

**‘The Peanut King’ and other pranks:  
Exploring working culture through apprentice initiations and rituals  
at the Midland Railway Workshops.**

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For 90 years, the WAGR (later Westrail) Workshops at Midland were the largest industrial Workshops in Western Australia. The Workshops trained apprentices in a range of industrial trades such as blacksmithing, boilermaking, fitting, mechanical and electrical engineering, machining, coach building and carpentry – skills required to build and repair locomotive engines and rolling stock, but which also fitted them for a wide range of trades outside the railways. The Workshops was a tightly knit community, within which a range of sub-communities, centred on the different metal- and wood-working trades, thrived in a proud and highly competitive working culture. Widespread community outrage greeted the State Government’s decision to close the Workshops, but to no avail and the gates shut for the last time in March 1990 – just over 90 years after they first opened.

From 1998 to 2004, the Workshops was the subject of an extensive history project. Commencing with an oral history programme aimed at interviewing as many past employees as possible, the project has extended (with the aid of grant funds) into an archive of documents and photographs, a collection of tools and other objects, a DVD, a web page and a book of the history of Workshops.<sup>2</sup> Many fascinating aspects of working culture have come to light; these paper focusses on the quaint, and often brutal, rituals to which apprentices were subjected during their first year at the Workshops.

Using interviews and written recollections provided by the tradesmen, this paper looks at the substance and the legend of such rituals as the ‘Peanut King’, and a range of ‘pranks’ from those designed to be humiliating but harmless to those that threatened – and in some cases took – lives. The paper will attempt to answer the following questions. To what extent were these rituals a product of the locality, and how much did they retain from a strongly British industrial heritage? Were they aimed at instilling dependability into workmates in an extremely dangerous work place? Did rituals change over time? Where appropriate, comparisons will be made with existing literature on the subject. The paper will include extensive quotations from interviews, so that the voices of the workers may be heard as well as the author’s interpretation of their words.

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<sup>2</sup> Published versions of these research outcomes are due in 2004-05.

The rituals to which apprentices were subjected fall into two main categories: initiations which involved the victim in one or more dangerous tasks or in which he was assaulted, and afterwards he was regarded as having made it into the select club of tradesmen; and pranks or practical jokes which could be played on the same individual many times over, depending upon how gullible he was. Initiations were usually carried out at the end of the first year of apprenticeship and sometimes at the time of the apprentices' qualification as a tradesman. Interviews undertaken for the History project contain many accounts of apprentices suffering or witnessing such initiations, pranks and 'jokes' over a period of more than half a century from the 1930s until the 1990s. The following are just a few examples. Edward (Ted) King, turner and iron machinist, 1953-59, recalled:

New apprentices were considered fair game for tradesmen and older apprentices and there were all sorts of tricks played on them, like being sent for a long weight (wait), a left handed hammer, a bolt hole, a sky hook, a right handed drill and various other time wasting errands that usually entailed going from place to place around the shop. [M]any of the pranks played on people seem dangerous and childish [now] but at the time they were considered to be funny. My first job was on a small Hercus lathe similar to those used in high schools. When I left the machine for a short while, I returned to find one end of it jacked up so that the bed was at about 45 degrees to the floor instead of being level. What do I do now? How would I get it down again?<sup>3</sup>

Geoff Hutchison, apprentice painter from 1944 to 1950, recalled that other favourite 'pranks' inflicted upon apprentices included putting a piece of oily waste on the back on one's overalls (like a sheep tail) and bleating 'baa baa' until the victim 'woke up'; painting the handle of any paint brush left on the pot, and sending boys to the store for a tin of striped paint.<sup>4</sup>

The ritual that many past employees at the Workshops remember most vividly was certainly the most elaborate prank ever played on unfortunate apprentices there. It would appear that the Peanut King ceremony began in the late 1930s. Christmas was a focal point for 'initiations', and it appears that the Peanut King developed over several years to become the entrée to some very riotous behaviour. Bill Millward, a fitter who was at the Workshops from 1930 to 1939, recollected:

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<sup>3</sup> Ted King, letter to R. McCracken, 11 November 2002. Unless otherwise stated, these materials were lodged in the project's archives at 79 Stirling Street, Perth, at the time of writing.

<sup>4</sup> Geoff Hutchison, 'Memories of being an apprentice painter, 1944-1950' (17 December 2001).

