

MATESHIP and MONEY-MAKING
Shearing in Twentieth Century Australia

by
Timothy Rory O'Malley

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**Department of History
School of Philosophical and Historical Enquiry
University of Sydney**

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Abstract

After the turmoil of the 1890s shearing contractors eliminated some of the frustration from shearers recruitment. At the same time closer settlement concentrated more sheep in small flocks in farming regions, replacing the huge leasehold pastoral empires which were at the cutting edge of wool expansion in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile the AWU succeeded in getting an award for the pastoral industry under the new arbitration legislation in 1907. Cultural and administrative influences, therefore, eased some of the bitter enmity which had made the annual shearing so unstable.

Not all was plain sailing. A pattern of militancy re-emerged during World War I. Shearing shed unrest persisted throughout the interwar period and during World War II. In the 1930s a rival union with Communist connections, the PWIU, was a major disruptive influence. Militancy was a factor in a major shearing strike in 1956, when the boom conditions of the early-1950s were beginning to fade. The economic system did not have satisfactory mechanisms to cope. Unionised shearers continued to be locked in a psyche of confrontation as wool profits eroded further in the 1970s. This ultimately led to the wide comb dispute, which occurred as wider pressures changed an economic order which had not been seriously challenged since Federation, and which the AWU had been instrumental in shaping.

Shearing was always identified with bushworker 'mateship', but its larrikinism and irreverence to authority also fostered individualism, and an aggressive 'money-making' competitive culture. Early in the century, when old blade shearers resented the aggressive pursuit of tallies by fast men engaged by shearing contractors, tensions boiled over. While militants in the 1930s steered money-makers into collectivist versions of mateship, in the farming regions the culture of self-improvement drew others towards the shearing competitions taking root around agricultural show days. Others formed their own contracting firms and had no interest in confrontation with graziers. Late in the century New Zealanders arrived with combs an inch wider than those that had been standard for 70 years. It was the catalyst for the assertion of meritocracy over democracy, which had ruled since Federation.

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I record my sincere appreciation to Professor Richard Waterhouse who supervised this project, providing patient and helpful guidance despite his high workload from other teaching and administrative duties at the university. He never seemed to doubt that the pieces of a complex story would fit together when it seemed bogged down in a confusion of detail. Gratitude is also due to the University of Sydney for its research facilities, and to other PhD candidates in the 'PGARC' room, and history postgraduates, for their companionship. I would also like to acknowledge Professor John Hirst for his work with postgraduates, and note that he suggested the title when I was struggling for a suitable one, although of course I take responsibility for it. The cheerful assistance of archivists and librarians is also gratefully appreciated. Research of this nature would be impossible without them.

I am not from the outback, and in fact have never been to most of the places mentioned in the thesis. Whether this is an advantage or a disadvantage is for others to judge. I do have some background in rural New Zealand and indeed my father was a shearer, although this had little to do with my interest in the history of shearing. When I first heard about the wide comb dispute I was genuinely puzzled by the attitudes of Australian unionists. The New Zealand point of view did not present such problems. After writing an honours thesis at the University of New England about the 1990s conflict between New Zealand and Australian shearers (not dealt with in this work) I was not much the wiser. It was a surprise to discover the dearth of analytical work on shearers during the twentieth century, and I resolved to see if I could get to the bottom of it by looking into the shearing industry for myself.

The emphasis on economics in the thesis arises from the pivotal role that wool has played in Australia's fluctuating prosperity, but it also serves the purpose of interpreting shearers within their broader social and political context.

Abbreviations

ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ASU	Amalgamated Shearers' Union
AWGC	Australian Woolgrowers and Graziers Council
AWMPA	Australian Wool and Meat Producers Association
AWU	Australian Workers' Union
BAWRA	British Australian Wool Realisation Association
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
LGPA	Livestock and Grain Producers Association (New South Wales)
MSU	Machine Shearers and Shed Hands Union
NFF	National Farmers' Federation
NSW	New South Wales
NZWU	New Zealand Workers' Union
PGA	Pastoralists' and Graziers Association (Western Australia)
PLB	Pastoral Labour Bureau
PUV	Pastoralists' Union of Victoria and Southern Riverina
PWIU	Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union of Australia
SCFA	Shearing Competition Federation of Australia
UGA	United Graziers Association of Queensland
UNGRA	United Graziers Shearing Co-operative

SECTION I

The Rural Context

Chapter 1: Introduction

Contracting and Arbitration

Sheep shearing is a distinctively ‘Australian’ occupation. Shearers characteristically combined elements of fierce egalitarianism with determinedly competitive work instincts. Strictly a male domain for most of its history, women were only integrated in any meaningful way in the 1970s. Shearing sheds have generated some intriguing episodes in labour history, and a colourful folk history adds to the mystique of shearers. Their involvement in twentieth century rural life and customs has been relatively neglected. Changing patterns of land use affected where they went and what they did, but also altered social alignments and attitudes.¹ Much of what happened was routine, if coloured by the rich and often humorous tales of a life which was arduous, but on the whole relished by those who lived it. Inevitably, though, shearers were sometimes (or often) in conflict with their employers. Many booms and busts shaped society’s overall approaches to reaping the rewards or sharing the burdens between profit and wages.² In the shearing industry stereotyped roles from the past regularly clashed with changing reality. Wool was so critical to Australian prosperity that these issues are of some general interest. Consideration of the nature of the work and the workplace (the woolshed) with broader themes about the rural societies from whence woolgrowers and the shearers mostly came, is worthy of further study.

Organisations representing shearers and woolgrowers played major roles. The Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) and the graziers associations were the relevant employee and employer collectives.³ Both coveted centralised control over the thousands of geographically isolated woolsheds where shearing actually took place according to an annual seasonal ritual. Both had origins in the ferocious woolshed labour disputes of the late-nineteenth century, which are well-known and extensively interpreted. The strikes of the 1890s have often been portrayed as climactic

¹ See Chapter 2, ‘Land Settlement and the Size and Location of Flocks 1900-1980’.

² See Chapter 3, ‘Riding the Sheep’s Back: Wool in Prosperity and Depression’.

³ The AWU was nationally organised with regional branches. The Queensland Branch, especially, was inclined to act independently. Woolgrowers were more fragmented. Grazier associations were State based, although coordinated on some matters through the Graziers Federal Council. In addition there were State based organisations of mixed (mainly wheat) farmers representing smaller woolgrowers. See Chapter 2.

confrontations of labour and capital.⁴ The union and woolgrower organisations were natural adversaries, suggesting social class was an important motive for regulation, but a more subtle understanding may be appropriate. Shearers and graziers regularly interacted in dispersed woolsheds of the outback and agricultural districts. There, although they played roles as members of their allotted ‘class’, behaving as ‘squatters’ or ‘farmers’ or ‘bush unionists’ or ‘union troublemakers’ or ‘cockie shearers’, as the case may be, they also exhibited humanity in its complex diversity. Varying degrees of intimacy were possible. Large and small woolsheds generated different interactions. Very often the same shearers went to the same sheds, year upon year, or worked for the same contractor. There were opportunities get to know each other’s virtues, prejudices and foibles.

At the beginning of the twentieth century two notable developments shaped the roles of these peak bodies, both also responses to the turmoil of the 1890s. One came from the ‘bottom up’, with minimal official encouragement from the pastoralists, and certainly none from the AWU. A system of private contracting quickly became the dominant means of recruiting shearers and organising shearing. I will argue that contracting was enormously adaptable, and belied the stereotype of warring classes.⁵ The other development could hardly have been more different, and if anything reinforced class division. It came from the ‘top-down’ instinct that shearing sheds needed codified rules to function peacefully. A system of judicial arbitration created the Pastoral Industry Award in 1907 to dictate rates of pay and a long list of very strict conditions governing the shearing process. Arbitration was supposed to be neutral, although whether it served either woolgrowers or shearers more favourably was always subject to various opinions. The contract system determined who was hired and where they went, and was quite independent of centralised intervention. Arbitration decided what they were paid and what the conditions were. It was a curious division of responsibility – the one *laissez faire* in character, the other almost

⁴ The pacesetter for this point of view is Brian Fitzpatrick, *The British Empire in Australia: An Economic History 1843-1939*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., second edition, 1949 (first published 1941), pp. 219-28. There have always been, and continue to be, differing interpretations. For an insightful summary, Melissa Bellanta, ‘16 August 1890: The Maritime Strike Begins: On utopia and “class war”’, in Martin Crotty & David Andrew Roberts, *Turning Points in Australian History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009, pp. 74-86.

⁵ See Section II, ‘The Rise of Contract Shearing’.

obsessively interventionist.⁶ The two systems coexisted reasonably successfully, although there was spasmodic dysfunction and bitter confrontation. Even at the best of times the regular harmony of shearing routine was often qualified by a simmering underlying mood of distrust which neither contractors nor the Arbitration Court seemed capable of eradicating.⁷

Contractors did not always follow the terms of arbitration rigorously. The tendency to ignore award provisions could ignite the ire of either the AWU or the Graziers Association, but quite often eased problems at the woolshed level. Graziers and shearing gangs would ignore their organisations if they thought it was ‘common sense’ or ‘unavoidable’. The geographically scattered nature of shearing meant that strict compliance was difficult to ensure. The underlying larrikin strain in Australian culture may have had something to do with this.⁸ Contractors had an ability to read the mood of shearers and graziers, and to broker effective outcomes even if they were not entirely amicable. AWU organisers on the spot, too, had this ability. If they departed from the official line it was sometimes ‘common sense’, but it could also reflect a combative or militant streak. Departing from the leadership line, however, ran a grave risk of a shortened union career.

The story of shearing through the twentieth century is enlivened by individuals and groups who, from time to time, disregarded rules. It is quite a varied list. It included powerful and independently minded pastoralists who resented their association interfering in private decision making. Small farmers tended to want to use family members and often had access to local labour which was more loyal to them than to the union. Militants, well aware of collective power of the ‘them and us’ mentality of shearing teams, were eternally attracted to the idea that ‘direct action’ was more effective than arbitration. There were enough mini-victories to sustain the delusion that industry-wide strikes could succeed. This was a persistent challenge to the

⁶ The 1907 case required 22 days of evidence and the judgement ran to 45 pages. The extent of regulation is demonstrated in the following example: ‘In opening the fleece at the neck and belly the machine or both blades of the shears shall be kept under the wool and close to the skin, so as to avoid cutting, and the shearer shall not be allowed to run the machine or the shears through the fleece so as to break it down the centre or the back, and shall not stand on the fleece.’ CAR, Vol. 1, 1907, p. 65.

⁷ See segment in Chapter 7, ‘“Undercurrents”’.

⁸ See extensive discussion below of Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, paperback edition, 1966, (first published 1958). Also C.W. Bean, *On the Wool Track*, Sirius Books, Sydney, 1963 (first published 1910).

AWU's pro-arbitration policy for the entire interwar period, extending into the 1950s.⁹ At the other end of the ideological spectrum, there were shearers not in the least rebellious, concerned primarily with making money, and broadly sympathetic with the graziers' point of view. These types, usually 'gun shearers' capable of shearing large tallies, complained less often about arbitrated rates of pay, but objected strenuously to rules which inhibited output.¹⁰ Thus early in the century many shearers owned their own handpieces despite the union rule against it, and in the 1970s the wide comb ban was frequently flouted.¹¹

Arbitration, of course, was a cornerstone of the wider post-Federation economic system and governed many workplaces throughout Australian society. Debate about its efficacy was, and is, lively.¹² The system experienced much legislative fine tuning, but attempts to seriously dilute or abolish arbitration never failed to galvanise the labour movement's opposition.¹³ This is worth noting because radical factions in the labour movement often claimed arbitration was a legalistic straightjacket which reinforced capital's hegemony over labour. A well established labour history tradition argues likewise. When arbitration was on the line, however, they fought for its retention. Employers were less enthusiastic, although in the shearing industry, Graziers Association support became as fundamental as the AWU's.¹⁴ Against a backdrop of dissent by militant unionists this consensus persisted until the 1970s. In the changing political climate of the 1980s woolgrowers' faith evaporated as they embraced 'free market economics', while the AWU's loyalty to arbitration was doggedly reinforced. The result, after a bitter struggle, was that the balance of control in shearing sheds shifted in favour of the heretics.¹⁵

⁹ This is intensively examined in Section III, 'The Arbitration System and its Enemies'.

¹⁰ Introduced in Chapters 2, 4, 5, 8 & 9.

¹¹ See segments in Chapter 4, 'Blades or Machines', and Chapter 10 'History of the Wide Comb Ban'.

¹² See, for example, Stuart Macintyre and Richard Mitchell (eds.), *Foundations and Effects of State Compulsory Arbitration 1890-1914*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989.

¹³ For example, the Bruce Government was swept from office in October 1929. See Chapter 3.

¹⁴ The effectiveness of the Graziers' Co-operative Shearing Company in the 1922 strike proved decisive. See Chapter 6.

¹⁵ See Chapter 10, 'Mate-ship's Last Stand: The Wide Comb Dispute 1970-1990'.

Nineteenth Century Background

The wool trade was a vital constituent of the Australian economy for a century and a half. The more enterprising spirits who found themselves in NSW in the 1790s were eager to enrich themselves, and wool delivered the kind of opportunity they craved.¹⁶ The Australian wool industry dates from the very early 1800s and by the 1830s it was a creature of Britain's nineteenth century industrial transformation. Ever more bales were absorbed as factories switched from water to steam power, ships gravitated from sail to coal to oil, and cables replaced sea-borne mail.¹⁷ The critical factors in Australia were unoccupied land (Aborigines were brushed aside), and a capacity to mass produce and ship a raw material with a receptive market in the woollen mills of northern England. British capital financed pastoral expansion and its sophisticated commercial infrastructure. It was not trouble free. Trade cycles and droughts wrecked havoc from time to time and fortunes were lost, but wool always bounced back. A century later, wool's imprint was plainly visible in a new nation and modern economy. Britain ceased to dominate woollen manufacturing in the twentieth century, yet Australian merino wool retained its pre-eminence. Primarily, wool was about money, but it was also bound to have profound cultural implications.¹⁸

The sheep shearers of Australia performed the essential task of harvesting wool. They were a highly mobile workforce, travelling from woolshed to woolshed, and they occupied a largely male world in which non-deferential and egalitarian attitudes were formed. Long before the Australian ascendancy raw wool production had been highly commercialised, but European shearing methods bore the stamp of bucolic tradition. There was surplus labour, estates were closer to markets and less urgency accompanied wool harvesting. Sheep were tied by the legs to prevent them escaping. Farm labourers, often women, sat around on stools clipping the staples. Australian squatters were not the first to have large flocks but the imperatives of mass

¹⁶ As early as 1792 John Macarthur said prosperity lay in the 'export of some raw material which would be produced with little labour, be in considerable demand, and be capable of bearing the expense of a long sea voyage'. Quoted in Samuel Wadham, R. Kent Wilson & Joyce Wood, *Land Utilisation in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, Third Edition 1957 (first published 1939), p. 12.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Sun Books, Melbourne, reprint 1974 (first published 1966), pp. 207-27.

¹⁸ John Merritt, *The Making of the AWU*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 3-11. W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, The Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961 (first published 1929), pp. 1-23; Fitzpatrick, *British Empire in Australia*, pp. 33-36, 43-45.

production, bulk shipping to faraway places, and scarcity of labour in the colonies, meant that these laborious methods would not do. This was the genesis of the Australian woolshed and its highly streamlined shearing system, which dates from the 1840s.¹⁹ By the 1880s giant sheds with 50 stands, or even 100, were commonplace. The woolshed was often compared to a factory, designed as it was to facilitate the flow of sheep from mustering yards into the catching pens.²⁰ There was constant bustle and movement; everything was coordinated. The process was unique. Although rooted in agrarian tradition the ideology of industrialisation drove its evolution.²¹ Shearers revelled in this, and tales of shearing in the ‘old country’ never failed to arouse considerable mirth in the antipodes.²²

Shearing was also done for money. Australian rural labourers were recent arrivals as were the pastoralists. There was no equivalent of the English field labourers living for generations in rural districts, whose unhappy dilemma was to flee to the burgeoning industrial cities or to roam the countryside scraping whatever employment modern agriculture offered.²³ Progress in Australia was more often beset by labour shortage. Early pastoralists were assigned convicts but, Aborigines aside, there was insufficient labour in the outback for this critical undertaking after transportation ended.²⁴ The problem was complicated by its seasonality – on the very largest stations shearing might last two months, but often less. Permanently employed station hands attached to properties could not cope with the mammoth assignment, and a system of itinerant shearing labour developed. The shearing process itself was deceptively skilful as well as demanding endurance and strength. It took time to become a successful shearer and not everyone could. By the 1860s shearers were often struggling farmers hungry for money to improve their blocks, and they hated rich landholders into the bargain. If

¹⁹ Richard Waterhouse, ‘Shearers and the Birth of Mateship’, Chapter 4 in Alan Mayne (ed), *Beyond the Black Stump*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town SA, 2008, p. 116.

²⁰ Bean, *On the Wool Track*, p. 54.

²¹ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 38-41; Hume Dow (ed), *Trollope’s Australia*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne & Sydney, 1966, p. 98.

²² John Martin, ‘Control in the Shearing Shed: the Introduction of Machinery and Changing Workplace Relations in New Zealand’, *Labour History*, Vol. 69, May 1992, pp. 72-3; *The Worker*, 30/7/1908, p29; A.D. Fraser, *This Century of Ours*, Dangar, Gedye and Malloch Ltd, Sydney, 1938, pp. 158-62; Richard Perry, *I went a’Sheperding: Chapters in the Life of a Sheperding Naturalist and His Wife in the Western Highlands and Islands*, Lindsay Drummond, London, 1944, p. 96.

²³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin Books, 1968 (first published 1963), pp. 233-58.

²⁴ Why Aborigines were not employed as shearers is an open question beyond the scope of this inquiry. There were Aboriginal shearers in Western Australia before World War I, see Chapter 9.

squatters wanted sheep shorn shearers had to be enticed out to the woolsheds. They developed a strong insider/outsider group mentality and could exert leverage against pastoralists.²⁵ If the ‘Captain Swing’ riots in southern England in 1830 are loosely comparable with the Australian shearing strikes in the 1890s as examples of angry rural uprisings, the point is made.²⁶ Both were put down, but the subsequent success of the AWU as a powerful voice for bushworkers had no close parallel in England.

The wool industry’s raw economics did not obviate its romantic appeal in narratives of the spread of white settlement. A vibrant folklore grew, and shearing cultural traditions have long been linked with the Australian outback. Despite its strict division of labour along ‘industrial’ lines, shearing occurred in isolated rural settings and was governed in some respects by quintessentially agrarian rhythms. Keen anticipation accompanied mustering and preparation of the shed. Shearers arrived and swapped yarns. The mood of the shed evolved as early anxieties folded into a daily routine. As cut-out neared a more relaxed atmosphere and light-hearted jousting was not unusual. Post-shearing rituals surely owed something to old European traditions of celebrating the harvest.²⁷

One of the threads of shearing culture was mateship. There is considerable debate about what this actually meant, but at its most personal, mateship was the male camaraderie which accompanied common experience. A strong sense of ‘them and us’ gave mateship a sharper edge. Widened to encompass social class, it has been linked to unionism and the solidarity this brought to demands for fair treatment.²⁸ It is recognisable in the celebrated ‘fair go’ embedded in Australian attitudes to workplaces. Mateship was mostly consistent with money-making, but it had poisonous undertones. The mentality of insiders and outsiders could be vicious in its denunciation of those who acted independently of group custom.

²⁵ Waterhouse, ‘Shearers and the Birth of Mateship’, pp. 116, 118.

²⁶ Fitzpatrick, *British Empire in Australia*, pp. 22, 225; E.J. Hobsbawm, *Captain Swing*, 1969.

²⁷ For example, Myrtle Rose White, *Beyond the Western Rivers*, Seal Books, Adelaide, 1969 (first published 1955), pp. 151-8.

²⁸ Mark Hearn, ‘Mates and Strangers: The Ethos of the Australian Workers Union’, in David Palmer, Ross Shanahan & Martin Shanahan (eds), *Australian Labour History Reconsidered*, Australian Humanities Press, Unley, SA, 1999, pp. 18-37; Roger McDonald, *Reflecting Labor: images of myth and origin over 100 years*, National Library of Australia, Evatt Foundation, Canberra, 1991.

Another thread was the renowned competitiveness of shearers. This arose from piecework payment and the incentives it created to work fast. Links to yeoman farming reinforced this.²⁹ However, the go-getting streak had traction far beyond the crude tenets of money-making. It was, indeed, another dimension of mateship. There was endless discussion of tallies and records of different kinds, and chiacking over victories and defeats.³⁰ Like footballers rivalries were fierce but they also joked about them. Competitiveness, though, was closely tied to individual ambition, and had considerable potential to clash with mateship in its ‘union solidarity’ form. Shearers were often at war with each other, rather than the squatter or shearing contractor.

Historiography of Conflict and Resolution

General histories treat the shearing strikes of the 1890s as key events in a tumultuous period which led to the formation of the Labor Party, crystallised Australian nationalism, and shaped the post-Federation political economy.³¹ By contrast, shearers are seldom mentioned in histories of the twentieth century.³² Regional histories of Queensland, where the AWU played a major hand in political affairs, invariably mention the 1956 strike as one element of a larger drama, the disintegration of the State Labor Government in 1957.³³ Overall, though, having been attributed a starring role in the opening act of the national story in the 1890s, shearers were not written into subsequent episodes. Even during the wool boom of the late-1940s and 1950s, coalmining strikes seemed of greater moment.

Twentieth century shearers no longer registered, presumably, because shearing was no longer at the cutting edge of labour history as it had been in the 1890s. Urbanisation became the driver of mainstream economic and social life. The coal mining strike of 1948, for example, was a more momentous event than the 1956 shearing strike

²⁹ Waterhouse, ‘Shearers and the Birth of Mateship’, p. 118.

³⁰ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 57, 67.

³¹ Bellanta, ‘The Maritime Strike Begins’.

³² C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. V*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1981, covering the period 1888-1915 contains 11 indexed references to ‘shearers and shearing’. *Vol. VI*, 1987, covering 1916-1935 contains none. See also indexes of Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999; and John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1988.

³³ Ross Fitzgerald, *A History of Queensland: From 1915 to the 1980s*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld., 1984, pp. 139-53; Raymond Evans, *A History of Queensland*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, Vic., 2007, p. 208.

although both involved vital industries.³⁴ It is not as if shearers disappeared or failed to live up to their reputation as distinctive ‘characters’. Certainly, they were a relatively small, declining, and sometimes difficult to define group, but the ongoing influence of wool in the economy might have been expected to generate more interest. Shearers may have been swept to the margins of social life but their circumstances were far from dull. Nor were they, it is argued, irrelevant to our understanding of broader social shifts.

Extensive coverage of nineteenth century shearers provides an important starting point. John Merritt’s history of the formative period of the AWU contains detailed chapters on methods of shearing, woolshed organisation, and shearers’ social backgrounds.³⁵ Although a diverse bunch, they emanated largely from the smallholdings of rural eastern Australia. Raymond Markey has also dealt with this in some detail.³⁶ Merritt has usefully and succinctly summarised this picture in a recent article, highlighting shearing’s links with smallholder ‘opportunism’ and aspirations for social advancement.³⁷

If professional historians have written relatively little, references in the popular press, in personal and family memoirs, travel writing, and local histories are voluminous. Shearers write autobiographies and are willing subjects for oral history whereas plumbers and carpenters are rarely troubled to reveal the minutiae of their working lives.³⁸ Patsy Adam-Smith’s popular book *The Shearers*, published in 1982, is a more comprehensive and cohesive treatment in this category. The focus is largely on the larrikin tradition and anecdotes from the woolshed. It assembles a massive amount of material on shearers’ lifestyles, and captures the underdog spirit of shearing culture, and also its infectious participatory energy:

It is an industry where the whole team works to maximum capacity. Many actions appear mechanical or set to a rhythm, due to the high intensity of concentration by all taking part;

³⁴ The Chifflery Federal Government was defeated in 1949, the Gair Queensland Government in 1957. Strikes were not the only, or even the main cause of electoral loss, but industrial unrest contributed to overall impressions of economic disorder.

³⁵ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, Chapter 1, ‘The Pastoral Industry, 1860-1911’, Chapter 2, ‘Shearing and Shearers in the 1880s’, and Chapter 3, ‘The Shed Floor in the Mid-1880s’.

³⁶ Raymond Markey, *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1880-1900*, University of NSW Press, Kensington, NSW, 1988, pp. 57-67.

³⁷ John Merritt, ‘Shearers, Mountain Stockmen and *The Australian Legend*’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008, p. 62.

³⁸ See bibliography for a list.

they can usually anticipate another person's actions. It is this rhythmic pattern that makes watching a shed in action so hypnotic.³⁹

Despite this, Des Williams, an historian of competition shearing in New Zealand, considers it inexplicable that an Australian champion of the 1960s, Kevin Saare, is not mentioned at all. By contrast, the treatment of the strikes in the 1890s, is extensive, and strikes in 1930 and 1956 each have a chapter devoted to them. One of the inspirations for the book was her own grandfather, who was a selector-shearer from Victoria.⁴⁰ Hearn and Knowles' study of the AWU contains significant sections with relevant but fairly generalised material about shearers' lives and social backgrounds.⁴¹

Whereas Merritt, Markey and others opened the way for shearers to be seen more as acquisitive populists than class warriors, sporadic scholarly journal articles and labour studies deal primarily with industrial disputes and conflict. The 'red and black which [Brian] Fitzpatrick had splashed about' has had more enduring appeal.⁴² Stuart Svensen's study of the 1891 strike in Queensland is meticulously researched and engagingly written, but its repeated assertions that conspiratorial and devious capitalists orchestrated events, while ruthless acts of violence and arson by unionists are forgiven as understandable indiscretions for the cause, tarnish its historical value.⁴³ Only very recently has a more balanced assessment of what happened in 1891 appeared.⁴⁴

Andrew Moore's article on the communist shearing union of the 1930s, the Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union (PWIU), is widely quoted.⁴⁵ This useful analysis is also handicapped by the author's doctrinaire Marxist perspective. Graziers are condemned as class enemies of the shearers but, if this was ever an adequate representation of complex social interaction, it fails to recognise changes in rural society after Federation. Moore's accurate recognition that there were, indeed, shearers willing to shear during strikes is contemptuous in tone, dismissing them as 'a distinctive labour

³⁹ Patsy Adam-Smith, *The Shearers*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1982, p. 323.

⁴⁰ Adam-Smith, *Shearers*, p. vii.

⁴¹ Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 25-7, 68-70, 150-6, 174-80, 244, 303-4.

⁴² Bellanta, 'The Maritime Strike', p. 75.

⁴³ Stuart Svensen, *The Shearers' War: The Story of the 1891 Shearers' Strike*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld., 1989.

⁴⁴ Peter & Sheila Forrest, *Bush Battleground: Barcaldine 1891*, Shady Tree, Darwin, 2009.

⁴⁵ Andrew Moore, 'The Pastoral Workers' Industrial Union 1930-1937', *Labour History*, Vol. 49, November 1985, pp. 61-74.

aristocracy, piece workers whose position inhibited fraternal relations with the more plebeian sections of the pastoral working class and who found the mantle of the “gun” shearer and “ringer” of the shed more compelling than class solidarity’.⁴⁶

Less well known, but more useful, is a series of six journal articles by Kosmas Tsokhas.⁴⁷ These, too, place woolshed conflict at the centre of events. Tsokhas deals with the period between 1900 and the 1960s in compartmentalised blocks, thus covering chronologically much of the period considered by this study. He argues that arbitration, as a means of regulating the terms of shearing, was only as successful as the underlying balance of social and economic forces in the woolshed permitted. The overall assessment that arbitration made the industry workable seems basically sound, although he pays no attention at all to the shifting rural social structure or the effect of contracting. His analysis of the strikes in Queensland during World War I and subsequent destabilisation of woolsheds in NSW in the early 1920s is incomplete. In particular the reasons for the creation of a separate Queensland award in 1920, or the formation of the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company (Grazcos) in 1919 are not canvassed.⁴⁸ Tsokhas’s analysis of simmering tensions during World War II is illuminating and gives the lie to Moore’s assertion that the PWIU influence was a spent force by the late 1930s.⁴⁹ Without attributing it explicitly to residual PWIU activists, Tsokhas continues to recognise a ‘rank-and-file’ influence putting pressure on the AWU in the early-1950s and as such accurately pinpoints some of the longer term causes of the 1956 strike.⁵⁰ This study makes further use of primary sources for the period from 1916 to the 1950s to examine conflict in woolsheds.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Moore, ‘Pastoral Workers Industrial Union’, p. 74.

⁴⁷ Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘The Shearing Labour Process 1900-1914’, *Labour History*, 59, November 1990, pp. 87-103; Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘Power, law and conflict in the pastoral industry 1914-1924’, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 76, 3, December 1990, pp. 218-36; Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘Shifting the Burden: Graziers and Pastoral Workers in the 1930s’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27, November 1999, pp. 40-51; Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘The Myth of Wartime Harmony and Conflict in the Australian Pastoral Industry, 1939-1945’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 36, 2, 1990, pp. 217-30; Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘Concessions, Conflicts and Collusion: Graziers and Shearing Workers, 1946-1956’, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, XIV, 7, May 1991, pp. 289-304; Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘The Shearing Labour Process in the 1960s’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 27, 1, March 1990, pp. 34-52.

⁴⁸ Tsokhas, ‘Power, law and conflict’, pp. 218-36.

⁴⁹ Tsokhas, ‘The Myth of Wartime Harmony’, pp. 217-30.

⁵⁰ Tsokhas, ‘Concessions, Conflicts and Collusion’, pp. 295-7.

⁵¹ See especially segments in Chapter 6, ‘Shearers and the IWW’, Chapter 7, ‘Busworkers’ Propaganda Group’, ‘World War II and Communist Influence’, and Chapter 8, ‘Militants after the War’.

The wide comb dispute of the 1980s is relatively recent. Tsokhas did not choose to produce a seventh article, although it was a fresh issue in the early-1990s when most of his work was published. Hearn and Knowles provide a segment titled “‘Bringing Back the Raddle’: the Pastoral Industry 1980-1993’. This portrays the AWU’s side of the story, accurately addresses the role of the National Farmers Federation (NFF), and identifies the ‘New Right’ dimension.⁵² The writers, however, are unable to explain unionist sentiment. In dismissing motivations of shearers who wanted wide combs, they appear to share the adage that perhaps money is not everything,

It was more ‘logical’ to shear with wide combs. But there was something wrong, something changing; many AWU shearers could not put their finger on the precise disturbance.⁵³

Paul Williams’ study of the breakaway Shearers and Rural Workers Union provides some illumination of the anti-wide comb point of view, but is even more partisan and fails to address attitudes of other shearers.⁵⁴

A key objective of this study has been to account for the emergence of shearing contractors before World War I, and their consolidation by the 1920s. Initially a response to industrial unrest in the 1890s, it quickly became the dominant form of shearing organisation. Contract shearing has been largely taken for granted although there are two exceptions. Merritt’s book on the foundation of the AWU describes the first attempt at contracting by J.H. Young and examines prior attempts to centralise the recruitment of shearers. His narrative ends around 1911, by which time contracting was firmly established. The AWU’s feud with the Machine Shearers and Shedhands Union (MSU) early in the twentieth century, for which Merritt is effectively a primary source, concerned the joint advance of contracting and machine shearing around which there was considerable controversy.⁵⁵ A little known paper by Irwin Young introduces a new form of contracting arising in country towns in the 1920s.⁵⁶ Young’s father was a shearing contractor based in Glen Innes during the

⁵² Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 304, 309, 313-319.

⁵³ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 341.

⁵⁴ Paul Williams, *Ramming the Shears : The Rise and Demise of the Australian Shearer and His Culture: The Origins of the Shearers' and Rural Workers' Union, an Historical and Contemporary Study of the Australian Shearer's Unionism and Industry*, Shearer's and Rural Worker's Union, Ballarat, 2004. An earlier version of Chapter 10 has been published. Rory O’Malley, ‘The Eclipse of Mateship: The Wide Comb Dispute 1979-85’, *Labour History*, No. 90, May 2006, pp. 155-174.

⁵⁵ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 260-357. These matters are discussed in Chapter 5, ‘J.H. Young & Co.’ and ‘The MSU and the 1902 Strike’.

⁵⁶ Irwin Young, ‘Changes Within the NSW Branch of the Australian Workers’ Union 1919-1924’, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 1, March 1964, pp. 51-60.

critical period between 1900 and 1920 when land use patterns and flock sizes were being transformed.⁵⁷ Andrew Moore mentions only ‘the special brand of sycophancy practiced by shearing contractors’, a comment which shows no realistic appreciation of who contractors were and how they functioned. Contract shearing proved its durability despite often expressed antipathy to it from unionists, and a degree of scepticism from graziers.

Competing Legends

The Australian Legend by Russel Ward, published in 1958, linked the traits of irreverence and egalitarianism to the ‘mateship’ that had grown up amongst bushworkers in the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ The argument was that the very harshness of the outback and the ‘nomadic’ work patterns drew men together into a culture of mutual sharing. Ward contrasted the collective tendency in Australian society with the competitive individualism of the American West founded on homesteader self-sufficiency.⁵⁹ The thesis neatly fitted the radical nationalist view of Australian history, which emphasised social turmoil in the 1890s as a platform for the emergence of the Labor Party as a cohesive political movement and a challenge to British capitalist hegemony. Ward wrote during the long years of the Cold War and conservative governments led by Sir Robert Menzies, a noted anglophile. In the minds of radical nationalists the national narrative had unfinished business.⁶⁰

Ward further argued that the disappearance of nomadic social patterns in favour of settled agriculture gave them nostalgic gravitas, contributing to their survival as legends or myths. The ‘somewhat belated discovery of the bushman by accredited literary men’, he says, became one of two key influences that allowed the bushman to become ‘firmly enshrined in both the popular and the literary imagination’. Thus ‘the extinct bushman of Lawson and Furphy became the national culture-hero’.⁶¹ Ward is

⁵⁷ Irwin Young, *Theodore: His Life and Times*, Alpha Books, Sydney, 1971, p. xv.

⁵⁸ Ward, *Australian Legend*.

⁵⁹ Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 242-3.

⁶⁰ For discussion of the effect of the Cold War on Ward’s desire to trace the origins of Australian nationalism: Drew Cottle, ‘A Bowyang Historian in the Cold War Antipodes: Russel Ward and the making of *The Australian Legend*’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008, pp. 801-22.

⁶¹ Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 13, 211-2.

claiming here that up-and-coming nationalism needed suitable narratives. Nationalist writers in the *Bulletin* seized on the bush as they found nothing sufficiently remarkable in urban society. The Eureka ‘rebellion’ hardly amounted to a satisfactory war of independence. Depicting Ned Kelly as a republican hero instead of a violent rural bandit helped. Anzac was a godsend because digger virtues were widely interpreted as originating in the bush. These connections are all acknowledged in *The Australian Legend*, including mention of a newspaper claim cited in C.E.W. Bean’s official war history that ‘by April 1915 there had been enrolled 12,000 shearers and station hands, members of the Australian Workers Union, and [only] 1,000 bank clerks’.⁶² AWU opposed conscription but this did not inhibit Jack McNeill, arguing the AWU’s claim in the 1927 Pastoral Award case, from mentioning it: ‘I may say in passing that whilst the war was on 40,000 members of our union enlisted, and they included some of the pick of Australian bushmen.’⁶³ Even members of the communist PWIU were not immune from these sentiments. A radical shearer who went to the Spanish Civil War taunted the fascist captors of his republican battalion in February 1937, just before they blew his head off: ‘If we had ten thousand Australian bushmen here, we’d drive these dogs into the sea.’⁶⁴

Whether nostalgia alone could sustain a national ethos is arguable, but values associated with the ‘legend’ (or at least something deceptively similar) do seem to resonate in urban and rural Australia today. Shearers were not only central to the legend, they continued to be economically important in the twentieth century.⁶⁵ Like everyone else they had the practical challenge of making a living in the society they belonged to. At the same time they were bearers of the nostalgic ideal - in a sense they were ‘living legends’ and a lot of shearers’ behaviour reflected it.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the fact that they travelled out to the shearing sheds belied their categorisation as itinerants. More accurately they were settled members of farming communities who happened to go out of their local districts for a month or two to make some money shearing.⁶⁷

⁶² Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 54-55, 118, 133, 229-31.

⁶³ NAA B1958/10 1926/27, Vol 1, Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, p. 356.

⁶⁴ R. Gollan, *Revolutionaries and Reformists: Communism and the Australia Labour Movement, 1920-1955*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p. 125. The PWIU is discussed in Chapter 7.

⁶⁵ Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 186-193. 213-7.

⁶⁶ Adam-Smith, *The Shearers*.

⁶⁷ See W.E. Abbott’s observation quoted below from *Pastoralists Review*, 16 July 1917, p. 660.

In 1978, twenty years after Ward, John Hirst suggested an alternative model for understanding ‘Australian’ attitudes, also generated in the bush, but rooted in land settlement. The ‘Pioneer Legend’, he proposed, arose from struggles to establish grazing runs and farms.⁶⁸ Pioneers built homesteads and railway stations and schools. They were bonded to their districts and not footloose at all. Accumulation of (modest) wealth was the embodiment of pioneer values, but they did not entirely ignore mateship. Indeed, it was critical to the ethos that neighbours came to one another’s aid in times of bushfire and flood, or if children were ill.⁶⁹ However, the pioneer mentality became hostile to trade unions, which Ward had seen as one of mateship’s most valuable ongoing legacies. This is a vital distinction. Hirst’s pioneers were not immune from notions of disdain for privilege and power, but this followed the selector’s desire for land and hostility towards banks and absentee pastoral companies. Small farmers were not unsympathetic to the grievances of shearers in the 1890s but there were limits to the appeal of collectivism.

This observation is not strongly made by Hirst, beyond recognising that the political viewpoint of pioneers was ‘conservative’, and suggesting that Ward was over-reaching the evidence with his assertion of a ‘radical collectivist aspect’.⁷⁰ It may be fair to argue that the legend was ‘classless’ when it was formed in the 1890s as Hirst suggests, but acquired anti-labour baggage as time marched on.⁷¹ Anti-unionism is impossible to escape in the behaviour of farmers in the 1930s, who otherwise reflected pioneer values. They saw no virtue at all in militant ‘communists’ who disrupted coal mines and ports (or for that matter, shearing sheds).⁷² Such troublemaking, farmers believed, was imported and not linked to the traditions of the Australian bush at all. Indeed, during the 1917 general strike a ‘farmers’ army’ from the bush assembled at the Sydney Cricket Ground. Volunteers loaded ships and drove trains which ‘unpatriotic’ unionists refused to do.⁷³ It is only fair to acknowledge that the AWU was also vehemently anti-communist, although *The Worker* had no love for

⁶⁸ John Hirst, ‘The Pioneer Legend’, *Australian Historical Studies*, 18, 71, October 1978, pp. 316-37.

⁶⁹ Hirst, ‘Pioneer Legend’, p. 322.

⁷⁰ Hirst, ‘Pioneer Legend’, pp. 316, 337.

⁷¹ Hirst, ‘Pioneer Legend’, p. 316.

⁷² Shearer militancy is discussed in Part III.

⁷³ SMH, 18/8/1917, p. 12; 20/8/1917, p. 6, 24/8/1917, p. 4; 25/8/1917, p.12; 27/8/1917, p. 6; 28/8/1917, p. 8; British heritage was certainly valued highly by pioneers, John Hirst, ‘Pioneer Legend’, p. 336.

the farmers' army. There is a 'town versus country' dimension to the pioneer viewpoint also, which found its strongest expression in the politics of the County Party.⁷⁴

Somehow photographs of shearing scenes look the same regardless of the era. In arbitration hearings shearing practices were scrutinised in excruciating detail and much the same issues were still being brought up in 1948 and 1978 as in 1907, when the first award was made.⁷⁵ At the end of the twentieth century woolshed routines were much as they had been in the late-nineteenth century. The basic layout of yards and pens changed little conceptually, although each shearing shed had its own particularities and new design ideas crept in. There was evolution in the mechanics of shearing equipment and wool presses, of course, and significant innovations in shearing techniques. As will be shown, reductions in flock sizes had significant cultural implications. But changes inside the shearing shed were not as conspicuous as those in the world outside where technological change drove extraordinary social transformations.⁷⁶ Shearers lived in this outside world and it affected how they got to the sheds. But the ambiance inside the shed was much as it had been before federation. This was oxygen for romantic legends from the past.

