than double the existing rate.²⁸ On 30 April 1954, the President of the Court, L.W. Jackson, ordered amended rates for apprentices to take immediate effect. The rate for all first year apprentices was raised to 30 per cent of the Basic Wage (£3/13/11) and the second, third, fourth and fifth year rates were raised respectively to 45, 60, 80 and 100 per cent of the Basic Wage, so that apprentices in their last year received £12/6/6. Jackson refused to award the apprentices a wage based on a percentage of the relevant tradesman's rate because, he claimed, he saw no reason to depart from Section 126 of the Arbitration Act, which stipulated that apprentices and juniors be paid at 'a lower rate of wage', meaning the Basic Wage. There was no proviso in the Act for anyone to be paid a 'lower rate' of a tradesman's wage. Also, he stated that the unions' case was not adequately substantiated, in particular the contention that the 'employers were receiving a productive value from the work of their apprentices, well in excess of the wages being paid'.²⁹

Other reforms had much more profound ramifications. At the end of the 1950s, a conference of employer organisations, officials of the Arbitration Court and representatives of the Western Australian Trades

Unions Industrial Council (WATUIC)—Western Australia's forerunner to the TLC—met to consider proposals to amend the Apprenticeship Regulations. It was the proud boast of Workshops employees that WAGR apprentices were equipped not just to work in the railways but in many other branches of their trade; they were prized throughout the State as competent tradesmen.³⁰ During World War II, for example, some Workshops tradesmen had become marine engineers. Yet the discussion at the 1959 Arbitration Court conference indicates the existence of a need for improved training in some skills. Apprentice watchmakers, for example, emerged from the Workshops with a trade qualification as a watchmaker in the WAGR, but were not qualified to join the Horological Guild, which required their members to undertake a six-year apprenticeship and gain specialist knowledge. AEU official Jim Mutton argued for the need for 'an interchange with some of the Perth watchmaking firms' so that boys from the Workshops could spend part of their apprenticeship in a city firm learning particular aspects of the trade.³¹

At the conference, J.J. Lepage, of the Carpenters Union, observed that boys leaving school at Year 10 often opted for a trade once they knew they had failed their Leaving Examination. Consequently, the building trades got 'the residue', as he unflatteringly termed the poorer students. He said many of these boys were the academic equivalent of eighth grade and it was difficult for them to learn technical training. Although boys who had completed an apprenticeship as car and wagon builders, but who were surplus to the Workshops' requirements, once had been readily absorbed into the Carpenters Union, it was different now 'when employers are getting a bit more choosy about their men'.

According to Lepage, some good car and wagon builders were not good carpenters and joiners. The only place they could follow their trade was at the WAGR or the Midland Private Railway Workshops. He added that the Commissioner for Railways should consider training only sufficient car and wagon builders for Workshops' requirements.³²

The conference also discussed the amount of technical training that an apprentice should receive. In the 1950s, it was mandatory for the boys to attend technical classes weekly in their first year and fortnightly for the next three years. George Groves, MOA at Midland, supported an increase in both the educational standard of applicants and the amount of technical training for apprentices. He believed that boys who twice failed consecutive apprenticeship examinations should never have been selected. Boys who had passed their Junior Certificate were preferred, especially for apprenticeships in electrical or mechanical fitting, as they had trigonometry and algebra, whereas boys who left school earlier were more likely to have such subjects as history or geography which 'were not applicable to the trade at all'.³³

During 1962, despite continuing opposition by the WATUIC, the State Government announced schemes to cut carpentry, joinery and bricklaying—and later, electrical and metal trades—apprenticeships from five to four years. Boys who had completed a year of full-time technical school could cut as much as two years off their apprenticeship. Apprentices would receive a full year's technical instruction in theory and practical work, followed by a three-year apprenticeship. In the first and second years of the apprenticeship, the boys would receive eight hours of technical training per fortnight. Thus the emphasis was on increasing

the proportion of technical education and decreasing that of instruction on the factory floor. A higher scale of pay was introduced which would result in the three-year apprentice actually earning £300 more overall than the five-year apprentice.³⁴