The initiation of apprentices was traditional in my time and was carried out on the day before the Christmas break up which was the only day when discipline was relaxed. I avoided it in my first year by fleetness of foot and reconnoitring good hiding places. I must have relaxed in the second year and was captured. I received a liberal covering of red lead and linseed oil paste around my genitals and the leg of my overalls was tied around a hydrant outlet that was turned full on. I eventually freed myself and from then on I was accepted by the older apprentices as one of the mob.<sup>5</sup>

By the beginning of the 1940s, however, the perpetration of initiations upon apprentices had spread from one particular day to a week or more. Nick Silich, a plumber at the Workshops from 1938 to 1949, recalled apprentices being singled out for about two weeks before the Christmas break. 'During the 40-minute lunch break, gangs could be seen pursuing the young 'uns determined to shove their heads under three-inch diameter fire hydrants along the driveway in front of the big buildings'.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst the earlier accounts suggest a spontaneous approach to initiations – just grabbing a passing apprentice and subjecting him to a painful and degrading experience – the Peanut King ceremony was planned weeks in advance and elaborately staged with a big audience. It had certainly become established by the time Jack Emery began as apprentice turner and iron machinist in 1940, although he referred to it as the Peanut *Club*.

Christmas was ... the time for apprentices to have some high jinks. The infamous "Peanut Club" involved the older apprentices going around the new apprentices asking for-promises of donations to a mythical Xmas 'peanut' fund. To give this operation credibility they also approached the tradesmen who responded with generous promises of money, which were added to the list in front of the unknowing new apprentices. On 'peanut day' the most gullible new boys were gathered on a platform erected against an empty locomotive tender in which lurked unseen, a group of older apprentices armed with sloppy lagging, old tins of oil, and foul slops of any kind. A large crowd gathered to hear the new boys read out lists of promised donations which they cheered or booed according to the amount pledged. The din was terrific, so nobody heard any noises coming from the villains behind the platform and concealed in the tender. In the middle of the new boys' performance, all the gathered filth and garbage was poured over the side of the tender onto the unfortunate 'Peanuts' below. When they ran out of ammunition a large fire hose was turned on those who had not fled. After this there was a fight for the hose which became a free-for-all, with the hose and the remaining garbage as weaponry. When

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<sup>5</sup> W.H. 'Bill' Millward, 'Some recollections of Midland Workshops', n.d., p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Nick Silich, letter to Ric McCracken, 27.10.02.

the fight for the hose began, the assembled crowd of adults would melt away and leave the apprentice mob to fight it out.<sup>7</sup>

Ivan Macmillan, an apprentice mechanical fitter during the second half of the 1940s, recalled that this was ‘the most highly organised and well-publicised scam aimed squarely at gullible apprentices’ and that it required months of organization.<sup>8</sup> By the 1950s, the Peanut King ceremony had become very elaborate. The most detailed account of it came from Fred Cadwallader, a moulder from 1942 to 1987, who told his interviewer that, at least in the Foundry:

[T]hey 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.<sup>9</sup>

On the last day before payday, 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. There was a Master of Ceremonies (or compere) to read out the list of names of staff who had offered to make a donation to the ‘fund’.

Another feature of the Foundry’s Peanut King celebration was that the ‘King’ was dressed up. Fred recalled:

So he’d come out and put his crown on. They found a crown of some kind. Another year, another one of them even had a sceptre, a crown 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 kind of a peak on it but it just fitted a blokes head. So, ‘hey this will do for the peanut king’, someone said, so for several years there they [used] this crown. 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.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Emery, ‘Learning a Trade. Memories of an Apprentice Turner and Iron Machinist, 29 January 1940 – 1 April 1945’, *Papers in Labour History No. 25: The WAGR/Westrail Midland Workshops*, ed. B. Oliver, September 2001, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> See Ivan McMillan, ‘Overalls ‘n’ Boots’ in this issue.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.

The compere, who stood on the platform next to the apprentice, would open proceedings. He would say something like, '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 percent'. And they would keep building it up to about 90 percent and then someone would shout, 'Oh don't be mean; give him the lot, hundred percent'. That was the signal for the compere to jump off the platform and run for his life. The poor apprentice, meanwhile, was left standing – wondering what was going to happen next. Just then, the apprentices hiding in the tender jumped up and tipped the sludge over him. The photographs (opposite) were taken at different ceremonies during the 1950s.



The Annual Peanut King ceremony behind the Foundry. The Peanut King, dressed in a tie, and with a 'crown' upon his head, sits on a platform in front of a wagon. The compere (right) waits to begin proceedings (*Courtesy Fred Cadwallader*)



A different ceremony in another year, but the proceedings are the same. The victim is doused, while the compere (left) flees. (*Courtesy Fred Cadwallader*)



The apprentice is still holding the sceptre in his hand, but his crown has been washed off by all the muck. (*Courtesy Fred Cadwallader*)

In the Foundry, unlike in the other Workshops, the apprentice was actually given the amount that he had raised – as a reward for going through the ceremony. Fred Cadwallader recalled one case of a boy who collected the lordly sum of ten pounds.