Besides nostalgia, a forward-looking, calculating attitude was often found. In 1917 W.E. Abbott, a well known pastoralist from the Upper Hunter, implied that money-making shearers from farming districts were not immune from using unionism to force up the price of shearing.

Thirty or forty years ago shearers were just nomads, who spent their cheques, as soon as they were earned, at the nearest pub, and we used to think it was no use to throw good money after bad by suing them. That is by no means the case now. I live in a district in which shearers are bred. Many of them go out every year to the remote parts of New South Wales and Queensland, and put in six month's shearing at from 30s. to 40s. or 60s. for each working day, and almost all of them own property and stock, in some cases worth a good many thousand pounds.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Hirst, 'Pioneer Legend', pp. 332-3.

⁷⁵ NAA, B1958/10 Box 2, and 1948, NAA, B1958/7 Box 33, Pastoral Award Transcripts 1927, 1948.

⁷⁶ Williamson, H.D. 'Wool Away', June 1944, published in Bolton, A.T. (ed) *Walkabout's Australia: An Anthology of Articles and Photographs from 'Walkabout' Magazine*, Ure Smith in association with The National Travel Trust Association, Sydney, 1964, p. 61.

⁷⁷ *Pastoral Review*, 16 July 1917, p. 660. Merritt notes that in Abbott's own district in the Upper Hunter, pastoralists had harmonious relationships with shearers and smallholders. Merritt, 'Shearers, Mountain Stockmen and *The Australian Legend*', p. 62.

During the long and spiteful shearing strike of 1956 Australian parliaments were outlets for the frustrations of both sides. A conservative Tasmanian senator resented a sermon from the Labor Party about the evils done to shearers by the squatters in 1891 and 1930. He related a story about a taxi driver boasting that he had been able to earn £50 clear a week at shearing, and as a result owned five taxi cabs worth £3000 each. Labor interjected , ‘He was taking you for a ride’!⁷⁸ Stories of big earnings by shearers are commonplace, even if some are exaggerated, and others simply apocryphal.

Perhaps competing legends simply reflect divisions in rural society. Attitudes to unionism, for example, differ between an employer or an employee, a shearer or a grazier, a member of the AWU and a Labor voter perhaps, or a supporter of the Country Party. There was certainly a pattern of shearing shed tension, but boundaries were blurred. Shearers from farming regions were likely to hold pioneering values. Bush unionism, at least in part, reflected the populism of land hungry selectors and their bitter struggles with drought, governments, and banks. It is significant that both Russel Ward and John Hirst felt able to cite the poetry of Henry Lawson and ‘Banjo’ Paterson as evidence for their respective legends. Both legends existed sharing some things in common. They transmitted nineteenth century images of the outback into twentieth century attitudes.⁷⁹

Legends emphasise virtue, but a lack of scruples was often alluded to. Pastoralists had broken strikes in the 1890s with ‘free labour’ (non-unionists) and Whiteley King, Secretary of the Pastoralists Union, devised schemes to lock in their loyalty. But a letter to the *Pastoralists’ Review* suggested he was wasting his time. Shearers would be ‘free labourers’ on one day and ‘unionists’ on another, it said. ‘The working man’s principles are governed by his pockets, and ... he will do anything that suits him.’ The few that ‘stick to their principles’ were ‘like snow in summer, not often seen’.⁸⁰ Were shearers sufficiently individualistic that neither legend adequately represents them?

⁷⁸ CPD, Senate, 1956, Vol.9, p. 620.

⁷⁹ Common ground is recognised in Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, pp. 65, 72.

⁸⁰ Quoted by Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 213.

The 'AWU Legend'

It is impossible to ignore the giant shadow of the AWU. Merritt emphasised the union's organisational power rather than what he calls 'movement', the spirit of collective purpose encapsulated in mateship.⁸¹ This is warranted because movement without organisation would not have been enough. Apart from disputes with the graziers the AWU had to fight breakaway movements on both its Right flank (notably the MSU revolt in 1902) and its Left (the PWIU in the 1930s).⁸² Hearn and Knowles analyse the AWU's institutional history from its founding until about 1990, but they also explain that a shearers' culture defined the mateship ethos of the AWU long after it ceased to be primarily a shearers' union.⁸³ Likewise, the founder's two published works stated the rational argument for the AWU's existence and philosophy, but also claimed ownership of the bushworker spirit.⁸⁴ In effect, the AWU had written its own legend around the experience of the 1890s strikes long before Russel Ward put pen to paper.

Scattered occurrences of agitation in woolsheds occurred as early as the 1870s. Pastoralists introduced signed shearing agreements in the hope that this would facilitate stability, but small regional unions quite quickly led to more ambitious schemes to unionise shearers. The Amalgamated Shearers' Union (ASU) was formed in 1886 under the leadership of David Temple, a shearer-activist, and William Guthrie Spence, who had already successfully organised mine workers. The time was ripe, and enrolments throughout NSW and Victoria were rapid. Parallel initiatives occurred in Queensland. The unions aimed to negotiate with pastoralists over the terms of shearing agreements, and to confine shearing to unionists. Pastoralists recognised the reality of unionism and formed their own organisations (also called 'unions' for the time being). Unskilled shed hands were separately unionised (although the leaders were the same), but amalgamated into the AWU in 1894. Queensland bush unions resisted amalgamation and did not merge with the AWU until 1904. Parochialism persisted, especially north of the Tweed, but by the end of the nineteenth century the

⁸¹ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 2.

⁸² See Chapters 4 and 7 respectively.

⁸³ Hearn & Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 7.

⁸⁴ W.G. Spence, *Australia's Awakening: Thirty Years in the Life of an Australian Agitator*, The Worker Trustees, Sydney, 1909; W.G. Spence *History of the A.W.U.*, The Worker Trustees, Sydney, 1911.

AWU was spearheading a brand of nationalism within the labour movement which resonated well beyond shearing sheds.⁸⁵

Pastoralists still harboured desires to return to a pre-union past and conferences lacked mutual trust. Conservatives were concerned – perhaps paranoiac describes it better – at the mobilisation of organised labour in general. The maritime strike of 1890 was especially alarming from their point of view. Direct confrontation loomed. The shearing unions enjoyed some success through a blockade of wool from Jondaryan station in Queensland in 1890, but strikes in 1891 and 1894 ended as bitter defeats. These defeats were orchestrated by the squatters in collusion with maritime companies and fearful colonial governments, but they were also facilitated by the independent streak within the shearing work force. Many colourful incidents of the strike period arose from pastoralists attempting to secrete ‘scab’ labour to the woolsheds – the burning the *Rodney* river steamer in 1894 being perhaps the best known example. The other side of this coin probably has not had the emphasis it deserves. It was relatively easy for Whitely King to recruit shearers in Victoria and New Zealand who were prepared to work sheds if they could be protected from union pickets.

The genius of the AWU was that defeats inspired recovery and survival. The union became a successful participant within the emerging labour arbitration system, for which Marxist historians and militant activists have consistently condemned it.⁸⁶ Not everything about the AWU was admirable, and its reputation for ballot-fixing and cynical manipulation is largely deserved, but its ideological critics seem unable to accept that a radical union could not have survived given the diverse constituency of shearers. Unlike Merritt, Russel Ward places most of the emphasis on ‘movement’. He argues that ‘the phenomenally rapid growth of [the ASU after 1886] probably sprang from the bushmen’s already existing ethos rather than from the organising genius and missionary zeal of prominent leaders’. He then quotes Spence:

⁸⁵ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, is the main source for this and following paragraphs; see also Stuart Svensen, *The shearers' war : the story of the 1891 shearers' strike*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia (Qld), 1989.

⁸⁶ V. Gordon Childe, *How Labour Governs: a study of workers' representation in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, second edition 1964 (first published 1923); Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia : an argument concerning the social origins of Australian radicalism and nationalism*, Penguin, revised edition 1978; Moore, ‘Pastoral Workers’ Industrial’, p. 62.

Unionism came to the Australian bushman as a religion. It came bringing salvation from years of tyranny. It had in it that feeling of mateship which he understood already, and which always characterised the action of one 'white man' to another.⁸⁷

The full passage goes on to note the profound importance placed on being 'true to Union rules' and the irreparable distrust of anyone who "scabbed" on his fellows', even to the point that 'at many a country ball the girls refused to dance with them'.⁸⁸ This is presented as firm evidence of the connection between mateship and unionism. The rapid emergence of shearing unionism in the late-1880s was certainly remarkable, but it could not have been sustained without robust attention to organisation. At the time of Spence's retrospective interpretation (1909) the union had just weathered a serious revolt from its non-militant Right wing. The AWU was embracing arbitration and, in practical organisational terms, distancing itself from its more militant past.⁸⁹ At the same time it was perfecting a style of rhetoric that made it sound more radical than it really was. The union maintained a cultivated envy of the grazier class and a belief in social redistribution. *The Worker* frequently reported valuations of deceased grazier estates with irony and a racy style which surely mirrored the talk of shearers who knew the stations and had shorn at them. The wry humour of the idiom, however, was more in fun than hard core class hatred.⁹⁰ While there was undoubtedly a groundswell of common feeling in bush unionism, organisation was the AWU's key asset. Shearers with 'principles' were 'like snow in summer' as the *Pastoralists' Review* ruefully observed. However, the union worked hard to foster a union spirit that appealed beyond blatant self-interest.

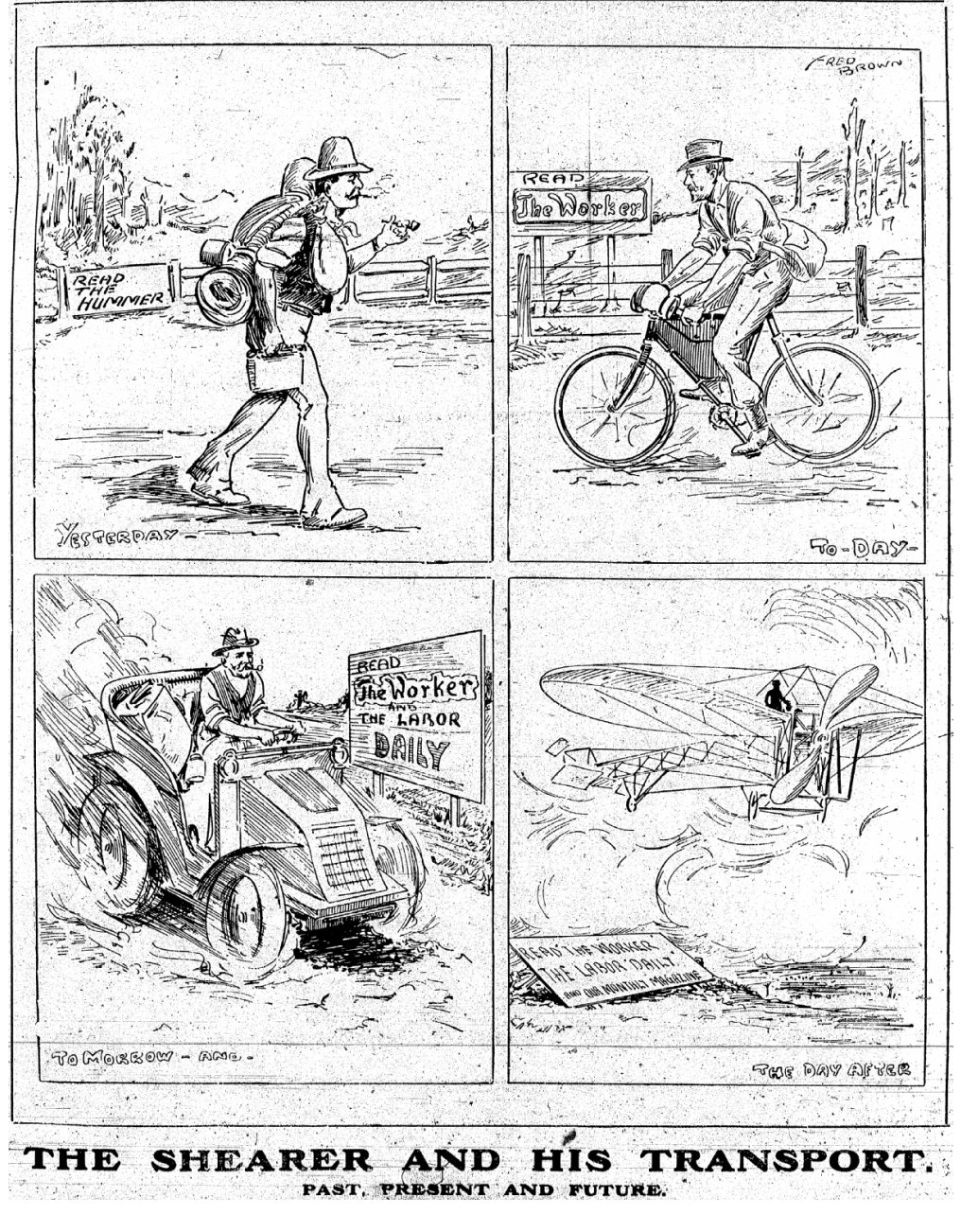
While the AWU wallowed in nostalgia to create a mythology of mateship, it was also forward looking. The essence of Laborism was to advance the wellbeing of working people through 'progressive' legislation, enforceable wage awards, and state investment in technology, education and health. Figure 1-1 was published in 1910. This was the age of the bicycle and long before motor cars were widely used by

⁸⁷ Quoted without stating the source in Ward, *Australian Legend*, p. 214; Merritt also discusses this, recognising its origin. He acknowledges that spontaneity did make the organisers' task easier. Spence's claim should have considered the 'growing small holder component of the shearing workforce'. Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 98-100. Spence's use of 'white man' needs careful interpretation. It is probably not explicitly racial – 'white man' was common outback usage as late as the 1920s to mean 'decent', 'sincere', 'loyal'. It is close to 'mateship'.

⁸⁸ The original quote is from Spence, *Australia's Awakening*, p. 53.

⁸⁹ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 362. A rival union, the MSU, existed between 1902 and 1906. See Chapter 4.

⁹⁰ *The Worker*, 9/7/1904, p. 7; 13/2/1924, p. 22; 26/12/1928, p. 6.

Figure 1-1: *Worker Illustration 1910*

shearers, let alone aeroplanes.⁹¹ Travel was fundamentally important to shearers and the message of social progress merges with the gospel of unionism. However, the illustration is more concerned with justifying union newspaper projects. The old *Hummer* newspaper of the ‘fighting days’ was already obsolete while the *Labor Daily* and a monthly magazine would, it was predicted in the cartoon, soon supplement *The*

⁹¹ *The Worker*, 12/1/1910, p. 1.

Worker. Conference approved an extra levy to finance it. The imagery was impressive but not everyone was persuaded. The labour movement believed (with justification) that metropolitan newspapers were biased, but the AWU plan to establish a daily newspaper was a sore point in some shearing sheds. Both Right wing and Left wing factions in the grassroots objected to money being diverted for political purposes. Shearers were willing to buy membership tickets but there was resistance to the ‘*Labor Daily* levy’.⁹² Moreover, the newspaper venture turned out to be a long and very sorry tale of financial mismanagement.⁹³

Ward’s *Australian Legend* provides a framework within which this idiosyncratic union can be understood. However, Ward was hardly born when the union was already writing its own remarkably similar legend.⁹⁴ This was repeated over and over at AWU conferences, and especially by union organisers as they went around shearing sheds enrolling members and preaching the faith. The AWU legend was enjoying one of its most potent periods after the 1956 strike when Ward was writing his famous book.⁹⁵ Ward thought better of mentioning it – perhaps wisely foregoing the temptation to comment on current events in a work of history. The posthumous rewards were substantial, however, as *The Australian Legend* now has legendary status of its own, although many scholars judge its argument flawed.⁹⁶ Interestingly, there is little evidence that the AWU looked favourably on *The Australian Legend* when it appeared in 1958, or that it noticed its publication at all.⁹⁷ Was this a sign that the AWU did not need academic professors (and a radical with past associations with communism at that) to tell its own stories?

The national egalitarian ethos was evocatively expressed by Joseph Furphy in *Such is Life* – ‘temper democratic, bias offensively Australian’. AWU’s aggressive championship of the underdog captured much the same spirit, but it carried illiberal

⁹² *The Worker*, 31/8/1910, p. 3; 21/9/1910, p. 3; 4/11/1911, pp. 5, 7.

⁹³ Clyde Cameron, ‘When Incompetence and Corruption Merge: the AWU and the World Newspaper’, *Labour History*, No.70, May 1996, pp. 169-81.

⁹⁴ Ward was born in 1914. He died in 1996.

⁹⁵ See Chapter 8.

⁹⁶ An Australian Historical Association Conference at the University of New England in September 2007 commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of publication of *The Australian Legend*. SMH, 29/9/2007, p. 28; *Journal of Australian and Colonial History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008 is dedicated to discussion of Russel Ward’s legacy.

⁹⁷ This point was discussed at the Australian Historical Association Conference, which the writer attended.

undertones. As Peter Coleman put it in 1962, the powerful concept of mateship might have arisen out of ‘genuine democratic emotion’, but it had a dark side, ‘the snarl of the collectivist bully’.⁹⁸

The Nature of the Work: ‘Speeding-up’ and Competitiveness

The absence of eye-catching innovation does not mean that woolgrowers were technologically unadventurous. Far from it. They readily embraced everything from artesian bores to aeroplanes, and if a way had been discovered to streamline shearing, graziers would have adopted it. The most obvious modernisation, machine shearing, dated from 1888.⁹⁹ Pastoralists embraced machines because they believed initially that it would free them from the tyranny of militant unionists. However, machine shearing turned out to be uncannily difficult to master, and full automation proved illusive. Militants and cocky shearers delighted in the fact that woolgrowers never succeeded in automating the shearing process.¹⁰⁰ It gave them self-respect, but it was also a reminder to all concerned that they were not to be mucked around with.

Two studies, both published in *Labour History* in the early-1990s, attempted to apply sociological work theory to the shearing process.¹⁰¹ One was presented by John Martin, a New Zealand labour historian. The other was by the above mentioned Kosmas Tsokhas. Both attempted to test the influential Braverman theory that mechanisation is a strategy of capitalists to depersonalise or ‘deskill’ work processes in order to maximise control and drive down wages.¹⁰² While they use different sources the conclusions are similar. Martin’s suggestion that ‘mechanisation did not in itself greatly change the balance of control and power in the shed’ is, if anything, an understatement, as are corresponding sentences in Tsokhas’s paper.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Peter Coleman, ‘Introduction: The New Australian’ in Peter Coleman (ed), *Australian Civilisation: A Symposium*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962, p. 2 (including Furphy quote).

⁹⁹ Fraser, *This Century of Ours*, pp. 191-204.

¹⁰⁰ McIntosh, *Beaten by a Blow*, p. 71.

¹⁰¹ Martin, ‘Control in the Shearing Shed’, pp. 72-3; Tsokhas, ‘The Shearing Labour Process’, p. 87.

¹⁰² H. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974.

¹⁰³ Martin, ‘Control in the Shearing Shed’, p. 84; Tsokhas, ‘The Shearing Labour Process’, p. 102.

In the industrial world at large capitalists intensified their quest for productivity in the early 1900s. An American approach known as ‘Taylorism’ (after the expert who suggested it) threatened to dehumanise work. A central concern was that the pace of work was determined by the machine, reducing worker autonomy. In the stereotyped example, cynical plant managers surreptitiously increased the speed of the conveyor belt to stretch a little extra output out of the production line. The aforementioned general strike in NSW in 1917 was a protest against an attempt to introduce a card recording system in the tramway workshops. It seemed to be a text book case of Taylorism.¹⁰⁴ Radical unionists were hostile to management tactics of this kind. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which originated amongst mine workers in western United States, was especially contemptuous of what it called ‘speeding up’, and introduced the deliberate ‘go-slow’ as a tactic to counter it.¹⁰⁵

The IWW was influential in Australian shearing sheds.¹⁰⁶ However, in woolsheds shearers, rather than the shed manager, dictated the pace of work. Although ‘speeding up’ was often presented as a reason for union opposition to shearing contracting in the 1920s and ‘30s, it was not an objection which carried much weight with the majority of shearers.¹⁰⁷ Successful IWW campaigns were fought over wage rates, not piecework. Shearers would contemplate direct action to get higher wages but they were more than happy to resume racing each other, and the clock. In other occupations piecework payment was considered a form of exploitation, and died out as trade unions became influential and society norms less brutal. Not in shearing, though. The AWU was sufficiently powerful to end piecework if shearers wanted it, but they did not.

Shearing was highly repetitive, yet shearers hated the tedium of urban factories where activity had no beginning and no end. Dennis McIntosh explained his reaction to an engineering workshop in the 1970s. ‘I felt sick. Every factory department we looked into had hundreds of men standing next to their workstations just waiting to die.’¹⁰⁸ Ken Prato spent part of the off-season in 1964 in a lawnmower factory in Melbourne.

¹⁰⁴ Verity Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Socialism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p 174.

¹⁰⁵ Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Socialism*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁶ See account of 1916 strike in Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁷ See segment in Chapter 5, ‘The AWU Response’.

¹⁰⁸ Dennis McIntosh, *Beaten by a Blow: A Shearer’s Story*, Viking, 2008, p. 24.

He was asked to drill holes in grass-catcher components, and with a shearer's mentality found the pace a bit slow. He couldn't wait to leave. 'If I found myself ahead I would sweep the floor to look busy. I worked five weeks at that place.'¹⁰⁹ Although sometimes the heat and the dust were unbearable and accommodation huts were lonely places on Sunday nights, the shearer's life was unrestrained by normal conventions (including the 'civilising' influences of women).¹¹⁰ An unmistakable conclusion from descriptions of shearing is that participants enjoyed the work. Notwithstanding the inconveniences, they were attracted to the lifestyle.

Shearers often kept records, and remembered sheds and seasons with numerical precision. They ranked sheds by the quality of the sheep and the run they could expect to get. Roy Ryan (1891-1976) kept meticulous diaries throughout his shearing career which spanned 1917 to 1971. He recorded daily tallies at every shed for 54 years, plus relevant earnings and expenses. Almost nothing else was put to paper apart from occasional comments on the weather, and even the trauma of his wife's death from pneumonia in 1934 is barely mentioned. Roy Ryan stayed with shearing for his whole working life but indulged an interest in motor cars and aeroplanes as well as well as paying boarding fees for his only son after his wife died. Ryan's obsessive accounting is certainly exceptional, but shearers talked constantly about their tallies and their income. They observed jealously how their companions fared.¹¹¹

Ferocious competition was a matter of being respected by other shearers as well as money. Ken Prato explained his own attitude to being last on the tally sheet, inevitably the predicament of all learners early in their careers.

Being in front of other shearers by even three or four a day seems to make the job feel so much easier than being behind by the same number. 'On the chain' – last – is pure hard work. The same tally in the same sheep feels infinitely more comfortable from a position further up the ranks.¹¹²

Prato had reached 130 a day, but was still 'on the chain', when another shearer called Frank of about the same level signed on. Ken decided that he had to finish in front. He

¹⁰⁹ Prato to writer, 20/4/2008.

¹¹⁰ By the late nineteenth century most shearers were married men 'who became itinerant workers as a means of supporting their families, not escaping them'. Richard Waterhouse, 'Australian Legends: Representations of the Bush, 1813-1913', *Australian Historical Studies*, October 2000, Vol. 31, Issue 115, p. 208. Oral histories and shearers' memoirs reveal the appeal of escape from domesticity.

¹¹¹ NLA MS 9139, Roy Ryan Papers.

¹¹² Ken Prato, *Sheepshit on the Brain: The trials & Tribulations of a Would-be Gun Shearer*, self published, Ballarat, 2004, p. 4.

worked to the limit of his capacity but guile was also required. Saving two of the better shearing sheep until last enabled him to jump one in front of Frank and the psychological ploy worked. Prato said that he liked to ‘pretend to have the ability to go round the other bloke any time he liked with an occasional short sprint’.¹¹³ Shearers would employ such tricks to cope with the tedious repetition of the work, but it was also about honour. The first ‘hundred’ (in a day) and for those good enough, the first ‘two hundred’ were lifetime milestones. As shearers got older they got slower, and learning to live with decline was difficult.

Whatever the relevance of the Braverman theory to other occupations and industries, it was difficult to apply in shearing sheds. Provided they could be persuaded to shear clean as well as fast (not always easy) shearers did not have to be cajoled or bullied by the overseer. Everyone else strived to keep up with them. ‘Wool away!’ they yelled at the rouseabout, ‘sheep-o!’ at the penner-up. If the overseer barked these orders it was only to get in first - it did not pay to upset the shearers’ rush to maximise tallies. The grazier was under constant pressure to keep a regular flow of sheep up to the shearers. Delays due to tardiness in filling the pens or breakdowns in machinery resulted in shearers rebuking the boss. There were sometimes legal suits for compensation after extended delays. Remarkably, this applied equally to militant unionists and cocky shearers. It was part of a shearer’s cultural DNA. More often than not the grazier aimed to slow shearers down rather than speed them up, because chasing big tallies compromised the quality of shearing. These nuances are brilliantly captured in Henry Lawson’s poem, ‘The Boss’s Boots’.

The 'rouser' has no soul to save. Condemn the rouseabout!
And sling 'em in, and rip 'em through, and get the bell-sheep out;
And skim it by the tips at times, or take it with the roots,
But 'pink 'em' nice and pretty when you see the Boss's boots.¹¹⁴

The parallel between woolsheds and industrial factories has already been drawn, but they differed from most manufacturing plants in one crucial respect. Shearers themselves determined the pace of work, not the machines. Dennis McIntosh described working in a beer can factory: ‘On a production line the machine is boss. I

¹¹³ Prato, *Sheepshit*, pp. 6-7.

¹¹⁴ Colin Roderick (ed), *Henry Lawson Poems*, John Ferguson, Sydney, 1979, p. 133. Lawson is describing a shearer going flat out, but not being very particular about clean shearing. Later in the poem the cheeky rouseabout tricks him by wearing the boss’s boots. Unaware that it is only the lowly rouseabout the shearer slows down and shears neatly.

spent my day with something that didn't wait for me.¹¹⁵ Woolsheds were not like that. The overseer was required to be a diplomat. More often he wanted to slow shearers down to ensure a neat job. Unlike the manufacturing process manager he could not set the belt speed a little faster to lift productivity.

Representations of Shearers

Shearing as a spectacle had a mesmerising appeal to casual observers. Travellers were often taken to woolsheds and shearing has been widely represented as a model of energy, social harmony and good humour. Accounts of shearing in the union newspaper also often had this flavour.¹¹⁶ At the same time, astute observers could detect attitudes of surly intolerance.¹¹⁷ Both the combative bushworker and the hard-working pioneer have a place in the ways shearers have been depicted in literature, journalism and art.

In the 1890s the *Bulletin* valorised shearers as feisty unionists who provided, as Richard Waterhouse describes it, a 'catechism for a nation' They were portrayed by nationalist writers as 'underdog heroes', a theme which was also common in popular theatre. By 1900 there had been a shift and they were more often written about as 'pathetic and downtrodden' and this was undoubtedly what many actually felt.¹¹⁸ Mateship coalesced around feelings of despondency, and sometimes angry frustration. Julian Stuart, a militant unionist of the 1890s, writing in the 1920s, thought shearing was a 'dead end'. Circumstances did not remain hopeless for long, but the sentiment remained and can be found consistently in later years.¹¹⁹ The inter-war militant 'Trucker' Brown was influenced by his harsh Cobar background.¹²⁰ Dennis McIntosh headed out to the sheds in 1971 as a nineteen year old looking for a pathway out of rural poverty, but the old-timers he met quickly disabused him of his naivety. (On the

¹¹⁵ McIntosh, *Beaten by a Blow*, p. 248.

¹¹⁶ See, E.S. Sorensen, 'At Wombah Station', *The Worker*, 3/1/1903, p 6; 'A Day in a Woolshed', *The Worker*, 10/1/1903, p. 7.

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 7 for a particularly good example.

¹¹⁸ Waterhouse, 'Australian Legends', pp. 217, 218.

¹¹⁹ Waterhouse, 'Shearers and the Birth of Mateship', p. 122. Julian Stuart is quoted on p. 123. The original is Julian Stuart, *Part of the Glory: Reminiscences of the Shearers' Strike Queensland 1891*, Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1967, p. 122. The whole segment, pp. 120-2, demonstrates Stuart's all round attitudes.

¹²⁰ See Chapter 7.

other hand they competed against each other tenaciously for their positions in the pecking order.)¹²¹ Rural depression in Victoria in the 1990s gave rise to the Shearers' and Rural Workers Union dedicated to banishing money-making New Zealanders.¹²² Many shearers thrived throughout the twentieth century, as this study shows, but others found it a social cul-de-sac, and this fuelled attitudes ranging from the mildly disgruntled to fiercely militant.

Charles Bean's portrayal of shearing published in 1910 bears passable resemblance to Adam-Smith's impressions in 1982, quoted above. He does not mention the strikes, although his companion work *Dreadnoughts of the Darling* recalls battles between 'free labourers' and unionists in a breezy style.¹²³ At one stage Bean characterises the woolshed as 'the republic' whereas the station or the homestead is 'the autocracy'. The station hands mustering the sheep are under orders from the squatter, but in the woolshed democracy rules. The shearers never decide anything without having a 'meeting', an observation that would resonate with many graziers in later decades. He criticises the 'Labour leaders' – he means the AWU - for their dogmatism which tends to undermine 'the genius of the Australian character'. He hints darkly of 'the great independent undercurrents that flow underneath the surface' without quite saying what they might be. The overall tone of his writing is 'pioneer', but it is constantly interspersed with 'bushworker' threads.¹²⁴ Bean's subsequent wartime journalism, and later again his official war history, linked Anzacs to the bush. Despite his innate conservatism he too had a nose for Australian egalitarianism. Indeed, Ward cites *On the Wool Track* liberally as evidence in *The Australian Legend*.¹²⁵

Shearing inspired one of the better known Tom Roberts paintings, 'Shearing the Rams', completed in 1890. The popular 1975 movie *Sunday Too Far Away* was also set entirely within the shearers' domain – the woolshed, the shearers' quarters, the shearers' pub and shearers hurtling along dusty back-country tracks in an FJ Holden. Both are artistic creations with licence to interpret, and emphasise different traits. Robert's worked for two painstaking years entailing frequent visits to Brocklesby

¹²¹ McIntosh, *Beaten by a Blow*, pp. 43, 54, 163, 170.

¹²² Williams, *Ramming the Shears*.

¹²³ C.E.W. Bean, *The 'Dreadnought' of the Darling*, Alston Rivers, London, 1911, pp. 335-42.

¹²⁴ Bean, *On the Wool Track*, pp. 79, 81-110.

¹²⁵ Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 31, 191, 197, 230-231.

Station, near Corowa.¹²⁶ The painting embodies co-operative harmony and a Protestant work ethic. The shearers are young and sturdy and keen, not at all embittered by years on the tramp or corrupted by gambling and drink. There is no hint of the notoriously prickly relationships between shearers and pastoralists, yet, at the time woolsheds were on the cusp of violent turmoil of near ‘civil war’ ferocity. The painting places shearers firmly within the pioneer myth. *Sunday Too Far Away* focuses on gritty social tensions associated with the 1956 strike, and association with Ward’s nomads is readily drawn. The shearers are hard workers and compete as shearers do, but they are unionists and relationships with the squatter are tense. They are hard drinkers. The great wool industry is a cesspit of distrust.¹²⁷

These examples suggest that depictions of shearing culture are somewhat variable, and often reflect the social agendas of those observing and writing. The reality was correspondingly complex. They hated the squatters and worked co-operatively with them. They resented ‘speeding up’ but bust their guts to beat the other man. They were egalitarian but considered themselves a cut above station hands and rouseabouts. They were nomads bonded by mateship but also dedicated family providers. They were solid unionists but resented the AWU’s dictatorial posturing. They were male chauvinists but female shearers became accepted in the sheds. They were nostalgic for the past but looked forward to better days.

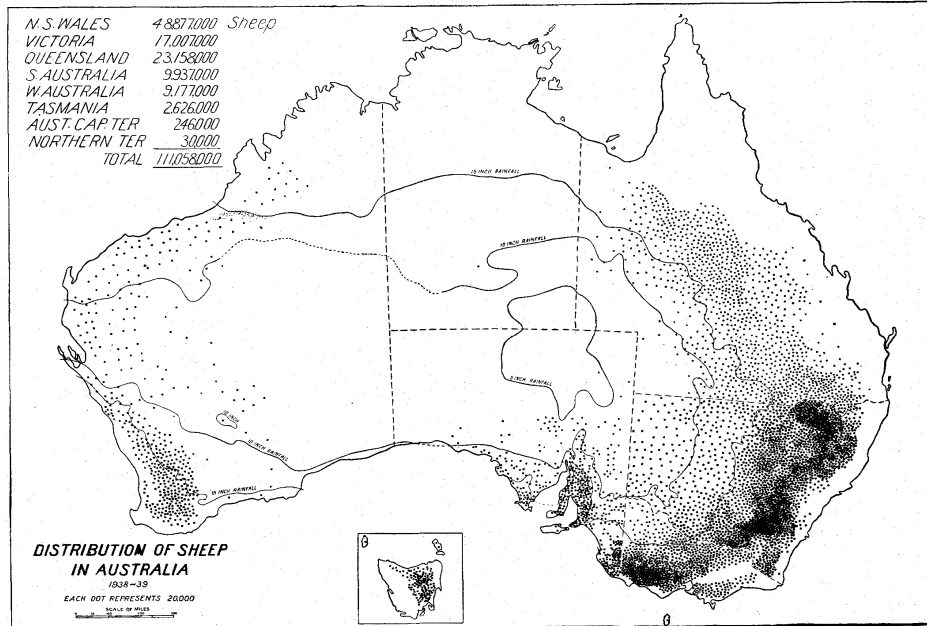
¹²⁶ Brocklesby in the Corowa pastoral district was owned by Alexander and Charles Anderson & James King. It was not one of the giant stations of the era, with a flock at the low end of the range for smaller stations (although certainly larger than a mere ‘selector’ flock). In 1893 it carried 14,170 sheep. In 1905, when the pastoral industry was beginning to rebuild after the disastrous drought, it carried only 7,926, plus 32 head of cattle.

¹²⁷ John Dingwall, *Sunday Too Far Away!*, (movie screenplay), Australian Theatre Workshop, 1978.

Chapter 2: Land Settlement, and the Size and Location of Flocks: 1900 to 1980

Map 2-1

II. DISTRIBUTION OF SHEEP IN AUSTRALIA, 1938-39.



Reproduced from Commonwealth Year Book.

Source is Commonwealth of Australia, *Statistical Handbook of the Sheep and Wool Industry: Prepared under instruction from the Minister of Commerce and Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics & Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture, Canberra, 1949, p3*

Graziers and Farmers

Sheep covered most of the eastern third of the continent and, in more scattered fashion, the western eighth. Map 2-1 represents the situation on the eve of World War II, but the occupation was complete by 1890, Western Australia excepted.¹ Both east and west had a 'pastoral' area of extensive grazing, and an 'agricultural' region where sheep were more concentrated and kept mostly on cropping farms. This was the realm of shearers, the territory in which they moved around - where they haggled with the woolgrower, shore their best tallies, endured dust storms, got stranded by floods, gambled at poker, and complained about the cook. Pastoral and agricultural zones

¹ Western Australia is covered in Chapter 9.

differed in organisation and culture, remembering always that shearers were mobile and moved seamlessly between regions.

Within regions sheep populations fluctuated, but overall numbers more or less doubled from about 90 million early in the century to a peak of 180 million in 1970.² For the most part land was not taken from other uses – indeed the opposite happened as grazing land was subdivided, primarily to grow wheat. The qualification is that some land inside the settlement area was not previously cleared for grazing or agriculture. Brigalow in Queensland and mallee in Victoria were cleared for occupation. Parts of Western Australia and the Macquarie Marshes were in this category.³ Vast regions of western-NSW and Queensland which had been egregiously overstocked, and virtually abandoned to rabbits or prickly pear, were resettled. Land policies encouraged tenures for family settlers, although with mixed results. Patterns of farming and grazing generally became more intensive, and social structures evolved accordingly. Dry-land farming techniques adopted in the agricultural zone combined sheep with cropping.⁴ Sheep numbers progressed least in the drier specialist pastoral country where wheat growing was not considered viable. They multiplied fastest, albeit in fits and starts, in the blackened patches on the map. The shift from pastoralism to agriculture is well documented.⁵

The family farm was the social goal of ‘closer settlement’ legislation throughout

² Sheep numbers peaked at 106 million in 1892, and fell by half to 54 million in 1903. They recovered steadily, passing 90 million in 1910. There were further setbacks due to drought and they did not again reach 100 million until 1926 and this growth period ended at 125 million in 1942. Since the peak in 1970 the population has fallen consistently and in 2005 dipped below 100 million for the first time since the 1944-1945 drought. Sources for statistics: Wray Vamplew (ed), *Australians: Historical Statistics*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Broadway NSW, 1987, p. 81; N.G. Butlin, ‘Distribution of the Sheep Population: Preliminary Statistical Picture’, in Alan Barnard (ed), *The Simple Fleece: Studies in the Australian Wool Industry*, Melbourne University Press in association with The Australian National University, Melbourne, 1962, pp. 281-387; updates from Australian Bureau of Statistics.

³ *The Land*, 17/1/1930, p 1; David Cameron, ‘Closer Settlement in Queensland: The Rise and Decline of the Agrarian Dream, 1860s-1960s’, in Graeme Davison & Marc Brodie (eds.), *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, Monash University ePress, Clayton Vic, 2005, p. 06.15. Ross Fitzgerald, *A History of Queensland From 1915 to the 1980s*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia Qld, 1984, pp. 411-4.

⁴ Bruce R. Davidson, *European Farming in Australia: An Economic History of Australian Farming*, Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1981, pp. 274-82; Wadham et al, *Land Utilisation*, pp. 109-14.

⁵ Butlin, ‘Distribution of the Sheep Population’, pp. 281-387; Wadham et al, *Land Utilisation*, Chapter V, ‘Land Utilisation in the Wool Industry’.

Australia between 1895 and 1914.⁶ In the 1920s this folded into ‘soldier settlement’. Soldier settlement has commonly been judged a total social disaster. It is an overly harsh assessment, although the whole history of rural settlement is characterised by a tendency to push production beyond the capacity of land and climate.⁷ Soldier settlement was supplemented by ambitious programs to attract suitable British immigrants. Nevertheless, while land development schemes sometimes left small farmers swinging in the breeze without working capital on blocks that were too small, agriculture progressed. Livestock numbers in western-NSW never recovered from the Federation drought, and persistent droughts in Queensland in the 1920s limited expansion. Agricultural areas recorded long term gains. Wheat, however, shaped local politics and social custom in these areas. By contrast, wool remained the dominant source of income on pastoral stations.⁸ Moreover, the absence for the most part of compulsory resumption in land policy, meant that large holdings continued to exist, even in areas suited to agriculture.⁹ Pastoral companies and wealthy grazing families persisted, and indeed thrived. On the other hand, land legislation had some success breaking up estates in Queensland and western-NSW. Social engineers wanted to break up vast grazing estates into suitably sized single family blocks on which a ‘gazing farmer’ (sometimes called the ‘grazing selector’) could achieve modest prosperity. By European norms these were vast leases – perhaps up to 100,000 acres each. However, at stocking rates of five acres or more to the sheep – flocks of up to 10,000 sheep were not excessive. The small grazier was a variant of the closer settlement ideal creating specialist woolgrowers with small flocks.

Social distinctions within the evolving settlement pattern had a peculiarly Australian flavour – settlers were either ‘graziers’ or ‘farmers’, stereotypes loosely based on class.¹⁰ They were signposted by wool and wheat. Graziers of the pastoral zone were ‘pure merinos’ who were wealthy and snobbish, although this was muddied by socially unrefined and fiscally fragile grazing selectors. Prosperous graziers were

⁶ Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia*, Curtin University Books, Fremantle WA, 2005, pp. 30-1.