The unions objected to the shortening of the trade apprenticeships, firstly, because those who had undergone the five-year apprenticeship felt that it provided boys with sufficient time in which to learn their trade, and that any reduction would result in a tradesman who was not fully trained. Secondly, unions opposed the scheme on the ground that less academically gifted boys could be discriminated against in favour of 'bright boys' who might ultimately prove to be less suitable.³⁵ Yet the scheme was gradually established in Western Australia, with introductory pre-apprenticeship courses commencing at Leederville Technical College in March 1963.³⁶ Later, new Apprenticeship Regulations, awarded by the Arbitration Court in 1972, stated that all apprenticeships were to be 'five years or less' in a range of trades that were taught at the WAGR Midland Workshops, including blacksmiths, boilermakers, coppersmiths, electroplaters, electrical and mechanical fitters, moulders, pattern makers and scale adjusters. The new Regulations granted four-year apprenticeships to boys who had passed the High School Certificate or Junior Certificate, and reduced the training by a further six to twelve months for boys who had, respectively, completed Year 11 and the Leaving Certificate.³⁷

As part of the process of changing from five- to four-year apprenticeships, the WAGR offered boys the opportunity to prove that they were competent by undergoing a series of practical trade tests, which

included building models. It was the task of trade examiners, such as Don Manning, to grade the boys on their competency. In Manning's experience, almost 98 per cent of those who applied for a shortened apprenticeship were successful, although some missed out because they did not have the mandatory subjects in mathematics and science. Only on one occasion was he called to explain to the union why he had failed an application. The applicant, who was three-quarters of the way through an engineering diploma, had produced a very poor model, which Manning regarded as evidence of incompetence. He offered to re-examine the apprentice, the union agreed, and at the second attempt the boy produced a far superior effort. Manning asked him to explain the difference between his first and second models, to which the apprentice replied that he was 'serious' when he knew that passing the test depended on merit and was not just 'a matter of course'. Manning learned from the experience, too. Like many other tradesmen, he admitted to being sceptical that 'people with academic qualifications' had the skill to pass trade tests. 'I was amazed to find out that [this particular apprentice] did have the skills.' This experience taught him that, if sufficiently determined to succeed, anyone could do the work.³⁸

The first four-year apprenticeships were established in 1968, and in June 1974, the maximum term for all WAGR apprenticeships was finally cut from five to four years. Apprentices starting in 1974 would automatically qualify for the shorter period and others could continue to apply to have their terms reduced.³⁹ The rationale for shortening the amount of practical instruction was based partly on technological

change. Steam locomotives required continual maintenance. Although diesel engines required a greater degree of high-precision work, once the problems with early models were overcome, their reliability meant that they did not need to be overhauled or repaired nearly as frequently as steam locomotives. Furthermore, although the Workshops continued to produce items ranging from heavy machinery and bridge girders to small precision tools, and undertook repair of diesel locomotives, new engines were imported instead of being manufactured on site.⁴⁰ Thus different types of skills and competencies were needed in an era when the Workshops were constantly rising to new technological challenges, as described by Philippa Rogers in Chapter 1.

Yet, many tradesmen expressed scepticism about these changes. According to Bob Wells, the shortened apprenticeship meant that boys were 'not fully trained' when they came onto the shop floor. Although the educational level was higher, the four-year apprenticeship in the electrical trades and fitting trades did not 'provide the time for the apprentices to actually learn the significance of what they were doing'. Not only were these new apprentices 'not as dexterous as they ought to have been' but, in Wells' opinion, they were not well suited to the Workshops, as their higher level of education made them 'look down on' the trades people and, especially, the trades assistants.⁴¹ Wells asserted that the apprentices who came to the Workshops after completing high school failed to understand that the 'education they were about to receive on the shop floor was a physical education in how the work was to actually be done'. Instead, 'they tended to look for answers out of books as to how a tradesman did their work and that's not how tradesmen work'.⁴²

Bill Kirkham, MOA from 1974 to 1988, also was sceptical about the value of the extra two years at high school:

Most of our apprentices were from year 10, some year 11 and 12 also. With the year 12s we found that they were not all smarter than the year 10s...In some cases it only showed that their parents were able to afford to keep their kids at school for another two years. A lot of [the year 12s] thought the trades were a bit tedious and they would much rather be involved in the professional side such as becoming academics and bank managers, whereas the year 10—all he wanted to do was something with his hands, none of this academic stuff.⁴³