He was a bit of a scallywag. He got into trouble at home a lot. Ten pounds was equivalent to his month's holiday pay. In other words he doubled his pay and he says 'I can't take this home, the old man will reckon I have pinched it'. So the shop steward had to write his father a note, 'This is Christmas cheer to what's his name, from the men of the foundry, signed shop steward'. And he says, 'Ok, now I can take it home and show my father that I haven't stolen it'. It was so much money you see. So we used to say 'how about making me peanut king this year. I'm short of a few bob'.<sup>11</sup>

The Peanut King ceremonies ran for several decades. While it is possible that they became more elaborate as time went on, they also varied from shop to shop. Ivan McMillan recalled one ceremony involving six apprentices during the 1940s, Fred Cadwallader's memories, dating from the late 1950s or early 1960s, are of a ceremony held at the back of the Foundry. Ted King, apprentice turner and iron machinist in the 1950s, had similar

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<sup>11</sup> Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002. Note that a very similar procedure is described in Ivan McMillan's paper in this issue.

recollections of ceremonies held in the Fitting and Machine Shops in Block 3. Like McMillan, he thought the money raised was intended to go to a charity and that several apprentices were involved in each shop – not merely one selected as in Fred Cadwallader’s account and photographs – and that they were not given any money because the pledges they collected were bogus, but otherwise the proceedings were much the same.<sup>12</sup>

Ted King viewed the ‘Peanut King’ ritual with some distaste, but others saw merit in the practice. Bob Wells, a car and wagon builder at the Workshops from 1963 until 1977, did not regard the ‘Peanut King’ as a victim – rather as someone who understood and worked the system to his advantage.

The apprentices that were involved in the peanut king, to my mind, knew what it was about. They had been there about a year ... The apprentices started the January so their participation in the peanut king ritual [always held just before the Christmas break] was clearly understood and [they knew] what the outcome would be. They participated ... for a number of reasons; part of the reason was that they became part of a team; they became socialised; they came to understand the camaraderie that existed...<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Bob Wells believed that the Peanut King was ‘non-harmful to the individuals’ and that the apprentices were not forced into it. Instead, it was just ‘a part of growing up’ and assimilating into the Workshops environment. In fact ‘it became part of the norm so a person that actually became the Peanut King wasn’t the poor innocent, slowest person in the group but quite often was the extrovert in the group who was in the joke. It certainly wasn’t the case of targeting some poor slow individual and it did have to do with how they fitted into the social fabric of the shop itself’. Here his account conflicts with the experience in the Foundry. Fred Cadwallader was emphatic that the apprentice picked for the ‘honour’ was:

...usually the youngest one who wasn’t a wake up. The second year [apprentices] had already gone through it. Whether they were selected or not they’d seen the peanut king crowned. So they did not want to be in that.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, despite his positive view, Bob Wells stated that he had not actually ever seen the Peanut King ceremony, whereas Fred Cadwallader had been present at many such occasions.

Bob Wells’ comment highlights a common strand in the accounts of pranks and initiations. Most of the narrators distanced themselves from events. As victims, they regarded themselves as clever to avoid being caught and ‘done’; when they were caught, it was a case of getting it over as soon as possible. Some apprentices managed to avoid

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<sup>12</sup> Ted King, letter to R. McCracken, 11 November 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Wells, interview with Dick Noyelle, 17 January 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.

the initiation experience altogether. Nick Silich, for example, did his ‘own ducking’ and thus avoided the humiliation, but was he then accepted as ‘one of the mob’? He commented, ‘Some furious wrestling used to go on and I couldn’t understand why the management didn’t have the practice stopped. Tradition?’.<sup>15</sup> There is some unsubstantiated verbal evidence that members of the Communist Party who were employed at the Workshops, objected strongly and tried to get the ceremony stopped in the 1950s, but if they did attempt this, they were unsuccessful. Indeed, the recollections of ex-employees from the 1970s suggest that ‘initiations’ became more frequent and more violent. Steve Smith, who began his apprenticeship as a boilermaker at the Workshops in 1972, admitted to being involved in several initiations – both as a victim and a perpetrator. Smith stated that his way of coping with being assaulted was to be compliant – ‘Go. Do it to me’ – in the hope that the ordeal would be shorter, but this did not save him from injury. Firstly, he appears to have suffered a number of assaults, which he regarded as ‘initiations’, resulting in three cracked ribs, a broken foot and being almost hanged. He also endured several dunkings and ‘greasings’ – being stripped and having grease applied to his genitals.<sup>16</sup>

The experience of initiation was commonly regarded as a ‘rite of passage’, which enabled the apprentice to enter the elite world of the master craftsman. Historian T. Sheridan, writing of the role of apprentices in one of metal workers’ unions – the Amalgamated Engineers – observed:

It is difficult to overstate the significance of apprenticeship in the history of the AEU. Generally speaking, boys were indentured at low wages for a fixed period, usually five years, during which practical instruction and observation on the job was combined with theoretical instruction at technical schools. Right into the 1970s unions and metal employers alike regarded this as the best means of producing engineering craftsmen. In addition 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.<sup>17</sup>

Sheridan emphasised that this was not just ‘an anachronistic hangover’ perpetuated by craft unions such as the AEU, but a continuing expectation well into the second half of the twentieth century. With regard to observations by the tradesmen themselves, Bill Millward commented that, after avoiding being caught the first year, he succumbed the second year and, thereafter, was ‘accepted by the older apprentices as one of the mob’.<sup>18</sup> The inference is that, previously, he had not been accepted because he had not undergone the humiliation of

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<sup>15</sup> Nick Silich, letter to R. McCracken, 27.10.02.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Smith, interview with Maxine Milne, 24 February 2003.