⁷ Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, Ch.4, ‘Soldier Settlement’, pp118-142; Richard Waterhouse, ‘Agrarian Ideals and Pastoral Realities: The Use and Misuse of Land in Rural Australia’, Ch. 4 of Martin Crotty & David Andrew Roberts (eds.), *The Great Mistakes of Australian History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006, pp. 71-3, 77-8.

⁸ Income from cattle was significant in some regions.

⁹ Large acreages were allocated to wheat on some grazing properties.

¹⁰ Colin Clark, *Australian Hopes and Fears*, Hollis & Carter, London, 1958, p. 73.

comfortable in the city and their weddings graced the society pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *The Age*. Often they lived in Sydney or Melbourne, and anyway limited their involvement in local rural affairs.¹¹ Farmers were down to earth, spoke with an Australian twang, hated Sydney and were more likely to watch district football. Land had been a marker of social distinction since the early colonial period, but ‘squatters’ and ‘selectors’ gave it sharper focus in the 1860s.

Post-Federation closer settlement created new issues to divide the wool grazier and wheat farmer, although they also developed interests in common. Production possibilities roughly corresponded to rainfall configurations but advancing technology continually redefined what they actually were. Inherited wealth and privilege, the core of grazier-farmer division, was undeniably a factor. Land was basically a fixed resource after 1890, but not impossible for new entrants to purchase. Vast acres were held on Crown leases, the terms of which could and did vary. Resumption of large holdings for closer settlement entailed ticklish issues of compensation. In NSW legislation drew back from compulsion despite enthusiasm for it from some quarters. On the other hand, many pastoralists voluntarily subdivided portions of their estates, because they judged it a sensible commercial option. Australian land settlement had its rigidities, but social and geographical mobility was a more powerful force. Banks were forced in the 1920s to focus on the needs of country towns such as Dubbo, Orange and Tamworth. Previously, they had been driven primarily by the capital needs of pastoralists. This was vital in the 1930s when wheat prices hit the floor and storekeepers were shackled by their unpaid accounts. Banks often carried both.¹² Farm size and the mix of enterprises were dictated by a range of economic and social influences. Like many stereotypes there was some basis to the grazier-farmer social barrier, but it was also an oversimplification. Land use since 1900 constantly changed, and in the early twenty-first century patterns are still in flux.

Increasing sheep concentration meant smaller flocks, smaller woolsheds and smaller shearing gangs. More frequent changes of location did not require moving as far from home to find sufficient shearing. The social climate of smaller sheds was also

¹¹ In 1920 the Prince of Wales stayed three days at Wingadee in the Coonamble district. Joan McKenzie, *Wingadee: A Great Australian Station*, Clyde Agriculture Ltd, Sydney, 2003, pp. 36-9.

¹² Geoffrey Blainey, *Gold and Paper: A History of the National Bank of Australasia Limited*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1958, pp. 308, 328.

different. Temperamentally, shearers identified with farmers more easily than graziers, although this was not straightforward either. Farmers could be even more fiercely anti-Labor than graziers, and successful shearers sometimes looked down on struggling selectors. Donald Macdonell, General Secretary of the AWU, got a laugh all round, including from the graziers present, when he cracked a joke about dairy farming in the Arbitration Court in 1907.¹³

Wool legends gripped imaginations more than mundane accounts of ‘cocky’ sheds, where most of the sheep actually were, or the wheat harvest.¹⁴ By the 1930s legendary giant woolsheds along the Darling were often unused or stripped of their corrugated iron, but hung on in memory as icons of bush unionism and wool folklore.¹⁵ Strikes in Queensland in 1891 and 1894 left a huge mythological footprint. The ‘tree of knowledge’ at Barcaldine, where striking shearers reputedly camped is held to be the ‘birthplace’ of the Australian Labor Party. The tree was poisoned in 2006 by an unknown vandal (presumably not a Labor supporter) and plans are afoot to spend \$5 million to erect a memorial on the spot.¹⁶ Equally, stories of mateship and droving, of surviving fire and flood, and also the social grandeur of the grazier lifestyle, survived closer settlement. Purely grazing districts held a mortgage on the cultural imagination although by the 1920s they carried only a quarter of the sheep. The poems of ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Henry Lawson were widely known. On the whole, everyday reality in ‘cocky shearing’ districts was not quite the same as in Longreach or Bourke. Reality and legend were not always on the same track.

Accommodating Land Hunger

The great success of wool did not quell the belief that land could be put to better use. Land tenure polarised rural Australia for most of the nineteenth century. Sheep stocking rates quoted in acres to the sheep rather than sheep to the acre did not gel with European notions of agricultural improvement, although wool from Australia had become an important raw material for industrial Britain. Sensitivities regarding

¹³ *The Worker*, 20/6/1907, p. 22.

¹⁴ For the stark difference in the social climate of small sheds and those on large stations, Walter Kilroy Harris, *Outback in Australia*, Garden City Press, 1913, pp. 152-3.

¹⁵ Michelle Grattan, *Back on the Wool Track*, Vintage, Milsons Point (NSW), 2004, p. 68.

¹⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 19/3/2008, p. 10; 22/3/2008, p. 3; 8/5/2008, p. 24.

land access were heightened by the mid-century gold rushes when prospecting waned as a sensible quest for the population bubble of independent fortune-hunters. Some went on to New Zealand where gold discoveries livened up austere pioneering settlements in Otago and the West Coast, for a while at least. Most were of a mind to put down roots in Australia where they had ended up. Industrialisation was making Britons mobile but Australia was even less hidebound by custom and tradition, less deferential to privilege. Democracy was adopted with remarkably little resistance.¹⁷ For a 'new' society it was sophisticated in its commercial and financial organisation – thanks largely to wool. For all that there was not much 'industry' for mass employment. Moreover, migrants saw themselves escaping industrial squalor. A self-supporting, wheat-farming yeomanry was enormously alluring and there seemed to be plenty of land – albeit the centre of the continent was desert and the tropical north considered unsuitable for white people. The perceived problem was that the best of it was 'locked up' by a handful of wool barons. In the minds of land reformers the main virtue of the 'squatters' was not pioneering fortitude, but their luck in getting in first.

This shaped 'squatter versus selector' politics between 1860 and 1890. 'Selectors' – another Australianism – were the intended beneficiaries of 'selection acts' passed in the 1860s.¹⁸ The failure to create an agriculture which satisfied these sensitivities is well enough known. Land Acts in the mid-1880s refashioned the rules, and although problems remained, key elements of what became the rural structure of the twentieth century took root. A viable form of agriculture, as opposed to grazing, made remarkable strides in the first decade of the 1900s, fortuitously graced by a run of favourable seasons – in stark contrast to the drought which went before.¹⁹ There was more to it than luck. Amidst the social maelstrom of the 1890s, the political organisation of selectors tends to be neglected. The Farmers and Settlers Association of NSW was formed at Cootamundra in 1893, instilling cohesion into the lobby for closer settlement. Farming in South Australia and Victoria was already well established, but in NSW the squatters' plight was the selectors' opportunity.

¹⁷ J.B. Hirst, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy: New South Wales 1848-1884*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988.

¹⁸ C.J. King, *An Outline of Closer Settlement in New South Wales: Part I, The Sequence of the Land Laws 1788-1956*, Reprinted from *Review of Marketing and Economics*, September-December 1957, Division of Marketing and Economics, Department of Agriculture, NSW, pp. 76-88.

¹⁹ ABL E256/1653, C.J. King, 'The Early Years of the Department of Agriculture in New South Wales, 1890-1965', p. 18.

Parliamentarians felt compelled to act and legislation regulating land tenure was a dominant preoccupation as Federation transformed Colonial into State Governments. Land policy remained a State responsibility.

Closer settlement legislation was not the only factor. Agricultural science and public investment in railways facilitated farming ambitions. There was also a favourable turn in world wheat prices around the turn of the century.²⁰ These factors were, arguably, more profound. Railways were certainly crucial. During the closer settlement era railway construction filled gaps in the network with branch lines where wheat farms were being established. It is a moot point whether wheat followed the railways or railways followed wheat. Because they were public investments using (usually borrowed) government money, intensive enquires preceded each extension. Wheat growing prospects were vital to these decisions. Between 1902 and 1925 the veins of the NSW railway network reached towns in the central-west and the Riverina.²¹ Edgars Dunsdorfs designated the period from 1896 to 1930 ‘the period of rapid expansion’ for wheat.²² Growth was particularly spectacular in NSW. Movement into the drier areas was certainly risky, but more successful than might have been imagined when they were purely extensive grazing regions. The NSW Department of Agriculture was established in 1890. Early in the twentieth century a network of government farms was established. William Farrer’s famed wheat breeding activities, originally begun as a private obsession, were extremely significant. The decade of grace with the weather came to an abrupt halt in 1914 and 1915 when drought again struck. By then the world was at war, and with it great trauma and further social transformation. Nonetheless, farming had graduated from being an irritation to sheep stations, to a force of some substance.

Drought had a habit of catching administrators by surprise. By the late-1920s major grain and fibre markets suffered from oversupply and prices sagged. In the 1930s, in the demand vortex of the Great Depression, they collapsed. Through all of this,

²⁰ Lionel Frost, ‘Across the Great Divide: The Economy of the Inland Corridor’, in Alan Mayne (ed), *Beyond the Black Stump*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town SA, 2008, pp. 64-5; David Wood, ‘Limits Reaffirmed: New Wheat Frontiers in Australia, 1916-1939’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1997, pp. 462-4, 465, 471-3; Waterhouse, *Vision Splendid*, p. 202.

²¹ King, *Outline of Closer Settlement*, p. 109.

²² Edgar Dunsdorfs, *The Australian Wheat-growing Industry 1788-1948*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1956, p. 187.

including the disastrous days between 1929 and 1934, the underlying presumption that wool was fundamental to Australian prosperity was never seriously challenged.²³ The perception was that graziers provided the money on which capital expansion depended. To a degree the yeoman ideal did eventuate, but the outcome was more complex and punctuated with setbacks. There was recovery of sorts by the late-1930s, but it was not until after World War II that product prices improved decisively. By then official attitudes to land and agriculture had been turned upside down – hillbilly selectors were giving way to agri-business entrepreneurs. The adage of upper limits on the acreage a settler could occupy under closer settlement gave way to the opposite notion. ‘Get big or get out’ became the secret of farming success. This was the lesson of the 1920s struggle with debt, poor prices, and recurring droughts. Furthermore, it was the old staple of wool which came to the rescue rather than wheat. Wheat growing became more deeply dependent on production quotas to support prices.²⁴

Settlers themselves needed no convincing on the need for larger holdings. Farmers had always expanded as they succeeded, recognising that long term security was not guaranteed by the upper limits imposed on their initial investments. They always saw settlement blocks as the minimum for survival, whereas official policy regarded them as the maximum. A 1971 government report claimed that the median size of farm had been increasing since 1938.²⁵ Local and family histories suggest that most successful settlers were finding ways to increase their holdings from the time they first occupied them. At the same time large grazing estates tended to shrink in size as blocks were carved off for closer settlement. But they did not disappear.

Shearers and the Land

The rambunctious egalitarianism of the gold rush population rubbed off on bushworkers.²⁶ Wages were relatively high when there was work, but it was an insecure basis for domestication. Drovers, bullock drivers – and of course shearers –

²³ *Daily Telegraph*, 29/1/1935, p. 6; 30/1/1935, p. 6.

²⁴ Tom Connors, *The Australian Wheat Industry: Its Economics and Politics*, Gill Publications, Armidale NSW, 1972, p. 1.

²⁵ Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *Rural Industry in Australia*, Australian Government publishing Service, Canberra, 1971, p. 10.

²⁶ Joseph Furphy, *Such is Life, being certain extracts from the diary of Tom Collins*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1944.

might have been unreliable gamblers and social misfits in some cases, but they were opportunistic rather than servile in their attitudes. Lack of domestication and larrikinism often disguised it, but many were ambitious to improve their lot.²⁷ Shearers came from the jumble of selector families sprinkled around NSW and Victoria as a result of the selection acts.²⁸ Their skills were in high demand seasonally but getting to a higher level of independent land ownership was impeded. They were well positioned to observe land use with its mixture of squatters and selectors. Rural populism coloured their outlook, complete with distrust of the banks.²⁹ Unionism in the 1890s was given some of its militant edge by frustrated land hunger.

A speech given by the union leader W.G. Spence to a large audience in Bourke in April 1893, in the midst of the shearing trouble, had the topic 'Land for the People' - also an identifying slogan for the Farmers and Settlers Association.³⁰ Spence's words would not have been out of place at a farmers' rally, despite the socialist undertone.

There is a need for change. Australia is becoming a land of syndicates and monopolists. We have often heard of the term 'wool-kings' as applied to the squatters, but I ask, how many of them are not in the hands of the Banks? To remedy this drift I support the idea of village communal settlements, to be aided by the State. We have here on the banks of the River Darling a very great advantage. If the State assists us to get on the land, we have plenty of water at hand for irrigation purposes, and if we go into this on a co-operative basis it will be better for all concerned.³¹

Rural Labor hoped small farmers would become part of its natural constituency, although by the 1920s the opportunity had closed. Farmer and grazier organisations circled their wagons around the Country Party built on anti-Labor foundations. As far back as the 1880s shearing unionists such as John Toomey of the Young Branch of the ASU, had exploited selectors' anti-squatter attitudes in the cause of bush unionism.³² Some stalwarts of the Farmers and Settlers movement were Labor men - notably John Treflé, later a minister in Labor Governments. Anti-squatter feelings were not enough, however. Three issues sealed Labor's fate - leasehold tenure, land tax, and unionisation of farm labour. This came to a head in 1910 when Labor Governments took office with genuine majorities for the first time in the

²⁷ Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 186-93.

²⁸ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 45-50.

²⁹ Ray Markey, *Social Democracy and the Agrarian Issue 1870-1914*, Department of Economics, Working Paper Series WP 97-3, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, 1997.

³⁰ Ulrich Ellis, *The Country Party: A Political and Social History of the Party in New South Wales*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1958, p. 15.

³¹ Attributed to *The Western Herald*, 11/4/1893, as quoted in 'Squattocracy and Struggle', ABC National Radio Transcript, 2/3/2008, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/hindsight/>.

³² Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 106.

Commonwealth and NSW. Federal Labor introduced a land tax designed to break up large estates but farmers feared it was aimed at them. The NSW Government moved to repeal legislation entitling leaseholders to freehold their farms (the ‘Conversion Act’). It led to a crisis in which two rural Labor members resigned in protest – the policy was reversed but the political damage was enduring. In 1912 the Rural Workers Union attempted to establish an award for farm workers in NSW. This was the last straw. In truth, the farmers had already chosen an anti-Labor path. Treflé’s radical land resolutions were unceremoniously spurned at the 1905 Farmers and Settlers Conference. Indeed, this persuaded him to enter parliament on the Labor side in 1906 although he remained active in farmer politics.

Land policy was a perennial interest of the AWU. In the 1920s an organiser in Queensland was confronted with questions about the fate of Stony Creek and Gordon Downs, properties listed for resumption. ‘What is to be done with the Gordon Downs country? Is the land hungry intending selector going to get a chance for some of it, or is the station going to get it back after a time?’³³ *The Worker* periodically whetted the appetites of its agrarian base by publishing pioneering stories, supplementing its usual diet of class warfare, Labor politics, woolshed disputes, and squatter bastardry. This was designed to sing the praises of the Queensland Labor Government, but plainly recognised the pioneer streak in its rank-and-file. Sometimes selectors had started out as shearers, but always upward mobility and the benefits of thrift and hard work were emphasised, given some help from the Government. The paper said less about pioneer attitudes to the AWU, as once bushworkers owned sheep their tolerance of shearers faded.³⁴ Queensland Labor’s agrarian credentials helped it to govern almost uninterrupted from 1915 to 1957, although graziers small as well as large gravitated to the United Graziers Association of Queensland (UGA) and the Country Party.³⁵

As the twentieth century advanced there was a blurring of the distinctions between the grazier, the farmer and the bushworker. Rank-and-file shearers did not necessarily think of themselves as implacable enemies of the grazier class. Many were shearing

³³ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 18/9/1924, p. 11. The Pastoral Directory 1923 records Stony Creek at Springsure, 146 cattle and 8,400 sheep. Gordon Downs in the Capella, 1,958 cattle and 41,593 sheep.

³⁴ *The Worker*, 20/4/1916, p. 16.

³⁵ Ross Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland From 1915*, pp. 14, 93, 217.

because it was a way of accumulating the deposit for the purchase of their own farm or grazing selection.

Pioneering Narratives

Glimpses of land settlement narratives appear in the transcripts of evidence given to public enquiries, land records, and in local and family histories. Pioneering attitudes highlight progress from humble beginnings, without electricity and tractors, to modest prosperity and community respectability. This is fused with contradictory images of population decline and nostalgia for simpler days. Farmers, wealthy grazing families, and grazing selectors made arrangements for getting the sheep shorn in a variety of ways, and this reflected their social attitudes. Anecdotes are risky sources of social generalisation, but human interaction is not easily understood from statistics of land settlement.

(a) Farmers

Arthur Cosh settled in northern-NSW in the 1920s.³⁶ He was born in Willunga, South Australia – wheat country - in 1891. His grandfather had been a gold seeker turned to farming, clearing and developing 11,000 acres of Mallee scrub. Cosh's father continued the farming tradition, but as Arthur and his three brothers approached school-leaving age land was too pricey and they looked further afield. There was talk of a move to Western Australia, but Cosh senior spotted a notice that Bannockburn station at Inverell was being subdivided. They bought 3,000 acres which they called 'The Wattles' plus 600 acres for Arthur's uncle. By 1908 they had cleared and sown 700 acres for wheat and 300 acres for maize, and sown lucerne for grazing. They went to a sheep sale at Wigewa station near Denman and spent more than £4,000 – a substantial outlay – on 3,000 sheep, some for the brother's 600 acres. It was quite an exercise to get them back to Inverell. Drovers were hired and they spent five weeks on the road. Clearly the family had access to cash, but it was imperative that the risks paid off.

³⁶ Material on Cosh comes from Arthur Ernest Phillipps Cosh, *David Jumping Kangaroos : the life of an Australian pioneer settler's son*, Devill Publicity, 1978.

The bigger picture was that the railway extension from Moree to Inverell had been completed in 1902. Under Closer Settlement Acts several large properties were listed for subdivision – Bannockburn, Myall Creek, Arrawatta, Byron and Auburn Vale. In 1906 when settlers began to arrive little of this country had previously been cultivated. New selectors with small holdings were under financial pressure to make quick returns. Many bought cows and established a co-operative butter factory. However, they gradually changed to agriculture. The butter factory closed and was eventually superseded by a flour mill. After World War I there were further subdivisions for soldier settlement, Inverell and Newstead North stations being cut up for this purpose.³⁷

By the 1920s Arthur Cosh was running The Wattles in his own right. Between 1915 and 1920 the family had explored further options to take up land.³⁸ They bought their first tractor in 1920, although kept the 8-horse team. Cosh remembers a mice plague in 1914. He notes the contamination caused by prickly pear and pays tribute to the scientists who eventually devised a solution. He recalls that for farmers the Depression really set in during the 1920s along with drought, but he was well enough established to survive it. He became a pillar of the local Farmers and Settlers Association branch, and remembered with particular pride his role in lobbying to have grain silos built in the 1930s. Cosh never states his political allegiance but it is safe to assume that he was solid Country Party. With some satisfaction he recalled ‘standing up to Evatt’ while giving evidence in defence of an AWU application for a Rural Workers’ Award.³⁹ The Farmers and Settlers position was to oppose any award ‘until the farmers got a fixed price for their products’.

The 700 sheep on Cosh’s grandfather’s selection in South Australia were usually shorn by the family. Arthur Cosh had learnt to shear with blades by the time he was 12, and he also wrestled with the old style wool press. He did not turn to shearing to make some money, although many like him did. Having learnt with blades the best he could manage with machines was 50 a day. In later years when he had his own

³⁷ Newstead was originally owned by the Anderson family, friends of Tom Roberts, painter of ‘Shearing the Rams’. Newstead woolshed was one of his works.

³⁸ For Victoria at roughly this time, Monica Keneley, ‘Closer Settlement in the Western District of Victoria: A case Study in Australian Land Use Policy, 1898-1914’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2002, pp. 363-79.

³⁹ Evatt became widely known as the Labor Party leader of the 1950s.

woolshed he marvelled that the best of the shearers could do 170. The Wattles was the first farm in the district to install machines in a 5-stand shed, and neighbours brought their sheep to be shorn. This was a common arrangement between the wars. The Wattles itself stocked less than 1,000 sheep but there were usually 13,000 shorn there, making it a significant shed for a contractor or a shearer (2,600 per man as the shearers looked at it). Arthur Cosh was certainly no friend of the Labor Party or the AWU, but his relationships with shearers were largely amicable. There is no reason to believe that he did not get on reasonably well with local AWU organisers. Politically he supported wheat pooling, and it is likely that he favoured wool market intervention. Conspicuously he was a ‘farmer’ or a ‘selector’ – albeit a successful one - rather than a grazier. He would not have agreed with Graziers Association policy on wool marketing, but there is no obvious evidence that he harboured a serious animus against ‘squatters’ or big land owners.

A Royal Commission in 1917 heard evidence of similar shearing arrangements in the Narrabri region. Tarriaro station was a medium-sized grazing operation owned by the Buchanans whose overall holdings were substantial. The woolshed was handily located 10 miles from a rail head. Buchanan let the shed to a neighbouring selector called McGregor who only had 700 sheep himself, but did shearing for others at 7½ pence per sheep. Ralph Terrbutt, a small owner with 1,000 sheep had his shearing done there. Buchanan did the same with the shed at Killarney station. Killarney ran from 6,000 sheep to 12,000 depending on drought conditions. The station had been cut up and had a larger shed than was now needed. It was rented out to Mr. Warren, a contractor, who organised shearing for 40,000 sheep from the surrounding district. In this way closer settlement did not necessarily always lead to smaller shearing sheds, although when selectors prospered they increasingly built their own. Killarney management had nothing to do with shearing at the shed, although it had priority over others when its own sheep were ready.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Royal Commission of Inquiry on Rural, Pastoral, Agricultural, and Dairying Interests (with Particular Reference to Share Farming), 1917, Commission’s Report on All Matters other than Dairying Interests, NSW PP, 1917-18, pp 157 ff, Minutes of Evidence, pp 580-1; Pastoral Directory, 1913.

(b) Graziers

Sir Norman Kater was born into wealth and opportunity in 1875. His grandfather Henry Kater arrived in Australia in 1839, a young man from a Bristol mercantile family which had prospered in the sugar trade. It was a sign of the wool trade's mid-nineteenth century standing that the Empire's merchant class sent their sons to Australia to establish new fortunes. Henry's well equipped and funded enterprise was badly timed. He paid top money for an estate near Parramatta just in time to be wiped out by the 1841 wool slump. He shifted to Caleula near Bathurst where he established a flour mill, and later ran a cloth factory at Orange. It is not known whether his indulgent father coughed up more precious capital, but it is likely he borrowed to get started again in what were undoubtedly uncertain ventures. The exact nature of the 'cloth factory' is difficult to imagine. According to the family history circumstances gradually improved, and the Katers grafted their way to economic security.⁴¹

Great wealth had not materialised by the 1870s. It was, in fact, Henry's sons – the father and uncle of Norman - who rode the wool boom of the 1870s and 80s, getting started in 1863 on 16,000 acres and 4,000 sheep on difficult country on the Castlereagh River. Like Arthur Cosh's grandfather Norman Kater's father was shaped by the gold rush period, but in a different way. The struggling flour mill could not finance sheep stations, and he began his working life as a bank clerk in Mudgee. There he gained an understanding of pastoralism. By the 1880s the brothers had a sizable holding in the Warren area.⁴² Despite their wealthy Bristol origins, it was still possible to see this history in Australia as a pioneer narrative of hard work and upward mobility. In 1893 Mumblebone station ran 41,450 sheep and 500 cattle.⁴³

The Katers survived the 1890s relatively intact. The region north of Coonamble had not been subject to the same speculative madness which gripped the west Darling in the 1880s. The 1884 Land Act had brought in a few selectors but it was considered borderline country for wheat, and the Katers had not been forced to freehold their

⁴¹ David S. Macmillan, *The Kater Family 1750-1965*, privately published, Sydney, 1966, pp. 23-33

⁴² Macmillan, *Kater Family*, p. 36-42, 47-9.

⁴³ Of 80 stations listed in the Canonbar pastoral district the Kater property was the 13th largest. Of 10 stations with more than 50,000 sheep, two had more than 100,000. *The Australasian Federal Pastoral Directory*, 1893.

leases. The Coonamble railway was not opened until 1903, and this helped keep selectors away.⁴⁴ In 1905 Mumblebone was carrying only 16,800 sheep, an indication of how severe the drought had been. Tellingly, though, they had added Egelabra, a small station of about 10,000 acres.⁴⁵ It ran only 4,613 sheep but was turned into a prize merino breeding stud. Probably the Katers acquired it at a ‘good price’.

The Katers were certainly not ‘selectors’, being stout opponents of the Robertson Land Acts. As time went on their opposition to closer settlement softened, but never disappeared. Perhaps governed by the collective family memory of the 1841 collapse, Norman’s father developed clear headed principles for station management taking into account the need to survive droughts while remaining faithful to the mercantile tradition of growth and improvement. He developed a strong interest in Darwin’s theory of evolution. This led to stud merino breeding. He selected sheep which not only had fine wool and a body type strong enough to carry a heavy fleece, but could survive in tough conditions. Kater senior had a saying: ‘A fleece, however good, is of poor value if picked up on the plains from a heap of bones.’⁴⁶

Young Norman spent the 1890s studying medicine at the University of Sydney, and looked set for a career as a surgeon when the untimely death of his older brother in 1902 drew him back to the pastoral enterprises.⁴⁷ He lived an essentially rural, if privileged life on a property at Molong until the war intervened. But from 1920 he resided in Sydney, often spending weekends at a property near Berrima, which the family had long owned. The extensive pastoral holdings in northern-NSW were run in this way.⁴⁸ By 1923 the Eenawena stud at Nevertire had been added. The overall stockholding was over 35,000 sheep, and in 1931 it exceeded 50,000. The Katers had been well enough established and sufficiently astute investors to survive many droughts and depressions. Of course, they prospered hugely in the 1950s.

In 1915 shearing on the Kater estates was done by contract although about half the sheds in the Warren district still retained ‘station’ arrangements. Mumblebone was

⁴⁴ McKenzie, *Wingadee*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ Pastoral Directory 1905.

⁴⁶ Macmillan, *Kater Family*, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Macmillan, *Kater Family*, pp. 62-7, 79.

⁴⁸ Macmillan, *Kater Family*, p. 74.

scheduled to start on 23 July, requiring 16 shearers for 16,000 sheep. Eenaweena nearby – also 16,000 but only 10 shearers – was listed for 2 August. Small by nineteenth century standards, they were very typical of grazier sheds in the twentieth century. It would not have been feasible for Norman Kater, much as he disliked the Labor Party and trade unions, to even contemplate shearing ‘non-union’ as pastoralists in the Warren district had in the 1890s. This was the antithesis of ‘cocky shearing’, such as the Cosh’s of New England practiced. Almost certainly the same contractor was engaged for all his sheds and the dates would have been set for his convenience. It was a tight schedule. Averaging 100 a day shearers might have made the second shed on time, just - but not if there were delays. However, the contractor could easily delay Eenaweena with the station manager’s co-operation. From a shearers’ point of view Mumblebone, was only 1,000 per man but the two sheds together averaged 2,600, a good professional proposition. Six shearers would miss out on the second shed, relying on the contractor to place them elsewhere. Warren was an early shearing district with some early-July sheds.⁴⁹

Kater was a founding director of the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company in 1919, and thereafter Mumblebone, Egelabra and Eenaweena were amongst its loyal sheds.⁵⁰ He served continuously on the board until his death in 1965, and was closely involved on the graziers’ side of every strike, of their complex dealings with the AWU and their focussed antagonism to the interwar communist shearing union.⁵¹ To most shearers Kater would have been a remote figure, and to some a hated one. Despite his association with the Shearing Company, it is unlikely that he was directly involved with shearing arrangements on his properties. As a squatter’s son he was probably capable of shearing an occasional sheep, but unlikely that he ever had much reason to pick up a handpiece.

The New Zealand and Australian Land Company consolidated after the drought and then expanded. In 1893 the company had owned four major stations controlling 720,000 sheep - Wellshot was then its only Queensland holding, and by far its largest

⁴⁹ These details are gleaned from the ‘Shearing Fixtures’ lists published in issues of *The Worker*.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 6, for the origins of the Company.

⁵¹ ABL Z278, Shearing Company Minutes 17/11/1964; 24/8/1965.

(360,000 sheep). By 1905 it had extended its holdings by adding five more stations, although most of its original holdings had endured massive losses, and its overall sheep flock was only marginally higher (800,000 sheep). Wellshot now carried only 176,000 sheep.⁵² The company had invested to compensate for the loss of some of its leases for a marginal increase in its overall wool production, although its cattle herds had more than doubled to about 100,000. No doubt acquisitions reflected depression property values. Between 1905 and 1913 – all round good seasons for woolgrowers – the company engaged in an expansion spree. In 1913 it controlled 14 stations in NSW and 10 in Queensland, with a combined flock of 1.3 million sheep and comfortably in excess of 100,000 cattle. Drought did not reappear until 1914 and 1915, and shearer militancy made an unwelcome re-appearance in 1916.⁵³ To make matters worse a State Labor Government swept to power in 1915. Nevertheless, guaranteed wool prices during the war ensured a strong income flow into the 1920s. In 1923 the New Zealand and Australian Land Company's 1913 empire was largely intact, although closer settlement eroded its overall carrying capacity to just over 1 million sheep and about 100,000 cattle. Wellshot, subject to further resumptions in 1917, now ran 146,000 sheep. It was still a substantial flock, but only 40 per cent of its 1893 size. In 1904 the shearing agreement specified 60-80,000 sheep at Coombe Martin, shorn by machines for the first time.⁵⁴ It was resumed for closer settlement in 1916, and the absence of later listings in the directories suggests that it disappeared as a separate entity. Shearing in the Land Company sheds was contract after about 1904.⁵⁵

Graziers and Closer Settlement

Despite the advance of agriculture and the dogged rural pragmatism of New England farmers like Arthur Cosh, class warfare in shearing sheds did not die on pastoral estates. However, there is a danger of exaggerating this. In 1891, the newly formed Pastoralists' Union of NSW had only 618 members covering 24 million sheep (about

⁵² The station was listed as shearing 230,000 in 1911 in *The Worker*, and the 1913 Pastoral Directory listing gave it 186,000. These were both reasonably good production seasons, implying that Wellshot lost had lost a large proportion of its acreage to grazing selection.

⁵³ See Chapter 6.

⁵⁴ This was the cause of a dispute, discussed in Chapter 4.

⁵⁵ For the experience of the AMLFC pastoral company in the 1920s see J.D. Bailey, *A Hundred Years of Pastoral Banking: A History of the Australian Mercantile Land & Finance Company*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1966, pp. 216-33.

40% of all sheep in the then colony). After 1900 the expanding population of wheat growers (who were also sheep owners) mostly joined the Farmers and Settlers Association, and became the dominant constituency of the Country Party in the 1920s. However, the population of specialist graziers also grew, with the corollary that flock sizes also shrank. The politics of graziers associations in all States reflected this. Table 2-1 summarises the total number of sheep controlled by members of the Graziers Association of NSW. The renaming of the Pastoralists' Union as the Graziers Association in 1916 was, indeed, one of the signs of social change.⁵⁶ Members' sheep roughly doubled during each 14 year stretch, 1900 to 1914, and 1914 to 1928, while membership of the Association quadrupled during each stage. In other words flock sizes fell by two-thirds, and then by another half. By the mid-1920s the Graziers Association now spoke for almost two-thirds of the sheep in NSW, while the average flock size had shrunk below 4,000 sheep. Pastoralists rebuilt their flocks after the drought and some bought additional stations, but in the longer term graziers were doing much the same as the farmers.⁵⁷ Through pasture improvement and changes in sheep husbandry they were running more sheep to the acre (fewer acres for each sheep). The difference between a 'grazier' and a 'farmer' narrowed, despite differences in political outlook and social standing between members of the Graziers Association and the Farmers and Settlers Association.⁵⁸

A table prepared by the Graziers Association in 1928 showed that 86% of its members held flocks of less than 5,000, but these only accounted for 50% of their sheep. There were a lot of graziers with flocks that were modest compared with the old days. The counterpart - that only 14% of members carried 50% of the sheep - is also noteworthy. Half the wool came from wealthy grazer families and pastoral company properties. The Association's leadership continued to be dominated by patrician types - men such as Sir Norman Kater, Sir Graham Waddell and O.E. Friend. They were resolutely conservative and highly suspicious of meddling governments especially if they were Labor. Increasingly, however, the Association had to be responsive to the

⁵⁶ SMH, 6/7/1916, p. 10.

⁵⁷ B.D. Graham, 'Graziers in Politics, 1917-1929', in Alan Barnard (ed.), *The Simple Fleece*, p. 595.

⁵⁸ Tom Connors, *To Speak With One Voice: The Quest by Australian Farmers for Federal Unity*, National Farmers Federation, Barton ACT, 1996, pp. 132-44.

small and medium graziers. District committees were established and Annual Conferences determined policy.⁵⁹

Table 2-1: Changing Flock Sizes and Membership of Graziers Association of NSW

	Members	Flock Size	Sheep Numbers		
			Graziers Association	Total NSW	Graziers Association Proportion
	(number)	(average)	(million)	(million)	(per cent)
1891	618	38,843	24.0	60.0	40%
1900	275	24,984	6.9	36.2	19%
1914	1,901	8,321	15.8	43.6	36%
1928	8,247	3,777	31.1	50.5	62%

Source: Adapted from table in Graham, 'Graziers in Politics', p. 595.

The Kidman Phenomenon

The rabbit invasion of the Darling River stations led to a drastic reduction in sheep numbers by 1902. After a Royal Commission, the Western Lands Board sought to establish grazing selectors. The Queensland State Government grappled with comparable climatic and ecological constraints in its huge pastoral zone.⁶⁰ The aim was subdivision of large estates into blocks big enough for a family to survive, but not become squatters. In western-NSW conditions were so dire that the problem of dispossessing squatters hardly arose – many were happy to get out.⁶¹ In Queensland the pastoral companies were in better shape and it remained a sanctuary of large stations well into the twentieth century.⁶²

⁵⁹ ABL E256/1647, 'Recollections of Mr. J.W. Allen, Former Secretary of the Pastoralists' Union of NSW and the Graziers' Association of NSW', circa 1950, p 12; Graham, 'Graziers in Politics', p. 596.

⁶⁰ Ross Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland From 1915*, p. 195.

⁶¹ Bailey, *Hundred Years of Pastoral Banking*, pp. 177-8.

⁶² H.M. Boot, 'Debts, Drought and Foreclosure: Wool producers in Queensland and New South Wales 1870-1905', *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2, Sept. 1988, pp.33-52.

The extraordinary career of Sidney Kidman (1857-1935) had a major influence.⁶³ Kidman was not, at heart, a pastoralist but a canny trader, although he eventually became the largest landowner in Australia, and arguably the world.⁶⁴ His activities in the Western Division were a relatively minor part of a huge cattle trading empire based on a 'chain of supply' concept which exploited flood plains to hold stock in good condition while vast areas withered through lack of rain.⁶⁵ Kidman's genius was that he combined an understanding of the ecological effects of drought with market arbitrage – the value of having livestock in the right place in the right condition at the right time. He developed his stock trading skills and his knowledge of pastoral country knocking around western-NSW in the 1870s and 1880s. A typical enterprise was a butchering business in Cobar with a population of copper miners, where the value of cattle bought from western squatters was readily multiplied.⁶⁶ Kidman's time as a wanderer in the west coincided with the great flock expansion along the Darling. He did not have the capital to become a squatter himself, but even as he began to accumulate wealth he continued to concentrate on arbitrage rather than station acquisition. Only after the turn of the century, when stations were cheap because of the Federation drought, did he engage in a 'non-stop buying spree'.⁶⁷ Even then he did not become a squatter in the accepted sense. He moved flocks and herds around selectively to exploit highly variable grazing conditions. Kidman's ownership of stock was fluid and he always maintained that he did not know himself how many he had apart from those being moved from place to place by drovers. He favoured cattle rather than sheep – they were less labour intensive, and the markets were more predictable. Also they did not cut up natural pasture as much as sheep did, allowing it to recover from drought and overgrazing. Nonetheless, there were about 250,000 Kidman sheep to shear in the Western Division during the 1920s, and some in south-western Queensland. This was the nucleus of a run for a Broken Hill shearing contractor.⁶⁸

⁶³ Jill Bowen, *Kidman: The Forgotten King: The true story of the greatest pastoral landholder in modern history*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde NSW, 1987. This is a carefully researched account of Kidman's life and pastoral career. The better known biography is less reliable. Ion Idriess, *The Cattle King: The Story of Sir Sidney Kidman*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1936. See Bowen's introduction, p. x.

⁶⁴ The double page map published before p. 1 of Bowen's book shows scale of Kidman's interests.

⁶⁵ Bowen, *Kidman*, pp. 72-87.

⁶⁶ Bowen, *Kidman*, pp. 31-8.

⁶⁷ Bowen, *Kidman*, pp. 104, 118, 125-140.

⁶⁸ Bowen, *Kidman*, pp. 371, 427-8, 429. See Chapter 5 for the shearing career of Charlie Flavel.

Kidman was a controversial figure. While he was enormously wealthy he had the personal style of a bushman who was most comfortable yarning to his drovers and station managers. He mingled with city slickers in Melbourne and Adelaide, but seemed less at home. On the other hand there was debate about whether he was mean, or just thrifty. Kidman's attitude to surviving harsh conditions was that nothing should be wasted. He bought stations 'cheap' and invariably stripped the buildings of iron and anything else that had value. Only skeleton staffs of station hands were retained, accelerating depopulation of the Western Division, the opposite of what land reformers envisaged. It was a common view that he destroyed rural communities, but any formula for closer settlement was likely to exceed the landscape's capacity to withstand human exploitation.⁶⁹

Under the Western Lands Act small blocks were made available for selectors – 'small' meaning runs of up to 100,000 acres able to carry perhaps 10,000 sheep.⁷⁰ Droughts impacted heavily again in 1914 and 1915, in the early 1920s and in 1927. The combination of Kidman's attitude to stocking sheep and the travails of the grazing selectors meant that the sheep population never recovered from its disastrous collapse in the 1890s. Bourke had been a thriving Darling River wool port and was also the terminus of the railway from Sydney. Some shearers had lived there, at the mining town of Cobar, and at Broken Hill. While Broken Hill continued to grow the overall region fell into decline. Shearers and miners drifted away, but the region retained a nucleus of shearers who tended to be more downtrodden and militant than those further east.⁷¹

The Land newspaper complained in 1924 that there was 'eager' demand from settlers which could not be met.⁷² However, there was a more sober analysis in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the midst of the Depression crisis in 1930. The articles provided a comprehensive summary of the history since 1902. Gritty courage of the settlers could not hide a message that was brutal and frank. Run holders big and small had been

⁶⁹ Bowen, *Kidman*, pp. 417-39.

⁷⁰ Carrying capacities were 10 to 20 acres per sheep. The bare minimum sized flock for a viable enterprise was regarded as about 5,000 sheep.

⁷¹ See Chapter 7 for 'Trucker' Brown, who came from Cobar.

⁷² *The Land*, 28/11/1924, p. 23.

seriously affected by the combination of drought and poor wool prices since 1927, and some had been ‘forced to leave their homes penniless’. The Western Lands Commission had foolishly caved into the pressure from settlers and the early confidence which built before World War I was ‘crudely shattered’. Was it cheaper to let sheep die or to go to the expense of keeping them alive?⁷³ Kidman usually had another station in his continent-wide network to which he could transport them before their condition deteriorated, but droughts generated a cruel dilemma for small run holders.