Even so, Kirkham believed that some Year 12 graduates had greater maturity and capability, and overall were 'sharper, brighter' and better equipped to learn trades which were becoming 'more sophisticated' with changes in technology. He encouraged them to enter the more demanding trades, such as electrical and mechanical fitting, and to study for a diploma or degree so that they could qualify as draughtsmen and as engineers. For this, they were required to be proficient in Maths I and II, Physics and Chemistry. While he was MOA, Kirkham opened nine new apprentice schools to cater for far more than the original basic skilling, and he appointed young instructors who developed a good rapport with the boys. Class projects included rebuilding a 1927 fire engine, which was later placed in the Western Australian Museum, and a Fordson tractor, making wheelchairs and assisting in the fitting out of the sailing ship *Leeuwin*.⁴⁴

Other tradesmen, such as Frank Bastow, Secretary of the Boilermakers—later the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipbuilders Union (AMWSU)—saw that the system needed an overhaul. While representing the Trades and Labor Council on the Industrial Training Advisory Council (ITAC) during the 1980s, Bastow advocated pre-apprenticeship training, the introduction of females to apprenticeships in non-traditional trades, and general training as distinct from extremely trade-specific apprenticeship training.

Industry concern over the decline in the numbers of new indentures in the early 1980s (which occurred at the Workshops as well as in other factories) resulted in further changes to the apprenticeship system. In 1984, the proportion of Technical College training in a trades apprenticeship was increased from 720 to 840 hours to provide more intensive training in fluid power for mechanical fitters and fitters and turners and specialist training for first class machinists. By 1989, 10 per cent of all places (across the State) in pre-apprenticeship courses for boilermaking, sheetmetal working and fitting and turning were allocated to females, and under the new assessment system each apprentice had to achieve a list of competencies, with 'a set of rules defining the minimum level of performance required for recognition as a tradesperson'. This differed from past practice in that, apart from completing his or her term of indenture, each apprentice would also achieve necessary trade standards, determined by trade and TAFE requirements.⁴⁵ There was also an emphasis on multi-skilling, which came, in part, from union recognition that 'cross training' was becoming more necessary and that 'a wider training spectrum' would be considered. This met with

resistance on the shop floor. Bastow advised ITAC that the AMWSU was prepared to consider broader training but that training of skilled and unskilled workers could not be mixed, and that there was need for 'a concerted education program on the shop floor' before workers fully accepted the new directions.⁴⁶

Female apprentices

Attempts to recruit females to 'non-traditional' trades paid off in a small way. In the financial year 1988–89, the number of Western Australian women in non-traditional trades increased by 108 (or over 40 per cent) to 375; however, women represented only 0.77 per cent of metal trades apprentices and 1.4 per cent of electrical apprentices.⁴⁷ Females finally began to enter trades apprenticeships at the Midland Workshops at the end of the 1980s. Many male workers remained unconvinced that women could perform the same tasks as men. Boilermaker Peter Carty deeply resented 'female[s] in a heavy work area'. He believed that women could not do the tasks required in heavy industry; they 'buggered up' rivets and refused to learn how to knock them out, and (he inferred) they accused males of inappropriate touching when working in confined spaces:

Blokes never did that at all, that was absolute garbage, blokes in there you had to push and wrestle to get into a confined area... Some women just took it as a laugh [but others couldn't cope].⁴⁸

Very few women took up trade training at the Workshops, and only two finished their apprenticeships. Sindy Hunter completed her



Workshops apprentices on a DB-class diesel engine, ca 1992. Sindy Hunter (right) was the only female apprentice to complete her training at Midland, just before the closure in 1994. *Courtesy of Sindy Hunter.*

apprenticeship on the eve of the Workshops' closure in March 1994, and Mae Jean Parker completed hers elsewhere, but returned to Westrail after training as a signal technician. Although Hunter could not obtain a job in private enterprise after the Workshops closed, she recalled her apprenticeship as a happy and fulfilling time. She stated that the older tradesmen 'looked after' the female apprentices and were 'like fathers' to them.⁴⁹ Her account contrasts starkly with the experiences suffered by many male apprentices only a decade or so earlier at the hands of older apprentices and the younger tradesmen—also with Parker's experience at Midland of being 'crucified like Jesus'. Her 'work mates' ran a piece of pipe through the sleeves of her overalls so that her arms struck out straight and then suspended her from a fork lift and pelted her with 'garbage' from their morning tea. On another occasion, the sleeves and ankles of her overalls were tightly bound and her clothes pumped full of grease. 'That took me in excess of a dozen showers to get it off my skin.'

Parker admitted, however, that her 'loose lips' often got her into trouble, and she seemed quite proud of her reputation for toughness.⁵⁰ For many, however, that other aspect of becoming a skilled tradesperson, to which Tom Sheridan referred as 'bawdy ceremonies' (in his *Mindful Militants*), was a high price—indeed, sometimes too high.