<sup>17</sup> T. Sheridan, *Mindful Militants. The Amalgamated Engineering Union in Australia, 1920-72*, Cambridge, 1975, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> W.H. ‘Bill’ Millward, ‘Some recollections of Midland Workshops’, n.d., pp. 1-2.



initiation. Geoff Hutchison, an apprentice painter from 1944-1950, recalled being locked in a locomotive boiler, which his fellow apprentices then attacked with rivet guns and welders, all the while shouting out to him, asking whether he was 'warming up'. He retaliated by splashing paint on his tormenters through tube holes in the boiler, after which, 'my initiation was done'.<sup>19</sup> While Geoff Hutchison's inference is that a spirited fight back could increase your respect in the eyes of fellow apprentices and, indeed, serve to cut short an horrific ordeal, the other comments reveal a sensitivity to the plight of those who lacked the necessary bravado to tough it out. Rod Quinn, junior worker and then apprentice car and wagon builder from 1950 to 1956, also commented on the practice of locking apprentices within a confined, noisy space, which was attacked from the outside with hammers.

Within the younger workforce, cruelty in the form of hostile teasing, 'initiations' and even physical bullying, was present. One example of this was trapping people in a water wagon. The wooden baffles inside these wagons had regularly to be checked and maintained. The repairer had to climb down into the tank to inspect and [if necessary] replace these boards whose purpose was to prevent large destabilising movements of water while the wagons were in motion. With the lid slammed and locked down, the repairer had simply to crouch in the dark while the tank was hit with hammers. Any tendency to claustrophobia would bring the victim to the point of panic. These incidents were fairly rare but they did reflect something of macho nature of an all-male working environment.<sup>20</sup>

Ted King, apprentice iron machinist, was given the task of turning a thread on tapered copper boiler safety plugs that fitted into the firebox of a steam boiler. Each plug was a different size and the hole in the boiler had to be measured. When he climbed into the boiler to do the measurements, 'you were exposed to being either hoisted up by a crane and left dangling or worse, a boiler maker would apply a pneumatic riveting hammer to the outside of the steel boiler'. Ted commented, 'this was guaranteed to rattle your brains or at least affect your hearing. More than one apprentice was locked inside a boiler all night after being forgotten. The effect on younger boys and their families was not good.'<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Geoff Hutchison's and Ted King's experiences show that there was a very strong element of bullying and of harassing the weak and vulnerable. Hutchison recalled:

As a 15-year-old boy [who'd] never been to the city, it was very daunting to be among a few thousand men. I learnt very quickly to have a sense of humour:

- 1) you had to be able to take a joke or else;
- 2) Be able to take it as well as give it;

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<sup>19</sup> Geoff Hutchison, 'Memories of being an apprentice painter, 1944-1950' (17/12/01).

<sup>20</sup> Rod Quinn, 'The Birth of My Activism', *Papers in Labour History No. 25: The WAGR/Westrail Midland Workshops*, ed. B. Oliver, September 2001, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> King to McCracken, 11 November 2002, in Midland Project Archive.

- 3) Never crack if [you were the] recipient of a prank;
- 4) I learnt to always have an answer to anything (guilty or not).
- 5) Be ever vigilant. And never lose your temper.<sup>22</sup>

All of these elements were present in the Peanut King ceremony: the solidarity that ensured that older apprentices or tradesmen never let on to any of the victims what would happen to them; the necessity for the victim to be 'able to take a joke' even when it was humiliating and life threatening, and the evidence of vulnerability. While Bob Wells justified the practice partly on the grounds that it *was not* picking on the weak and vulnerable, Fred Cadwallader indicated that there was a element of singling out the 'green' or 'woolly' ones – as he termed them. This differentiation, however, could indicate a change in the way the ceremony was viewed and structured. It would appear that by the 1960s, the Peanut King had achieved legendary status rather than being just a nasty prank, and there was honour attached to being *it*.

There were, of course, those who would never fit in, and those whose initiation experience was so appallingly violent that they could not recover from it. It 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 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.<sup>23</sup>

It is noteworthy that the narrator, while owning up to committing pranks on other apprentices, distanced himself from this one with comments such as, 'I felt so sorry for that kid'. Even more revealing, however, is the indication that the foreman knew and accepted this behaviour. Today, he would be guilty of abdicating his duty of care to the apprentice. Why, then, was such behaviour permitted on the factory floor?

Perhaps it was because these rituals were grounded in a long, British industrial tradition. In his classic book, *Life in a Railway Factory*, first published in 1915, Alfred

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<sup>22</sup> Geoff Hutchison, 'Memories of being an apprentice painter, 1944-1950' (17/12/01).