Kidman died in 1935. The grazing empire was divided amongst descendants, but a large chunk continued intact under the guidance of his son-in-law Sid Reid.⁷⁴ After World War II many of the Kidman properties were split up for soldier settlement. Yancannia station, for example, was divided into 17 lots of about 100,000 acres each, capable of carrying about 5,000 sheep plus the progeny. Laurie Walsh, a Broken Hill shearing contractor in the 1950s explained that this ‘worked out pretty right’, but only because the Western Lands Act was not rigidly administered. With blocks of this size selectors were inclined to overstock and abuse the country. With a run of dry years carrying capacity could fall as low as 1,000 sheep. However, in Walsh’s observation the act came to be administered ‘more flexibly’ enabling leaseholders to control bigger areas. Somehow ex-Kidman managers seemed to get preference when blocks were balloted. Walsh expressed the view that the Kidman pattern of land occupation would eventually re-assert itself in some form. It was possible for a leaseholder with four or five sons to gradually accumulate a holding of up to a million acres.⁷⁵

The World of Shearers

The world of shearers (Map 2-1) may usefully be viewed in regional sub-groups based on flock sizes.⁷⁶ As small flocks were frequently combined for shearing, flock

⁷³ SMH, 2/7/1930, p12; 3/7/1930, p. 19; 4/7/1930, p. 12; 5/7/1930, p. 14; 7/7/1930, p. 10.

⁷⁴ Bowen, *Kidman*, p. 412-5.

⁷⁵ SLV MS 557-558, Patsy Adam-Smith interview with Laurie Walsh, 1980.

⁷⁶ Available statistics are canvassed in Butlin, ‘Distribution of the Sheep Population’, pp. 296-9. Butlin’s estimates (pp. 300-7) detailed regional shifts between 1860 and 1957, but do not address flock sizes. Estimates in Tables 2-2 to 2-4 are derived from data published regularly in official Year Books of NSW, Queensland and Victoria, anchored to the Butlin figures. For manageable discussion, they were amalgamated into broader regions, corresponding as closely as possible to Butlin’s zones.

Flock Size	<u>1900</u>	<u>1912</u>	<u>1929</u>	<u>1950</u>
Below 500	248	637	721	788
500 to 1,000	430	988	1,537	2,209
1 to 2,000	978	2,141	3,125	4,223
2 to 5,000	1,325	3,513	5,830	6,667
5 to 10,000	1,426	2,245	3,574	2,975
10 to 20,000	1,431	1,986	2,625	1,594
20 to 50,000	2,248	2,023	1,555	876
Over 50,000	1,895	974	607	64
Total	9,983	14,505	19,572	19,396

size statistics are a limited but useful guide to changing woolshed patterns. Tables for Victoria and the Riverina are not presented, but both regions exhibited rough similarities to northern and central-NSW (Table 2-2).⁷⁷

The overall number of sheep in the sheep-wheat country surrounding Moree, Coonamble and Dubbo expanded at least until the 1930s, after which it flattened out. Numbers roughly doubled from about 10 million early in the century to nearly 20 million at the time of the 1950s wool boom. Wheat was harder to grow in the more western parts. Moree was already established as selector country in the 1880s but Coonamble, with less reliable rain, was not settled by selectors until early maturing wheat varieties became available. Still, in 1900 there were almost three million sheep in flocks of less than 5,000.⁷⁸ Grey shaded rows represent flock sizes for which sheep numbers were rising. Rows bordered in heavy black identify declining sheep numbers. It is clear at once that smaller properties were gaining a larger share of the total sheep in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1900 (admittedly drought affected) there had been slightly more than two million sheep in flocks of 1-5,000 sheep. By 1912 there were over 5½ million, almost nine million by 1929, and 11

⁷⁷ The accumulation corresponds as closely as possible to NSW statistical districts III and IV ('Middle and North Central Divisions'), Butlin, 'Distribution of the Sheep Population', Figure 1, p. 282.

⁷⁸ NSWPP, 1913, Vol. 3, Pt. 2, Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, Report on Proposed Railway, Warren to Quambone, Minutes of Evidence, p. 1050.

million by 1950. By contrast, over four million sheep on properties with more than 20,000 sheep in 1900 had withered to less than one million by 1950.⁷⁹ Medium sized flocks (5 to 20,000 sheep) initially showed some growth – roughly three million sheep in 1900, more than six million by 1929 – but this is deceptive because as larger stations lost acreage in the 1920s some slipped into this category. This ceased to matter by the 1930s. Between 1929 and 1950 this category shrank by 25 per cent from 6.2 million to 4.6. In 1900 55 percent of the wool came from big sheds (more than 10,000 sheep), and by 1929 it was only 11 percent.

For shearers it represented dramatic change. Before World War I most of them made their money in big sheds accompanied by up to 30 shearers. Graziers were socially and culturally aloof and easy to hate. By 1950 most of them worked in sheds where the owners were from social backgrounds much like their own. Maybe six or eight shearers were present, in some cases as few as three or four. The actual mechanics of shearing and woolshed practice changed little, but the social climate in small sheds was more intimate. Nevertheless, there were enough larger sheds in the interwar period for industrial conflict. Both Midkin and Wingadee were in this region.⁸⁰

Victoria was on the whole comprehensively closely settled well before 1914 although the Western District carried a distinctive pastoral pattern and ‘old money’ character into the interwar period.⁸¹ Irrigation along the Murrumbidgee gave the Riverina a closely settled look, but large stations maintained a presence. There was always a marked difference in settlement patterns north of the Murray River and the unambiguously farming districts of northern-Victoria on its southern banks. The Riverina retained its reputations for merino stud stations, as the famous statue of a ram near Deniliquin bears witness. Towards the north, as the country on the Hay Plains and along the Lachlan River merges with the arid Darling River regions of western-NSW, extensive grazing was never superseded.

⁷⁹ This figure was certainly diminished by the drought – in the ‘normal’ years before 1895 these stations carried 5 to 7 million sheep.

⁸⁰ For Midkin and Wingadee see Chapters 7, 8.

⁸¹ Monica Keneley’s articles on land settlement in the Western District - ‘Closer Settlement in the Western District of Victoria’; ‘Land of Hope: Soldier Settlement in the Western District of Victoria 1918-1930’, *The Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History*, www.jcu.edu.au/aff/history/articles/keneley2.htm, 2000; ‘The Impact of Agricultural Intensification on the Pastoral Economy of the Western District of Victoria, 1890-1930’, *Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History*, 1999.

Flock Size	<u>1900</u>	<u>1912</u>	<u>1929</u>	<u>1950</u>
Below 500	52	26	25	18
500 to 1,000	121	59	104	57
1 to 2,000	241	237	414	353
2 to 5,000	426	597	1,002	2,890
5 to 10,000	684	817	783	1,639
10 to 20,000	1,068	1,204	1,004	883
20 to 50,000	2,359	2,683	1,364	779
Over 50,000	1,362	1,287	625	178
Total	6,375	6,910	5,361	6,799

The Western Division – Kidman country – was a hub of pastoralist expansion in the 1880s, but by 1900 it was devastated (see Table 2-3).⁸² In 1893 the region carried 19 million sheep, and was the home of some of the biggest flocks in Australia. It never rose above seven million in the next fifty years. Grazing selector properties (2 to 10,000 sheep) grew erratically, hosting about a million sheep in 1900 and almost five million by 1950.⁸³ Opportunities for shearers who lived in Broken Hill or Bourke stagnated as the emphasis shifted towards these smaller properties. The 4½ million sheep in large flocks in 1900 was a quarter of what it had been before the drought, and after World War I shrank even further. These were the stations Charles Bean mentioned in *On the Wool Track*. In the early 1890s Samuel McCaughey's Dunlop and Toorale stations accounted for half a million sheep and an acreage comparable to Belgium. Dunlop was the first station to attempt a complete shearing with Wolseley's patented machines. Henry Lawson briefly worked as a rouseabout at Toorale in 1892. Although he hated every minute of it he was still writing poetry about it a decade later, and helped create what Russel Ward identified as the 'Australian Legend'. While the Darling River continued to shape the national mythology of shearing, by

⁸² NSW Statistical districts V and VI ('East of Darling' and 'West of Darling'), Butlin, 'Distribution of the Sheep Population', p. 282.

⁸³ Useful statistics are also presented in J. Rutherford, et al, *New Viewpoints in Economic Geography: Case Studies from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, North America*, Martindale Press, Sydney, 1966, Chapter 9, 'Woolgrowing in the Western Division of NSW', p. 175.

Table 2-4: CHANGES IN RURAL SOCIETY
Sheep to be Shorn, by Flock Size
(thousand sheep)

Queensland

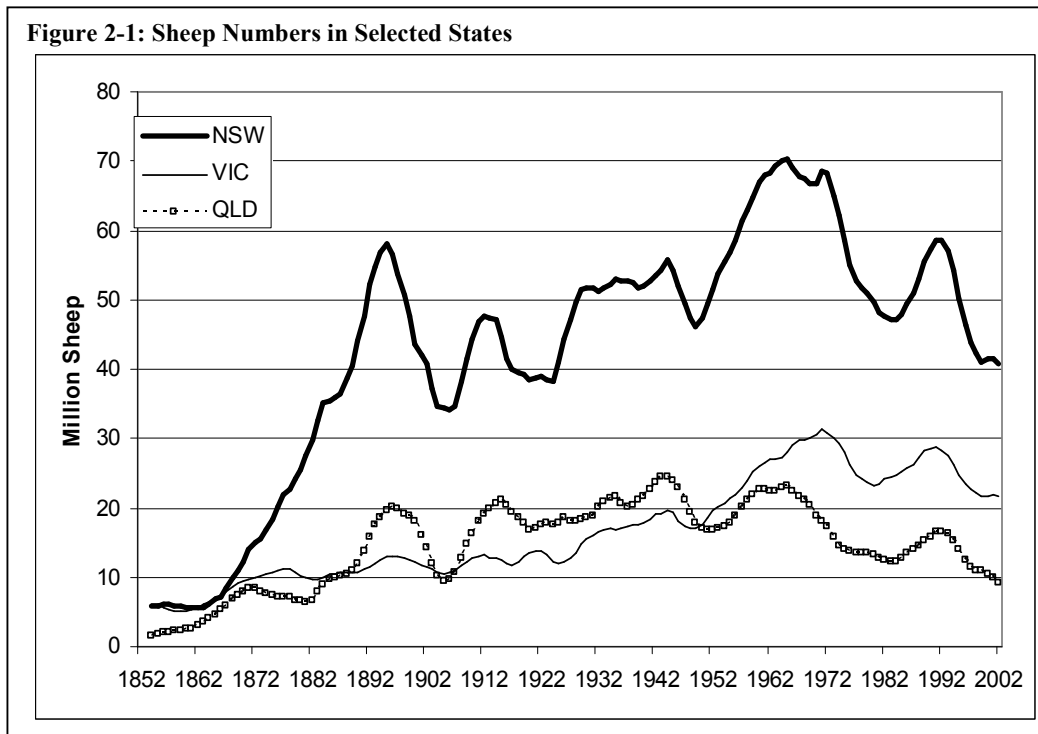
Flock Size	<u>1905</u>	<u>1914</u>	<u>1924</u>	<u>1934</u>
Below 500	111*	187	186	195
500 to 1,000	220*	295	262	392
1 to 2,000	1,246	601	685	1,056
2 to 5,000		1,922	2,435	4,714
5 to 10,000	2,903	2,551	3,385	5,343
10 to 20,000		3,893	3,146	4,182
20 to 50,000		5,881	4,996	3,742
50 to 100,000	8,054	4,606	2,944	1,883
Over 100,000		3,194	990	121
Total	12,535	23,129	19,028	21,574

1950 few shearers had much incentive to go out there. A scattering of grazing selectors and Kidman holdings stripped of assets were almost the only ones left.

Queensland has similarities, but is less bleak (see Table 2-4).⁸⁴ Sheep numbers fell heavily in the 1890s but recovered quite quickly to 12.5 million by 1905. By 1914 they passed 23.1 million, exceeding the pre-drought peak. Thereafter, the wool industry struggled and there was little further growth until the 1950s. Land policies encouraged a shift to smaller flocks, but unlike closer settlement in NSW, this did not result in an increase in the overall population of sheep. The country was more like that around Broken Hill and Bourke than Moree and Armidale. Wool production was vital to the Queensland economy and there was persistent angst over the lack of growth.⁸⁵ Problems in the Western Division of NSW could be viewed as a social issue, because there was plenty of wheat and wool grown elsewhere. In Queensland the difficulties of smaller woolgrowers impeded the overall economy.

⁸⁴ There would have been some point in separating the western Mitchell, Maranoa and Warrego districts on Butlin's map from the more closely settled Darling Downs. As 80 percent of Queensland sheep were in pastoral regions the State is represented as a whole to avoid clouding the discussion.

⁸⁵ Ross Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland From 1915*, pp. 195-8.



In 1914 small flocks (less than 10,000) accounted for slightly more than five million sheep. This was 11½ million by the mid-1930s, indicating a huge shift in emphasis towards small flocks, as there was little overall growth. Big stations (more than 20,000) dropped from 13½ million to under six million over the same period. Unlike western-NSW large stations had not disappeared, but they ceased to dominate. There was only one flock left with more than 100,000 sheep. With 20 million sheep Queensland remained an attractive hunting ground for shearers. Its appeal was underlined by the spread of shearing throughout the year. Queensland proved popular with fast shearers and shearing contractors for this reason, but this also meant local shearers had to compete against ‘southerners’ for the most lucrative stands, and there was unemployment in pastoral towns.

Another way of examining patterns is to compare Victoria with Queensland (see Figure 2-1).⁸⁶ Victoria’s usually reliable rain had already made it a wheat farming region with small flocks by the 1880s, although pastoralists still dominated the Western District. Queensland’s sheep population was roughly the same, but spread over the western plains on large stations and grazing selections. Victoria’s sheep

⁸⁶ Figure 2-1 is a redrafting of Butlin’s, Fig. 2, p. 283. Data has been smoothed into 5-year moving averages to focus on longer term movements, and is not drawn to a logarithmic scale.

numbers expanded steadily with minor fluctuations, while in Queensland they stagnated in the inter-war period and declined from the 1940s.⁸⁷ After World War II there was more shearing in farming districts of Victoria than Queensland, where shearing legends had been created.

NSW is also shown in Figure 2-1 for comparative purposes, but it is more usefully split into its grazing and farming components and compared with Queensland (see Figure 2-2).⁸⁸ The role of Queensland as a magnet for shearers from northern NSW underlines this grouping of districts. The Darling River region (also with autumn shearing) stagnated and lost its appeal. Within NSW the focus of opportunity shifted decisively from the romantic far-west to the wheat-sheep regions and to Queensland, although the latter was affected by droughts in 1914 and 1915, in the 1920s, and again in the 1940s. Still, there were almost always more sheep to shear in Queensland than either of the two major regions of northern NSW. Moreover, after 1920 the wages in Queensland were better.⁸⁹

Many of the great old sheds fell into disrepair, although some gradually acquired heritage value. Some continued to be used, although usually the number of stands was cut back.⁹⁰ Medium sized sheds were built when they needed replacement. A new woolshed was a big investment for heavily mortgaged selectors and in the 1920s many growers postponed it. In the more affluent 1950s many built woolsheds for the first time.⁹¹ The hiring of woolsheds to neighbours or contractors was common between the wars.⁹² Another development was ‘depot shearing’. A suitable building in a country town was set up with yards and shearing machinery, and farmers brought sheep from the surrounding district. Shearing depots were often combined with wool scouring. The use of portable ‘2-stand shearing plants’ was another common practice. These were mounted on a truck or a trailer for mobility, and were particularly suitable

⁸⁷ A burst of growth during the 1950s was less marked than in either NSW or Victoria.

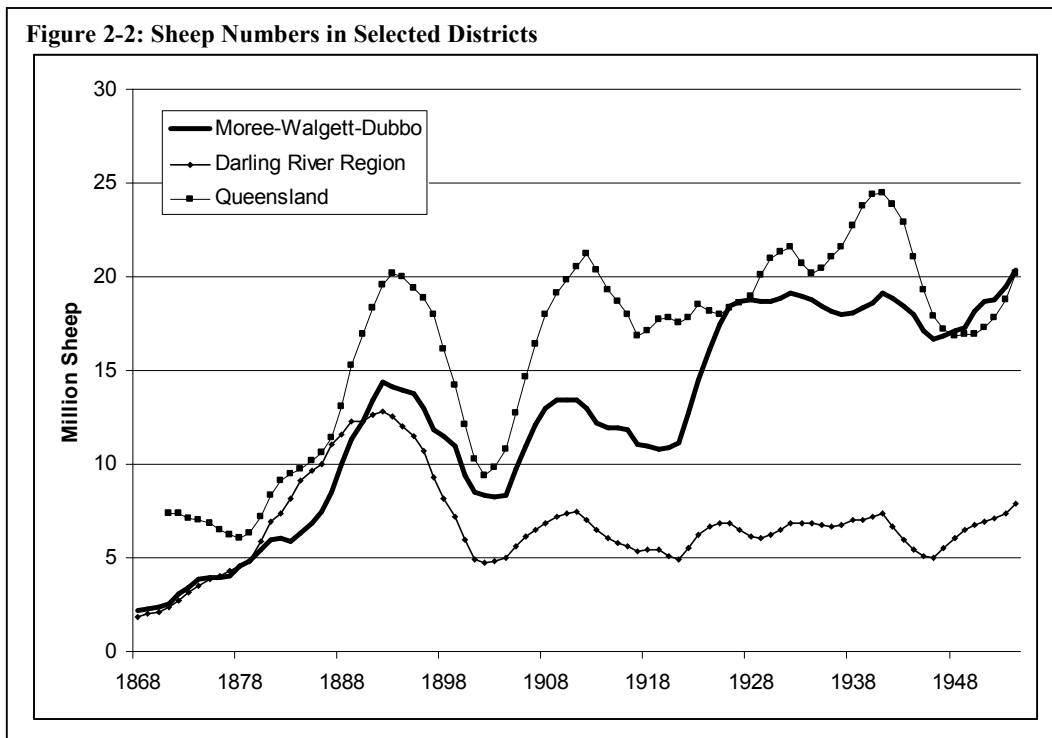
⁸⁸ 5-year moving averages of Butlin figures. The corresponding data is graphed by Butlin in Fig. 3, 6 on pp. 286, 292.

⁸⁹ See Chapter 6.

⁹⁰ The 51-stand woolshed at Tupra station, near Hay, was built in the late-nineteenth century and was still being used in 2003. However, only 8-stands were in operation. Witnessed by writer. See also, McKenzie, *Wingadee*, pp. 42, 49, 54.

⁹¹ Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘Concessions, Conflicts and Collusion’, p. 290.

⁹² See Chapter 4.



for handling flocks of 1,000 sheep or less, but their use was not confined to this.⁹³ During severe droughts, there was a chance sheep could be saved if the shearing plant was set up in the paddock.⁹⁴

Bicycles and horses gave way to motor cycles (briefly) and then cars (although this was more gradual). Trains had taken shearers out to Bourke since 1882, but as the rail network thickened it improved as a means of reaching shearing sheds. In the interwar period rural garages ran taxis which could be loaded up with shearers' gear, to take them to the shed from the nearest railway town for a shilling a mile.⁹⁵ Sometimes shearers were taken to sheds on the tray of a truck, although only in Western Australia was this widespread.⁹⁶ In the pastoral age shearers were engaged by letter, or almost as often by turning up at the roll call and taking their chances. Life on the road was complicated by unscheduled delays due to weather or breakdowns, and predicting exactly when a shed would cut out was impossible. Early in the century the telegraph was of more immediate use to employers and the union than individual shearers, but

⁹³ I.C. Heazlewood, *Old Sheep for New Pastures: A Story of British Sheep in the Hands of Colonial Shepherds*, Australian Society of Breeders of British Sheep, Tasmanian Branch, Launceston Tas., 1992, pp. 25-6.

⁹⁴ ABL Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 9/7/1929.

⁹⁵ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, p. 80.

⁹⁶ See Chapter 9.

gradually improving telephone services helped to improve the flexibility of arrangements. These factors changed the ways shearers met and reacted with each other, and also with graziers and employers. The emergence of shearing contractors as the dominant method of engagement was intertwined with these social and technological elements, and is taken up in detail in Section II .

Shearers mainly lived in the areas where farm development was concentrating the sheep population – in Victoria, the central-west of NSW and New England, but mainly because farming supported an expanding rural population on selector blocks and rural towns. Shearing was a logical occupation for young rural men, but for most it was not year-round employment and they often lived where the other opportunities were. If they were farmers or engaged mainly in agricultural work, naturally they lived in farming areas. If the alternative employment was mining, or road and railway construction this dictated the choice. There is strong evidence that about a quarter of all shearers before World War II lived in either Sydney or Melbourne, where there was seasonal employment in abattoirs, flour mills and on the waterfront.⁹⁷ The proportion living in the metropolis gradually declined. During the pastoral age, when there were many more sheep inhabiting the Darling, shearers made their homes in Bourke or Wilcannia and some lived in mining centres such as Cobar or Broken Hill. Even so many shearers came out from selector districts further east.⁹⁸ The decline of the big stations (and many of the mines) led to population drifting away but the proportions of local to incoming shearers may not have changed.

⁹⁷ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1927.

⁹⁸ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 38.

Chapter 3. Riding the Sheep's Back: Wool in Prosperity and Depression

Burden of Dominance

It was often said that Australia rode on the sheep's back. The cartoon in Figure 3-1 was originally published in the *Pastoral Review* in 1892. It was prescient because over the next decade shearing strikes, rabbits, bank crashes, low wool prices and finally drought closed out the 'long boom' of the nineteenth century and economic depression was settling in. When the *Review* reprinted it in September 1930 the Great Depression of the 1930s had already arrived. The debt swamp which the pastoralist waded through in 1892 was largely of his own making, but in 1930 most of the national debt had been created by others. After Federation the economy was rigged to favour non-wool sectors and this inflated the cost of producing wool. Pastoralists were natural 'free-traders' in a society of 'protectionists'. The ideology of 'the new protection' was most associated with Alfred Deakin, a Victorian politician who served three times as Prime Minister during the first decade of Federation, but it was a haphazard consensus more than a grand plan. To urban protectionists and the labour movement, the political constituencies which counted, it combined sound economics and social justice. Its components were tariffs to protect industry, arbitration to ensure 'fair' wages, British immigration, state enterprise rather than rapacious capitalism, and, last but not least, government borrowing.¹ Probably closer settlement legislation should be added to the list, although it is not often referred to in the context of the 'Deakinite settlement'.² So pivotal was the wool economy that it encouraged a view that it was the only non-subsidised commodity Australia was capable of producing, and graziers succumbed to delusions of grandeur at times. Their backs, rather than the sheep's bore the burdens.

Despite its problems in the 1890s, wool re-emerged in the early 1900s as an economic colossus. For more than a century it had outmanoeuvred foreign competitors to

¹ P. Kelly, *The End of Certainty : Power, Politics and Business in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, Revised edition, 1994, pp. 1-16. Kelly coined the term 'the Australian Settlement', or alternatively 'the Deakinite Settlement'.

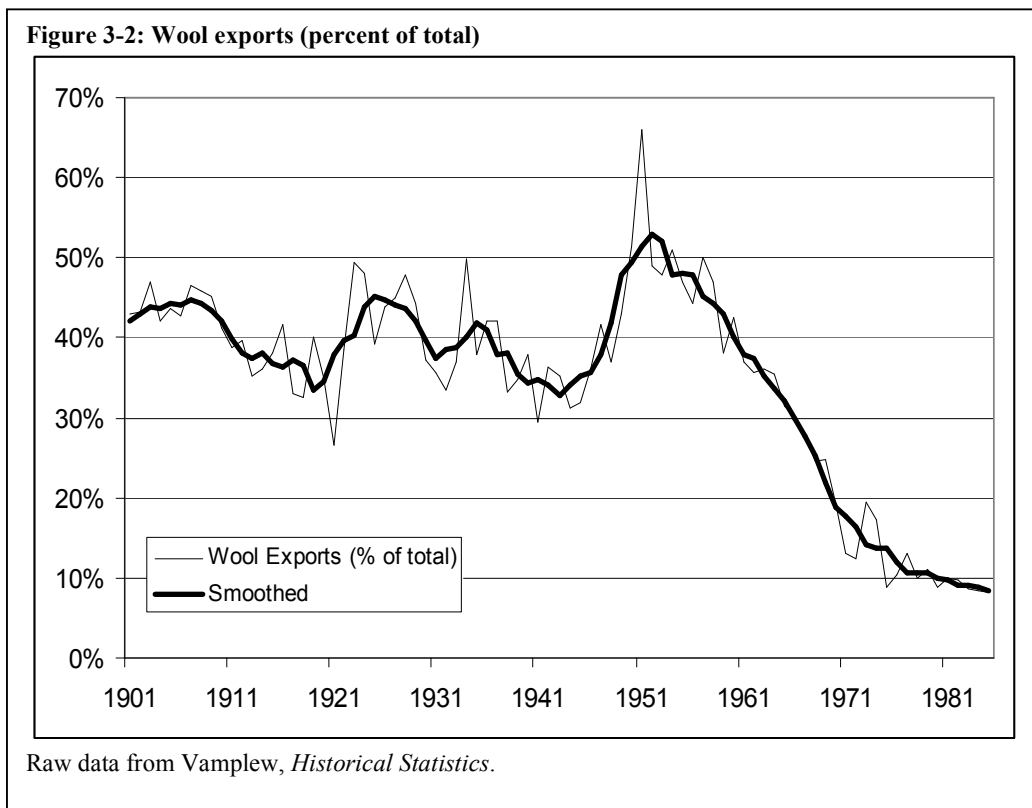
² Deakin was an enthusiastic supporter of state funded irrigation schemes, a clear indication that closer settlement was consistent with his overall vision.

Figure 3-1: Pastoralists' Burden



THE PRODUCER'S BURDEN.

This cartoon, originally published in the Pastoral Review in 1892, was reproduced in the issue of September 1930, p 868



dominate world trade in merino wool.³ Sheep stations monopolised the outback. Sophisticated commercial tentacles reached far and wide, internationally and through much of Australian society. Wharf labourers, broking house clerks, rural publicans, country golf clubs, and perhaps even Kings Cross brothels rode the wool economy. Social divisions and alliances arose from its inter-dependencies. On the whole, wool growing was highly profitable, but risky. Prices were volatile and stock perished during droughts. Growers experienced a disconcerting variability in their income. Size mattered, and adequately capitalised pastoralists were better at withstanding these shocks. Yet large sheep stations led to class envy, as already observed. The Australian polity was ambivalent about wool, mythologising it into the national culture and exploiting its riches, but also contriving to limit its influence.

Dominance of land use and the wool trade were of less moment than wool's dominance of exports (see Figure 3-2). Australia needed to import capital and manufactured consumer goods. An export staple was essential to pay interest on the foreign loans which built railways and other infrastructure considered vital for

³ Alan Barnard, *The Australian Wool Market 1840-1900*, Melbourne University Press on behalf of The Australian National University, Melbourne, 1958, pp. 19-44.

economic progress. The burden - or was it a privilege? – was carried by wool, because it was by far the most successful export commodity. Wool as a proportion of overall exports fluctuated around 40 percent between 1900 and the mid-1960s, rising to over 60 percent in 1951. Then it went into a sustained slide and no longer dominates economic events. For most of the twentieth century, however, the trappings of modern society were leveraged to the foreign currency earned by wool. Major fluctuations in wool income triggered crises (notably in the 1930s) and booms (as in the 1950s). Minor variations were scrutinised for their effects on the rest of society. Menzies Governments rode the post-War boom from 1949 to 1972, but came close to losing general elections in 1954 and 1961, when minor wool downturns forced it to apply the monetary and fiscal brakes to restore ‘balance’ to the economy.⁴ The ultimate decline of wool as an export staple once the 1950s boom had run its course was not as damaging as the history of wool dependence implies, because by then exports of minerals were eclipsing it.⁵ However, for a century and a half cycles of depression and prosperity were largely dictated by the ebb and flow of the wool trade.

The planks of the Federation architecture were not laid all at once. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 was one of the first initiatives of the new Commonwealth Parliament. The Arbitration and Conciliation Act was passed in 1904, but it was 1907 before it had much impact. The ‘Harvester judgement’ of Justice H.B. Higgins created a ‘basic wage’ of 42s per week, and paved the way for a wage fixing bureaucracy at the centre of economic affairs. Over time, wages in specific industries were linked to the basic wage.⁶ Comprehensive import tariff schedules were not completed until 1908.⁷ The policies were not quite a grand plan, but were inter-dependant. They shaped a social order not directly exposed to wool shocks. The problem for woolgrowers was that their costs were determined in one world, sheltered from competition, and their prices in another, the unforgiving external marketplace. The conjunction of the major export sector being exposed to risk while key employment

⁴ Sir Robert Menzies retired in 1966, but the Liberal-Country Coalition remained in office until 1972.

⁵ Barrie Dyster and David Meredith, *Australia in the International Economy in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1990, p. 244.

⁶ The Pastoral Industry Award of 1907 (July) pre-dated ‘Harvester’ (November). See Chapter 6.

⁷ For overviews of tariff policy see David Pope, ‘Protection and Australian Manufacturers’ International Competitiveness: 1901-1930’, *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, March 1986, pp.22-9; Peter Lloyd, ‘100 Years of Tariff Protection in Australia’, *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 48, No. 2, July 2008, pp. 99-145.

sectors were protected from it created enduring tensions.

The monetary dimension of wool dependence needs some emphasis. 'In an open economy with a fixed exchange rate', according to economic theory, 'an externally transmitted disturbance will be amplified'.⁸ Wool was sold at auctions in Australia but paid for with foreign money. Although wool was not the only source of foreign reserves, another being the sometimes profligate borrowing by State governments, it facilitated foreign borrowing to boost sectors that had nothing to do with getting wool off the sheep's back. Credit-driven development was sheltered by the tariff wall.

The Harvester judgement was typical of the mechanisms insulating citizens from external events. Higgins has enjoyed heroic status in labour historiography, although the case has been made by an economic historian that the basic wage was a factor in persistent unemployment in the 1920s.⁹ Higgins used the phrase 'frugal comfort' to describe the basic wage.¹⁰ This brilliantly expressed the social decency of fixing wages to internal prices. It was progressive, humane – it tempered the cut-throat nature of raw capitalism. However, prices for household goods were formed in a monetary oasis largely created by wool income, while wool prices were generated outside. It was an excellent compromise in many ways, but had dangerous ramifications. The system was divorced from market reality, exposed to the whims of politics and social prejudice, and risked compromising prudent limits. The crisis of the 1930s was a particularly acute demonstration of these flaws, but there was a persistent tendency towards over-consumption, just as likely when wool prices were high. 'Civilised capitalism' exhibited a brand of egalitarianism that survived most of the twentieth century.¹¹ By the end of the century, though, it was unravelling.

Graziers had access to corridors of power, although the extent to which this translated into hidden and sometimes sinister backroom political manipulation has been greatly exaggerated. The AWU could also get its foot inside ministerial doors, as did urban

⁸ A.M.C. Waterman, *Economic Fluctuations in Australia, 1948 to 1964*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1972, p. 40.

⁹ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 92-3; Colin Forster, 'An Economic Consequence of Mr. Justice Higgins', *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, Sept. 1985, p. 111.

¹⁰ John Rickard, *H.B. Higgins: The Rebel as Judge*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, p. 261.

¹¹ N.B. Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism: The Labor Movement in New South Wales, 1870-1900*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1973.

manufacturers. Wool interests could not be ignored, but a cool examination of the Australian political economy suggests that big graziers seldom got what they wanted.¹² In particular, protection of manufacturing was embedded. There was one further nagging qualification to wool's economic supremacy. From the 1920s on, mass produced synthetic fibres ate away at its market share, and eroded its terms of trade.¹³ When society did finally move to a more free trade position late in the twentieth century, wool was too weakened to really benefit. The AWU was preoccupied with graziers crying poor, and slow to appreciate the difficulties of the industry in the 1970s.

Arbitration during the Depression

Shearers were amongst keenest observers of wool's fluctuating fortunes. They were often battlers who knew that the wealth did not automatically trickle down from powerful pastoralists. Crude notions of class division do not adequately represent their place in the social structure or their attitudes, but shearers built a great union, the AWU, committed to extracting its pound of flesh from the graziers.¹⁴ Woolshed strife in the 1890s had two noteworthy legacies. Independently of the union, a system of employment by contractors proved a very robust system of organising shearing runs.¹⁵ The other was industrial arbitration.¹⁶ From 1907 working conditions were fixed by the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, and much of the subsequent history of grazier-shearer relations was shaped by its cumbersome but enduring bureaucratic machinery.¹⁷ Together, they achieved a measure of symbiosis. Contractors were more in tune with woolshed reality, but they probably could not have kept the peace as effectively without the anchor of the Court's pedantic rule-making. As it was, strikes did occasionally occur and minor disputes were commonplace.¹⁸ Shearing was a hard life, but the AWU successfully institutionalised high wages for white men. The union

¹² Hart, Philip 'The Piper Calls the Tune', in Cameron Hazlehurst (ed.), *Australian Conservatism: Essays in Twentieth Century Political History*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1979, p. 137.

¹³ Commonwealth of Australia, *Statistical Handbook of the Sheep and Wool Industry: Prepared under instruction from the Minister of Commerce and Agriculture*, Bureau of Agricultural Economics & Ministry of Commerce and Agriculture, Canberra, 1949, pp. 93-98.

¹⁴ John Merritt, *Making of the AWU*; Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*.

¹⁵ Contract shearing is discussed in Section II.

¹⁶ Section III deals with arbitration and woolshed conflict. See especially Chapter 6 for Graziers' Co-operative Shearing Company and Graziers' Association tactics during the 1922 strike.

¹⁷ John Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 354; Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 106.

¹⁸ Tsokhas, 'Shifting the Burden', p. 51.

was a trenchant supporter of ‘White Australia’, and vehemently opposed women working in shearing sheds. Through the AWU, shearers epitomised a typically ‘Australian’ approach to dividing the spoils between profits and wages.

According to J.W. Allen, Higgins was ‘hated very cordially’ by the graziers, while ‘the Union liked him’.¹⁹ In 1911 Thomas Waddell, a former Premier and well known pastoralist, was speaking in the NSW Legislative Assembly on an Industrial Disputes Amendment Act. This had nothing to do with Higgins, but the Federal Pastoral Award hearing of that year was underway with Justice Higgins presiding, and Waddell could not resist a blistering attack under parliamentary privilege.

I would not like to trust the matter to this sentimental humbug, the present judge [Higgins], this man who is a disgrace to his position as a member of the bench, in showing himself to be a violent partisan. I say, no man has ever disgraced his position more. God help the farmers of this state, and of Australia, if they have to suffer restrictions that a man of that sort would place upon them.²⁰

He was not mincing words but Higgins over-reacted. The first three pages of the written award responded in kind. While Waddell’s words were personally ‘hurtful’, he was speaking out only for the public good and with ‘salutary judicial restraint’. Nevertheless he managed to accuse Waddell of cowardice and to get in a few jousts of his own about his ‘wild and whirling words of reckless and irresponsible ill-temper’.²¹ It was enough to force Waddell into a ‘personal explanation’ in the NSW Parliament, but it was the kind of apology that indicated he was not very repentant.²² W.E. Abbott (1844-1924), another well-known, straight-talking pastoralist warrior attacked Higgins over the 1917 award, which lifted shearing rates from 24s per 100 to 30s and for the first time regulated wages and conditions for station hands. He could not resist a swipe at protected farmers while he was at it.²³

The wool grower has taken a lot of killing because he grew up strong and sturdy without coddling or protection, but now I think the politicians, with the help of Judge Higgins and the AWU, have got him down and will give him the ‘coup de gras’ (sic) before long. Then Australia will have to look to the coddled and protected irrigationists of Yanco and Victoria to pay the interest on her debts with their exports of produce.²⁴

¹⁹ ABL, E256/1647, ‘Recollections’, p. 5.

²⁰ NSW PD, Vol. 41, 1911, p1144; *The Worker*, 6/7/1911, p. 4.

²¹ CAR, Vol. 5, 1911, pp. 62-4.

²² NSW PD, Vol. 41, 1911, pp 1811-1813. See also, Rickard, *Higgins*, pp. 188-190. J.W. Allen also remembered the incident, see ABL, E256/1647, ‘Recollections’, p. 5.

²³ Stuart Piggin, ‘Abbott, William Edward (1844 - 1924)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 7, Melbourne University Press, 1979, pp 3-4; John Merritt, *That Voluminous Squatter : W.E. Abbott, Wingen*, Turalla Press, Bungendore, N.S.W., 1999.

²⁴ *Brisbane Courier*, 11/8/1917, p. 6.

Higgins died long ago in 1929 but New Right commentators in the present day still single him out for calculated scorn.²⁵ This goes to the heart of a continuing debate about economic regulation.²⁶ Practice has shifted sharply away from the Higgins philosophy since the mid-1980s. In the early twentieth century grazier protest was futile as ‘the workingman’s paradise’ took shape.²⁷ The image of the woolgrower as the ‘squatter’ is an enduring one and it was customary to assume that they could afford to endure the costs they complained about. However, although there were graziers who were wealthy, grazing selectors battled droughts and struggled.²⁸

In 1930, the graziers did get their way in the Arbitration Court, but the circumstances were extraordinary. Abbott was no longer alive although Waddell, now aged 76, was still in the NSW Legislative Council.²⁹ The shearing award set in 1927 was due to run until the end of 1931, but the collapse of wool prices in 1929 persuaded the graziers to approach the Court in May 1930 for an unscheduled and drastic variation. Justice Dethridge was presiding. Wool prices were a mere third of their mid-1920s level.³⁰ Dethridge explained that the Court had been in the habit of linking shearing rates to the ‘Harvester basic wage’, and that the employers had always acknowledged they could afford to pay whatever the Court decided. On this occasion, however, he had ‘the distasteful duty of adjusting wages in accordance with the present economic realities’.³¹

It is manifest therefore that whatever the court may do, the market prices of a product of an industry must, in the long run, be the main factor governing the share of wage earners, as well as those of capital and management, in the return from an industry.³²

²⁵ SMH, 18/12/2007, p. 11.

²⁶ The defeat of the conservative Howard Government in the 2007 Federal Election has been widely attributed to its ‘Work Choices’ policy.

²⁷ The phrase was used with irony by William Lane in his 1892 polemical novel about the shearing strikes. As with Donald Horne’s phrase ‘the lucky country’ of the 1960s, the irony was largely lost. Historians of the Left were inclined to straight denial rather than irony. W. Lane, *The Workingman’s Paradise: An Australian Novel by ‘John Miller’ (With an Introduction by Michael Wilding)*, University of Sydney Press, Sydney, 1980 (first published 1892); Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*, 2nd rev. ed.; Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968 (first published 1964); K.D. Buckley & E.L. Wheelwright, *No Paradise for Workers: Capitalism and the Common People in Australia 1788-1914*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988; K.D. Buckley & E.L. Wheelwright, *False Paradise: Australian Capitalism Revisited, 1915-1955*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

²⁸ Graham, ‘Graziers in Politics’, p. 595. See also Chapter 2.

²⁹ He died in 1940. A. R. Buck, ‘Waddell, Thomas (1854? - 1940)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 12, Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp. 337-8.

³⁰ This was 9.5 pence in February 1930. In world ‘gold’ terms they dropped to 4 pence in 1931, but devaluations of Sterling and the Australian pound ‘rescued’ the situation. See also below.

³¹ CAR, Vol. 29, 1930, p. 263.

³² CAR, Vol. 29, 1930, p. 265.

The Judge thought that ‘in some industries’ it was open to ‘subsidize a market price by artificial means’. But for wool ‘there is no power in Australia that can control prices’. He concluded that ‘if the wool industry is crippled, all other industries will be more or less lamed’. It was ‘the main staple industry of the country, not a parasite that Australia can afford to allow to wither’.³³ ‘Crippled’, ‘parasite’, ‘wither’ were all strong words. It was a brutal analysis, but essentially accurate.³⁴

The Worker disagreed. It reminded readers that for 15 years, ‘squatters opposed tooth and nail every proposal that they should base wages on what the industry could afford to pay’. The 40 percent slump in wool prices was all very well, but ‘Let it not be forgotten that in 1922 when there was a slight setback in wool prices, the graziers let loose a flood of propaganda that the days of high wool prices were gone forever.’ Judge Powers made his damaging award (to graziers it was enlightened common sense).³⁵ ‘But what happened!’, *The Worker* fumed. The subsequent recovery in wool prices and wool revenue between 1921/22 and 1928/29 was then laid out in clear detail.³⁶ There was an element of understandable hyperbole in this indignation, but statements of this genre accompanied every pastoral award hearing that was ever held, in good times and in bad. Grazier advocates knew the history just as thoroughly and returned every AWU barb with interest. The *Pastoral Review*’s slant on the Dethridge ruling was that ‘shearers and station hands are not fools’, and understood the reasons for the award even if the AWU did not.³⁷ Dethridge chastised the AWU for not co-operating in the hearing, but the union had serious problems trying to calm its militant wing and could not afford to be seen co-operating with the squatters.³⁸

Higgins retired from the Bench in 1923 and died in 1929. It will never be known what he would have thought of his successor’s interpretation. His legend as a Labor hero was safe from the ravages of the Depression. The possibility that his reputation as the *bête nior* of conservatives might be redeemed was forever lost. When Dethridge died

³³ CAR, Vol. 29, 1930, p. 265.