'Bawdy' ceremonies: initiations and pranks

A culture of what would now be defined as 'bullying' flourished at the Workshops, finding many different forms of expression over the years. The most elaborate was an annual ceremony known as the 'Peanut King', which ran for over 40 years, involving first-year apprentices in a clever, but humiliating, hoax. Each of the major workshops held their own 'Peanut King' ceremony. Fred Cadwalladar recalled that in the annual proceedings at the Foundry:

They usually got the *green* apprentices [who] had only been there a few months. They had not been through a Christmas. One had been selected as the woolly apprentice to collect Christmas cheer for the foundry apprentices so they could have a picnic on the last day. And he was to go around with a list before Christmas and ask the different staff members how much would they contribute to the Peanut King Christmas party. So they would nominate two 'bob', or two and sixpence...and he would write all their names down.⁵¹

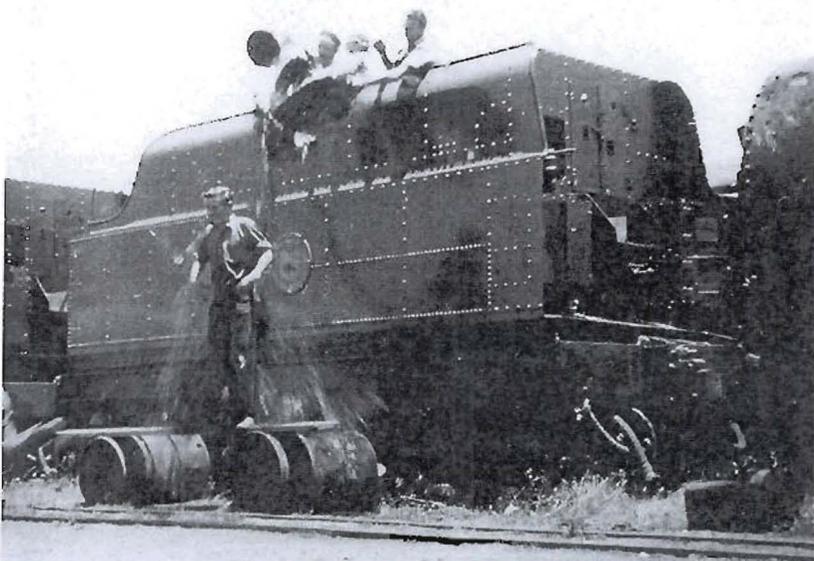
On the last day before the Christmas break, a group of older apprentices would hide with buckets of mud and slush, black wash, carbon, molasses

and other revolting and unidentified substances in a conveniently parked locomotive tender. Below the tender, where the crowd was to gather, a little platform was erected for the ceremony, ostensibly organised to honour the apprentice for collecting so many 'pledges'. There was a compere to read out the list of names of staff who had offered to make a donation to the 'fund'. The 'King' was dressed up for the occasion. Cadwalladar recalled:

So he'd come out and put his crown on. They found a crown of some kind...and a sceptre. There was some kind of a globe protector or something; it was like a dome shape with ribs of metal in. It had a kind of a peak on it but it just fitted a bloke's head...You had to dress him up, too. He'd had to bring in a tie, you know, even though he has got his working shirt on. He's going back to work like that. He just put on his tie. He looked just the part.⁵²

The compere stood on the platform next to the apprentice and opened proceedings. He would say:

Righto, we got this lad here. He has collected the money, now what do you reckon we should give him. What sort of percentage, you know, how much do you think—30 per cent? And the crowd might say, 'Don't be miserable'. So then the compere would reply, 'I know he is experienced. He has helped me a lot. We will make it 40 per cent.' And they would keep building it up to about 90 per cent and then someone would shout, 'Oh don't be mean; give him



'Give him the lot.' The Peanut King ceremony being enacted outside the Foundry in the 1950s. *Courtesy of Fred Cadwallader.*

the lot, hundred percent.' That was the signal for the compere to jump off the platform and run for his life.⁵³

The poor apprentice, meanwhile, was left standing—but he was not left long in suspense. Immediately, the apprentices hiding in the tender jumped up and tipped the sludge over him. There was a reward, however, as several shops gave the money to the apprentice.