<sup>23</sup> Steve Smith, interview with Maxine Milne, 24 February 2003.

Williams described similar experiences endured by apprentices at Swindon – though it was sometimes psychological, rather than physical, cruelty.

The boys were always frightened at the thought of one painful ordeal which they were told they would have to undergo. They were seriously informed by their new mates in the shed that they would have to be branded on the back parts with a hot iron stamp containing the initials of the railway company [GWR], and very many youngsters firmly believed the tale and awaited the operation with dreadful suspense. As time went on, however, and they were not sent for to the offices, they came to discredit the story and smiled at their former credulity.<sup>24</sup>

Williams also mentioned pranks very similar to those experienced at Midland, whereby unsuspecting apprentices were sent to the engine-house for a ‘bucket of blast’ or a ‘toe punch’ – the latter being a kick in the backside.<sup>25</sup> These activities, however, appear very innocuous compared with some of the experiences of Midland apprentices.

The Midland Railway Workshops had strong British antecedents. In the period prior to the union amalgamations that occurred in the early 1970s, four major unions and a number of smaller unions operated at the Workshops. One of these, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, subsequently the Amalgamated Engineering Union [AEU] was a British union with Australian branches.<sup>26</sup> Kathy Bell wrote of the inter-war period that, ‘although many of the workshops’ staff of interviewees’ generation [that is, the ten men whom she interviewed for her study] were Westralian born and bred, a large proportion of the craftsmen, especially the older men, were immigrants from Britain.’ Furthermore, Bell detected similarities between the habits and beliefs of her interviewees – ‘sobriety, religiosity, self-education, self-improvement, thrift and moderation in all things’ – and those of the ‘“respectable” section of the British working class’.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond that, however, a range of indicators in the contemporary media suggest that practices loosely termed ‘initiation’ – whether they be confined to one particular incident or an elaborate ceremony such as the Peanut King, or a number of so-called ‘pranks’ – are widespread in Australia and Britain – and in other societies, too. Almost any sizeable grouping of young males, be it boarding school, the defence forces, or the factory floor, has its ‘traditions’ of physical behaviour that today is known as ‘bastardization’. A fellow historian, who has had 15 years of supervising apprentices in the motor industry, has researched similar customs among stock men in the South West of Western Australia.<sup>28</sup> Workers at the Broken Hill Proprietary (BHP) Steelworks in Newcastle have related similar stories of pranks and tests that workers forced upon one another in this massive and

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<sup>24</sup> A. Williams, *Life in a Railway Factory*, Allan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1986, p. 243.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>26</sup> Sheridan, *Mindful Militants*, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Kathy Bell, ‘The Midland Junction Railway Workshops, 1920 to 1939, *Studies in Western Australian History XI: Western Australia between the war 1919-1939*, ed. J. Gregory, June 1990, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Gil Hardwick, email to the author, 20 January 2003

dangerous workplace.<sup>29</sup> In recent years, certain incidents at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra have been publicised by the media, giving the College a reputation as a place where bullying is institutionalised. One such ‘initiation prank’, known as ‘running man’ consisted of taking a cadet up to the top of Mount Ainslie, the peak behind the college, removing all of his clothes except for his shoes and forcing him to run home naked.<sup>30</sup>

There is a common link in these accounts, moreover, between the nature of the work and the level of violence involved in the initiations. Whether the location is railway workshops, steel works, a factory assembly line or the defence forces, there is a strong element of physical danger in the work. In the clerical occupations at the Workshops, however, there was no such danger and, while there may have been a few mild pranks perpetrated, there were no parallels in initiation practices. Alan Wahl, who began as a Junior Worker in the Chief Mechanical Engineer’s Office in 1935, wrote of his relief at being selected to work as a clerk in an environment that he depicted as clean and genteel, especially when compared to the tough atmosphere of the Workshop floor. Apparently, there was not even a suggestion that clerical workers went through any sort of initiation; whereas even the day-to-day tasks on the factory floor filled Wahl with dread.<sup>31</sup> This brings us, then, to the matter of motivation.

Evidence from interviews with Midland Workshops employees indicates that various motivations lay behind the pranks and initiations. Bill Millward recognised that while such behaviour might be viewed differently in the twenty-first century, 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.<sup>32</sup> There were strongly tribal practices at the Workshops, quite apart from initiation. Steve Smith, a boilermaker, 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 those things went overboard a little bit but they weren’t seriously bad.<sup>33</sup>

While the rivalry between the shops was not constant, it occurred sporadically throughout the year, and was often sparked during the slightly more lax atmosphere that surrounded the Christmas closedown and fuelled by high spirits aroused by the initiations. Fred Cadwallader

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<sup>29</sup> Susan Marsden, email to the author, 21 January 2003, referring to *Tailing out: BHP workers talk about life, steelmaking and the Newcastle closure*, a study published by the Workers Cultural Action Committee, Newcastle, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> According to anecdotal evidence given to the author, this practice had an antecedent in the National Service days of the 1960s and ‘70s.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Wahl, ‘My Experiences at the WAGR Workshops, 1935 to 1960’, *Papers in Labour History No. 25: The WAGR/Westrail Midland Workshops*, ed. B. Oliver, September 2001, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> W.H. ‘Bill’ Millward, ‘Some recollections of Midland Workshops’, n.d., pp. 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Steve Smith, interview with Maxine Milne, 24 February 2003.