³⁴ For a different interpretation of the judgement, Moore, ‘Pastoral Workers Industrial Union’.

³⁵ This was the trigger for a major strike, discussed in Chapter 6.

³⁶ *The Worker*, 16/4/1930, p. 7.

³⁷ *Pastoral Review*, Aug 1930, p. 732.

³⁸ Moore asserts the Court had a grazier bias, Moore, ‘Pastoral Workers Industrial Union’, p. 61; Tsokhas is more measured, Tsokhas, ‘Shifting the Burden’, p. 41.

in 1939 *The Worker* was as respectful as it felt it needed to be towards a judge of the institution it revered, but there were no weasel words.

Many of the awards handed down by him fell short of what the Unions reckoned was ‘a square deal’, and his opposition to any shortening of working hours was bitterly resented by the working masses.³⁹

This was a contrast to the fulsome eulogy for Higgins, the ‘famous judge’, published a year or so before the 1930 crisis struck. The same issue, written as wool was on the eve of its worst crisis, presented a list of recent deceased grazier estates under the headline ‘They Died Rich’.⁴⁰

The problem of reconciling external prices and internal costs was an enduring preoccupation of woolgrowers. A 1939 Queensland inquiry expressed it as follows:

The Australian Wool Industry is thus entirely unsheltered and dependent on overseas trade. It is exposed to any economic blizzard that blows in any wool-consuming country of the world, and to the political exigencies of customer countries. It has to accept world parity for its product, and this fluctuates according to the ability of the customer countries to pay, as well as their desire, or their disinclination, to buy. While its income is determined by the purchasing power parity of low wage countries overseas, all its costs of production are inflated by the high living standards of Australia.⁴¹

Again the language was graphic – ‘blizzards’. It added that wool could not be supported ‘by stimulating purchases overseas’.⁴² It therefore required ‘sympathetic consideration from within’.

Anything that [is] done in Queensland and Australia to help the industry function efficiently, and to reduce its costs, should *ungrudgingly* be done in order to advance not only its interests but the interests of the whole community.⁴³

The AWU was apt to look at decisions of the arbitration court the other way around.⁴⁴ Emphatically, the union did not, as the report implored, ‘ungrudgingly’ accept the need to reduce ‘inflated ... high living standards’. Hatred of ‘cheap foreign labour’ was in its bones. Its *raison d'être* was to inflate living standards as much as it possibly could, and it poured scorn on realism of this kind. Not even during the extreme crisis of 1930 did it shrink from this view.

³⁹ *The Worker*, 4/1/1939, p. 13.

⁴⁰ *The Worker*, 16/1/1929, pp. 15, 17. For class envy see also *The Worker*, 1/8/1928, p. 20.

⁴¹ Report of the Wool Advisory Commission appointed to Inquire into the Economic Condition of the Wool Industry in Queensland, 1939, QPP, 1939, Vol. 2, pp 629-745. See pp. 11, 31 of report.

⁴² This clumsy phrase meant that woolgrowers could not influence overseas prices. Advocates of pooled marketing disputed the proposition.

⁴³ Report of the Wool Advisory Commission, p. 31 of report. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴ The Chairman of the Commission was W.L. Payne, President of the Land Board. Payne had also chaired the inquiry in 1927.

Shearing cheques had to go around in the grocery stores, petrol stations and doctors' surgeries of the society shearers lived in – perhaps also on the racecourses and in the pubs. Shearers were reluctant to accept arguments from the graziers that shearing rates might sensibly be linked to the price of wool. In arbitration cases the AWU only drew attention to wool prices when they were rising, and the graziers only mentioned them when they were going south! The *Pastoral Review*, however, was not completely astray when it claimed that shearers 'understood' the reasons for the award cut in 1930.⁴⁵ Cuts in shearing rates at the height of the Depression were, with hindsight, not especially draconian. Woolgrowers also sent their children to schools in Australia (often not the same ones shearers' families attended), and had to buy cars and farm machinery over the top of tariff barriers. They did not have the luxury of a privileged market for wool, and knew better than shearers that wool prices did not track the retail prices index. The mechanism for adjusting shearing rates was cumbersome, and hampered by the class rhetoric of the 1930s, which both sides had fashioned in the 1890s.

Evolution of Economic Ideas

Cost-price disparities drove economic debate in the twentieth century. It divided town and country and contributed to Australia's idiosyncratic class war.⁴⁶ Social engineers and economic boffins took a back seat, as politicians' searched for a formula to marry 'sound economics' with treasured social philosophies. Wool affairs could not avoid the attentions of grand theorists, political visionaries, and assorted crackpots. Wool was a proven wealth generator but its commercial scaffolding did not spread it around as desired. Nineteenth century anxieties focussed on land reform, but in the twentieth wool was increasingly entangled in unfathomable money and banking questions - inflation and deflation, rates of currency exchange, the basic wage, and tariff policy. It was drawn into the twentieth century obsession with macroeconomics.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See Jack Munday's response, described in Chapter 9.

⁴⁶ The Federation-era division between 'protectionists' and 'free-traders', the inter-war policies of S.M. Bruce culminating in the 1929 election which was essentially about the future of arbitration, the swirling policy controversies of the Great Depression, and the debates between 'Keynesians' and 'monetarists' in the 1970s, may all be seen as examples.

⁴⁷ One colourful contributions from the 1930s was Joseph Hamlet, *Australia Joyriding to Bankruptcy: Tariff Mad - Work Shy: A Drastic, Trenchant and Virile Criticism of Australia's Economics*, Mortons Ltd, Sydney, 1930. The book was published on the defeat of the Bruce Government in 1929, and is indicative of the prevailing mood of crisis. Hamlet, who is credited with both a BA and B Ecs, had

The voice of rural labour, the AWU, was a passionate supporter of the post-Federation consensus. So much so that it often claimed to be its main inventor.⁴⁸ The union's enthusiasm for arbitration arose out of the devastating failure of strikes in the 1890s. It differed from urban unions who saw arbitration as compensation for manufacturing protection. The first comprehensive arbitration legislation appeared in New Zealand and it was adopted in Australia in the early-1900s. This was a uniquely antipodean approach to labour relations. Radical labour was strongly opposed to arbitration, regarding it as a product of parliaments dominated by bosses and a supine labour movement, but this only reinforced the moderate view that it was sacrosanct.⁴⁹ Ted Grayndler, AWU General Secretary, returned from a study tour of the United States in 1927 convinced that Australia had little to learn from a society where brutal confrontation accompanied collective bargaining without regulation.⁵⁰ Henry Boote expressed it most colourfully.

[S]trikes and lockouts rage beneath the Stars and Stripes with a virulence unknown in this country – with bloody battles between the strikers and the bosses' gunmen; with assassination, incendiarism, roundings-up and big stick beatings. The Capitalist and the Communist enjoy themselves thoroughly in America! There is no arbitration system to get in their way.⁵¹

Despite virulent antipathy from old timers like Waddell and Abbott, the Graziers Association came to exactly the same view as the AWU on arbitration. There was no natural love of a system so linked to protection and inflating costs, but graziers concluded that it was the best way to fix problems in shearing sheds.⁵²

On 'White Australia' the AWU was rock solid, to the extent of boycotting rural hotels employing Chinese cooks.⁵³ State enterprise was also much to its liking. AWU

something to say on a wide range of subjects: fiscal matters, secondary industry, geographic isolation, 'scientific money v the gold standard', the jury system, arbitration awards, the future of democracy and, of course, the wool industry. By the 1930s there was a small but cohesive network of genuine professional economists who wielded significant influence. See P. Kenyon, *Does Australia's past have a useful economics?*, Murdoch University. Economics Programme, 2nd draft. ed.; Murdoch University, Murdoch, W.A., 1992; Donald J. Markwell, 'Keynes and Australia', A paper presented at the Reserve Bank of Australia on 18 September 1985, Research Discussion Paper 2000-04, Research Department, Reserve Bank of Australia, and New College, Oxford, June 2000.

⁴⁸ *The Worker*, 15/8/1928, p. 7.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 6.

⁵⁰ *The Worker*, 25/5/1927, p. 4. AWU leaders in some ways resembled Samuel Gompers, the American union leader who died in 1924, in their dislike of socialists. But Gompers 'pure and simple unionism' scorned political action. AWU officials sought seats in Parliament and careers in labour tribunals.

⁵¹ *The Worker*, 4/1/1928, p. 3.

⁵² See Chapter 6 for the graziers' conversion to the value of awards for shearing.

⁵³ *The Worker*, 13/5/1915, p. 19; 2/1/1924, p. 7.

support for tariffs is harder to understand, and it was rarely explained.⁵⁴ In Queensland the focus on agrarian development made the AWU lukewarm about urban industry. However, it was paradoxical that the AWU denigrated sheep grazing in favour of wheat farming, given that its grassroots made a living from shearing sheep. Moreover, agrarianism led to smaller shearing sheds and these were hard to unionise. In 1952 Queensland conservatives mischievously speculated that the AWU did not support Labor Government land resumptions because this would reduce the number of sheep. In conditions of booming wool prices there may have been some truth to the jibe.⁵⁵

Before 1945 wool prices fluctuated between lows of eight pence per lb and highs of about 25. A rough benchmark for wool over the long term was 10 pence.⁵⁶ Above this graziers were doing well unless they were in a drought. Below it they were in trouble. In December 1916 the Imperial Government agreed to pay 15½ pence for all Australian wool for the rest of the war (plus a half share of the profits on resale!). This was an outstandingly good deal, but massive unsold stocks risked destabilising the market after the war ended.⁵⁷ There was a rocky period in 1921 and 1922, but by 1924 wool, at 25 pence or more, was again buoyant. Prices softened in the late 1920s then collapsed between 1928 and 1931. The Court set shearing rates by retail prices and was not required to adjust them for these fluctuations, but in practice the profitability of woolgrowers was considered. On two notable occasions – the Powers Award of 1922 and the Dethridge Award of 1930 - the Court cut shearing rates because, it was argued, the country could not afford to maintain the cost of living formula.⁵⁸ Overall, arbitration managed to create a reasonable correlation between the value of wool and the payment of shearers, though that was not its central purpose (Figure 3-3).

⁵⁴ The usual justification for protection was that an industrial base supported a larger population. A visiting British Labour MP in 1926 asked why Australia should worry about secondary industry when perfectly good products were produced by British workers. ‘When the population is 106 million – maybe!’ sneered the AWU. *The Worker*, 6/10/1926, p. 15. It was also claimed that tariffs on farm machinery reduced its cost, presumably through economies of scale. *The Worker*, 26/1/1927, p. 5.

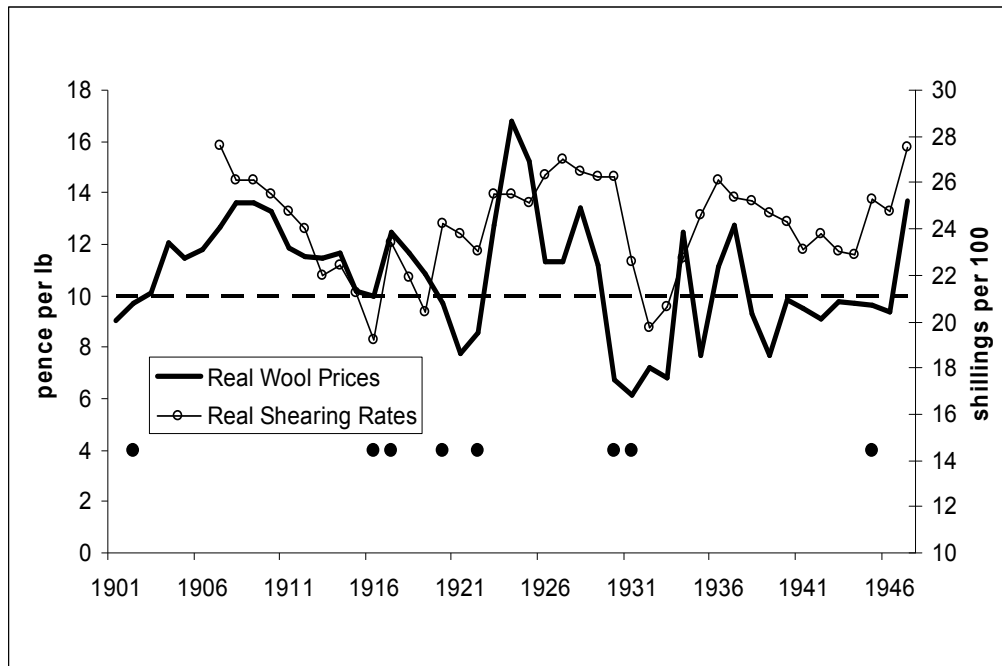
⁵⁵ QPD, 1952, p. 1435.

⁵⁶ The data in Graph 1 have been adjusted to a 1912 general price level. There was little sustained inflation during this period so the figures approximate nominal prices for wool in Australian currency.

⁵⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, prepared under instruction from the Hon. The Minister for Commerce and Agriculture, *Statistical Handbook of the Sheep and Wool Industry*, Bureau of Agricultural Economics & Department of Commerce and Agriculture, Canberra, ACT, 1949, p. 73.

⁵⁸ CAR, Vol. 16, p. 375; Vol. 29, p. 261.

Figure 3-3: Wool Price and Shearing Rates 1900-1946



Calculated from raw data on wool and retail prices published in Vamplew, *Historical Statistics*. Data on shearing rates from table published in *The Worker*, 26/6/1947 p. 14, and CAR Volumes. Note slumps in wool in early-1920s and in 1930s. Shearers were well paid in late-1930s and '40s.

The pre-1930 economy was not ‘managed’ in the way that became the norm after the Depression, and especially after World War II. There was no central monetary authority. Credit conditions were shaped primarily by the actions of private banks. When wool prices fell banking reserves shrank, and banks tended to restrict lending without being compelled by the government to do so. This meant that the ‘balance of payments’ – consistently an economic ‘problem’ after World War II – tended to be self correcting. Likewise, short bursts of inflation were nullified amazingly quickly, compared with later experience. The corollary – although it was not fully recognised until after the Depression – was that employment took the brunt of cyclical economic forces.⁵⁹ Before John Maynard Keynes there was no consistent acceptance that the employment cycle could be controlled, or that an economy could exist for extended periods at less than ‘full employment’.⁶⁰ The Deakinite economy was insulated from

⁵⁹ Jenny Lee and Charles Fahey, ‘A Boom for Whom?: Some Developments in the Australian labour market 1870-1891’, *Labour History*, No. 50, May 1986, pp. 1-27; Charles Fahey, ‘“Abusing the horses and exploiting the labourer”: the Victorian agricultural and pastoral labourer, 1871- 1911’, *Labour History*, No.65, Nov 1993, pp. 96-114 .

⁶⁰ Roy Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1951, pp. 535-6.

‘any economic blizzard that blows in any wool-consuming country of the world’,⁶¹ but it was directly exposed to sharp fluctuations in monetary conditions.

The Depression crisis hastened the idea that it was possible, and desirable, to fine-tune demand to stabilise economic fluctuations. The visit of Sir Otto Niemeyer from the Bank of England in 1930, the acrimonious debate over ‘The Premiers’ Plan’, and conservative anxieties over J.T. Lang’s threatened default on overseas debt, were indications of how novel the notion of macroeconomic management was in the 1930s. The dismissal of Lang from office by the Governor of NSW in May 1932 epitomises a confused and troubled period. The Scullin Commonwealth Labor Government was elected in a landslide amidst unprecedented (until then) euphoria, but the Government collapsed through internal division after barely two years of its term.⁶² In 1937 a journalist who witnessed events in Canberra first hand wrote a lively memoir which probably captures the mood of the time better than many later histories of the Depression period. The battle of wills between the ultra-conservative Chairman of the Commonwealth Bank, Sir Robert Gibson, and Ted Theodore, the Labor Treasurer who was politically damaged by the Mungana mine scandal, is a case in point. Theodore wanted to attempt a brave but untried monetary reflation, but was hostage to conservative orthodoxy as well as his political enemies on the Labor side, including Lang to his Left and J.A. Lyons to his Right.

There is much to be said on both sides; and when the full history of this period comes to be written, a long chapter could be devoted to the contests between the Government and the Bank Board, for they involved many problems affecting the nature of parliamentary and democratic government which were not then settled, but merely pushed to one side by the ebb and flow of day-to-day events.⁶³

‘Long chapters’ have since been written, but not brought the resolution Denning expected.⁶⁴ Gibson is mostly painted as a died-in-the-wool reactionary while Theodore is a social progressive who had read the new Keynesian economics. There

⁶¹ Report of the 1939 Wool Advisory Commission, quoted above.

⁶² *The Worker*, 23/10/1929, p. 3; 2/12/1931, p. 10. For a graphic insider’s account suggesting cabinet paranoia and confusion, Frank Anstey, ‘Memoirs of the Scullin Government, 1929-1932’, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, 1979, pp. 368-92.

⁶³ Warren Denning, *Caucus Crisis: The Rise and Fall of the Scullin Government*, Cumberland Argus, Parramatta (NSW), 1937, p. 75.

⁶⁴ The literature is large. Probably the most authoritative analysis is C. B. Schedvin, *Australia and The Great Depression :A Study of Economic Development and Policy in the 1920s and 1930s*, Sydney University Press in association with Oxford University Press, Sydney, 1970; other useful papers are Markwell, ‘Keynes and Australia’; and Alex Milnow, ‘Niemeyer, Scullin and the Australian Economists’, *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2, July 2004, pp. 142-60.

is some truth to this, but deflation was wildly experimental. Moreover, Lang's enmity with Theodore was just as damaging. The Treasurer might at least have expected some support for a progressive approach from his own side of politics, but Lang had his own agenda. The 'Lang was right' version of events continues to have currency amongst historians.⁶⁵ Conservatives, including most of the prominent graziers, fingered Lang as a dangerous demagogue. Many in the Labor Party thought so too, and the split in NSW lasted until the 1940s. As a result of the 1930s shambles, though, a new economic orthodoxy emerged in which it was axiomatic that Governments could control events.

The Depression did not lead to any weakening of the Deakinite settlement. Rather, protection was dramatically increased. The Bruce Government had commissioned a comprehensive review of economic policy in 1927. This foreshadowed a rationalisation of tariff policy, and had it been implemented there would have been reductions. But the Brigden Report was not received until 1929.⁶⁶ Bruce was defeated and the Scullin Government was not interested in tariff reductions. Denning is again worth quoting.

Canberra became a happy hunting ground for tariff 'touts', an unpleasant name bestowed on a group of importunate people whose purpose it was to impress on the government and the party the dire importance of Australian-made silk stockings, or razor blades, or toilet paper, receiving the whole of the Australian market; and whenever two or three people were gathered together in a quiet place, it was an easy wager that one of them was a Labor member, and the others high tariff advocates. The doormat at the entrance to the Customs department was worn thin by their feet.⁶⁷

The defeat of Scullin in 1931 did not mean that tariff policy was reversed. The political vortex catapulted J.A. Lyons into the Prime Ministership as a conservative. He had been one of Scullin's senior economic ministers and perhaps it was not surprising that he had no taste for cutting tariffs. Tariff policy was modified to exempt some items of farm machinery not manufactured in Australia in 1934, but only because Lyons needed to appease Country Party sensitivities.⁶⁸ Sir Norman Kater on

⁶⁵ Frank Cain, *Jack Lang and the Great Depression*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2005.

⁶⁶ Clark, *Australian Hopes and Fears*, p. 157.

⁶⁷ Denning, *Caucus Crisis*, p. 62. See also, Clark, *Australian Hopes and Fears*, p. 159.

⁶⁸ Earle Page, *Truant Surgeon: The Inside Story of Forty Years of Australian Political Life*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963, Ch 25, 'The Lyons Tariff Controversy'.

one occasion sought an audience with Lyons to apprise him of woolgrowers' views.⁶⁹ Tariffs were reviewed and the rates were fiddled on a regular basis, but the underlying philosophy of protection did not change significantly.

Arbitration, too, survived the Depression intact. Like tariffs, there was frequent fiddling with the empowering Acts, but the need was less often questioned. Frustration with industrial unrest in the 1920s led conservatives to question whether it was worth the trouble. In Prime Minister Bruce's view the parallel State Commonwealth courts were destabilising. If unions did not get what they wanted in one jurisdiction they found ways of getting disputes heard in the other. This certainly happened in the shearing industry when a Queensland Award was established in 1920.⁷⁰ There was also a NSW shearing award from 1926.⁷¹ Shearing sheds, though, were not central to Bruce's attempted Commonwealth takeover of the arbitration system via referendum in 1926. As usual it was coalmining and the docks. The referendum was lost and the Prime Minister changed tack, calling the 1929 election on abolition of the Commonwealth system, handing the unholy mess, as he saw it, to the States to sort out.⁷² It was seen by Labor as a return to the pre-arbitration capitalist jungle.⁷³ Until 2007 Bruce was the only Prime Minister to lose his seat in a general election.⁷⁴ Given the political disaster that followed for Labor, the Whitlemesque euphoria accompanying Scullin's landslide in October 1929 is largely forgotten. 'It Will Never Again be Threatened' roared Henry Boote's editorial.⁷⁵

The labour movement was angered by Arbitration Court reductions in the basic wage during the Depression, but remained wedded to the principle. Whether Bruce, through the Brigden tariff review and emasculation of arbitration, was inching towards wholesale abandonment of the Deakinite economy is unanswerable. He did not really understand the labour movement and was in coalition with the Country Party who

⁶⁹ Hart, 'The Piper Calls the Tune', p. 117. See Chapter 2 for Kater's background.

⁷⁰ See Chapter 6.

⁷¹ *The Worker*, 22/9/1926, p. 20; 13/10/1926, p. 18. This was to encourage unionisation of cocky sheds. Farmers could avoid paying award wages if shearers were not in the AWU. The NSW award was even more generous than Queensland and was a source of instability.

⁷² A.B. Wildavsky, D. Carboch, D. *The 1926 Referendum & The Fall of the Bruce-Page Government*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1958.

⁷³ *The Worker*, 29/5/1929, p. 18.

⁷⁴ The 2007 election, in which Prime Minister John Howard lost his seat, was also fought with industrial relations as a central issue.

⁷⁵ *The Worker*, 23/10/1929, p. 3.

complained about tariffs on farm machinery, but expected and received government support for farmers. He was essentially conservative rather than a radical reformer. As with tariffs, Lyons Governments of the later-1930s did not contemplate another wild experiment with the arbitration system. The growing fear of communism dissuaded them from any further Bruce-type political adventures.

The Ottawa Agreement of 1932 reinforced the principle of ‘Empire preference’ in trade, the core idea being that the Empire should buy Dominion food and raw materials for British machinery and consumer goods. No group was more loyal to the Empire than graziers, but they were at heart *laissez faire* liberals and this was not an ideal arrangement for them. The market for wool had shifted away from Britain and it was not in their interests to irritate German and Japanese industrialists. This underscored what came to be seen as ‘appeasement’ of totalitarian powers in the late-1930s.⁷⁶ Marketing issues were again temporarily sidelined during the war, when wool was purchased by the British Government (as in World War I on very favourable terms) to prevent enemies getting hold of it.⁷⁷

The Exchange Rate

Before 1925 the exchange rate was not used to mediate internal and external imbalance. The British Government, in a perhaps foolish attempt to reassert its previous status in the international economy, decided to return to the pre-World War I gold standard. It amounted to a revaluation of Sterling against America and the European Continent of about 10 per cent. For Britain it proved to be a wrong choice, but that is incidental to this narrative.⁷⁸ It led to the first conscious exchange rate decision in Australian history. It was actually a ‘non-decision’ because Australia retained its parity to Sterling, but the advantages and disadvantages had to be weighed for the first time. Had exports still been dominated by British markets it would have

⁷⁶ Robert Menzies earned the tag he wore for life, ‘Pig Iron Bob’, confronting unions trying to block iron shipments to Japan.

⁷⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, prepared under instruction from the Hon. The Minister for Commerce and Agriculture, *Statistical Handbook of the Sheep and Wool Industry*, Bureau of Agricultural Economics & Department of Commerce and Agriculture, Canberra, ACT, 1949, p. 73.

⁷⁸ Britain’s decision to rejoin the gold standard in 1925 was to be an important destabilising factor leading to world depression, but Australia was not able to affect this or even predict they might happen. Roy Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1951, p. 358.

made little difference, but this was not the case. Over 60 per cent of wool was now sold in Europe, and some in Japan and the United States. The flow of Australian pounds from these sales was reduced by 10 per cent. Wool prices were strong at the time and this masked the effect of overvaluation for a year or two. Apart from the direct effect on exporters' incomes, it had a moderating effect on domestic prices (and perhaps inhibited the Arbitration Court when adjusting shearing rates). It also meant that the hefty interest payments on Australia's large overseas debt were, in the meantime, slightly less burdensome.

The first significant devaluation of Australian currency occurred in January 1931 as the Depression deepened.⁷⁹ This time there was much more at stake. It was effectively an acknowledgement of the inability of banks to counter speculation. It did not in any way solve woolgrowers' problems because the circumstances were so extreme and it had the disadvantage of increasing interest payments on overseas loans.⁸⁰ Another effect was to transfer income within Australia from sheltered (internal) sectors to exposed (exporting) ones. This was pointless if the arbitration court simply passed it into wages, as Norman Kater pointed out. Wool prices between 1906 and 1916 averaged 9½d in gold, he said, and from 1920 to 1930 - 17½d. After the fall it was 9½d/lb in 'Australian currency' and 7½d in Sterling - but only 4¾d in gold.⁸¹ There was no magic solution to the predicament of the wool producers who received prices determined externally and paid internal costs. It was the first glimpse of a long and tortuous debate about how the exchange rate should be managed.⁸²

Although Keynesian economics had introduced the idea that Governments could control the employment cycle, it took until 1946 for a co-ordinated international response to the Depression to be formalised. The Bretton Woods agreement set rules for fixing exchange rates, while fresh concepts of demand management were employed internally to steer a course between inflation and deflation. A speech in

⁷⁹ Dyster and Meredith, *Australia in the International Economy*, p. 134.

⁸⁰ Debt was a politically volatile issue. In 1932 the NSW Premier Jack Lang was sacked by the State Governor as a consequence of 'repudiation' of foreign debt.

⁸¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 29/1/1935, p. 6. For a graph of export prices between 1929 and 1933 showing the impact of currency realignments, Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression 1929-1939*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1987, p. 86.

⁸² Keynes' own views about exchange rates at the time largely concerned international stability. He had little to say about the problems of small trade dependent economies. Harrod, *Life*, pp. 526-7.

1944 by Dr. H.C. Coombs, then Director-General of the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction, was an indicator of the new thinking.⁸³ With hindsight it was overconfidently paraded as a recipe to guarantee full employment. This was the real beginning of the ‘Keynesian revolution’, which Australia enthusiastically embraced. Keynesian philosophies ‘worked’ for two decades in a way that the pre-War shambles palpably had not. In principle, however, not all that much had changed in Australia. The Deakinite ingredients were retained. Keynes, in fact, disapproved of protection, although he was not a doctrinaire ‘free trader’. He was ambivalent about arbitration.⁸⁴ Protection was frowned on by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the international bank which policed Bretton Woods arrangements.

The Bretton Woods formula for managing international payments was based on fixed exchange rates. The rules, however, allowed countries to change the exchange rate to get out of balance of payments trouble, but only if internal problems were addressed. This was designed to avoid Depression-era trade wars in which tariffs and exchange rate devaluations were the chosen weapons of economic nationalism, while underlying structural issues were ignored.⁸⁵ Stripped of jargon, IMF rules usually meant something nasty to quell inflation, including curbs on wages and cuts in government spending.⁸⁶ This kind of thing had made Justice Dethridge, Sir Otto Niemeyer, and Sir Robert Gibson very unpopular in 1930. Now the medicine of economic puritans was being written into the conventions of international trade, albeit with some honey to sweeten the taste. It was all aimed at avoiding the instability of the Depression. The AWU, however, was no happier getting the message from the IMF, than from the arbitration bench. The exchange rate, if used wisely, could facilitate desirable structural shifts. Niemeyer’s approach was more brutal, and less likely to do so.⁸⁷

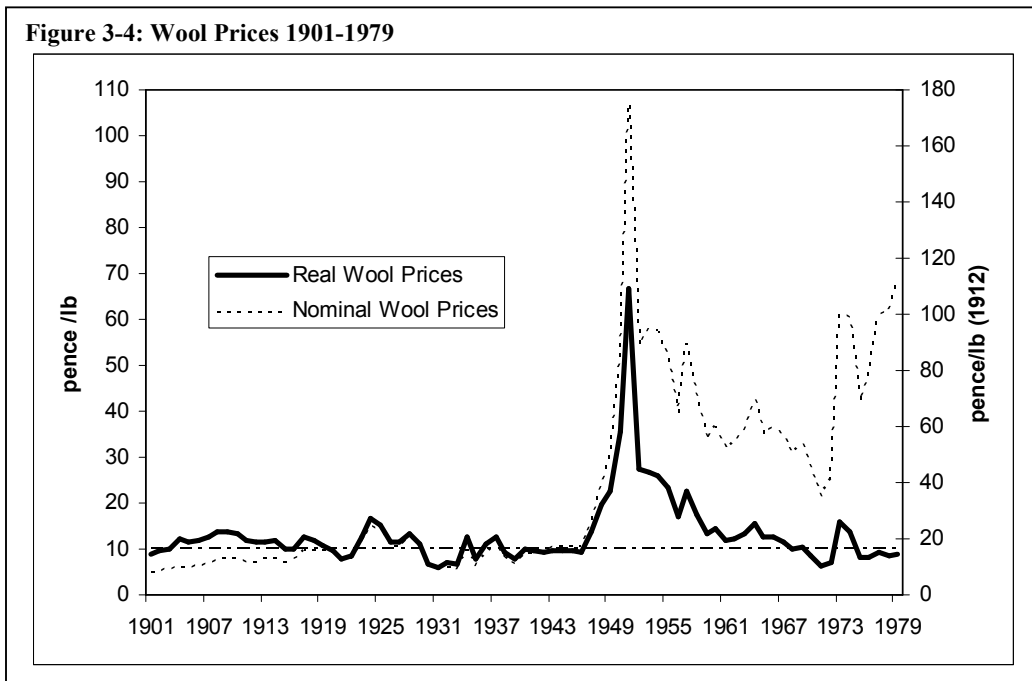
⁸³ Coombs, H.C. *Problems of a High Employment Economy*, The Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce given in Adelaide on 29 June 1944, The University of Adelaide, 1944.

⁸⁴ Harrod, *Life*, pp. 446, 469; Clark, *Australian Hopes and Fears*, p. 134.

⁸⁵ Harrod, *Life*, pp. 526-7.

⁸⁶ For the ‘IMF system’ and the ‘gold standard’, Victor Argy, *The Postwar International Money Crisis: An Analysis*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1981, pp. 1-30. The system had broken down and the era of floating exchange rates had arrived, although Australia did not float until March 1983.

⁸⁷ For a discussion on Keynesian economic ideas and Australian policy in the post-war period, Selwyn Cornish, ‘The Keynesian Revolution in Australia: Fact or Fiction?’, *Australian Economic History Review*, Volume 33, No. 2, 1993, pp. 42-68.

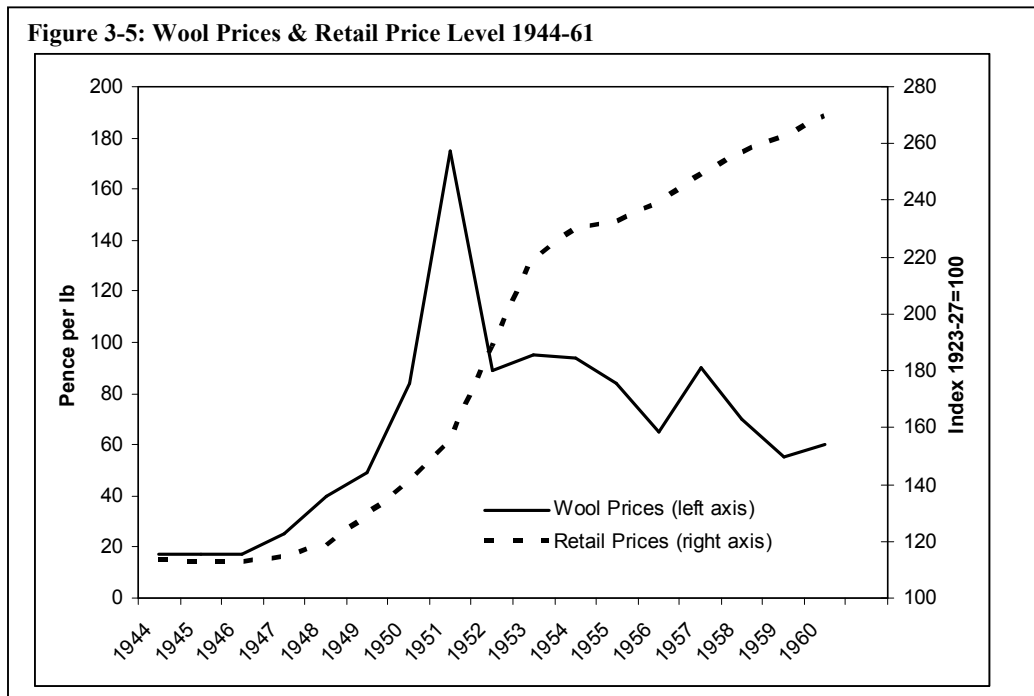


1950s Wool Boom

The first major test was not the risk of another depression, but handling the boom following World War II. This was a novel experience. The average wool price for 1950/51 was 175 pence per lb, fuelled by exceptional demand to equip the United States army fighting in Korea (see Figure 3-4). The effect on an industry used to living off 10 to 15 pence was profound. The previous all time peak was about 25 pence.⁸⁸ Prices retreated but remained high historically. This was partly illusory because inflation lifted costs. Figure 3-5 zooms in on the wool price spike and the retail price index. The sharp jump in retail prices (with a bit of a lag) is now understood to be a monetary effect rather than a direct effect of woolgrowers accelerated spending. Adjustments in the ‘basic wage’ via the Arbitration Court had levelled out by 1953, but the damage was done. Wool prices were now falling and income had shifted from woolgrowers to sheltered activities. Periodic ‘credit squeezes’ became the key instruments of ‘stop-go’ economic management.⁸⁹ On 26 September 1951, wool prices having slumped since 1950, the government brought down what was called the ‘Horror Budget’. It was ‘the first time in Australian history’

⁸⁸ Selected lines sold for more than 240 pence per lb, giving rise to the slogan ‘a pound per pound’, by which the Korean War boom in wool prices is often recalled.

⁸⁹ This is the popular name given to the use of government budget contractions and controls on lending, to reduce aggregate demand in the economy. Short term ‘recessions’ came close to causing the defeat of the Menzies Government in 1954 and 1961.



that the budget had been used for ‘anti-cyclical purposes’.⁹⁰ The 1950s are thought of as a ‘low inflation’ period but economists were concerned that latent inflation could easily get out of control.

The squeeze on woolgrowers’ incomes was not recognised as a national problem until the mid-1960s. Australia was riding its good fortune without appreciating signs that the good times were ending. Simmering tension in the shearing industry was indicative of general wage pressure. Shearers wages were linked to the retail price index, and Figure 3-5 makes the grazier side of the 1956 shearing strike more explicable.⁹¹

The economist Colin Clark was critical of the failure of the Menzies Government to revalue Australian currency in the early-1950s. This had potential to ease inflationary pressures, and dampen wages movements.⁹² Clark was voicing views that were already orthodox, and government advisers did recommend revaluation in 1951.⁹³ Clark claimed that a majority of the Cabinet favoured the move but Menzies over-

⁹⁰ Waterman, *Economic Fluctuations*, p. 86.

⁹¹ The 1956 strike is discussed in Chapter 8.

⁹² Under a fixed exchange rate regime revaluation would not have caused a contraction of reserve money. Australian price levels would be lower, however, and economists reasoned that this moderated the wage-price spiral. Clark, *Australian Hopes and Fears*, pp. 261-3.

⁹³ Tim Rowse, *Nugget Coombes: A Reforming Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 208.

ruled them. It would have been unpopular ‘in certain quarters’, Clarke wrote in 1958.⁹⁴ This was not quite accurate. Menzies, largely an innocent in matters economic and an Anglophile, was probably happy to restore parity with Sterling, severed during the crisis in 1931. It was John McEwen, the Country Party leader who strenuously vetoed it because it would have trimmed the incomes of his rural constituents.⁹⁵ Clark explained that the opportunity had probably been lost by the time wool prices hit their peak in 1951. An enormous flow of imports meant there was now a balance of payments problem as well as inflation, and revaluation was no longer a viable course.⁹⁶

For a nation ‘growing on the sheep’s back’, the 1950s wool boom was an extraordinary event. In the interests of running a stable economy there were strong grounds for smoothing out the highs and the lows of external income, but this was difficult politically. Woolgrowers were highly suspicious of currency trickery (although in later years they were more forgiving of devaluations which lifted incomes when prices slumped). The AWU was even harder to convince that compromises for the general good were sensible. The cost of living was rising and wool prices remained upwards of 60 pence a lb. Complex economic theory carried little weight in the woolshed. Social prejudices forged in the cauldron of the union’s historical fight with the squatters, not monetary theory, fashioned reactions.⁹⁷

‘McEwenism’

John McEwen was a soldier settler from Victoria. He had come up the hard way. He got his start as a dairy farmer and was shrewd enough to get a bigger farm and change to sheep. He was one of those who came out of soldier settlement better off than he went in. A gruff and often ruthless man, he could in later years be moved to tears when reminded of those who had to walk away.⁹⁸ A natural leader, McEwen

⁹⁴ Clark, *Australian Hopes and Fears*, p. 232.

⁹⁵ Peter Golding, *Black Jack McEwen: Political Gladiator*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1996, pp. 148-9.

⁹⁶ Clark, *Australian Hopes and Fears*, p. 232.

⁹⁷ Waterman, *Economic Fluctuations*, Chapter 3, ‘The Korean War Episode, 1949 to 1953’, pp. 64-98 provides a lucid if technical account of the economic arguments, usefully recognizing contemporary political realities. It was written in the early-1970s before the Keynesian consensus amongst economists gave way to ‘monetarism’, market deregulation and floating exchange rates.

⁹⁸ Golding, *Black Jack*, pp. 48, 49.

became prominent in the rancorous forums of Victorian rural politics. The Victorian Country Party had two wings: ‘people who had graduated into farming from being miners, from being share farmers or from being people employed on farms⁹⁹ – people whose natural affiliation would have been with membership of the Labor party’, and ‘the stable and more well-off farmers’.¹⁰⁰ McEwen gravitated to the conservative wing of the movement. He entered Federal Parliament in 1934, and became a minister in the Lyons Government in 1937. He held influential posts continuously from 1949 to 1971. From the late-1950s until the end of his political career he was the key architect of economic policy and was arguably more powerful than Menzies himself.

McEwen’s enthusiasm for protection outweighed the narrower rural interest. Underlying this was a belief in the importance of immigration to build up population, and the supposition that it was not possible to provide employment without intervention by the government. The rationale for this was not purely ‘economic’, but McEwen was not an inward looking economic nationalist. As Minister of Trade he fought vigorously to promote exports, and expected protected manufacturers to strive for overseas sales. One of his most significant initiatives was a trade agreement with Japan in 1957. Memories of Japanese concentration camps were still fresh and this was not politically popular, but it was far-sighted, and it opened the way for a flood tide of mineral exports to an emerging economic superpower. This largely underwrote the ‘long boom’ of the 1960s. So comprehensive was McEwen’s influence that the philosophy of the period has been widely designated ‘McEwenism’. This is not by any means an mark of admiration and a later generation of ‘economic rationalists’ expressly condemned it. They considered him second only to Justice Higgins as a malign influence on Australian progress. They devoted their careers to bringing it to an end. They eventually succeeded, but not until the 1980s.