Other 'pranks' involved stripping an apprentice naked and anointing his genitals with grease or other substances, or 'crucifying' the victim as described earlier. Some were locked in a confined space, such as the smoke box or the boiler of a locomotive.⁵⁴ The 1970s was a period when initiations and 'pranks' became particularly violent. Some former workers have attributed this behaviour to the unsettling changes during the shift from an old craft-based system where value was placed in the skill of an individual to a mass-produced product created under assembly line conditions. Consequently, some believed, the younger tradesmen lost their respect for the craft and adopted a careless attitude to their

work. The discipline on the shop floor declined and this was reflected in initiations 'getting out of control'.⁵⁵

The initiation experience of some apprentices was so appallingly violent that they could not recover from it. In one particular case:

This poor kid was a little bit sort of feminine, and the tradesman said, 'I'm going to get you one day. Me and all these guys [referring to his work mates] are going to get you.' They grabbed this kid, threw him down the pits, stripped him and they [appeared to be] going to basically rape him. This kid was terrified, screaming, crying, [although] they weren't going to actually do it but it was the impression. This poor little kid, they let him go and he ran; he was terrified. I mean, I felt so sorry for that little kid. Well the next day we were called up to the foreman's office and there was his mum. [It was] the worst thing that could happen; his mum had come in and laid a complaint and so she was sitting there with the son watching all these people getting a dressing down [by the foreman]...The mother was quite happy with the end result, walked out of the foreman's office, and the foreman turned around and said to the boy, 'You have just signed your own death warrant' and that was the end of the kid. The kid was just physically and psychologically abused so he had to quit his apprenticeship.⁵⁶

This account is typical of many, in that the narrator, while admitting to perpetrating pranks on other apprentices, distanced himself from this particularly violent one by expressing his sympathy with the victim.

Furthermore, there seems to be, if not an implicit acceptance of the 'rightness' of ostracising a boy who could not 'fit in', then at least a fatalistic acceptance that this was 'reality'. From the vantage-point of the twenty-first century, when legislation exists to penalise such 'bastardisation', one is struck by the appalling injustice of the situation. The victim was punished not only by his terrifying and humiliating ordeal, but by losing his job and his opportunity of gaining a skilled trade, while the perpetrators went free.

Apart from 'vulnerability' or 'naivety', eccentricity or individuality were other characteristics that singled people out for attention, and in such cases the apprentices were not always the victims. If a man could not take a joke against himself, he was 'fair game'. Such was the case of 'Old Jack', the Fitting Shop engine lifter, who had been directing the overhead cranes for longer than most could remember, but whom everyone regarded as 'a crabby old coot'. Jack's major irritation was apprentices. The regular flare-ups between him and the boys were a source of great amusement, which not even the foreman attempted to prevent. Keeping watch from the height of a locomotive cab at the end of the line, an apprentice would signal that Jack was coming. As Jack shuffled past the next locomotive on his way through the shop, a second apprentice would lean down from the cab and place a wad of kerosene-soaked cotton waste in the crown of his greasy hat, so delicately that he felt nothing. As he passed along, the third boy in the team would ignite the waste with a match. Then the onlookers would amuse themselves laying bets on how far the victim would continue before he became aware of the fire:

There was actually no mistaking the point at which the heat had penetrated. He bellowed and tore the blazing hat from his smoking scalp. He danced and kicked and stomped on it to quell the flames—and the language!...In his furious outburst, he laid a terrible curse on all apprentices, regardless of race, colour or creed and upon their forebears as well.⁵⁷

What was the motivation behind the pranks and initiations? Tradesmen who served their apprenticeship in different eras have offered diverse explanations for these behaviours. Bill Millward (1930s) recognised that, while such behaviour might be viewed differently today, it was essentially driven by tribal instincts to make the new members 'prove' themselves and in so doing to 'bond' with those who 'passed through' the ordeals earlier:

In these days it would probably be called bullying but I believe it was more an initiation into a tribe and did no lasting harm. I seem to remember that the initiation practice dropped off gradually and I suspect it was because my apprenticeship was 1930 to 1935, the worst years of the great depression, and I was one of the last apprentices put on for at least 4 years.⁵⁸

There were strongly tribal practices at the Workshops, quite apart from initiation. Boilermaker Steve Smith (1970s) remembered:

Boilermakers didn't go into the Blacksmiths' Shop (and vice versa); it

was very dangerous ground. [If] any blacksmith strayed into our shop we'd grab them. If any boilermaker strayed into their shop [they] would grab them. There was a lot of fun and sometime [sic] those things went overboard a little bit but they weren't seriously bad.⁵⁹