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, that was supposed to be the end of the tomfoolery.<sup>34</sup> This was not always so. The incident of the ‘pretend rape’ during the 1970s involved tradesmen – not apprentices. Despite recollecting ‘battles’ in the Foundry that were similar to those described by Steve Smith, however, Fred Cadwallader did not suggest ‘tribalism’ or ‘bonding’ as an explanation for the initiations. He said that ‘amusement’, ‘tradition’ and the need to ‘educate’ were driving motives, and that these experiences taught apprentices to be ‘sceptical’, rather than being gullible,<sup>35</sup>

Another motive would appear to be ‘toughening up’. Drawing upon his experience in the motor industry, historian Gil Hardwick observed:

[I]t seems fair to me that this behaviour should not be interpreted outside the context of the dangerous work itself. I have received a number of comments over the years about this type of ‘blokey’, ‘humiliating’, ‘brutalising’ behaviour, although I remain strongly of the opinion that the process of toughening and sharpening trade apprentices is a deliberate and thoughtful strategy for keeping them safe.

Those who failed to get the message were inevitably dismissed as constituting a danger to their work-mates, not dissimilar to battlefield conditions requiring the similar process of bonding and mateship to ensure group survival. Anyone who has spent years in such conditions will know how quickly tragedy can strike through a moment's carelessness, and in these early practices we can see a developing Work Safe ethic strongly supported by tradesmen everywhere.<sup>36</sup>

It is notable that here the connection between a dangerous trade and the nature of the ‘initiations’ has been made. Similarly in the context of the Midland Railway Workshops, Bob Wells 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’.

The storeman being part of the same culture for years understood what the message was when the lad was sent for 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

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<sup>34</sup> Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Cadwallader interview.

<sup>36</sup> Gil Hardwick, email to the author, 20 January 2003.

holes, or self tightening nuts, or a 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 – the engineering that was done – there just wasn't room for lack of trust or lack of commitment into what you were doing. And this idea of trust and commitment was something that didn't come naturally to school boys.<sup>37</sup>

There seems little doubt that from Bob Wells' point of view, the rituals were aimed at instilling dependability into workmates and making them aware of the dangers that surrounded them. He saw a direct link between being 'pulled into line' and taking notice of instructions on the factory floor.<sup>38</sup>

Bob Wells reiterated that far more dangerous situations were likely to arise if the apprentice had not been 'put in his place' by some type of initiation ritual than by the rituals and pranks themselves. This, he believed, was because new apprentices were often thoughtless about danger to others.

There was a definite danger to the trades and to the non-trades people working ... with apprentices who were undisciplined...[A]pprentices coming onto the shop floor unfortunately in the first year did have a tendency to say 'I know', and they would say this from what they knew about tech. trades that they learned at high school ...

Consequently,

... the initiation process is really not a pranks type based exercise; it's really a question of familiarising themselves with the consequences of things not being done in the order and if they want to question its fine to lead them to question what was being asked for, but it was not fine for them to do things out of sequence if they were asked to do it, bearing in mind that the tradesman at the end of the day was responsible for fixing their work if they did stuff up. And the question of cost of materials was something that you should get home to the tradesman because it was never the apprentice's responsibility. So the tradesmen themselves, being responsible for the apprentices, did demand they do things in certain style and if the next tradesman they went to had a different way of doing it that

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<sup>37</sup> Bob Wells, interview with Dick Noyelle, 17 January 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Wells, interview.

was fine but that tradesman expected the apprentice to do it *his* way not the way the previous tradesman, nor the way the apprentice himself, thought [it should be done]. So at all times the apprentices were under the direct control of tradesmen and the tradesmen were aware of the consequences of things being done out of sequence or the instructions they issued were not being carried out in the [correct] order...<sup>39</sup>

While Bob Wells regarded initiations and pranks positively, he was of the opinion that the shortening of the apprenticeship term from five to four years in the 1970s, and the practice of accepting more highly educated boys worsened the situation. The shortened period of apprenticeship meant that boys were not adequately trained when they took up their trades. He also detected in some of the more highly educated apprentices a ‘contemptuous’ attitude towards trades men and their assistants. Wells observed that other changes resulted from the presence of returned servicemen (Vietnam war veterans) who served another shortened form of apprenticeship – called a ‘traineeship’. Although these men received their trade papers, few progressed beyond being tradesman, and their training was not ‘generally seen as [being] equal to the [full length] apprenticeship’.<sup>40</sup>