In his maiden speech in 1934 McEwen wondered aloud how or why the Commonwealth Bank fixed the exchange rate, and if anyone in the government could influence it. He noted that labour had the arbitration system (which he approved of) and manufacturers had the Tariff Board (which, at that time he may not have), ‘but unfortunately those engaged in essential primary industries have no tribunal to which

⁹⁹ Some would have been shearers.

¹⁰⁰ From *John McEwen His Story*, as quoted by Golding, *Black Jack*, p. 68

they can appeal in order to secure a reasonable return for their labour.’¹⁰¹ Although revealing deeply interventionist instincts, it also indicates a capacity for lateral analysis. McEwen wanted equivalent certainty for his farmers as manufacturers enjoyed.

The ideas behind ‘McEwenism’ were not new. They had been expressed by Earle Page, Country Party leader of the interwar period, at a Farmers and Selectors Association function in 1927. Page was right behind the White Australia Policy, which ‘stood for protection of all sections of the community against inferior standards of wages and living’. However, he said, it should apply to ‘everyone in Australia’. Primary industries should be ‘maintained on a White Australia basis’! This could almost have been from the transcript of an AWU conference. He spent a little time decrying urban protectionism, but seemed to accept that it was a political reality. The only alternative for country people, therefore, was to stake a claim for their share.¹⁰² The result was that wheat growers, sugar producers and dairy farmers had benefited from guaranteed prices and subsidies since the 1920s. Only woolgrowers were left out of the loop.

The 1960s saw continuing consumer prosperity. Inflation was sufficiently contained to prevent a further crisis arising from disparities between internal and external price levels. Already, however, graziers were thinking about broader issues than awards for shearers and station hands. Ted Cole, industrial officer for the Graziers Association wrote in 1965 that he spent almost as much time in the Arbitration Court making submissions regarding Metal Trades Awards and basic wages cases as he did on Pastoral Award matters. The graziers recognised that ‘major increases in costs were coming from outside the boundary fence’ and that ‘something had to be done to protect the pastoral employer and the rural industries caught in the resultant cost squeeze’.¹⁰³ There was some pressure for a devaluation in 1967 but Australia managed to avoid it. British Sterling was devalued in November 1967. Australia’s export competitiveness was already under pressure, and it was a question of whether the British move should be followed. McEwen was strongly in favour of a devaluation

¹⁰¹ Golding, *Black Jack*, p. 63.

¹⁰² SMH, 8/8/1927, p 11.

¹⁰³ *Muster*, Graziers Anniversary Supplement, 7/6/1965, p12. Clipping in ABL E256/1641.

to assist the farmers, but was far away in Geneva conducting trade negotiations. Had he been in Canberra he may well have persuaded Cabinet to devalue.¹⁰⁴ The incident was, however, a precursor of difficulties throughout the 1970s

The Keynesian revolution of the 1950s folded into an insipient but ultimately crippling addiction to inflation in the 1970s, known as ‘stagflation’. In a nutshell the problem for wool was that inflation in Australia averaged 11.5 percent while export prices rose 9 per cent.¹⁰⁵ Wool prices were hinged to a lower world inflation rate, but competition from synthetic fibres was further eroding wool’s value.

In 1927, only two years before the worst slump in prices hitherto experienced, a Queensland report was arrogant enough to assert: ‘The state has no need to explore for new markets [for wool], as manufacturers come here from other countries anxious to buy.’¹⁰⁶ Already, however, acute observers were worried that the advantage enjoyed by nylon and rayon through economies of scale was a serious threat. Synthetics might have been cheap and nasty compared to the natural feel and quality of woollen textiles, but consumer mass markets could be seduced by price at the expense of quality. Australian grazing interests lobbied hard for a high price for compulsory purchase during World War II, but the negotiators feared that the substitution of manufactured synthetics would accelerate. The danger was obscured during the wool boom of the 1950s, although few doubted in the 1960s that synthetic competition was hurting wool. High wages for shearers and the burden of Australian protectionism were bound to be more seriously questioned in these circumstances.

There was a related and frenetic debate over wool marketing. Pastoralists built close relationships with woolbrokers in the nineteenth century. Farmers, on the other hand, deeply distrusted ‘middlemen’. They complained about ‘lot splitting’ - buyers colluding at auction then ‘splitting the lot’ amongst themselves. Compulsory purchase of both wool and wheat during World War I was a watershed, because it suggested collective marketing worked well and the British Australian Wool Realisation

¹⁰⁴ Golding, *Black Jack*, p. 267.

¹⁰⁵ Calculated from Australian Bureau of Statistics figures.

¹⁰⁶ QPP, 1927, Vol 2, pp 121ff, Report of the Land Settlement Advisory Board appointed to Inquire into Certain Matters Relating to Land Settlement, , p 2 of report. By 1939 Queensland experts were deeply concerned about markets. See 1939 report quoted above.

Association (BAWRA) disposed of the surplus in an orderly manner. Large graziers blocked plans to make BAWRA permanent. Norman Kater argued in 1923 it would be ‘overstepping the bounds of commercial morality’.¹⁰⁷ Farmers and Selectors Association meetings and the rural press did not agree, but in the meantime grazier rugged individualism carried the day. BAWRA was not formally wound up until 1931, and there was a move to resurrect it during the crisis of 1930, but the graziers again prevailed.¹⁰⁸ It was all more or less repeated after World War II, but the farmers had little hope of changing the *status quo* when wool prices were booming. By 1971 the resistance of graziers was broken and market intervention to smooth the extremes of price fluctuation was introduced.

From Stagflation to Economic Rationalism

During the 1970s governments tried to redress internal/external imbalance by more frequent exchange rate adjustment. This alleviated cost pressure on woolgrowers for short periods, but a circuit-breaker was needed. The ‘crawling peg’, by which the Reserve Bank was given authority to reset the exchange rate at regular intervals based on an automatic formula, was not a solution. It paralleled the Arbitration Court fixing wages. The whole economy, including now the exposed export sector, was controlled by regulations for fixing wages, prices and the currency. Economic management was treating symptoms but not the disease.

This was the background to an economic debate with revolutionary implications. Australia was a small fish in a very big pond, and had to participate in international trade by rules not of its making. The Bretton Woods system had ceased to work properly in the 1960s, and effectively ended in 1971 when the \$US severed the link to the gold price and became a floating currency. For a time the crawling peg perpetuated the fiction that Australia could decide its own exchange rate. The eventual ‘cure’ was the floating of the currency in 1983, but this required a radical deregulation of financial flows, and a mechanism to reduce real wages *should this be*

¹⁰⁷Macmillan, *Kater Family*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁸*Pastoral Review*, July 1930, p. 629.

necessary.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately this meant that the automatic linking of awards to the cost of living had to be broken. It gave an old conservative fear of ‘union power’ additional piquancy.

Formation of the National Farmers Federation (NFF) out of the rag bag of State and product-based organisations in 1978 introduced fresh cohesion to rural politics. The NFF Secretariat was an enclave of neo-liberal economics, or the ‘New Right’. The philosophy was far from universally welcomed by its farming grassroots, spoon fed by generations of Country Party interventionism and special pleading.¹¹⁰ In a circulated *Industrial Newsletter* Paul Houlihan, who became the NFF’s Industrial Officer in 1981, lamented the ‘dumping’ of the Minister for Industrial Relations Ian Viner from the Fraser Government. Viner’s replacement, Ian McPhee, was viewed by the inner circle at the NFF as an economic ‘wet’. He had been Executive Director of the Victoria Chamber of Commerce, ‘probably the most rabid protectionists in the country’, with close links to the Confederation of Australian Industry and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)!¹¹¹ Houlihan was alluding to the ‘industrial relations club’ which, radical economists believed, was a cosy political alliance of protected industries and unions who colluded to link wages and prices at the expense of healthy competition. Even the graziers, the only wing of rural politics with *laissez faire* instincts, had been solidly behind labour arbitration since 1922. Flirtation with ‘free market’ economics risked alienating much of the NFF membership, but ‘flexible labour markets’ could easily be packaged as an anti-union message. That was always popular amongst farmers.

Ian McLachlan, from a wealthy South Australian grazing family, was convinced ‘McEwenism’ had to be abandoned.¹¹² He became chairman of the important Industrial Relations Committee of the NFF while the former unionist Houlihan was

¹⁰⁹ An important caveat of neo-liberals was that the system permitted an *increase* in real wages if it is possible. Whether it does so according to egalitarian sensibilities is another matter. Keynesian thinking, however, required reductions in real wages to ensure full employment.

¹¹⁰ ABL NFF records. These abound with papers on macroeconomics, presenting Friedmanite or ‘monetarist’ views. See also Connors, *To Speak With One Voice*, p. 218.

¹¹¹ ABL N143/7, Circular No. 111, 4/8/1980; N143/8; N143/9; N143/201; *The Land*, 1/2/1979, p.32; 4/4/1980, p. 15; 1/2/1979, p.3.

¹¹² A publicity document called *Farm Focus* was officially launched in early-1981 after intensive preparation. This distanced farming organisations from ‘McEwenism’. ABL N143/327; *The Land*, 14/8/1980, p. 9; *The Australian*, 19/1/1982, pp 1, 32; 23-24/1/1982, p. 4.

his ‘go to’ man in the secretariat.¹¹³ Press reports of a ‘strike fund’ to fight industrial disputes appeared during 1980. A detailed proposal was indeed discussed internally on 18 June. \$100,000 would be raised ‘to encourage member organisations and their members to offer resistance in industrial matters which have national implications’. Bans on the export of live sheep had been occupying most of the Industrial Committee’s time, as well as constant shearing wage applications. The live sheep campaign helped to galvanise membership support, and the fresh-faced Canberra team was keen to exploit other labour issues.¹¹⁴ A peculiar controversy over the legality of wide combs for shearing was ready made for the purpose.¹¹⁵

The AWU’s dominance of shearing sheds was a small matter in the overall reshaping of the economic system which radical economists advocated, but it exemplified the wider problems they identified. This is the background to the ‘wide comb dispute’. The dispute itself was extremely contentious amongst shearers and in rural districts, and is of considerable cultural interest. It was not especially pivotal in reforming the economy because wool was no longer a leading industry. But shearing traditions symbolised deeply imbedded values about what was ‘fair’ which had been operating for almost a century and these were under attack. Opponents of ‘economic rationalism’ repudiated the values implicit in the reforms of the 1980s, but the experience of shearers showed some surprising insights into who were winners and losers.

This was the third economic ‘revolution’ to confront Australia’s export dependent society since Federation. The Keynesian consensus had emerged from the ashes of the Depression, although under McEwenism the protectionist Deakinite consensus remained intact. In the 1980s the exchange rate was floated, industrial protection was largely dismantled, the labour market ‘deregulated’ (but only partially), and public enterprise was ‘privatised’. This radical transformation occurred after decades of frenetic controversy amongst economists. It is outside the scope of this overview of wool’s wild ride to address the reasons for the NFF’s embrace of ‘monetarism’ and ‘free market economics’, or its full consequences, not all of which are yet clear.

¹¹³ For Houlihan’s career and background, Helen Trinca and Anne Davies, *Waterfront: The Battle that Changed Australia*, Doubleday, 2000, pp. 100-101.

¹¹⁴ ABL N143/7, N143/8, N143/9; *The Land*, 1/2/1979, p. 3; 24/4/1980, p. 15.

¹¹⁵ See Chapter 10.

Nevertheless, it laid the foundation for the third ‘long boom’ in Australian economic history. Unlike the previous two, this boom had nothing to do with wool! Somewhat surprisingly shearers, whose union was entrenched in Deakinite thinking, proved better equipped to cope with the pressures of the deregulated world than anyone would have thought.¹¹⁶

The most revolutionary aspect of the new model was that it forced entrepreneurs to focus on markets rather than seeking favours from governments. Warren Denning’s image of Canberra as ‘a happy hunting ground for tariff “touts”’ comes to mind. In John McEwen’s day, too, the success of an industry depended more on getting the ear of the Minister or ‘the department’ than it did on market research or entrepreneurial risk taking. For a simple, if brutal, exposition of how the floating currency transformed the way the economy worked it is hard to go past the words of Hugh Morgan, a mining magnate rather than a grazier, but four square with the NFF philosophy. In 1988 he delivered the Alfred Deakin Lecture at the University of Melbourne. The irony of a tradition honouring one of the great protectionists could hardly be avoided, but Morgan was suitably deferential to the memory of a giant of Federation. Recent economic history since the float in 1983 had witnessed a collapse of the Australian dollar over 1985 and 1986. The then Treasurer, Paul Keating had made a famous comment on radio about Australia becoming a ‘banana republic’ – it was an oblique message to the trade unions that if they pegged wage demands to the cost of living rather than what they produced, the currency would keep falling. By the time Morgan made his speech a fortuitous rise in foreign commodity prices had occurred and (assisted by the fact that wages had been restrained) the floated currency rose in value. In Morgan’s view the market was ‘rewarding’ the sensible behaviour of the manufacturers now that the door to the Treasurer’s office had been closed.

As commodity prices rise, so does the Australian dollar and economic pressure is transferred from commodity producers to those manufacturers who, whilst protected in some measure against imports, cannot now merely solve their difficulties by obtaining an increase in the tariff.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ This study deals with the period from 1900 to 1990. As these words were finalised global financial markets were experiencing the most serious banking crisis since the 1930s. It seems safe to assert that the long boom which started in 1993 is coming to a shuddering halt during 2009. It is at least a warning against ‘end of history’ interpretations of the 1980s economic reforms.

¹¹⁷ H. Morgan, *Political Vision and Economic Reality*; 22nd Alfred Deakin Lecture, 29 November 1988, Alfred Deakin Lecture Trust, Melbourne, 1988, p 15.

There was no need to add, because it was only rubbing it in, that the manufacturers could no longer cave in to every demand for higher wages just to reward employees for honouring factories with their presence. Hugh Morgan's brand of plain speaking was not everyone's cup of tea, but it must be acknowledged that, as Managing Director of Western Mining Corporation, he was adversely affected by a rising exchange rate. He did recognise a bigger picture. When they vetoed revaluation in 1950, they only saw the government depriving them of a 'pound a pound' for wool. Of course in 1950 the manufacturers *could* get redress from their difficulties by running to the Tariff Board. Moreover, John McEwen, the warrior of the Country Party, encouraged them to do it!

Throughout the twentieth century 'competition' had been seen as incompatible with Australian egalitarian values. Interest groups were encouraged to co-operate in building the economic nation. Manufacturers had tariffs. Labour had awards. The States invested in railways. Even farmers were compensated for the costs they endured. John McEwen bragged that 'devaluation compensation' was the best lurk he had ever discovered!¹¹⁸ Only when neo-liberalism asserted itself in the 1980s did 'competition' become politically correct. Although not acknowledged by Left-wing critics, a major reason for the political success of neo-liberalism was that it portrayed competition as the friend of egalitarianism rather than its enemy.¹¹⁹ The egalitarian myth became 'the customer is always right'. In his inimitable style, Hugh Morgan reserved his sharpest barbs for Justice Higgins, the 'famous judge' of long ago.

Higgins' influence has been so profound and so pervasively harmful, that we are entitled to speculate upon the causes of so much disdain for economic reality. Higgins' vision was of a nation for whom commodity prices never fell, and where mediaeval doctrines of just prices could be applied without disturbance from an outside world.¹²⁰

Even W.E. Abbott and Thomas Waddell might have considered this a bit harsh on the worthy judge. Nonetheless, after ninety years of pretending otherwise, Australia was coming around to their point of view.

¹¹⁸ Farmers were granted subsidies *in lieu* of currency devaluation.

¹¹⁹ Consider as a specific example the recurring controversy over whether big oil companies rig petrol prices. The 'solution' to this in the 2000s is invariably referred to the Australian Competition and Consumer Council (ACCC). In the 1930s some form of price control would have been pursued. Arguably, neither approach has been particularly successful, but that is beside the point.

¹²⁰ Morgan, *Political Vision*, p. 15.

SECTION II

The Rise of Contract Shearing

Chapter 4: J.H. Young and the Pioneer Contractors 1895-1920

The 'Station' Shearing System

In the nineteenth century sheep stations organised their own shearing. Dates were advertised inviting written applications with a £1 deposit.¹ Alternatively, shearers simply turned up at the roll call. At big sheds they camped for days in advance. If hired they moved into the accommodation and others drifted away. Large numbers moved around at shearing time and men did not always know each other well, or at all, but roadside camps had a cheery conviviality. Mates travelled in twos and threes but yarning and information swapping fostered mateship on a grander scale.² Henry Lawson poems, based on a relatively brief excursion to western-New South Wales in 1892 when the system was at its peak, helped to mythologise the life.³ In 1909 when the system was in sharp decline, Charles Bean wrote of the migration to Darling River stations: 'At that time of year there began – as there still begins – a great movement, away back in the heart of Australia. Far out there the back country was mobilizing.'⁴

'Station' shearing was a haphazard means of recruitment. Travel was a serious challenge. Better-off shearers rode horses but many tramped by foot until bicycles arrived. Trains were also used but vast areas of the outback were hundreds of miles from the few railway lines.⁵ Motorcycles became popular after about 1913, but use of cars remained limited in the inter-war period.⁶ Engagement at the end of an energy sapping journey was far from guaranteed, and gaps between sheds meant weeks of unemployment.⁷ Demand for shearers was intense for relatively short periods while for most of the year little shearing was available. Working conditions and

¹ *The Worker*, 2/7/1913, p. 1. Forfeited deposit money was usually donated to charity. Telephones and cars eventually rendered them obsolete.

² *The Lone Hand*, October 1907, pp. 613-4; *The Worker*, 14/7/1909, pp. 4, 5; *Brisbane Courier*, 21/7/1923, p. 18.

³ Robyn Burrows and Alan Barton, *Henry Lawson : A Stranger on the Darling*, Angus and Robertson, Harper Collins, Sydney, N.S.W., New York, 1996, pp. 8-9.

⁴ Bean, *On the Wool Track*, p. 81.

⁵ Henry Lawson went to Bourke by train. Toorale station, and Hungerford on the Queensland border were reached on foot. Burrows et al, *Stranger on the Darling*, p. 8. For rail and bicycle, and travelling in groups, *The Worker*, 14/7/1909, p. 4; *The Lone Hand*, October 1907, p. 613.

⁶ For motorcycles *The Worker* 12/2/1913, p. 3.

⁷ See Chapter 5 for Tom Bartle's experiences 1912-1915.

accommodation were often shabby. Bush unionism and the legendary contempt for ‘the squatters’ fed on these privations.

Not all pastoralists were tyrants, and station shearing was not ideal for them either. Overloaded with correspondence, coping with the unpredictability of a roving workforce was never easy. Station managers could never be sure even on the eve of shearing whether chaos or order would rule. All sorts tramped the outback and it was difficult to gauge their merits. Codes of mateship operated in ways that pastoralists could not easily fathom, let alone control. Name-swapping, although a harmless enough subterfuge, often made it difficult to be sure who was who. E.L. Barnes related an amusing instance, during his trip to New Zealand in 1904. He arrived for shearing using the name of a comrade who had been offered a stand but did not want to take it up. Barnes generally got on well with overseers. He did well at the shed, and at the cut out – forgetting for the moment that he had not been employed under his own name - asked for a reference. The overseer readily agreed to provide one, but looked at him wryly. ‘Which name will I put it in?’⁸ Stands were kept for regulars, and shearers often left their deposit at a station after the cut-out to book the shed for next year.⁹ Both squatters and shearers had a vested interest in building mutual understanding, but arrangements could easily fall apart.

Neither the union nor the pastoralists had much success solving the logistical nightmare of co-ordinating 50,000 pastoral workers at thousands of sheds covering a third of the continent. In the troubled 1890s both saw merit in centralisation. A reasonably successful system was operated by the Pastoralists Union of Victoria and Southern Riverina (PUV) from the mid-1890s until the early-1920s. In 1899 7,000 shearers were registered and 936 shearers were sent to 52 sheds.¹⁰ In NSW Whitely King worked hard to foster ‘office engagement’. The motivation was partly political, aiming to subvert unionism, but it was also an attempt to streamline arrangements amid indications that it could become popular amongst shearers.¹¹ W.G. Spence of the ASU, later the AWU, also saw mutual benefits in centralised recruitment, but

⁸ SLV H17273, Box 125/1, E.L. Barnes, *Shirtsleeves to Shirtsleeves*, unpublished, 1949, p. 290.

⁹ Randell, *Teamwork*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 211, 295.

envisaged the union being in control.¹² Each side distrusted the other's motives (probably with sound reason). Union rules prohibited members from registering at pastoralist offices (although many did anyway). Graziers were advised against recruiting from the union office (but some did when they badly needed shearers).¹³ Lukewarm class solidarity on both sides was, in fact, a ray of hope if someone reasonably neutral could cut through the ingrained distrust.

J.H. Young & Co.

John Henry Young was not exactly neutral, but had the right idea. He had been a clerk in the employment office of the Pastoralists' Union, and knew enough shearers to calculate that he could put a team together. In 1895 he approached a few carefully selected stations with a proposition. Young would supply the machines, employ the shearers and shed labour, hire the cook, provide the rations and bale the wool for a fixed price per sheep. The pastoralist needed only to muster the sheep and load the bales onto wagons when it was all over. It was a bold idea. How he financed it or set the price is not clear, but Young was a capable entrepreneur. The experiment occurred in three sheds in the Walgett area. It was a limited exercise involving about 50,000 sheep in total, but evidently proved the point. At a calculated guess, Young had employed perhaps 10 shearers continuously over the three sheds, engaging a similar number of shed hands, a presser, a wool classer, and a cook. Each shearer would have pocketed a cheque for about 5,000 sheep. Young had astutely observed that providing a good run of sheds was the key to being able to retain the best shearers. Before contracting, many shearers did only three sheds for 6-7,000 in a whole season.¹⁴ Young soon had a thriving business and almost immediately other firms started up.¹⁵

John Young was surprisingly frank about his trade secrets at the inaugural Pastoral Award hearing in 1907. Fast shearers were essential for profitable contracting. Wool had to come off fast enough to keep the wool handlers (mostly paid by the week) fully occupied. 'If a man could not shear 100 sheep a day under fair conditions with the

¹² Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 131-2. From about 1910 until the late-1930s *The Worker* newspaper regularly published a listing of starting dates and other details.

¹³ Possibly union leaders pulled strings for Henry Lawson to get a position as a rouseabout at Toorale. Burrows et al, *Stranger on the Darling*, p.113.

¹⁴ *The Worker*, 20/6/1907, p. 22; 23/7/1907, p. 3.

¹⁵ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 259.

machine he [is] of no use.’¹⁶ He acknowledged that this applied amongst the lighter sheep of the Western Division, and tallies in the Central Division and the Riverina were lower, but they were exacting judgements. His views on shearers were based on their general attitudes as well as overall speed and competence. ‘The South Australian shearers are a wretched bad lot. If we had these shearers again we would give up contracting.’¹⁷ He meant they were slow and clumsy, but probably also that they had been a bit too assertive for his liking. Alternatively, Queenslanders were superlative shearers: ‘They are the finest shearers in the world. They are the only shearers in Australia.’¹⁸

Counsel for the pastoralists – a friendly inquisitor - asked him to elaborate, and he provided an overview of the shearing workforce.

In Queensland they shear from January to December, and are professional shearers. There [are] certain months of the year when there [is] a slight difficulty in getting shearers in Queensland. The difficulty [begins] about August and September. These [are] busy months over the whole of the States. There [are] over 40,000 shearers required in Australia during these months, but there [are] really only 20,000 men who follow it up regularly, while there [are] 10,000 who [do] casual shearing as ‘cockies’ on the bosses’ station.¹⁹

It irked the AWU that any employer, but Young in particular, would be so opinionated. At one point the senior counsel asked in cross-examination whether Young had shorn sheep himself. This became a standard practice by the AWU in the Arbitration Court – if you did not shear you were not entitled to have opinions about it. He had not, he admitted, ‘but the business [has] been under [my] observation’.²⁰ It certainly had - at squatter headquarters - but his understanding of the logistics and psychology of shearing was hard to fault.

Young stressed the importance of keeping pressers fully occupied, and he usually had

¹⁶ *The Worker*, 11/7/1907, p. 19.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.* AWU counsel was Hon. George Houston Reid, former Premier of NSW, recent Prime Minister of Australia, renowned free trader, and (supposedly) anti-Labor. In 1909 Deakin’s Protectionists and Reid’s party (Reid was not then closely involved) combined in a liberal-conservative ‘fusion’ to oust Labor from office. Reid plied his trade as a lawyer and saw no conflict accepting this brief, nor the AWU in engaging him. He joked about his better known political role when the graziers tabled an issue of *The Worker*, purporting to demonstrate and discredit AWU political activity, *The Worker*, 20/6/1907, p. 22. Only four months earlier *The Worker* had run a very unflattering cartoon of Reid and an article ridiculing his declared intention to ‘smash socialism’, *The Worker*, 14/2/1907, p. 9. He had also represented the AWU at the Royal Commission into the MSU in 1904 (see below). Correspondence with Nick Dyrenfurth of Monash University on this matter is acknowledged.

the same ones ‘year after year’. If a presser did 20 bales a day he was less than fully occupied. ‘The wool pressers [have] to be going all the time to make a fair thing out of it.’ They could make up to £8 per week. With 10 shearers, a presser might bring in his son to help keep up, but for 15 shearers, Young said he could afford to hire another man. The profit for the contractor was 3 pence per sheep up to 20 shearers, but above that it would be 4 pence! A manager ought to be able to make £1 per day.

Of course, a great deal [depends] upon the quality of the shearers employed. Twenty good shearers would turn out between 40 and 50 bales. Twenty bad shearers might turn out only 20 bales.²¹

Contracting was not aimed at reducing wages, but equally, Young was only prepared to pay big money to workers good enough to earn it. Provided men were fast enough Young was not particularly concerned about the rate per 100. If they were not fast enough they were not wanted at any price. The profit came from having the presser fully occupied. He would not employ an extra presser if the wool was not coming off the board fast enough, preferring instead to persuade the presser to ‘bring in his son’ (and presumably not pay him). Such arrangements were possible in rural society without being condemned as exploitation, but were anathema to the AWU view that everyone had to get the union rate. Shearing and pressing were skilled and physically demanding, and he could not expect to find the qualities needed in every swagman wandering the outback. He cultivated men who had what it took, but was not much interested in anyone else. The regime was popular with some shearers, but clearly did not please everybody. Charles Bean’s woolsheds were ‘republics’. AWU mateship and ‘meetings’ made them democratic, but J.H. Young’s republic was a meritocracy where meetings were considered a waste of valuable time.²²

Other Early Contracting Companies

According to the *Pastoralists Review*, in 1896, the very next season, ‘quite a proportion’ of the larger stations had shorn contract, and contractors had started up in south-west Queensland. Within a decade J.H. Young & Co was operating in all the eastern States shearing over six million sheep annually, employing approximately 2,000 shearers. The NSW Sands Directory for 1910 listed five sheep-shearing contractors with offices in Sydney including J.H. Young. The others were the Federal

²¹ *The Worker*, 11/7/1907, p. 19.

²² Bean, *On the Wool Track*, p. 85.

Sheep Shearing Company, Great Pastoral Co-operative Sheep Shearing & Wool Scouring Company, Merriwa Contract Shearing Company, and Paroo Shearing Company.²³

Federal's Queensland manager, James Meredith Yates (a former Young's manager), also enlightened the 1907 hearing. Company headquarters was in Sydney. It operated in NSW and Victoria, but its most rapid growth was in Queensland. Queensland operations began in about 1903 with four sheds. Only four years later it had 50 spread across the grazing districts: Tambo, Blackall, Adavale, Hughenden, Richmond, Eulo, Darling Downs and St George. The company operated amongst large flocks averaging about 40,000 sheep with one or two as high as 140-150,000. The clientele, this suggests, were graziers on pastoral leases and pastoral companies with chains of sheep stations, plus a smattering of 'grazing selectors'.²⁴ By 1910, over all States, Federal was doing about 200 sheds, all over 10,000 sheep each, and was probably close to matching Young's six million sheep.²⁵ In some cases the company entered into 3-year contracts with stations. 'Wherever [we can we take] the shearers from one shed to another', Yates explained to Reid.

We occasionally succeed in making arrangements in connection with dates to suit the pastoralists and the company, but we have to be ready for all emergencies. The shearers apply to us, and we try to give local men the preference, and at the present time we are filling up our sheds as the shearers send in their applications. I employ from 200 to 250 men, and the head office sends us some from New South Wales. It all depends on the number of sheep we have to shear.²⁶

Management of shed hands during wet weather was a particular headache. Under the weekly pay formula, the old 'station agreements' were entitled to ask idle shed hands to 'do some work, such as chopping wood', but this was less practicable under contracting. Yates said the company had always paid union rates in the pre-arbitration period.

It was never easy 'arranging our sheds in the office'. There was never a 'rush of shearers' and 'now and then [we cannot] fill the sheds and the pastoralists [have] to wait for some time before a start [is] made.' Yates said this had little to do with a lack of machine shearers but a 'want of shearers of any kind'. The difficulty did not arise

²³ Sands Directory for NSW, 1910, p. 1680.

²⁴ *The Worker*, 4/7/1907, p. 19.

²⁵ *The Worker*, 18/10/1910, p. 4.

²⁶ *The Worker*, 4/7/1907, p. 21.

in May-June-July, 'but up to the latter part of October, we have the greatest difficulty'. This was when most properties wanted to shear, and other work was available. Justice O'Connor wanted to know why the shortage persisted, noting that shearers could make a lot more money than unskilled labourers, but no convincing answer was forthcoming apart from the fact that harvesting on the Darling Downs coincided with shearing. The contractors' ambition to cultivate a small workforce of highly skilled elite year-round shearers was frustrated by the fact that many shearers were tied to farming and unavailable at busy periods of the cropping calendar. Some shearers preferred shearing, and would wait several weeks to get a shed if they had to, but the less skilled shed hands were more difficult to procure.²⁷

Many pastoralists were not willing to be flexible when fixing starting dates. A contractor could seldom predict exactly which day a shed would finish, and needed a degree of tolerance. Many graziers cooperated, but some adopted haughty attitudes to fixing dates and expected the contractor to somehow make everything fall into place. William John Young (no relation to John Young the contractor), general manager of the Australian Pastoral Company, was in charge of stations throughout Australia, including nine in the St. George district of Queensland. He was seized of the advantages of contracting (it '[provides] all the labour – everything') - two properties had just switched and others were to follow. However, he refused to recognise that careful scheduling of start times was necessary to ease labour shortages. 'I must have my shearing done about the same time. It must be got over in six weeks. I could not do with less than 200 men.' On one occasion he had four sheds shearing simultaneously.²⁸

Contractors could at times seem dismissive of shearers, but they were faced with practical problems and came to understand how to get the best out of pastoral workers. Old style pastoralists like William Young were less understanding. He replied to the stock question that he could shear sheep by hand but added, with obvious intolerance, 'I have had a lot of experience supervising shearers'. He expected that somehow about 200 of them would materialise when it was convenient for him. Yet he did not know, and did not seem to care, where they came from or

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

where they went to after they left his stations. Shearers, he said, came from ‘no place in particular’ but added vaguely, ‘a good many come from New England’. Shed hands were mostly ‘local men’.²⁹

James Yates told the court honestly enough that he could shear but had never followed it for a living’. He had worked in the sheds since 1880, starting with shed work and within a year or two took on wool classing. Later, he managed woolsheds for J.H. Young & Co before taking up the position with Federal Shearing.³⁰ John Young the contractor had given an answer not unlike William Young the pastoralist, but at least it was backed by considerable knowledge of shearers’ capabilities and habits.

While these contracting enterprises enjoyed great success in the early-1900s it was not always plain sailing. The National Shearing Company ran into financial difficulties and was eventually bankrupted.³¹ Fresh issues arose about where legal obligations rested. When the AWU attempted to collect lost wages from the stations the courts ruled that they were not the legal employers.³² In 1910 it was rumoured that the Federal Company was short of cash. It was accused of offering the piece pickers tins of tobacco to work during smoko, and trouble arose at Tupra station over its refusal to provide ‘vegetables, butter, sauce and jam’. Frank Lundie of the Adelaide Branch claimed that Federal Shearing ‘absolutely refuse[s]’ to return deposits, hinting that shearers’ cash was being used as working capital.³³

Contract shearing originated in NSW but its most rapid growth was in Queensland, where grazing selections intermingled with huge pastoral empires. Stations with more than 100,000 sheep each still dominated, but the number of small graziers was expanding due to the 1910 Land Act. Woolscouring plants were located at Longreach, Ilfracombe, Barcaldine, Winton and Blackall, and these were also set up with shearing stands, where ‘hundreds of thousands of sheep [were] put through the hands of the shearers’. These were almost all sheep from the smaller properties. The Longreach-

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *The Worker*, 4/7/1907, p. 19.

³¹ *The Worker*, 22/8/, 1915, p. 19; 28/10/1915, p. 23; 6/4/1916, p. 21; 18/1/1917, p. 19.

³² *The Worker*, 20/4/1916, p. 20; 18/1/1917, p. 19

³³ *The Worker*, 17/8/1910, p. 12; 31/8/1910, p. 5; 21/9/1910, p. 6; 28/9/1910, p. 8; 5/10/1910, p. 3.

Ilfracombe scour owned by Edkins, Marsh & Co shored 777,000 sheep in 1913, a huge throughput for a single location. Barcaldine had more than one establishment. Westbourne's scour had 16 shearing stands and was able to handle about 2,000 sheep per day (average of 125 per shearer). During the season they used about 40 shearers, so few stayed for the full season. McLaughlin & Co's scour was equipped with 23 stands with a capability of about 3,000 per day, doing 100-120,000 sheep a year. At Blackall the Western Queensland Meat Company provided 20 stands and the turnover of shearers was comparable, 40 or 50 different shearers filling the stands during the season.³⁴ These were all prime employment sites for money-makers. The comments of Justice H.B. Higgins, presiding over the 1911 arbitration case, removes all doubt about the rapid uptake of contract shearing in Queensland.

The principal cause of the higher average tallies in Queensland, and of the higher average earnings of the Queensland shearers, is to be found, in my opinion, in the fact that the shearers in Queensland are faster workers. In the other States the shearing usually takes place in the latter part of the year, but in Queensland there is shearing all the year round, in all the months; and there has arisen a special class of professional shearers, men attracted by the early season and the prospect of many sheds, men who come to live in the various centres of Queensland, and who, by frequent shearing, acquire exceptional dexterity and speed. In Queensland there are also, perhaps as the result of the same causes, partly also because the stations are generally larger, far more sheds than elsewhere in which shearing contractors are employed. Of the shearing fixtures for this year in Queensland, I gather about 70 per cent, or more, are contract sheds. In New South Wales, I am told, not one-fifth of the sheep are shorn contract, and the proportion of contract sheds is still smaller. The contractors have the pick of the sheds and the pick of the shearers, and attract them by the steady run and rapid sequence of sheds. In Queensland there are also many co-operative parties of shearers, who go from station to station, bringing engines and other plant with them; and the tendency of such parties to 'speed up' is apparent as in the case of butty-gangs. The effect of contract shearing on the tallies is very marked in certain instances where it has been introduced after the station has been doing its own shearing.³⁵

No wonder John Young thought Queensland shearers were 'the best in the world'.

John Young came from the pastoralists' side of the fence and this affected the union's willingness to come to terms with contracting. He was correspondingly reluctant to concede that the AWU, for all its extravagant myth-making, was a voice for the legitimate grievances of a disparate and sometimes unruly workforce. His thriving business was less than seven years old when he was embroiled in grazier intrigues aimed at undermining the AWU and accordingly the union never expressed any gratitude for the valuable service he rendered money-making shearers (see below).

³⁴ The Queensland Government Intelligence and Tourist Bureau, *Central Queensland: Its Marvellous Pastoral and Mineral Resources, Its Unbounded Agricultural Possibilities, and Its Scenic Beauties*, G and N Ingleton, 1914 (digital edition published by Archive CD Books, Adelaide, 2007), pp. 52-54.

³⁵ CAR, Vol. 5, 1911, p. 87.

Events seemed to reinforce the union's view that the prime purpose of contract shearing was to do the squatters' dirty work. In fact, under the nose of the union, and to a lesser extent the graziers, contractors had eased such problems. The Pastoral Award arrived more than a decade after Young's successful venture at Walgett. Young sold the business in 1913 and the name changed to Long and Hill, but his role as a pioneer of shearing organisation was not yet finished.³⁶ His hard headed realism was disturbing to old shearers who could not keep up the pace of 100 a day or better and they favoured rules which would slow gun shearers down. This was given a sharper edge by the transition from blade shearing to machines.

Blades or Machines

At the turn of the century the transition to machines was far from complete. Smaller stations with flocks of less than 10,000 and the proliferating farming properties with as few as 1,000 mostly shone with blades. However, machines were relentlessly closing the gap as prosperity began to return after the end of the drought. Machine shearing skills were quite different to blade techniques and older shearers found them difficult to master. Contract shearing rapidly advanced the uptake of machines and Young's aggressive management style stirred up growing resentment. In 1923 T.J. Lonsdale, a former shearer and AWU organiser at Bourke before the war, recalled 'a feud between the followers of the two systems', and 'hatred engendered in the hearts of the old blade men towards the machine men'.³⁷ Some owners were as reluctant to adopt machines as the old blade shearers, although the hard-headed case for them was overwhelming. It sped up the shearing, reduced its average cost, and resulted in a cleaner cut that enhanced the value of wool. Young men were shearing with machines and blade specialists were a diminishing breed. Heavier fleeces, too, advanced new methods of shearing.³⁸

Mateship and money-making clashed over 'carrying machines'.³⁹ As far as the union was concerned the onus was on the grazier or contractor to provide the equipment. For battlers it was bad enough paying for fresh combs and cutters. AWU rules

³⁶ *The Worker*, 2/7/1913, p. 1; See Chapter 6 on the Graziers' Cooperative Shearing Company.

³⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 14/7/1923, p. 18.

³⁸ *The Worker*, 20/6/1907, p. 1; 4/7/1907, p. 19; 27/6/1907, p. 19.

³⁹ To 'carry a machine' meant a shearer owning his own handpiece.

prohibited members from carrying machines, but not all handpieces were the same. Money-makers who had mastered machine shearing did not seriously object to buying their own. The unreliability of station handpieces was a key factor. Gun shearers gravitating to the new contracting gangs were especially attracted to owning their own gear.⁴⁰ In Queensland, perhaps half of all shearers owned handpieces in 1907.⁴¹

Carrying machines quickly became a form of ‘scabbing’. As Lonsdale explained, ‘strange things happened’ to private machines. ‘The lagoon at Toulby station is the resting place of at least a score of shearing machines which disappeared off the stands at the shed’, he wrote.⁴² In 1905 at Warraweena station, near Bourke, there was ‘some trouble over some of the men hanging their own machines’. To appease quarrelling amongst the shearers ‘the boss is said to have bought them’. There was a limit to what this boss would put up with, though. A dispute over wet sheep arose and the ‘rep’ ‘was made the target of the boss’s spleen and his shearing suddenly found to be unsatisfactory’. That is, he was sacked! The significant conflict at this shed, however, was between machine carrying shearers and sticklers for union protocol, and the squatter was primarily an observer.⁴³

The rule against private machines was emphasised strongly in the union’s 1904 policy statement. ‘Members are not permitted to provide machines, and must not use any other than those provided by the employer.’⁴⁴ However, in Queensland serious thought was being given to abandoning the rule. Matters came to a head at the AWU Conference in 1905, a year after Queensland amalgamated with the AWU. While conference favoured retaining the ban, delegates knew it would be difficult to enforce. E. Bowman feared that failure to keep it might be the ‘thin edge of the wedge’. Squatters and contractors would simply stop supplying handpieces altogether and before long shearers would be compelled to buy their own if they wanted work. Even worse – shearers would be obliged to pay ‘the experts to do them up, find their own oil, and even perhaps pay rent on the top gear and engine driver.’ This was deliberate hyperbole, surely, but it did make the point that the union had to decide whether it

⁴⁰ *The Worker*, 20/6/1907, pp. 19, 23, 24.