Rivalry between the shops occurred sporadically throughout the year, especially fuelled by the slightly more lax atmosphere preceding the Christmas closedown and the high spirits aroused by the initiations. Cadwalladar (1950s) recalled that sometimes a group from one shop would come into the canteen at lunch hour and see a few apprentices from another trade sitting there. The larger group would 'come storming in, about ten of them, and drag one of them away and I would think, "gee, I hope they don't pick me." They'd drag him outside and under the tap'. But, once the apprentices graduated and became tradesmen, this was supposed to be the end of the tomfoolery.⁶⁰ Cadwalladar said that 'amusement', 'tradition' and the need to 'educate' were driving motives.⁶¹ 'Toughening up' was another explanation, and here a connection can be made between a dangerous trade and the nature of the 'initiations'.

Bob Wells (1960s) believed that menial and humiliating tasks helped to bring the apprentice into line and make him one of the team. If an apprentice was a bit 'cocky' and started ridiculing the trades assistant, he might be sent to the stores to ask for 'a long weight' (that is, a long wait):

The storeman being part of the same culture for years understood what the message was when the lad was sent for [a] long weight. So he would leave them there and when he got back to the job

of course the tradesman would berate him for being away for half an hour...knowing full well that's what he went for. They would send them for obvious things that didn't exist, like tins of striped paint, or left handed screw drivers, or a box of holes, or self tightening nuts, or any number of similar items where, if the lad was silly enough to go and ask from the store, everyone in the shop would know about it for quite some days. In terms of other treatments [that] were dished out, it was true that they would get the occasional cuff under the ear or whatever if they didn't do what they were told. And if they complained to the foreman, the foreman would then tell the lad that telling lies was not appropriate for apprentices or tradespeople. It couldn't have happened, it didn't happen, there weren't any witnesses to it happening. That was also part of the socialisation process. But I think, as I said, it was part of the training process when in the heavy type of work that was done at the Workshops ...[t]here just wasn't room for lack of trust or lack of commitment into [sic] what you were doing. And this idea of trust and commitment was something that didn't come naturally to school boys.⁶²

According to Wells, therefore, the rituals were aimed at instilling dependability into workmates and making them aware of the dangers that surrounded them. He illustrated the point with two instances where 'fatal accidents' occurred as a consequence of apprentices being too headstrong to obey instructions. In the first instance, the apprentice was instructed that, in order to remove the split rim off a tractor tyre, he

should first let the air out of the tyre and then undo the outer rim bolts. Attempting to short cut the procedure, the apprentice jammed a nail into the tyre valve and undid the bolts holding the rim in place. The air pressure in the tyre was so great that the rim came off suddenly, decapitating the apprentice in the process. In the other accident related by Wells, a car and wagon builder was knocked under the wheels of a shunting locomotive.⁶³ There are a number of difficulties with this explanation. Firstly, it is arguable whether these accidents were caused by lack of discipline, or due to the fact that the apprentices concerned had escaped being subjected to painful and humiliating experiences. In such incidents—Wells was present at neither—it would be easy to blame the most inexperienced worker. Secondly, there are alternative verbal accounts that neither of these accidents involved apprentices. The absence of any fatalities in official reports of this period tends to substantiate the account that the former accident resulted in the tradesman involved losing his leg rather than his life. He was able to continue in employment at the Workshops. In the second accident, the fatality was an experienced tradesman.⁶⁴ Many past employees have expressed disgust and revulsion towards such practices.⁶⁵ The Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which had an active branch at the Workshops, apparently deplored the ritual of the Peanut King and campaigned to get rid of it—without success.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Further cultural changes occurred in the 1980s, as Workshops management strove to comply with the demands of new Occupational Health and Safety legislation, as later discussed by Patrick Bertola, in

Chapter 7. In a system where all accidents became subject to thorough investigation, those resulting from pranks gone wrong were harder to disguise. The presence of females and the previously discussed changes to the training of apprentices as the Workshops embraced concepts of 'multi-skilling' or 'broad-banding' also served to break down the old trades elites. These changes occurred during a declining intake of apprentices. In 1980, the Workshops indentured approximately 222 apprentices, compared with 362 in 1960.⁶⁷ Even more dramatically, the Workshops wages staff numbers plummeted from 2,034 in 1971 to 565 in 1993, the last year of operation.⁶⁸ The impact of this decline upon the employees has been discussed in Lyla Elliott's chapter (Chapter 11) on the closure.