The Workshops, of course, had always had their share of war veterans and refugees. After World War Two, many European refugees found a home in Australia, and the ethnic mix of the Workshops changed to include men who were not native English speakers. Other workers were returned servicemen with disabilities, who were sometimes given dead end jobs which provided a livelihood but did not offer advancement. Sometimes these people were the butt of apprentices’ jokes; the intolerant young men regarded them as unintelligent because they had difficulty expressing themselves, or because they held lowly and menial jobs. The bond between tradesman and trades assistant, however, was strong and – where a relationship of trust had grown up – it overcame racial differences. An apprentice caught ‘taking the mickey’ out of a trades assistant could easily earn a clip round the ear from the trades man. Another tactic, aimed at bringing apprentices into line, was to exclude them from the camaraderie of the tradesmen and their assistants. Apprentices were expected to refer to the men by their first names but not by nicknames bestowed on individuals by their Workshop mates. Another hurdle to be negotiated was acceptance into the social club. Membership was bestowed by the committee; it wasn’t an automatic privilege that a man qualified for at a particular time in his career, so if a youth was regarded as being ‘disrespectful’ or as ‘not fitting in with people’, he might be excluded from joining the social club. Ultimately, this could carry over into whether, at the end of his apprenticeship, he was offered a place in the Workshops as a tradesman. Seen in this context, the need to ‘fit in’ became a powerful tool in disciplining apprentices.<sup>41</sup>

Both changing external circumstances and the composition of the workforce naturally impacted upon behaviours upon the factory floor. Steve Smith, the son of a bank manager, applied for an apprenticeship at the Workshops because he loved steam locomotives and

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<sup>39</sup> Bob Wells, interview with Dick Noyelle, 27 January 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Wells, interview 27 January.

<sup>41</sup> Wells, interview 27 January.

wanted to learn how they worked. When he commenced his four-year apprenticeship in 1972, steam locomotives had all but vanished. He began work with the men who had practised the skills used in manufacturing steam engines – whom he referred to as ‘the old tradesmen’ – and who were steeped in tradition. He had to call his tradesman ‘Mister’, whereas many younger tradesmen permitted their apprentices to call them by their first name. There was a strict ‘pecking order’ observable by the requirement that an apprentice walk behind his tradesman and next to the labourer (*not* in front of him). At the end of every working day, Steve Smith had to get two buckets of water, warm them up using the steam injector from the boiler, and place them down for his tradesman to wash himself. After the tradesman, the trades assistant washed in the buckets; then the apprentice was last. In the third year of his four-apprenticeship, Smith went to work with younger tradesmen and he found them entirely different. For one thing, their language was crude and he soon developed a ‘disgusting’ vocabulary.

He recalled that the 1970s:

...was an era where ... in the final year of your apprenticeship the mining companies were coming around and poaching you. They would make offers because we were reportedly the best trained of tradesman around; we did steel, aluminium, we had such diversity. It was there [among the younger tradesmen] that I saw a lot more initiations and one had to be more careful. The other thing that was [happening] ... was that the workshops was [becoming] such a diverse culture. We had Jews ... Nazis ... Serbians ... Croatians. We had such cultural diversity and most of these people were labourers [and] trades assistants ... I mean you put a Serbian and Croatian in the same room and there is 400 years of conflict between those two races. Of course it happened within the workshops; it was no different, and I think there was a lot of conflict that was going on because we had these ... displaced persons from the war who came [with unresolved issues from their past] ... and of course every now and then it would bubble over ... When we used to get changed, we had big long rows of lockers [where we kept our street clothes] ... a lot of the older blokes wore long johns but every now and then you would see their tattoo and you would work out [from the rumours that went] around you would [say to yourself], ‘Ah so they were in an extermination camp. That’s why they won’t work or talk with that person’.<sup>42</sup>

Smith’s experience varies considerably from some of those who had undergone earlier apprenticeships. In one incident, where he admitted involvement, an apprentice was stripped and anointed around the genital area with fibre glass resin which subsequently hardened and burned, causing the boy agony. Smith was horrified and ran away, but some of his fellow perpetrators justified their actions by saying they were merely handing down what they had suffered, with a bit more added. But Smith believed that the whole business of initiations had got badly out of hand. In his opinion:

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<sup>42</sup> Steve Smith, interview with Maxine Milne, 24 February 2003.