⁴¹ *The Worker*, 28/2/1907, p. 13; 27/6/1907, p. 19.

⁴² *Brisbane Courier*, 4/8/1923, p. 18.

⁴³ *The Worker*, 28/9/1905, p. 6. Warraweena was a large machine shed with over 46,000 sheep. *The Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1905, p. 14.

⁴⁴ *The Worker*, 9/4/1904, p. 5.

should accommodate the protest, or side with money-makers who preferred their own handpieces to poorly maintained station machines.

The Secretary General Donald Macdonell typically tried to appease both sides.

[I think] they should have had a rule years ago allowing men to find their own machines, provided they were paid something extra by the sheepowner for so doing. The best men [are] now penalized for their loyalty in sticking to the rule: while the disloyal not only [earn] more by having superior machines, but - what [is] more galling to many men - they [are] unable to compete on even terms with other shearers carrying machines whom they [know] they could beat on their merits. Of course, if men were allowed to carry their machines all would soon be compelled to do it, and that would amount to a reduction in price; but if the sheepowner paid extra rates there would be no reduction, and their claim to the Arbitration Court could not be prejudiced. [I think] such a proposal would best meet the case.⁴⁵

The ‘disloyal’ ones he was referring to were deserting the AWU for a rival union. During its short life from 1902 to about 1906 the Machine Shearers and Shed Employees Union (MSU) threatened to undermine the very survival of the AWU. At the time of the conference debate, though, the battle to destroy the MSU was almost won and Macdonell was more interested in wooing its followers back into the fold. Rather than condemning them as ‘scabs’, he wanted to find a way of letting them carry machines. Fining them and encouraging the angry mob to throw handpieces into lagoons was not helping. In a typical AWU fudge, the carrying machines ban remained and union rhetoric condemned the practice. But it was a rule more honoured in the breach than the observance. It was quietly left out of the 1905 policy statement.⁴⁶

As the original machines installed in the 1890s began to wear out after 15 or 20 years of use, machine shearers were often in conflict with employers over poorly maintained or faulty machinery.⁴⁷ This contributed to shearing unrest during World War I.⁴⁸ In a case involving Talavera station near Roma in 1908, shearers were eventually exonerated on appeal, having walked off the job after an extended machinery breakdown. This was regarded by the AWU as a watershed.⁴⁹ The legal precedent that employers were bound to provide efficiently working machinery and handpieces reinforced the argument that shearers with private handpieces were

⁴⁵ *The Worker*, 13/5/1905, p. 7.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*.

⁴⁷ *The Worker*, 9/1/1913, p. 20; 17/9/1913, p. 4; 24/9/1913, p. 4.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 6.

⁴⁹ *The Worker*, 12/3/1908, p. 29; 19/3/1908, pp. 21, 29; 25/6/1908, p. 29.

encouraging squatters to ignore their obligations and ‘scabbing’ on their mates.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the practice did not die out. For a time ‘cocky’ sheds were a form of reprieve for the remaining blade men – although this was a very different social environment from the old giant sheds, and it was a little demeaning.⁵¹ Before long the farmers ‘began to get small plants of two machines and up to four and six’, so eventually these were no longer blade sheds either. Older men drifted to opal digging at Lightning Ridge, and some saw out their working days as shed hands.⁵² This reduction in status was not necessarily a source of continuing conflict with the younger men, because their yarns and attitudes from the ‘old days’ found their way into twentieth century shearing culture. Gradually their number dwindled and by the end of World War I the issue had lost its sting. For a time, though, it split the union.

The MSU and the 1902 Strike⁵³

Seasons from 1895 to 1899 were extremely difficult for the AWU. Shearers were disillusioned as sheep numbers declined steadily due to drought. The union bled members but its leaders were determined to hold it together. They negotiated to the extent they could with pastoralist organisations to set terms for shearing. This bound its members to ‘union rates and conditions’, but the solidarity of shearers could not be counted on. Pastoralists were not in much better shape. Rabbits were running wild and many were in financial trouble. From their perspective the union remained belligerent and disruptive. Pastoralists were turning to contracting, but some remained obsessed with being in control of their own woolsheds.⁵⁴ Victoria’s labour registration system was working reasonably well, and the PUV was ambivalent about contractors, instructing its office not to engage shearers for them.⁵⁵ Conferences between the AWU and pastoralists’ unions were hampered by distrust, and both sides had difficulties in getting their own members to abide by the set rates.

⁵⁰ *Brisbane Courier*, 4./8/1923, p. 18.

⁵¹ *The Bulletin*, 22/12/1910, p. 44.

⁵² *Brisbane Courier*, 14/7/1923, p. 18.

⁵³ This segment relies heavily on Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 260-357, and Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 95-9.

⁵⁴ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 260-71, 304.

⁵⁵ Randell, *Teamwork*, pp. 17-31.

In 1900 and 1901 the drought was getting worse but the bargaining position of shearers improved. Sheep numbers were still declining but many shearers were lured to the Western Australian goldfields and a good number went to New Zealand.⁵⁶ As the oversupply of shearers narrowed they became more assertive and most sheds shored at 20/- a hundred in 1901, above 18/6 set as the limit by the NSW pastoralists. This was as much due to the mood of men in the sheds as to AWU policy, as non-union sheds also shored at 20/-. More ominously from the pastoralist viewpoint, there were dramatic increases in AWU membership in both 1900 and 1901. Its leaders grew more confident. The 1901 season witnessed a number of wildcat strikes at individual sheds and, in Merritt's judgement, the overall season was a clear win for the AWU. The Pastoralists' Union, which had also been bleeding members, likewise saw a rise in subscriptions. When they were in trouble squatters were more inclined to appreciate the advantages of group solidarity.⁵⁷

Despite these encouraging signs for the AWU its leaders sought succour in political rather than industrial agitation. Labor representation in parliament and the prospect of compulsory arbitration legislation would be more effective in the long run than direct action at woolsheds. Already, many of its leaders had served terms in parliament and many more had stood for office. Arthur Rae was one of 35 members elected in 1891 to the New South Wales parliament – Labor's first flush of real electoral promise.⁵⁸ W.G. Spence had represented Cobar from 1898, switching after Federation to the Commonwealth seat of Darling. Cobar was inherited by Donald Macdonell, whose day job from 1900 was Secretary General of the AWU. Political activity required funds and an increase in membership dues was rammed through at the 1901 Conference over rank-and-file reservations. The Wade Government in NSW, having closely examined the New Zealand Arbitration and Conciliation Act of 1892, passed legislation in 1902. Pastoralists viewed arbitration with trepidation, but knew they had to learn to live with it.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Arnold, 'Yeomen and Nomads'; Rollo Arnold, 'The Dynamics and Quality of Trans-Tasman Migration, 1885-1910' *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, 1986, pp. 1-20.

⁵⁷ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 284-92.

⁵⁸ Rae reappears briefly in Chapter 5, and is prominent in Chapters 6 and 7.

⁵⁹ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 192, 271-7, 292-4.

In 1902 the drought deepened alarmingly and despite the renewed strength of the union a very difficult season beckoned. As a letter writer to *The Worker* put it:

The stations around Ivanhoe are not likely to have much of a shearing this season. Some sold most of their sheep before the worst of the drought. It will be a hard job to save the remainder from perishing.⁶⁰

Graziers were desperate, and faced the diabolical problem of getting the wool off to at least salvage something before stock perished. Their plight gave shearers leverage despite dramatically depleted sheep numbers, although strikes at such a time hardened anti-AWU prejudice. The AWU was confident enough to announce at the Annual Conference in January that union rates for 1902 would be 25/- a hundred. Pastoralists saw it as a gambit for the likely claim in the NSW Court, not necessarily what the AWU expected to get. Nevertheless, it was a 25 per cent rise – more in Victoria where ruling rates were lower. It was bold to the point of being provocative.⁶¹

An unexpected bombshell dramatically changed the equation. A new union (the MSU) had been registered at the NSW Court, and announced that its rates for 1902 would be 20/- a hundred. In commercial terms it was an aggressive act of price competition. In trade union terms it was unmitigated ‘scabbery’. The shearing agreement offered to squatters was in many respects similar to the AWU’s, but with telling differences. The MSU permitted shearers to engage through contractors and (as the name suggested) to own machines. Overall, it was shrewdly judged. For desperate times 20/- was a good rate. Many sheds had shorn for less in recent years and very few, possibly none, for more. Some drought stricken squatters were desperate enough to pay 25/- to get the wool off before sheep perished, and shearers worth their salt would have been happy to hold out for the AWU’s 25/- if they could get it. Most knew, though, it was unrealistic. The MSU was splitting shearers into two sharply defined camps, and was likely to cause major defections from the AWU.⁶²

It quickly got worse for the AWU. The pastoralists accepted the MSU’s request for a conference, and after some spirited haggling came to terms with the rebel union at 20/-. They agreed to dispense with ‘Clause 8’ of the agreement, which had been there

⁶⁰ *Worker*, 7/6/1902, p. 2.

⁶¹ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 294-7.

⁶² Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 297-301.

since 1894, and was a sore point with the AWU.⁶³ To add insult to injury the AWU's request for a conference was met with a polite return letter enclosing a copy of the Pastoralist's agreement – it was a way of telling the AWU that there was nothing further to discuss! The over-confident claim for 25/- had been comprehensively upstaged. To suddenly revise 'union rates' to 20/- would have been extremely embarrassing and the subsequent gloating in the *Pastoralists' Review* unbearable. To fight for anything higher was doomed to failure. The AWU was boxed into a corner.⁶⁴

The key architects of the MSU were J.H. Young shearers, notably John Leahy who was appointed Secretary. Leahy had shorn 'non-union' in 1894 although he joined the AWU in 1895 and 1896. Jack Meehan, an AWU stalwart, met Leahy in 1901 at a contract shed and they had long (seemingly constructive) conversations about unionism and 'law and order' in the sheds. George Maiden of Goldsborough Mort & Co. said that the MSU shearers were 'a great boon to the pastoral interests' and 'they get along pleasantly together without bother or trouble'.⁶⁵ The emphasis on attitudes tempered a discussion within the MSU about the merits of establishing grower subsidised shearing training. It was said the industry needed 'young men who will act fairly in time of any unpleasantness in the sheds', and a 'class of men [from] ... temperate non-contentious families [to avoid] the nauseous problem of how to deal with crowds of warlike bushmen'.⁶⁶ MSU shearers were not, however, immune from a touch of bush legend swagger, as this dismissive view of formal training hints.

'Technical schools' is a term which sounds magnificent; but the man who wants to learn machine shearing, will do so much quicker in a woolshed..... In a shed can be seen all the latest styles – long blow, three-quarter blow, and the blow which is a mixture of both; also the 'bogus' organiser's blow, which, like the shears, will soon be a thing of the past.⁶⁷

The correspondent could not resist turning the tables on the AWU, cheekily deeming it 'the "bogus" organiser'.

The turf war between blades and machines was a factor in the MSU's creation. It attracted top line contract shearers who viewed the AWU's anti-squatter viewpoint

⁶³ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 73. Clause 8 specified that interpretation of agreements rested with the woolgrower. In later years the onus was shifted to the Arbitration Court.

⁶⁴ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 301-6.

⁶⁵ NSWPP, 1905, Vol. 3, Part II, p. 1097, Legislative Assembly of NSW, *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Formation, Constitution and Working of the Machine Shearers and Shed Employees Union of Employees*, pp. 17, 23 of Report.

⁶⁶ *The Shearer*, 19/11/1904, p. 4.

⁶⁷ *The Shearer*, 10/12/1904, p. 4.

with contempt. The ‘undercurrents’ referred to by Charles Bean referred to nit-picking agitation over woolshed conditions which interrupted proceedings and caused delays. MSU shearers eschewed the idea that squatters were class enemies. J.H. Young’s testimony at the arbitration hearing some years later showed that contractors were prepared to pay shearers top rates if sheds hummed with efficiency and speed. The increase in AWU fees and its political activities were singled out for ridicule by MSU leaders.⁶⁸ References to *The Worker* newspaper as *The Loafer* underscored contracting money-makers’ disdain for the AWU’s mateship ethos.⁶⁹

Whether the MSU was a squatters’ front remains unclear. The AWU certainly thought so, but Merritt gives it the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps there were no explicit links to pastoralists, although the contractor Young was suspiciously proactive. Young and Leahy preferred to be fined than to appear before a Royal Commission in 1904. This might have produced some historical clarification, but it was certainly ammunition for AWU accusations that there was something to hide. During 1902 and 1903 Young was negotiating with Burgon & Ball of Sheffield, shearing machinery manufacturers, to float his business. A private letter to Young at the end of 1902 contained the following intriguing comment.

You refer in your letter to the ‘Blowing out of the old Union’, having received many congratulations: well you know Jack, I have congratulated you, and again wish to do so, for I am sure you are responsible for the great success the new Union seems to have obtained, and if I were you, I should most certainly clear the way to some quiet corner in that beautiful harbour of yours and paint pictures.⁷⁰

This is not quite the smoking gun which proves Young’s financial and organisational involvement, but it is awfully close.⁷¹ It certainly indicates that as 1902 drew to a close, pastoralists thought they had the AWU on the run.

Macdonell’s response to the crisis was two-pronged. Firstly, the MSU’s legal right to registration had to be undermined – its long term survival would be difficult otherwise. Secondly, he prepared to fight for ‘union rates’. This was not a preferred strategy because of recent bitter experience, but to do nothing would see desperate

⁶⁸ AWU fees after the 1902 increase were 15/- pa. MSU fees were 2/6. The MSU claimed it could afford to do this because it did not pay officials £200 a year, sponsor parliamentary candidates, or run a newspaper. Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 295, 300, 301.

⁶⁹ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 333.

⁷⁰ SLV M2555, Jas Hinde to J.H. Young, 19/12/1902.

⁷¹ Hearn and Knowles emphasise financial links between the MSU and ‘shearing contractors’, and lean more to the view that it was a vehicle of pastoralists, Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 98-9.

shearers rush the sheds and boost the credibility of the rebel union. Moreover, if contract shearers won most of the sheds at 20/- a hundred, most others would be out of work. It could be painted as a victory of a greedy few against true mateship. The moral basis of solidarity could be reinforced.

The deregistration ploy backfired horribly. The AWU tried to argue that the MSU was an employers' organisation rather than one of workers, but MSU lawyers succeeded in exposing union rules not compatible with MSU members' needs. These included AWU political funds, and (unsurprisingly) rules against private machines and contracting. Macdonell decided that the offending clauses would have to be jettisoned and hastily convened a meeting of the Executive Council. Unfortunately this was ruled out of order when the court agreed with the MSU that the amendments required a plebiscite of AWU members. Thus after an unsuccessful court challenge, an unsuccessful appeal, and a defence of the MSU's cheeky counter application to deregister the AWU (all at considerable legal expense), the 'bogus outfit' was still a registered workers' union in NSW at the end of 1902.⁷²

Meanwhile the strike was also a fiasco, although it is hard to discern this from contemporary accounts of it in *The Worker*. Knowing the weakness of its position the Executive Council hastily revised 'policy' rates from 25/- to 22/6 before the campaign had even started. As with all shearers strikes hard facts are vague and the AWU seems to have enjoyed some early success. Strike camps were formed and there were colourful reports of incidents involving intimidation and kidnapping at Wingadee and other stations in the Coonamble region, some written by 'Banjo' Paterson for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.⁷³ These imbued the 1902 strike with some of the myth-making aura of the 1890s strikes, but a pattern quickly emerged of shearing at the MSU rate. This was hardly surprising and by September the strike was abandoned.⁷⁴

The twin debacle explains Young's optimism at the end of the season, but Macdonell persisted with a quasi-legal assault in 1903. If his day-job was Secretary General of the AWU, his night-job as the Member for Cobar now showed its true worth. At 3am

⁷² Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 298-9, 307.

⁷³ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 96-7. 'Wingadee' is misspelt as 'Wingalee'.

⁷⁴ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 312-5.

on the 3rd of September 1903 when the House was almost empty, he moved that a select committee investigate the MSU. By 5am the motion was passed, and even better, Macdonell was ensconced as chairman of the investigation. When the ambush was discovered the next day there was an uproar, but the upshot of it was the setting up of a Royal Commission a day or two later to examine aspects of the MSU's origins and purpose. The legitimacy of the Commission was challenged by the pastoralists – this was the basis on which several key figures including Leahy and Young refused to testify – and it became something of a legal quagmire.⁷⁵ However, it was enough for AWU propaganda purposes that the final report questioned the motives of MSU supporters, and the idea that it was a squatter conspiracy struck.⁷⁶ In 1903 and 1904 the seasons improved and pastoralists swung back to hiring local men in preference to MSU shearers from outside their districts. Basically the MSU was unable to maintain its early momentum in the face of persistent and superior AWU organisation. Equally, Macdonell had a field day exploiting the conspiracy theory. With the MSU on the back foot the AWU energetically pursued a Commonwealth award.⁷⁷

The union was, in fact, positioning itself to accommodate MSU deserters. But it needed militants also. The 1902 strike was not best forgotten but became another heroic myth, created out of what was, at the time, an unmitigated disaster.⁷⁸ For years afterwards, when organisers gave rousing pep talks while going round the sheds, or when an old unionist died and was being eulogised, phrases such as 'he was with us in the fight of 1902' were often repeated. The AWU leaders of the 1930s had been young unionists in 1902 and this legitimised their status. Delegates to the Annual Convention in 1949 took time off to make another of their 'pilgrimages' to the graves of Ted Grayndler, John Barnes and Jack McNeill in the Melbourne General Cemetery. The current President, W.H. Nicol, presented what was described as a 'stirring address' mentioning as well two other 'great warriors' buried elsewhere, Arthur Watts and Frank Lundie. These 'five great men' had graduated to influential positions, including Cabinet rank, but had begun as ordinary shearers. The story was told of the time Barnes, McNeill and Lundie had been travelling in the Riverina looking for work, but 'there was a strike on, and they would not go into the shearing sheds'. They

⁷⁵ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 97-9.

⁷⁶ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 323-5, 330-2.

⁷⁷ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 99.

⁷⁸ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 344-54, 362.

spotted the fire of a strike camp on the opposite bank of the Murrumbidgee. Rather than cross to join the camp they pitched their tent for the night, joining the strikers after breakfast the following morning. They had, of course, been spotted. The strikers wondered rather indignantly whether they were spies. If they were union men why hadn't they come straight into the camp? Barnes replied that they did not want to place extra demands on their depleted food supplies, even though he knew they would willingly offer it!⁷⁹ The story may, or may not be true, but it exemplifies the intriguing way that the union's mateship code was able to claim heroic radicalism from its past, and weld it onto its adopted pragmatic scheming and deal making. The AWU made an art form out of such ideological gymnastics.

Shearing at 'Coombe Martin' and 'Wellshot', 1904⁸⁰

Ilfracombe lies between Barcaldine and Longreach in the heart of Queensland's pastoral country. By 1904 the rains had returned, wool prices were improving, and stock numbers recovering. The rapid advance of machine shearing and contracting was a talking point whenever sheep men gathered. There was already a significant scattering of 'grazing farms' throughout central-western Queensland in 1893, and these had since been added to.⁸¹ One response to the 1902 drought, however, had been to extend expiring pastoral leases on favourable terms, so that pastoral companies could recover financially before they had to relinquish them. This remained an ongoing cause of resentment in Labor circles for years to come. The New Zealand and Australian Land Company, owners of Wellshot and Coombe Martin stations, was one pastoral company expanding its activities against the trend to closer settlement.⁸²

Coombe Martin had switched to machine shearing about a decade previously. Wellshot had just changed the previous season and was now going a step further, engaging J.H. Young and Co. for the first time. At least a few of the 60 or so shearers who scored stands at these two sheds in 1904, and maybe some of the shed hands, would have imagined how much better life would be if only they could get a few quid together. Perhaps they might even end up with an acreage carved out of one of these

⁷⁹ *The Worker*, 9/2/1949, p. 6.

⁸⁰ Details were reported in *The Shearer*, Vol. 1, No. 8, 17/9/1904, p. 2.

⁸¹ *Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1893, 1905.

⁸² See Chapter 2 for New Zealand and Australian Land Company expansion during this period.

vast estates and make a go of it on their own, running 5-6,000 sheep and fattening a few steers. Shearing big tallies was a way of getting the capital together to get started, provided the government did its bit to encourage the small man onto the land. Such men appreciated union efforts to bargain shearing rates up, but had little time for radicals. They resented the wealthy squatter to an extent, and had no particular love for the New Zealand and Australian Land Company. Although 1894 was a relatively fresh memory, few were still brooding over it.

The drought and the failure of the strikes had nevertheless left their mark, and not all shearers felt this hopeful. The hardships of shearing bred disillusionment, and many were resigned to lives as wage workers. The bleak view of the outback portrayed by Henry Lawson resonated. Perhaps their ageing bones might last for another year or two. They wanted shearing rates high enough to make a living without having to race the clock. Younger ones might have heard radical talk circulating in mines and cane fields, and the railway yards in Brisbane, and been excited by it. William Lane's *Workingmen's Paradise*, perhaps, encouraged hostility to the 'squatter', and to the world at large.⁸³

Shearing at Coombe Martin did not go according to plan. The manager got 60 replies for his advertised 40 stands, so on the face of it there was little to worry about. But when shearing actually started on 3 August only 25 signed on. To make it worse most of these were grossly incompetent. In the overseer's view only eight were any good and the rest were hopeless. They were unacceptably slow with very poor technique, hacking the wool and 'butchering' the sheep. The management put up with it for three days, hoping there might be some improvement as they acclimatised to the work, but then decided to cut their losses and call it all off. They sacked the whole board, including the eight shearing to an acceptable standard. Putting a whole new team together at very short notice when there was a shortage of good shearers was risky to say the least. However, the manager had the luxury of knowing the larger flock at Wellshot was being shorn extremely efficiently under the contract arrangements. The sheep were driven over to Wellshot where Young's shearers easily

⁸³ Both had been 'scab' sheds in 1891 and 1894. At Coombe Martin in 1894 a unionist – one of a group who had turned up to harass the 'free labour' - was shot in the thigh by a stray bullet. Another unionist named Prior was jailed, possibly on false evidence. Svensen, *Shearers' War*, pp 204-5; Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, pp. 242, 244.

coped with an extra 60,000 or so sheep - roughly another 1000 per man, perhaps six or seven days extra for gun shearers, and a welcome fattening of cut-out cheques.

There was a subsequent court case because the minimum quota specified in the Coombe Martin agreement had not been reached. All but one of the shearers accepted their fate, but James Simple stood on his dignity and sued for wrongful dismissal. The historical interest lies mainly in the insights into shearing culture embedded in the evidence.⁸⁴ Simple was 32 years old. He had, he said, shorn with blades in 1886 (which means he would have been 14) and with machines since 1892 (aged 20). It had taken him about a week on the machines to get to about 60 a day and his best tally was over 100. However, it transpired that he had shorn at only two sheds in 1892 and had not done any machine shearing since. He had recently shorn at Wellshot when it was still a blade shed (he would not have had a show of getting a pen there in 1904 with Young's running the shearing). When pressed he acknowledged that he had 'been away from it two or three years at a time'. He had a 'learner's reference' from one of the sheds he had shorn at in 1892 and a 'first-class reference' from the other, but unfortunately these papers had been 'destroyed in the fire at Emerald'. Reading between the lines, he was not a regular shearer and had talked up his ability in order to get the stand. The '60 a day' and a best tally of 100 suggests he had the makings of being a good shearer, but he was badly out of practice and there is a strong possibility that the claims were fabrications. During the abbreviated 3-day shearing at Coombe Martin he had averaged 43 a day, with a lowest tally of 35 and a highest of 56. He maintained that his tallies were acceptable for a competent shearer during the first week. It was widely accepted by shearers that it took a week or more to get their hand in at a new shed. He claimed the sheep were exceptionally wrinkled and had dense wool, and all the shearers were complaining about them. He said that he did not know what tallies other shearers were getting (which seems implausible) or that one shearer, Harry Darnley, had shorn 114 on 8 August (the same day that Simple got his best tally of 56).

Harry Darnley was one of the eight shearers management had regarded as acceptable. He did not openly contradict Simple's version, perhaps out of a sense of worker

⁸⁴ James Simple v R.A. Hopkins, Small Debts Court, Longreach, Friday, 2 September 1904.

solidarity, or perhaps due to an understandable reaction to the sacking, which in his case was certainly unfair. He was also the shed ‘rep’, and probably therefore a ‘union man’ and not inclined to back the pastoralist’s version. When shearing was called off he had taken the settlement, but was not re-employed at Wellshot and had not been able to get replacement work⁸⁵. His usual tallies among good sheep were in the range of 100 to 140, but the sheep at Coombe Martin were, he said, ‘rough’. Nonetheless, his tallies over the three full days were 67, 78 and 114, which suggests that he was getting used to them pretty quickly. Simple was a ‘fair shearer’, in Darnley’s opinion. He confirmed that shearers who were ‘out of practice’ could expect to improve their tallies by ‘about a third’ after a couple of weeks. Darnley had been shearing for ‘thirteen or fourteen years’, so he may have been only a year or two older than Simple but the evidence suggested that he was more experienced.

Hugh Gill was considerably older than either, and had been shearing for 35 years (i.e. since about 1869). He had not shorn with machines since 1898 (six years previously). Gill drew a clear distinction between the skills of blade and machine shearing. It took a full season for a good hand shearer to come to grips with the demands of machines. On the other hand an ‘out of practice’ machine shearer would require ‘from three or four days up to a fortnight to get his hand in’. Moreover, ‘it would take him fully a fortnight to get up to his usual average’ but ‘he could do passable work in the meantime’. A man ‘with his hand in’ should have been able to do 85 a day of the Coombe Martin sheep. Asked about a shearer who had not touched a handpiece for 12 years, but had followed hand shearing (as Simple had claimed) Gill still thought ‘it would take him ten or twelve days to become competent’. Perhaps a sense of solidarity also coloured Gill’s evidence to the court. Gill’s assessment of his own proficiency was later flatly contradicted by Richard Hopkins, the station manager. Gill had no idea how to shear with machines, chopping the wool and he ‘did not know how to handle the sheep and work the sheep to the machine’.

Joseph Webb was another older shearer who had been in the sheds since 1875 (nearly 30 years – suggesting he was around 50 years old, possibly more). He, too, spoke of the difference between machine and blade shearing and found the transition

⁸⁵ Shearers of Darnley’s ability were in short supply, but it was very late in the year for shearing in Queensland. He probably needed to travel down to NSW, or even Victoria, to get a shed.

problematic. Tallies with the blades averaging 130 fell to around 100 with machines (but he claimed once to have done 135 with machines in a day and 700 in a week). Even though machines had been around for at least half of Webb's shearing career, hand shearing was still quite common in 1904. Webb's testimony confirmed the general view that it took about 10 days for a shearer to build up to his usual daily tally. At Coombe Martin he had done only '39 or 40' on the first day and this had built up to 63 on the last full day before the shearing was called off. It was hard for older shearers to adjust to machines, and Webb was one of those who had not successfully made the transition.

The shearers maintained that the sheep were exceptionally difficult to shear. Simple was the only one who refused to accept the settlement offered and took the station to court. Had he been sacked for incompetence there would have been no case, but because the whole shearing had been halted he claimed that he was owed compensation because the station had broken its agreement. The management's account of the Coombe Martin shearing was, understandably, quite different. Hopkins said that if 20 or 25 of the shearers had been of a similar standard to the top eight (e.g. like Darnley), it would have been worth persisting. However, not only were the tallies low (which meant that wages for shed hands and pressers were spread over fewer sheep and added to average costs) but there were too many like Simple and Webb who were making a mess of it. Managers were prepared to allow some leeway on the basis that shearers improved with practice. However, they were getting messages about the wondrous deeds of the contractors at Wellshot and tolerance quickly evaporated.

The court was concerned with Coombe Martin and there is no comparable evidence of events at Wellshot.⁸⁶ However, the ill feeling between the two shearing gangs got an airing. The Wellshot contract shearers had benefited at the others' expense, and the temptation to brag was too much to take. Mateship wore a little thin. Darnley, especially, resented the taunts about clumsy shearing. He wailed that the employers were ruthless and greedy. The contract shearers were self-serving and duplicitous. John Leahy's retort was correspondingly sarcastic.

⁸⁶ See Thomas Kerr, Chapter 5, for a contract shearer thriving at this time.

I am fully aware of the Coombe-Martin dispute and am prepared to fill that shed in 1905 and will guarantee that the men I engage will double the average tally of the 'competent' shearers who shored there this year. You can't ring your mulgas on me. I know the Central Division of Q as well as you.

and:

You don't know what you are talking about. The sheep at the station mentioned are 'good' sheep from a shearer's point of view. I know because I shored there and cut 173 wethers in less than eight hours. The boss is a good sort and has always been reckoned one of the 'whitest' men in the West.⁸⁷

It is no accident that the case was extensively reported in *The Shearer*, the newspaper of the MSU. Its ethos was to get stuck in and get the job done. As the disappearance of blades accelerated, older shearers were still finding it hard to adjust to machines. Even competent shearers such as Harry Darnley could find it difficult to accept the implications of a more competitive environment, although he was a good enough shearer to get sheds with a contractor. The prospects for older men such as Hugh Gill and Joseph Webb were unlikely to improve. Young James Simple would need to work on his shearing technique and do less complaining if he wanted to be taken seriously. The managers would have been apprehensive about the engagement of J.H. Young & Co. for the Wellshot shearing – 200,000 sheep meant there was a lot at stake – but it can hardly be doubted that the contractors would be invited back in 1905 and be offered Coombe Martin as well.

Machines and contracting had changed the nature of shearing on the big pastoral stations by the end of World War I. Lonsdale's use of the terms 'feud' and 'hatred' are corroborated by this incident, although over time a more nostalgic and respectful attitude to old timers crept in. Sentimental tributes to shearers when they died reflected this.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the collectivist notions of mateship underscoring the AWU ethos sat uncomfortably with the cult of competitive meritocracy imbedded in piecework payment. Yet, mateship was a very elastic concept that could accommodate staunch unionism as well as the renowned rivalry between shearers and the gut busting ambition to shear big tallies. Already, contracting was adapting to closer settlement. New forms of it were finding ways to take machine shearing into the regions where most shearers actually lived, where wheat was grown and the flocks were becoming much smaller.

⁸⁷ *The Shearer*, Vol. 1, No. 8, 17/9/1904, p. 4.

⁸⁸ *The Worker*, 12/2/1913, p. 4; 12/3/1913, p. 3; 9/3/1916, p. 21.

Chapter 5: Contracting Diversifies: Love-Hate Relationships, 1910 – 1940

Shearers' Perspective

The murky MSU affair failed to impose a more compliant form of unionism but contracting continued to advance. Sheep stations decided one by one, but as more of them switched it was harder to get shearers the traditional way. The transition in Queensland was especially rapid whereas in NSW 'station' and 'contract' co-existed into the 1920s. Station shearing shrank as graziers were converted to its benefits, but the ultimate triumph would not have been possible if shearers themselves had not voted with their feet. Not all shearers were as enthusiastic as John Leahy's men, but union debates exaggerated the virulence of opposition. Narratives of union loyalists and sceptics bear this out.

The MSU was still alive when Tom Bartle was doing station work in the Riverina; he took up shearing a bit later.¹ When he appeared at the 1917 Pastoral Award hearing as an AWU witness he had recently been working as a union organiser, and his attitudes were coloured by this. The Court was being fed with concrete evidence about 'lost time' between sheds so that the award would generously compensate. Justice Higgins presided, and unfortunately for the social historian, tired of extraneous detail when Bartle's narrative had just entered 1914, cutting the witness short. However, more emerged in cross-examination, and the transcript provides valuable insights into the shearing life on the eve of World War I.

Bartle came from Sydney. He arranged his first shearing engagement each season by writing to stations in the time honoured manner. By 1915 he had discovered shearing contractors and this measurably reduced his down time. Although this was his best season to date he abandoned the sheds for a mining job in Cobar at the end of the year. Probably in his late-twenties he rationalised being single. 'I cannot save enough money or get enough to keep a [wife] on', but he seemed to be still something of a free spirit. Certainly other shearers were more conscientious about finding replacement sheds. He alluded to grazier antipathy to unionists. 'I know that for being

¹ NAA Box 206/126 Vol. 1, pp. 113ff. Pastoral Award Transcript 1917. The narrative is supplemented from other sources.

outspoken in certain sheds I have been practically victimised'². Higgins had already noticed his confident and somewhat cheeky tendency: 'I have no doubt about your being outspoken', the judge quipped, departing from his usual meticulous impartiality, 'but I will not take that statement about victimisation without something more definite.' There are few clues to Bartle's family background. He was in the age-group for enlistment, although it is futile to even guess why he had not gone to the war.

He originally left Sydney around 1905 or 1906 and found a job as a jackaroo at Illawa Station in the Riverina.³ He took jobs as a station hand and gravitated to shearing sheds as a rouseabout. Taking opportunities at 'barrowing'⁴ he started as a full time shearer in 1910. He describes himself as a good shearer, claiming to be the 'ringer' in at least one shed in 1913, but gave no definite evidence of his tallies⁵. When unable to find shearing he worked at anything he could find, and seems to have abandoned the sheds altogether after the 1915 season for the mining job at Cobar.⁶ 'There was absolutely nothing in the game so I turned it up', was the way he put it. The relative security of a salaried career with the AWU beckoned, although a position as a temporary shed organiser was the best he had managed.

Bartle's first shed in 1912 was Bindara in NSW. Shearing began on 31 July and he was engaged for about nine weeks. Following a gap of 10 days after the cut out, he shore at Umetbee from 10 October to the 23rd.⁷ Then he went to New Zealand but Higgins' tidy mind was not interested in that. The full NSW season stretched from mid-June to late-October, provided a shearer was prepared to travel, and there was potentially enough shearing in Queensland and Victoria to occupy some shearers for

² Bartle's 'outspokenness' had been on display at the end of 1916 during his stint as an AWU organiser. He was ordered off a property in the Coonabarabran district while attempting to organise wheat harvesters. He later persuaded them to demand 'log rates'. The owner conceded but there was a disagreement over the terms. To Bartle it was a case of 'victimising the prominent unionists' but with a little more tact the dispute might have been avoided. *The Worker*, 4/1/1917, p. 19.

³ Probably this was 'Uillawa', in the Hay district, a large station running 680 cattle and 46,438 sheep. *Australian Pastoral Directory* 1913, p. 67. It was not unusual for court stenographers to misspell the names of people and places.

⁴ The practice of young station hands or rouseabouts shearing during 'smoko'.

⁵ Shearers invariably described themselves as 'a bit above average'. From a strictly statistical perspective, some must have been 'a bit below'. It was part of the culture of competitive mateship to talk their ability up. 'Shearing in the bar' was a popular song, recognising this.

⁶ Mining at Cobar was also insecure. See Chapter 7.

⁷ These properties could not be found in the 1913 Pastoral Directory.

almost 12 months of the year. Yet Bartle had managed to find only two sheds for 11 weeks work before he went to New Zealand.

In 1913 he got started much earlier with a pen at Boorara, a Kidman property with 35,000 sheep near Hungerford on the NSW-Queensland border.⁸ Roll call was on 12 March. The most direct route was by train to Bourke then across country – the only firm details are that it took four days and included a bicycle ride of 170 miles.⁹ There is independent evidence of some trouble at Boorara - no details are provided but it possibly concerned delays due to faulty machinery.¹⁰ All Bartle said was that shearing did not actually start until the 14th. Boroora cut out on 12 April and he did not find another shed until early August, when the main NSW shearing was in full swing.

This was at Ingar Station¹¹ at Nevertire, where he shored from 4 August to 5 September. It did not form part of Bartle's evidence, but a report by the shed 'rep' printed in *The Worker* gave a sense of very miserable conditions at this shed in 1913. The accommodation was 'disgraceful, the weather boards having shrunk to leave gaps of ½ to 1 inch'. All hands had colds and there was not enough room for everyone to sit at the mess table. In the now politically incorrect phrases of AWU-speak, 'some had to do the blackfellow act on the woodheap'.¹² Finally, Bartle managed to find a regular run of sheds. After a 3 day gap he began at Eurabba, Grenfell on 9th September until the cut out on 3rd October - another three week's shearing. He was, in fact, a day late as shearing at Eurabba began on the 8th. The fact that the pen was kept for him is probably a sign that he was known. Then, after a 5 day gap Bartle started at Emutdee on 9th October and cut out on 29th November, a decent stint of about 7 weeks.¹³

So after barely a month of shearing in March/April he had drifted around for 4 months 'looking for any class of work'. He picked up 'three or four weeks in a mine' at

⁸ *Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1913, p. 165. Kidman actually bought the station in 1913. Bowen, *Kidman*, p. 242.

⁹ Henry Lawson tramped the same route from Bourke to Hungerford in 1892.

¹⁰ *The Worker*, 14/5/1913, p. 1. Sidney Kidman was notorious for keeping costs down.

¹¹ A modest station with 5,868 sheep. *Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1913, p. 22.

¹² *The Worker*, 17/9/1913, p. 1.

¹³ The directory lists Eurabba amongst the holding of Steele Calwell. The total shearing was probably about 15,000 sheep. *Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1913, p 132. No listing for Emutdee found.

Cobar. Perhaps the pay was good, because when he abandoned shearing at the end of 1915, he ended up in Cobar. Once the main shearing season started he fared better – three sheds for perhaps 14 weeks of paid work, but living conditions were rough. It is not mentioned whether or not he went to New Zealand again in 1913. He may have been discouraged by the violent industrial unrest disrupting wharves and transport services in the Dominion. This was widely reported in Australia. Early in 1913 *The Worker* had published a ‘Keep Away From New Zealand’ indicating that the New Zealand union was in a ‘fight to the death’ with the sheepowners.¹⁴

He began the 1914 season at Goolring, Bourke, from 4 May to 27th, and then after a three day gap started at the famous Weilmoringle.¹⁵ It was at this point that Justice Higgins interrupted, although the grazier's advocate extracted further sketchy details of his activity in 1915. In that year he shored in 7 sheds for the Paroo Shearing Company, starting at Thurloo Downs on 23rd April. He shored a further two sheds for the Southern Contract Shearing Company based in Goulburn, cutting out for the year at Myalla, Cooma on 1 December 1915.¹⁶ This was the only season in which he had worked entirely for contractors, and it was by far the fullest. He shored continuously from the end of April through to the beginning of December – about 7 months, without the unproductive gaps of 1913. He started well in 1914, getting stands at two really big sheds in the north-west. Weilmoringle alone would have kept him busy almost to the end of August. There is every reason to believe he then found sheds further south, as he had in other seasons.

The nature of his decision to go with the Paroo contracting company in 1915 was not explored, but it is possible to speculate. Weilmoringle was one of a handful of bigger sheds deluded into persisting with old methods of recruitment. These large stations had junior bookkeepers to handle voluminous correspondence and the station manager himself did little other than supervision. Keeping control was one thing, but wiser

¹⁴ The New Zealand shearing dispute was settled within a fortnight. *The Worker*, 2/7/1913, p. 1; 16/7/1913, p. 3; For reports of general labour unrest see *The Worker*, 6/11/1913, pp. 1, 3, 5; SMH most issues during October-December, 1913.

¹⁵ Goolring was owned by Goldsborough Mort Pastoral Company, 7,841 sheep. Weilmoringle in 1913 was owned by Magill Bros & Mackay, and carried 55,000 sheep. *Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1913, pp. 16, 19. Weilmoringle was still ‘station’ shearing in 1915.

¹⁶ Another Goldsborough Mort holding, 31,253 sheep, *Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1913, p. 122. Thurloo Downs was a ‘contract’ shed in 1915. Myalla ran 11,817 sheep.

graziers understood that contractors could handle detail more efficiently. More to the point, if there was a strike a contractor stood a fair chance of putting together a fresh team at short notice. Militants explicitly targeted large ‘station’ sheds because they were vulnerable. Smaller stations without the baggage of office staff embraced contractors more enthusiastically. Nonetheless, by 1915 it was relatively rare to find big sheds still shearing ‘station’.