It is evident that reforms to apprentice training were responses to changing demands upon the Workshops. Management attempted to maintain the Workshops' role as the State's foremost employer of industrial labour and trainer of apprentices in the context of the requirements of industry in the latter part of the twentieth century. Sadly for Western Australia's economy as well as for its industrial history, the Workshops were closed before the benefits of this transformation could be fully assessed. Despite being closed ostensibly because they were costly and inefficient, local private enterprise has been incapable of taking over many of the functions of the Workshops, and for that the State is the loser.

¹ The author wishes to thank Mr Bill Kirkham and Mr Malcolm Lander for their constructive criticism of an earlier draft of this chapter.

² Jack Emery, 'Learning a Trade: Memories of an Apprentice Turner and Iron Machinist, 29 January 1940 to 1 April 1945', in B. Oliver (ed.), 'The WAGR/Westrail Workshops', *Papers in Labour History*, No. 25, September 2001, p. 10.

³ 'Apprentices Application Board. Minutes of meetings held at the Midland Railway Institute on 19–29 June 1939.' The Minutes are in a bound volume donated to the Midland Railway Workshops History Project, 2003 (as yet uncatalogued).

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 3–5; also Emery, 'Learning a Trade', p. 10.

⁵ *ibid.*, 'Apprenticeship Selection Board, Group III, 24–31 July 1939, p. 2.

⁶ National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), 'Australian Apprenticeships: Research at a glance', < www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj2/mk0008/milestone.htm >, accessed 28 November 2003.

⁷ T. Sheridan, *Mindful Militants: The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia, 1920–72*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, p. 20.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Bob Wells, interviewed by D. Noyelle, 27 January 2003; in comparison, Frank Bastow (interviewed by B. Oliver, 8 November 2000) stated that he was introduced to the sub-foreman, rather than the foreman, but otherwise the experience is the same. Unless specified otherwise, these interview tapes and transcripts were held at the Midland Workshops History Project archive, Unity House, 79 Stirling St, Perth, at the time of writing.

¹⁰ Neil McDougall, interviewed by B. Mitchell, 12 March 2003.

¹¹ Steve Smith, interviewed by M. Milne, 24 February 2003.

¹² Bill Kirkham, mechanical fitter, later Master of Apprentices and Malcolm Lander, mechanical fitter in conversation with the author, 25 March 2004. Also, Smith, interviewed 24 February 2003.

¹³ Emery, 'Learning a Trade', p. 11.

¹⁴ S.J. Hagarty, '1950—A Year Never to Forget!', in *Papers in Labour History*, No. 25, p. 28.

¹⁵ McDougall, interviewed 12 March 2003. It is probable that McDougall's awe of the place magnified the number of workers present. During the 1960s, according to staff records, the total number of employees was around 2,500, of whom between 300 and 400 were apprentices.

¹⁶ Dave Hicks, interviewed by J. Rogers, 24 April 2002.

¹⁷ WAGR Papers, Cons. 1240, Item Box 3215/29, SROWA.

¹⁸ Emery, 'Learning a Trade', p. 15.

¹⁹ Frank Bastow, interviewed by B. Oliver, 8 November 2000.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Emery, 'Learning a Trade', pp. 12–17.

²² Bill Kirkham, interviewed by Kate Ferguson, 7 May 2002, Acc. No. OH 3278, Battye Library, WA.

²³ Smith, interviewed 24 February 2003.

²⁴ D. Underdown, interviewed by M. Milne, 30 January 2002. Although other past employees have demurred, stating that it was unusual for a tradesman to be physically violent with his apprentice, Underdown's comment suggests that this behaviour towards apprentices was relatively commonplace.

²⁵ Dave Moir, interviewed by Hermione Stott, 23 April 2002.

²⁶ *Syllabus of Training for Apprentices (1940)* with typed sheet of additional competencies, WAGR Papers, Cons. 1239, Item Box 16/1920, File: 'Apprentice Rate Claim 1954', SROWA.

²⁷ E.V.Y. King, 'I've been working on the railroad', unpublished memoirs enclosed in letter to R. McCracken, 11 November 2002, Midland Workshops History Project archive.

²⁸ Don Manning, interviewed by B. Oliver, 24 September 2003.

²⁹ Westrail Papers, Cons. 1239, Item Box 16/1920, File: 'Apprentice Rate Claim, 1954', SROWA.

³⁰ *Western Australian Industrial Gazette 1954*, Vol. 34, pp. 165–7.