There is a difference between being greased up [or] painted with blue dye [and] a group of guys saying, 'We're going to rape you'. That's totally and utterly different and I think that was the whole change the shift in the workplace from steam to diesel; from then a craftsman to being someone working on production line – a whole shift in respect for themselves, respect for the workshops, for management.<sup>43</sup>

For some apprentices, however, even 'being greased up' was incredibly traumatic. A man who had completed his apprenticeship as a painter at the Workshops, recalled an incident in 1977 when an apprentice painter suicided. Although it was put down to 'relationship difficulties' he knew that the boy had been 'greased up' not long before he took his own life.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, Smith's conclusion is an thought-provoking one. He imputed the rise in violence to the frustrations brought about by changing circumstances – the move 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, he 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'. He did, however, also mention the presence in the workforce in 1975 of members of the 'Club Deroes' bikie gang, some of whom were caught manufacturing firearms.<sup>45</sup>

There is not the space in this paper to explore the contention that discipline relaxed on the factory floor during the 1970s, although a number of other ex-employees had a similarly negative opinion of the outcomes of technological changes and from the shortening of apprenticeships from five to four years.<sup>46</sup> According to Bob Wells, who began his apprenticeship in 1963, the shortening of apprenticeships from five to four or fewer years meant that people were not fully trained when they came onto the shop floor. Although the educational level was higher – boys were required to have their Leaving Certificate before applying – the four-year apprenticeship in the electrical trades and fitting trades did not 'provide the time for the apprentice to actually learn the significance of what they were doing'. Not only were these new apprentices 'not as dextrous 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. They 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'. And 'they tended to look

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<sup>43</sup> Smith, interview.

<sup>44</sup> Email, R. McCracken to author, 15 April 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, interview.

<sup>46</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see B. Oliver, 'Transforming Labour' at the Westrail Workshops, Midland WA, 1940s to 1990s' in B. Bowden & J. Kellett, eds, *Transforming Labour. Work, Workers, Struggle and Change. Proceedings of the Eighth National Labour History Conference, Griffith University, 3-5 October 2003*, pp. 247-252.

for answers out of books as to how a tradesman did their work and that's not how tradesmen work'.<sup>47</sup>

Bill Kirkham, Master of Apprentices from 1974 to 1988, was similarly 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 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.<sup>48</sup>

In summary, the change from steam to diesel meant considerable upheavals in trades such as the blacksmiths and boilermakers, who gained work in new areas but lost it elsewhere. With dieselisation, the Workshops began making aluminium wagons instead of the old wooden ones; thus work that had traditionally been 'woodies' (carpenters) became blacksmiths' work. Blacksmiths had been a dying trade at the Workshops because the skills required to refit a steam locomotive were no longer needed. When a steam 'loco' came in for a refit, everything had to be cut off with an Oxyacetylene torch, con rods lengthened or shortened, the wheels fitted with new tyres that had to be shrunk on by the blacksmiths before being machined. Initially, nothing ever fitted, so every little bracket had to be machined to fit. Consequently, the change to diesels meant a steep decline in the tasks performed by blacksmiths that even the work involved in the change to Standard Gauge could not halt. According to Don Underdown (a blacksmith at the Workshops from 1949 to 1991), once the 'steamies' went, the number of blacksmiths operating individual fires in the main shop went down from around 87 to 19.<sup>49</sup>

In the 1980s, the atmosphere changed again as Workshops management strove to comply with the demands of new Occupational Health and Safety legislation. Safety equipment was issued free, and workers were expected to comply with regulations and wear protective gear. With the lowering of the incidence of genuine industrial accidents, the risky pranks that had in the past resulted in severe injuries or fatalities were less likely to be successfully passed off as 'accidents'. This tends to be supported by the comments of two men who were apprentice painters in the early 1980s. One recalled that the 'bastardization', as he termed it, 'faded away in the mid 1980s' and the other stated that by 1982 'you just didn't put up with that stuff at work any more'.<sup>50</sup> The experience of Mae Jean Parker, one of

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<sup>47</sup> Wells, interview 27 January.

<sup>48</sup> Bill Kirkham, interviewed by Kate Ferguson, 7 May 2002, transcript p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> D. Underdown, interviewed by M. Milne, Jan-Feb 2002, transcript pp. 10 ff.

<sup>50</sup> Email, R. McCracken to author, 15 April 2003.

the few females trade apprentices, who was an apprentice electrical fitter from 1991 until the closure in 1994, suggests that initiations and pranks did not cease entirely, however.<sup>51</sup>

This paper commenced with a number of questions about initiation practices at Midland. The evidence examined here suggests that the practice of rituals was well established in British workshops, and in other workplaces in Australia, and was particularly common in overwhelmingly male workforces in the blue collar industries, and especially in workplaces where there was a high level of danger. The workers themselves usually regarded the practice as useful for instilling discipline in young workers; but some saw it as degrading and objectionable. Although few used such concepts as 'bonding', 'developing tribal loyalties' or 'superiority', many of those interviewed believed that such practices helped to develop a sense of responsibility and 'camaraderie' among apprentices, and spoke of 'the culture'. The rituals changed over the period examined, and became significantly more violent in the 1970s and early '80s; yet the main factors in these changes occurred around Australia and world-wide, as well as at Midland. Was there anything specifically unique about the rituals at Midland? It is possible that the Peanut King is of entirely local origin. It is yet to be proved otherwise.

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<sup>51</sup> Mae Jean Parker, interviewed by Helma Lowande, 20 March 2003. Parker spoke of being 'crucified', having her overalls pumped full of grease, and being chained up.