³¹ See, for example, King, 'Railroad': 'The workshops were known as a place where you could obtain the best training on the widest range of modern machinery available.'

³² WAGR Papers, Acc. No. WAS 1280, Cons. 4780, File R487/58 (attached to file R4487(1)), Report of proceedings in the Arbitration Court, 12 February 1959, transcript p. 6, SROWA

³³ *ibid.*, pp. 7, 12. The Midland Private Railway was closed in the early 1960s and its workers were absorbed into the WAGR workforce.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁵ *West Australian*, 4 May, and 26, 27 Oct. 1962.

³⁶ See 'Notes of a conference before Chief Industrial Commissioner B. M. O'Sullivan re. 4-year term of apprenticeship, 27 June 1974', in WAGR Papers, File R4487(1), folios 65–86, SROWA.

³⁷ *West Australian*, 13 Mar. 1963.

³⁸ Copy of Schedule Clause 44, Item 30 and Clause 45 (5) in WAGR Papers, File R4487(1), SROWA.

³⁹ Manning, interviewed 24 September 2003.

⁴⁰ Minute A.E. Williams, Secretary of Railways to CME, et al., 24 June 1974, in WAGR Papers, File R4487(1), SROWA.

⁴¹ Manning, interviewed 24 September 2003.

⁴² Bob Wells, interviewed by D. Noyelle, 27 January 2003.

⁴³ Wells, interviewed 27 January 2003.

⁴⁴ Kirkham, interviewed 7 May 2002.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Bastow, interview 8 November 2000; Westrail Papers, Cons. 5692: Item No. 7517/84, ITAC minutes 12 December 1984; Item No. 7517/89, ITAC Minutes 13 September 1989; Item No. 7096/87—Dept of Employment and Training, 'Apprentice Training and Assessment. A New Assessment Scheme to be introduced by 1988'.

⁴⁷ WAGR Papers, Cons. 5692, Item No. 7140/87, ITAC Minutes 8 April 1987.

⁴⁸ WAGR Papers, Cons. 5692, Item No. 7394/89, Twelfth Annual Report of ITAC, for the year ending 30 June 1989, p. 29.

⁴⁹ Peter Carty, interviewed by Chelsea Gellard, 9 May 2003, OH 3251, transcript, p. 21, Batty Library, WA.

⁵⁰ Sindy Hunter, interviewed by Ricki Barnes, *The Westrail Workshops Oral History Interviews*, produced by Geraldine Harris and Mia Lindgren, Murdoch University, 2001; Mae Jean Parker, interviewed by Helma Lowande, 20 March 2003.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Fred Cadwalladar, interviewed by Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Individual incidents at the Midland Workshops are described in B. Oliver, 'The Peanut King and Other Pranks', paper presented to the Joint UK/Australian Labour History Conference, Manchester University, 16–18 July 2003.

⁵⁶ See for example, Smith, interviewed 24 February 2003.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Ivan Macmillan, 'Who Wants Moss', unpublished memoirs, Chapter 4, held in Midland Workshops History Project archive.

⁵⁹ W.H. ('Bill') Millward, 'Some Recollections of Midland Workshops', n.d., pp. 1–2, held in Midland Workshops History Project archive.

⁶⁰ Smith, interviewed 24 February 2003.

⁶¹ Cadwalladar, interviewed 2 July 2002.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Wells, interviewed 27 January 2003.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Malcolm Lander, conversation with the author, 25 March 2004. The shunting fatality was that of G A. Kenworthy, who was killed on 10 March 1967, as shown in *WAGR Annual Reports*. There is no mention of a fatality that corresponds to the decapitation incident.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Ted King, letter to Ric McCracken, Project Manager, Midland Railway Workshops History Project, 11 November 2002, Batty Library collection, still to be accessioned at time of writing; Rod Quinn, 'The Birth of my Activism', in B. Oliver (ed.), *The WAGR/Westrail Workshops. Papers in Labour History* No. 25, September 2001, p. 64

⁶⁷ This information is anecdotal. The author has not found any written information regarding CPA attempts to have the 'Peanut King' or other rituals banned from the Workshops

⁶⁸ Sources: 1920–60: *Workshops Staff 1912–39 and 1940–67*; 1970–80: WAGR Papers, WAS 1403, CN 5267, File 2841/1966, Foremen's Annual Reports

⁶⁹ Compiled by Linley Batterham from WAGR Annual Reports, Acc. No. 385.941 WAG, Batty Library, WA