From a shearer’s perspective, a regular spot at such a shed was gold. If this could be done without the medium of a contractor, well and good, but it was hard to secure these prized stands. Even a well regarded shearer known to the management could easily miss out – they required 36 shearers and if your letter was the 37th in line, too bad. Alternative large sheds were now rare. The advantage of going with a contractor was that if you missed out on a shed the contractor was likely to find another stand reasonably quickly. Returning to Weilmoringle in 1915 would presumably have been a good option for Bartle, but he signed up with Paroo.

While graziers such as W.E. Abbott complained about the generosity of shearing awards, to shearers it was a mirage. Starting with the best of intentions in April 1913, Bartle had managed only 4 sheds and barely 20 weeks of shearing by October. With contractors in 1915 he had 7 sheds in the north and a further two (probably small ones) in the Tablelands by the time he cut out in early December. The option of Tasmania or New Zealand would have employed him beyond New Year if he felt inclined. Given this success it is surprising that Bartle went mining, but it was a year of very severe drought and sheep were dying and in poor condition. An acute shearer shortage due to the war was fuelling militant unionism, and though he saw himself as ‘outspoken’ he may not have seen eye to eye with IWW firebrands.¹⁷ Bartle did not have a regular pattern from season to season, and in this respect was not typical. Whatever the reason, his attitude to contractors remained ambivalent. He admitted they provided the best basis for continuity of work, but he insisted that station owners treated shearers better. There was an element of rose-tinted nostalgia in this – shearers had not entertained much fondness for squatters in 1894. The AWU's antipathy to contractors may also have influenced his opinion.

¹⁷ See Chapter 6.

Another problem for shearers under ‘station’ arrangements was predicting how long they would be engaged. It had become standard practice for agreements to specify the number of sheep as an aid to planning shearing runs. Graziers were legally required to compensate shearers if they did not provide the minimum number. It also worked the other way. If the grazier kept on supplying sheep after the maximum had been reached, shearers were under no obligation to shear them. However, the minima and maxima tended to be unrealistically wide.¹⁸ Consider the dilemma of Frank Lysaught, shearing at Noondoo in 1917.¹⁹ The agreement specified 25,000 to 50,000 sheep. If the shed cut out, say after 26,000, the grazier would have fulfilled his side of the agreement, but shearers might have three weeks idle if they had counted on more. Alternatively, if they wrongly assumed an early cut out, shearers would miss roll call at the next shed. Walking out early risked prosecution.

Contractors took start times out of shearers’ hands. Yet Lysaught protested that this was not ‘fair’. He complained, no doubt with justification, that contractors only favoured faster shearers with follow-on work. If a shearer was ‘dropped’ by a contractor he was doomed to wandering around on his luck, as Tom Bartle had done in 1912. Lysaught held this view very strongly, even though he was a more than competent shearer averaging around 130 a day. Ever reasonable, Justice Higgins balked at Lysaught’s assertion that it was somehow unfair for contractors to favour the best shearers. If he needed a doctor would he not try to find the best one available? Lysaught doggedly refused to acknowledge that the grazier or the shearing contractor had a comparable right to hire the best shearers. The question was posed to him a number of different ways by counsel for the graziers, and by Higgins, but he tenaciously stuck to this point of view. ‘The slow man has to live as well as the fast man’, he said. He refused to agree with the exasperated grazier advocate who asked him, ‘Supposing you were going to get anyone to do *anything* for you, you would get

¹⁸ This was a persistent issue in award cases. The graziers argued that, especially in drought years, it was impossible to know how many live sheep they would be able to muster.

¹⁹ Noondoo was one of many holdings of Australian Pastoral Company, listed as 27,689 sheep in 1913. It ran a large herd of 2,564 cattle. Dirranbandi in southern Queensland was very drought-prone and sheep numbers varied widely. The cattle-sheep ratio reflected markets and grazing availability.

the best men you could, wouldn't you?' Lysaught stubbornly insisted, 'I do not think I would; I believe in giving a fair deal.'²⁰

This was the AWU mateship ethos, contradictions and all, in a nutshell. The fuss over 'carrying machines' and the 'broad gauge comb' rule were other examples.²¹ Both Bartle and Lysaught clearly benefited from the sequencing of sheds that contractors offered. Contractors paid award rates and the 'lost time' problem was resolved. Contract shearing succeeded, firstly, because it simplified the grazier's burden, but there were crucial advantages for shearers. Despite what they said about a more kindly attitude from the stations, it is doubtful whether Tom Bartle engaged in friendly chat with the station overseer at Weilmoringle any more than with the Paroo Company's shed manager. As employers contractors were often hard to please, and their reputation for meanness was partially deserved. Equally, though, they had an interest in 'looking after' shearers with reputations of 'reliability'.

There is a glimpse of the kind of judgments made by contractors in the following letter to a shearer applying for a pen, unwisely committed to paper and subsequently leaked in *The Worker*:

Yes, I will handle the team at 'Crower' this year, but in picking the men have to be quite satisfied that they are out to work and not lie in the hut because of two or three points of rain. I remember you and your shearing, but don't remember if you are what we call a wet sheep shearer or not. If you will guarantee that you will vote right and not make one to hang up the job, I shall be pleased to receive your £1 deposit and put your name on the list. 'Crower' starts November 1; about 2000 per man.²²

'Wet sheep shearers' were sure of getting stands in follow-up sheds. Those who were getting a little older, those with a reputation for drunkenness or gambling, and most of all, agitators likely to stir up trouble by ostentatiously proclaiming the sheep wet, were not wanted. Contractors did not always have enough stands available to accommodate every shearer's desire for a follow-up shed, and they were not always ethical in the way they dealt with this, leading to distrust.²³ Complaints about the iniquities of shearing contractors could still be heard in the late 1930s, but by then it was immovable as the principal means of carrying out shearing.²⁴ Bartle and Lysaught

²⁰ NAA Box 206/126 Vol. 1, Pastoral Award Transcript 1917, pp 172-3. Emphasis added.

²¹ See Chapter 10.

²² *The Worker*, 9/9/1915, p 20.

²³ McIntosh, *Beaten by a Blow*, p. 66.

²⁴ *The Worker*, 3/11/1937, p. 20.

were also money-makers when it all boiled down, despite the mask of mateship. Still, if contractors wanted ‘wet sheep shearers’, they were not going to sink that low. On the other hand, there were many who despised whingers who wanted to ‘lie in the hut because of two or three points of rain’. Contracting survived all this, but the ritual of complaining about it was equally persistent. It was part of the underdog spirit that kept shearers going. The acid test was that despite everything they elected to work for them.

Shearers Taking the Initiative

A small passage in *On the Wool Track* touches on another trend.

Of late the shearers themselves have taken it into their heads to get those profits for themselves, and have started a co-operative contract company of their own, which divides the contractors profit amongst the men. I heard the golden opinions of their work. It is perhaps the most hopeful development in the wool industry.²⁵

Justice Higgins made a similar observation in 1911.²⁶ In 1908 the AWU was told:

On the Murrumbidgee last year there was a party of four shearers with a little plant of their own, who were a co-operative company, doing the whole of their own work, and taking contracts with farmers in the district.²⁷

This new practice of ‘co-operative group shearing’ was already common enough to be noticed but sufficiently unusual to be discussed. It was but one reflection of the ways in which rural change was already spawning new solutions to shearing organisation.

Diversification of flocks introduced new priorities although the squatter prerogative did not disappear. Contractors such as J.H. Young & Co, the Merriwa Shearing Co. and Federal Shearing had been flourishing for about a decade. They were centralised from Sydney, and in effect contracting refined the ‘station’ system. As Young’s involvement with the MSU showed, pastoralist perspectives persisted. Contracting enterprises springing up in rural towns, where both the sheep and the shearers were concentrated, were an adjunct of closer settlement. There was less need to circulate the supply and demand for shearers through a Sydney office. It was common for shearers to start up these enterprises. In farmers’ woolsheds traditional antagonisms lost some of their bite.

²⁵ Bean, *On the Wool Track*, p. 99.

²⁶ CAR, Vol. 5, 1911, p. 87.

²⁷ *The Worker*, 12/3/1908, p. 29.

Corroborating evidence is tucked away in the transcripts of arbitration cases and inquiries into the wool industry. Private contractors in rural districts did not completely displace the pioneer contractors but co-existed with them.²⁸ By the 1920s there was considerable diversity in the style and size of shearing contractors, as befitted diversity in flocks and farming systems. The attitude of shearers was mixed. Some relished the opportunities, some were ambivalent, and there was an undercurrent of hostility that was never quite extinguished. Between the wars shearing contractors became embedded as the dominant employers of shearers and they continued to evolve as the wool industry itself evolved.

In 1909 Arthur Rae encountered something a little different from group shearing. He was visiting sheds as a 'general organiser' for the AWU, and on his travels he came to Eremeran station, a large shed in the vast open spaces between Hillston and Cobar, with 40 stands and about 40,000 sheep.²⁹ Rae commented on 'the peculiar manner' in which the shearers had been engaged. Recruitment had been delegated to a shearer named Joe Coves from Goulburn, a man who had regularly shorn there in previous years. Applications had simply been handed over to him to sort out. A stand was being kept for him, so he was still earning income by shearing. As he was not actually present Rae was unable to interrogate him, but perplexed though he was, found nothing the AWU could seriously object to. There was no evidence of 'personal favouritism', or even worse, that Coves might have taken money for his services. Pens had simply been allocated in the order of the dates on the letters, but Rae was in no doubt that such arrangements were open to abuse 'and must be nipped in the bud'.³⁰ Coves was perhaps one step away from becoming a contractor in his own right, although whether this happened is unknown. W.H. Lambert visited the same shed in 1910, keen to test rumours that Joe Coves was acting as a 'labour agent', but could only infer guilt, stating that 'he thought it expedient to stay away!'.³¹ Coves was still working as a shearer in 1911 when he was one of six who narrowly out-voted five

²⁸ Some of the original batch of contractors were still in business in the 1920s and 1930s. Grazier co-operatives formed after 1919 also continued the tradition. See Chapter 6.

²⁹ Rae was an activist for the original ASU and involved in radical unionism in the 1920s and 1930s. For more on Rae see Chapter 7.

³⁰ *The Worker*, 14/7/1909, pp. 4, 5.

³¹ *The Worker*, 20/7/1910, p. 7.

others demanding the return of deposit money. One of his companions was denigrated as a ‘Sunday sheep-shearer’.³² Whatever Coves actually did, he was a money-maker not too concerned with mateship sensitivities. By 1913 Eremeran had been purchased by A.B. Triggs who controlled a string of stations in NSW with an aggregate of more than a million sheep. *The Worker* described him as ‘Australia’s sheep king’, and as such he was a squatter worth cultivating by a budding contractor.

In 1906 Thomas Kerr had, with a partner, bought a shearing plant and established the contracting firm Sinclair and Kerr. They engaged 60 shearers during the season and shored 280,000 sheep in sheds covering quite a wide area of central Queensland - Barcaldine, Isisford, Blackall, Longreach. Already they had contracts for more sheep in 1907. He gave evidence at the 1907 award case about his earlier shearing career.³³ Kerr had been shearing for ‘15 or 16 years’, which means he had entered the sheds around 1890 when unionism was buoyant. Kerr decided when he was about 25 to make full use of the year-round shearing pattern in Queensland to make some money, and carefully accumulated savings from shearing to invest in the business. In consecutive years from 1902 to 1905 he banked £191, £190, £239, and £278 (including £40 from a repaid debt). ‘[I] began shearing in January, and had not finished sometimes in December, when the shearing was carried on until next year. [I] was able to go from one shed to another.’ At £1 per 100 he needed to shear 10,000 sheep to gather £100 in gross income, so these were large sums, and he must have been shearing 20-30,000 sheep per annum (or 2-3000 a month).³⁴

Justice O’Connor was impressed: ‘You do not waste time, then?’ ‘Not in the years mentioned’, Kerr replied. He had begun as a hand shearer and converted to machines. He was a better shearer than average without being outstanding. Perseverance and thrift were his outstanding qualities. He was, he claimed, ‘above average’ with the blades – ‘over a hundred a day’. Kerr thought hand shearing was physically more

³² *The Worker*, 22/3/1911, p. 4; 2/8/1911, p. 3; Pastoral Directory 1913, p. 69.

³³ All details on Kerr are from the account of the case in *The Worker*, 4/7/1907, p. 21.

³⁴ *ibid.*

demanding than machine shearing, although the vibrating ‘tube’³⁵ caused problems and some men used ‘blocks and pulleys’ to keep them steady. Machine shearers averaged 25 sheep more in a day.³⁶ In 1904, two years before the contracting partnership was established, Kerr had been at ‘Corona’ and ‘Westlands’, sheds in the Longreach district, each shearing about 80,000 sheep. Corona started on 17 August and finished on 4 October. Kerr’s yield had been 5,592 (averaging 135 per day – the shed average was 91), compared to the highest tally of 5,860. Westlands had started on 6 October and cut out on 2 December. Kerr averaged 123 for each working day (including some part days interrupted by rain), for 4,500 sheep. This is concrete evidence of just over 10,000 sheep over 4½ months, with only two days between sheds. If he was as well organised for the rest of the year he may well have shorn 25,000 sheep (for a gross income of about £250). In that year, Kerr ‘banked’ £239.

While shearing may well have contributed most of his capital, it seems likely that he had additional income. In reply to another O’Connor question he explained that he had been ‘shearing selectors’ sheep on the Flinders ... with [a] Ladbury’s shearing plant’, although he also said he was paid £1 per 100, which was the going rate for shearing, not a ‘per sheep’ contractor’s charge. Probably, however, he was able to ‘go from shed to shed’ in selector districts beyond the scrutiny of the AWU (which strenuously opposed this sort of enterprise). Possibly the selectors provided shed labour and paid rental for the machines. Whatever the precise arrangements, he was banking about £200 each season over and above his living expenses, and it would be hard to do this by shearing alone. Most likely 1906 signified the formation of his formal partnership with Sinclair, but he had been operating on a self-employed basis several years beforehand. He must have been in his late-30s when he made the jump from shearer to boss.

³⁵ This refers to the cable connecting the overhead mechanism to the handpiece. Until they were superseded by a more robust system of gears and rotating metal rods, ‘tubes’ caused problems.

³⁶ This evidence is quite different to that given by the older blade shearers Webb and Gill in 1904 (see Chapter 4), and goes to the cultural rift between blade and machine shearers early in the century.

Another Queenslander had gone shearing just before World War I, when he was twenty.³⁷ Around 1917 or 1918 he set up as a shearing contractor, making enough money to achieve his ultimate ambition of becoming a grazing selector in 1925. In 1926 Queensland was gripped by a serious drought and he told the land inquiry in 1927:

When I was a shearing contractor I thought I only had to go into the land business and I would be a millionaire in no time. If you tell the others the position today they will tell you that you twist it around, and that you are with the boss.³⁸

He had taken a lease on 20,000 acres, enough to carry 8000 sheep and make a reasonable income – or so he thought. But the drought still had not broken and the property was carrying only 3,500. His dilemma had been to sell sheep and lose wool revenue or to hold them by buying fodder. Whatever he did meant a loss and already his debt was up to £11,000. He anticipated that the drought would end, but it would still be several years before he would be better off than he had been when he gave up shearing contracting in anticipation of financial independence. He looked back wistfully on his years of accumulating capital in the shearing game.

When I was shearing I could always earn £300 to £400 and go away for two or three months, possibly to New Zealand in the hot weather.

And,

A shearing contractor has no worries. He knows what he is getting for his sheep, so long as he has a good team of shearers. I have had men with me earning £500.³⁹

The ‘with the boss’ remark showed an awareness of talk amongst shearers that they did all the work while ‘squatters’ made all the money. Now he saw the world from the point of view of a grazing selector rather than a shearer. Importantly, though, the account highlights the attractions of shearing and contracting as vehicles for money-making.

Another very successful contracting business which began before the war was McInnes Brothers of Queanbeyan. As with many others it became an inter-generational concern, and McInnes grandsons were still running it in the 1950s. Andrew McInnes, one of the founders, was also active in the formation of the

³⁷ QPP, 1927, Vol. 2, pp121ff, Report of the Land Settlement Advisory Board appointed to Inquire into Certain matters Relating to Land Settlement, 1927,

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

Shearing Contractors Association of NSW in 1927. Few details are known of the origins of this business, except that the brothers were shearers. By the mid-1920s they had a run of 25 sheds shearing about 500,000 sheep, employing 150 to 200 men – which probably meant they were running five or six teams simultaneously. In the early days the McInnes brothers supervised most of the sheds personally (and perhaps also continued to shear) but as the business succeeded they were increasingly office bound. By the late-1920s they had opened an office in Anderson Street, Belmore, in western Sydney. Presumably this was dictated by the need to find shearers.⁴⁰

Often contractors benefited from the patronage of grazing interests. At the very least, repeat business at one or two large sheds was needed to provide the nucleus of a viable concern. The Kidman properties in western-New South Wales were Charlie Flavel's opportunity in the 1920s. Born around 1896, Flavel was a rough diamond who grew up in Broken Hill and by the end of World War I was a shearer. Kidman was primarily a cattle man, but his Darling properties carried sheep. Numbers varied widely, but there could be 200,000 sheep in good seasons scattered over the Kidman holdings which needed to be shorn. It was the basis of a shearing business. In 1926 Flavel bought a truck to transport the shearers and he was in business. Contracting for Kidman, renowned for penny-pinching, was not for the faint hearted. Machinery was seldom properly maintained and station budgets were too lean to carry spare parts. Flavel always fixed them to keep the shearing going and this was seldom charged to the stations. As Clyde Cameron wryly remarked, 'That's why he was able to hold the contracts!'.⁴¹ It followed that Flavel also ran a tight ship. Shearers from Broken Hill were a tough lot, and often militant. Flavel needed to be able to handle them if he was to keep the Kidman sheds. Cameron was an AWU organiser in the 1940s and Broken Hill was part of his beat. They often sparred on industrial matters but Cameron had a grudging empathy with this character from the west.⁴² Perhaps there is an echo of Russel Ward's thesis that the harsh environment helped to breed mateship, although not in this case linked to union solidarity. Flavel built up a run of 450,000 sheep – all

⁴⁰ NAA1958 Box 206/126 Vol. 1, Pastoral Award Transcript 1917, pp. 242-8, 250-1.

⁴¹ Bowen, *Kidman*, p. 429.

⁴² Bowen, *Kidman*, pp. 427-9. Mick Young worked for Flavel during his shearing career.

of it in the 'corner country' - and was rumoured to be 'very wealthy' by the 1950s with investments in mining shares and ownership of a drive-in movie theatre. After World War II most of these far-western stations were broken up into soldier settlement grazing blocks. Charlie Flavel slid into retirement as new contractors moved in, but he was still telling shearing yarns to anyone who would listen in the 1980s.⁴³

Jack Dwyer was born in 1908 into a farming family in Victoria. He had solid but limited schooling before venturing into the Riverina in the 1920s. Handicapped by the effects of poliomyelitis, shearing was not a suitable occupation. Dwyer, a quick learner, found a clerical position in the office of the stock and station agents, W.J. Quirke & Co in Narrandera. Working the accounts of merino stud breeders along the Murrumbidgee indicated that there was 'money in wool'. Shearing contracting beckoned as a means tapping into the flow of wealth. However, it was the 1930s and a bit of luck was needed to get established. A prominent grazier William Brown of Memagong station in the Young district took a liking to him and helped him considerably.⁴⁴ Dwyer decided to try his hand in Queensland, and got his break at Northampton Downs, one of the biggest sheds in the Blackall district. Brown lent him money to buy a small property at Dalby and (probably using Brown's influence to attract clients) became a full time shearing contractor while running some stock on the small property. By the end of World War II he was affluent enough to repay his debt to Brown and buy a larger property at Roma. He thus became a grazier in his own right, subsequently prospering during the 1950s wool boom.⁴⁵

⁴³SLV MS 557-7, Patsy Adam-Smith interview with Laurie Walsh, 1978, Walsh uses the name 'Blakeley' when talking about the shearing contractor, but all the facts suggest he means Flavel. Arthur Blakeley was a prominent AWU official in the 1920s and '30s. He had once been an organiser around Broken Hill and it is possible the names were confused.

⁴⁴ An element of notoriety is associated with Brown as the father-in-law of Eric Campbell, leader of the paramilitary organisation, the New Guard, during the Depression.

⁴⁵ Information provided by Jack Dwyer's son, Don Dwyer.

Ray Stibbard was born in 1896 and grew up around Dundee and Glen Innes in New England, districts being transformed to wheat-sheep farms under closer settlement.⁴⁶ He did various forms of rural work but shearing was in the family. His older brothers went ‘out west’ every year, and his uncle ran Chappell’s Woolscour at Dundee.⁴⁷ He learnt to shear in ‘cocky sheds’ when still a teenager, but began to venture further afield to bigger sheds such as Angledool to the west and others near the Queensland border. In 1918 he did wool pressing for the Merriwa Company at C.J. Campbell’s Ranger’s Valley Station. It was the tail end of the war, and shearers were still in short supply. However, 12 of them were clipping wool faster than a young novice could jam it into bales. He was pressing from 6am to 11pm to keep up. Sometimes the shearers helped at night. Whether they were in the AWU or not, this was the antithesis of a union culture. Wartime labour shortages were the spark for increased militancy in Queensland, but this was not the way in New England.⁴⁸ It was not as if Campbell was a mere selector. He was a wealthy grazier with partnership interests in perhaps 100,000 sheep. Stibbard’s lesson from this, though, was not of being exploited, but that dedication earned regular contracts at Ranger’s Valley.⁴⁹

With companions from the Glen Innes district Stibbard went on his first big shearing trip to Queensland in 1920.⁵⁰ The contractor did not honour an undertaking to pay extra if the sheep were well shorn. ‘It was there and in other western areas’, he wrote in his retirement, ‘that I began to realise that life as a shearer would not be all milk and honey’. He returned to Glen Innes taking jobs in the Bulldog Boot Factory for a while, and then on the construction of the Tenterfield railway. But he was not happy, realising ‘that with all its drawbacks, wool was my life’.⁵¹ He returned to shearing. Just how the transition was accomplished is not described, but by the late-1920s Stibbard was established as a contractor. Forty years later it was handed over to his sons. He lists 39 sheds which were the core of his activity, which built quite quickly to a run of about 350,000 sheep per annum. This was dominated by holdings of the Campbells, for whom Stibbard had sweated long hours in 1918. Apart from one or

⁴⁶ Stibbard, *Not a Dream*. Similarities with the background and outlook of New England farmer Arthur Cosh are worth noting. See Chapter 2.

⁴⁷ Stibbard, *Not a Dream*, pp. 26, 31.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 6 for Queensland unrest.

⁴⁹ Stibbard, *Not a Dream*, p. 39; details of Campbell interest from Pastoral Directories

⁵⁰ See below for the targeting of Queensland sheds by NSW contractors in the 1920s.

⁵¹ Stibbard, *Not a Dream*, pp. 42, 44.

two other large properties, much of Stibbard's run consisted of smaller sheds of between 2 and 9,000 sheep each, which he returned to year after year.⁵² Stibbard's origins were sufficiently knockabout to entertain some empathy with unionism, but he was wary of the AWU's growing power. He preferred one to one relationships to regulations: 'I attribute my success as a shearer and contractor to the fact that I have always treated my men as equals.'⁵³

Henry Salter was born in the vicinity of Kerang in Northern Victoria in 1907. His father was a farmer. The original 280 acres occupied in 1876 had been expanded by almost 1000 acres. They were not dirt poor, but it was a robust existence. Henry's father died in 1923. His older brothers were able to buy dairy farms, and in 1927 a new house was built on the home farm.⁵⁴ After working in shearing sheds as a rouseabout Henry had learnt enough to land his first shearing stand in 1924. Graziers could be tough customers, but they were also conscious of the shortage of quality shearers. Henry was still struggling to master the art when the boss sacked a man who seemed unwilling to improve and Henry feared for the consequences when his own inexperienced efforts faced scrutiny. 'How long have you been shearing?' was the question. 'About six weeks', was the reply. His tactic was to refer only to the period he had been full time, to create an impression he was learning quickly. The response was encouraging, 'Well, keep at it.' Salter was short and stocky and diligent, and did improve quickly. Within a year he had shorn a 100 in a day, the mark of reasonable proficiency.⁵⁵

Salter seemed to be able to find plenty of farm work to occupy the year, but he quickly saw shearing as his vocation. The season in Northern Victoria was short, but across the Murray the expansive Riverina beckoned. Fly-blow was becoming prevalent and this meant that crutching was available throughout the year. In 1926 – he was still only 19 – he bought a 'Cooper Little Wonder' two-stand shearing plant

⁵² Stibbard, *Not a Dream*, p. 44; various Pastoral Directories.

⁵³ Stibbard, *Not a Dream*, p. 45. Note also Stibbard's anecdote about the 'young lady' from Chapter 1.

⁵⁴ Ian Day, *Quick Go the Shears: The Life and Times of Henry Salter*, Self Published, Kerang, Vic., 1993, p. 15,

⁵⁵ Day, *Quick Go the Shears*, p. 11

driven by a petrol motor. This was mounted on the tray of a converted Model T Ford.⁵⁶ A local retired farmer, Frank Kane, ‘had enough confidence in Henry’s industriousness to back him in the venture’.⁵⁷ Salter recruited another man, who went everywhere with him as a working mate. This plant was used until 1939, and in 1936 he purchased another, operating the two together. Most of his early work was within 20 or 30 miles of Kerang, and he later expanded into the Balranald district. This was an ideal way to survive the Depression, the caveat being that cash-strapped farmers could not pay for shearing unless funds were released by stock agents in control of the wool cheque. Salter cultivated George O’Connor, an agent based in Swan Hill, for inside intelligence on the financial position of grazing clients. In 1939 he switched to a four-stand electric plant, powered by a portable diesel engine. As the business expanded he employed a rouseabout, and then a cook and a wool-presser. During World War II it was very hard to get shearers and Salter advertised in Melbourne, although mostly he employed Kerang locals (his own brother-in-law was one of his regular shearers). He worked one of the stands himself and some employees stayed with him for 10 to 15 years. In districts like Kerang these arrangements were often far from the scrutiny of the AWU. Shearers were usually members, but rarely tribal unionists. Henry Salter himself was a paid up member most of his life, although he ran into serious conflict with the AWU in the 1960s.⁵⁸ Conditions were often rough but it was in Salter’s interest to see that his team was well looked after. He was, after all, one of the workers too.⁵⁹

In 1932 the nearby town of Lockington became the base for a similar two-stand plant operation. Brothers-in-law Frank Saare and Ron Arnold formed a partnership, and like Salter they found this an effective way to survive the Depression. In 1942 they too upgraded to a six-stand electric plant. The Saare and Arnold families spent much of the year living in a caravan, but owned modest homes in McColl St, Lockington. Frank’s son, Kevin Saare was born in 1933 and became a champion shearer in the

⁵⁶ As with many shearers of the twentieth century, Henry Salter was mechanically minded and interested in cars. He remembered all the cars he had ever owned. Day, *Quick Go the Shears*, p. 55.

⁵⁷ Day, *Quick Go the Shears*, p. 23.

⁵⁸ See Chapter 8.

⁵⁹ For Henry Salter’s contracting business in the 1930s and ‘40s, Day, *Quick Go the Shears*, pp. 22-7.

1950s and '60s.⁶⁰ Twenty-six years separated Salter and Kevin Saare, but they were both important figures in the shearing industry after World War II. The confrontational mateship code which prevailed in Queensland and other pastoral regions, including the Western District of Victoria, tended to be more visible. Salter and Saare represented a way of life more readily identified with 'the pioneer legend'. Ward's legend throws little light on their shearing entrepreneurship. This bore some resemblance to MSU values, but the roots of their ethos were found amongst the small farms of rural Victoria.⁶¹

Overview

Shearing contractors got started in a variety of ways. By the 1930s as many as 170 shearing contracting firms were spread across NSW.⁶² The majority of these were located in the wide strip running from north to south through central NSW, including the eastern and western 'slopes' and the northern and southern tablelands. There were relatively few shearing contractors based on the western plains.⁶³ Many were located in towns such as Moree, Walgett, Narrabri, Dubbo, Molong Bathurst and Young. A large number (about 50) were located on the relatively unpopulated country of the north-west (from Bourke and Brewarrina in the west, east to Moree and south to Coonamble). This was largely grazing territory, but companies based here were handy to the Queensland border. Taking teams of shearers up to Charleville and Longreach during the autumn was a way of extending the season. There were about 40 companies in the central west, conveniently located to take shearing teams north and south, as well as west. The 28 firms based in the Riverina could service the flocks in Victoria as well as the many stud flocks on stations along the Murrumbidgee.

⁶⁰ Margaret O'Brien and Louise Ross, *In the Pursuit of Excellence: The Life and Career of Shearing Legend Kevin Saare*, Lockington and District Living Heritage Complex, Lockington, Victoria, 2002, pp. 6-10.

⁶¹ Des Williams, an historian of New Zealand competition shearing, considered it inexplicable that neither Salter nor Saare is mentioned in Patsy Adam-Smith's 300 page *The Shearers*.

⁶² Based on an various issues of Sands Directory for NSW. In 1927 Andrew McInnes thought there were about 120. NAA, B1958/10 Box 2. Pastoral Award Transcript 1927.

⁶³ See above for Charlie Flavel of Broken Hill.

Although most shearing contractors were located in wheat-sheep territory, there were at least 19 in Sydney in the early 1930s, eight in the suburbs rather than central Sydney. Up to a quarter of shearers lived in capital cities. Some of the five pioneers from 1910 were still there, although there had been name changes. The most notable addition was the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company owned by the Graziers Association of NSW, which became by far Australia's largest contractor.⁶⁴ In 1927 Pugh's listed 21 shearing contractors scattered around the Queensland pastoral districts. Unlike NSW there were few indications that Brisbane was a recruiting centre for shearers.⁶⁵ Well-known names such as the Warrego Sheep Shearing Company (Charleville) and Edkins, Moran and Co (Longreach) were included, but it was certainly not a complete listing.⁶⁶

The historical record is more likely to note successful transitions from shearer to contractor than failures. The lot of a contractor was far from easy. The usual logistics of scheduling shearing runs while dealing with the sometimes unreasonable demands of graziers were compounded during runs of bad weather. Shearers' egos needed to be massaged. Shed hands and often the shearers could be an unreliable lot and had to be found or replaced if they did not turn up when expected. It was a world in which a bit of give and take, a bit of human understanding was required, but also firmness to the point of being ruthless. Probably the best known sources of discord were arguments over wet sheep, but there were many others. Problems were exacerbated by the undercurrents of distrust that poisoned shearers' views of squatters, and *vice versa*. The contractor's concern was to minimise these tensions because delays always cost money.

The AWU Response

The AWU was antagonistic to contracting. The union had already debated 'co-operative' partnerships in 1908 without being able to decide on a policy, but unlike Bean it was apprehensive. Unionists were uncomfortable with the idea that a shearer could also be a boss. One 'solution' was to ban AWU members from shearing with an

⁶⁴ See Chapter 6, 'The Graziers' Co-operative Shearing Company (Grazcos)'.

⁶⁵ Even the United Graziers Sheep Shearing Company, was based in Barcaldine.

⁶⁶ Pugh's Almanac and Queensland Directory, 1927, Digital version published by Archive CD Books Australia Pty. Ltd.

employer who was also shearing. Another approach, completely different but tempting to the controlling AWU mindset, was to set a 'union rate' for self-employed shearers-contractors and perhaps get them included in the award. In the end the conference settled for amending its rules to forbid AWU members from having anything to do with 'group shearing' at all.⁶⁷ Like 'carrying machines' and 'broad gauge combs' it was bound to be broken.⁶⁸ The subliminal fear was that if co-operative partnerships worked unionism had no useful purpose.

Group shearing was a minor matter in the face of the general spread of contracting in the decade before the war. At the AWU Annual Convention in January 1911, J. McNeill (then representing the Charleville Branch, Queensland) moved a motion calling for a plebiscite to consider abolition. Contracting and group shearing, he insisted, were 'a menace to the health and earnings' of members. References to 'co-operation' were a 'mockery'. Rather, the contractor was 'unscrupulous' and trouble invariably arose through him 'trying to take a point on the men and his greed for sweating out extra profits'. Men who voted 'wet' were often singled out and not offered further sheds, and contractors deliberately operated short handed with respect to rouseabouts. 'The game of the contractor [is] to take only the very fastest men with the result that the shed hands [are] run off their legs.'⁶⁹ 'Southern states [are] not cursed with this system to the same extent as Queensland', he noted.⁷⁰ He referred to it as 'sweating', and a note of nostalgia for the old days crept into the argument. The once hated pastoralist was now looked on with some fondness. 'In cases where the pastoralist [looks] after his own shearing there [is] hardly any trouble at all about the award.'⁷¹

Others spoke along the same lines. Jim McLean (also from Charleville) claimed that 'outrageous sweating practices [are] allowed, neither the shearer nor the shed hand getting a fair deal'. He cited one case in Queensland (near the NSW border) where 30

⁶⁷ *The Worker*, 12/3/1908, p. 29.

⁶⁸ For broad gauge combs see Chapter 10.

⁶⁹ *The Worker*, 8/2/1911, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Justice Higgins noted this too in the award hearings later in the year, although in his mind it was not a menace. See Chapter 4.

⁷¹ *The Worker*, 8/2/1911, p. 4.

of the ‘fastest shearers in Australia’ had only 18 rouseabouts to pick up the fleeces.⁷² Ted Grayndler, then secretary of the Victoria-Riverina Branch, said he was sure a plebiscite would vote contracting down, and gave an impassioned speech condemning the system. ‘Personally, [I have] never had any time for the shearing contractor’, he intoned, calling on his own credentials as a former shearer and fighting unionist. Most of the trouble the union had to deal with occurred in contract sheds, and even the poor machinery manufacturers lost out because contractors skimmed on replacement combs and cutters to reduce expenses. Moreover, because of their hard nosed attitude the men seemed to be cowed into submission. They put up with more petty inconveniences than used to be the case with station shearing. He noted a case near Longreach where electric light (then quite a luxury) had been installed in a shed to facilitate ‘two long runs’ before breakfast. Doing something about the iniquitous practice of electric lights in sheds would have to wait for another day, but in the meantime he supported the case for a plebiscite, and he sincerely hoped the members would make their abhorrence clear.⁷³

Jim Laracy argued that as a result of contract shearing men were ending up on the ‘scrap heap’ by the time they were 35. Hardly anyone over the age of 40 was seen in contract sheds. He did not mention that this was probably less because men were ‘physically wrecked’ than it represented the age group contractors recruited from.⁷⁴ It was suggested that contractors favoured men using broad gauge combs because they could enhance their tallies by up to 30 sheep per day.⁷⁵ The wide comb (as the ‘broad gauge comb’ was later known) had not long been invented and there was already an AWU rule more or less banning it (although it would be another 15 years until it was restricted by the award). They made shed hands into ‘sweated labour’, but there was another problem based on the way the arbitration system operated. Contractors were endeavouring to make out, unionists asserted, that shearers could make ‘big money’, and this would bias the court against increasing shearing rates, and it could even

⁷² A rule of thumb said the same number of shed hand as shearers was required, depending on the speed of shearers and other factors. Eventually the award specified minimum shed hand to shearer ratios, which contractors and graziers considered unfairly restrictive. The ‘sweated labour’ charge was often made, but it was just as important to have the wool cleared promptly and false economy to run a shed too light on shed staff. McLean was probably being disingenuous with this anecdote.

⁷³ *The Worker*, 8/2/1911, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Most shearer entrepreneurs described in the previous segment were no longer shearing in their 40s.

⁷⁵ This is a rare hint that contractors tried to introduce wide combs in these early days. Most evidence suggests otherwise. The full history of wide combs is canvassed in Chapter 10.

persuade it to put them down. It was said contractors were ‘deliberately swelling’ tallies in the facts place before the court. It was also noted (and in this graziers were inclined to agree) that sheep were ‘butchered, tommyhawked and hamstrung’ as a result of these practices.⁷⁶

Amidst this chorus of condemnation there were some notes of caution. C. Last of Bourke questioned whether, the Arbitration Court actually had the power to abolish contracting. Tommy White moved that a committee be established to examine the matter further, and E.J. Bowman recommended that nothing should be done until the committee reported. This was a time honoured tactic of union heavyweights to shelve radical propositions.⁷⁷

At the end of 1911, the union did conduct a plebiscite. They were asked simply: ‘Are you against contract shearing?’ It might have been a leading question, but opposition to contracting was, on this count, undeniable. Out of 27,397 replies only 3,487 said ‘no’ – or to put it the other way 87 per cent of shearers had said ‘yes’, they were against contract shearing. However, Tommy White, now Secretary General, seemed to back away from committing the AWU to a policy of outright opposition in his rambling response.

The plebiscite on the question of contract shearing resulted in an overwhelming majority against the system (even in Queensland where it has the greatest hold an 8 to 1 majority was given), showing that members, after working years under it object to a system that the pastoralists have forced on them. The pastoralists themselves in many cases are finding out it is a disadvantage, as they have lost control of their shearing to a large extent where it operates and the more it increases the more they are placed at the mercy of the contractors and their employers who get the monopoly of the best runs. It will be to the interests of pastoralists to co-operate with the AWU in checking it, otherwise they will find the supply of efficient labor (sic) getting less each year, and in the end have reason to curse the day they encouraged it in the hope that by its aid they would defeat the AWU. Unless the pastoralists will assist in checking the evil of a system that cannot ultimately benefit them, but which in fact limits their supply of labor (sic) by driving a number of the average men out of the industry, through the monopoly of the most profitable sheds being secured by a favored (sic) section, members will be justified in refusing to accept employment under contractors till some, at least, of its worst features are removed and a squarer deal given by contractors to both employers and employees.⁷⁸

The line that the pastoralists had forced the system on shearers was only partly true, as was the suggestion that they were now beginning to regret it. Whether pastoralists

⁷⁶ *The Worker*, 8/2/1911, p. 4. These arguments are almost identical to those ventilated during the ‘wide comb dispute’ seven decades later!

⁷⁷ *The Worker*, 8/2/1911, p. 4.

⁷⁸ *The Worker*, 30/1/1912, p. 2.

would cooperate with the AWU 'in checking' contracting was decidedly optimistic, and the notion that contractors were increasingly dictating terms to pastoralists and shearers alike was flawed. Underneath the rhetoric about an 'evil' system, White himself was seeking no more than the removal of its 'worst features'.

Predictably, nothing was done. The leaders understood that it suited most shearers. Nonetheless, turning a blind eye gave ammunition to the leadership's more radical critics. In 1916 Jim Prior from Pittsworth challenged W.J. Dunstan, the Queensland Secretary's argument that war and drought had caused declining AWU membership.

[The] real cause, in my opinion, is the contractor, who has a monopoly of sheds and who employs none but fast shearers. I have known men that could shear a hundred sheep turned down. The men he employs start shearing in January and finish in December, and that is what they call getting a big run. You can't blame the men getting all they can, but the system is to blame. I have known a large number of shed hands, shearers and cooks who have left the pastoral industry because of the contract system. The smaller the shearing plant the greater the evil becomes. A small plant of five shearers were shearing near here last year. They shored 20,000 sheep, and none of those men had a ticket. Abolish the contractor, and our membership would be doubled. More shearers, shed hands and cooks would be required. The shed hand would then have a chance to learn to shear; now he has none. A plebiscite of members was taken a few years ago, and the abolition of the contractor was carried by a large majority, but the executive took no action. By not doing so they blundered greatly, in my opinion, and the pastoral industry remains in the grip of the middleman and monopolist.⁷⁹

Prior's argument that shearing in small sheds, out of sight out of mind to AWU organisers, was reducing the membership, did worry the AWU. However, there was very little that could be done about contracting as the cause of it. Remarks condemning contracting had a ritualistic air, and were still part of union discourse in the 1950s. The AWU concentrated on organising shearers by reaching as many sheds as it could, and was remarkably successful in this respect. One reason for this was that many shearers did a mixture of sheds, and they were sold union tickets when they were in the bigger woolsheds. Moreover, cocky shearers understood the benefits of award rates as much as anybody. It was better to quietly condone contracting and put up with the abuse of agitators, than to buy a fight with the contracting industry it had no hope of winning.

Queensland in the 1920s

The rapid spread of contracting in Queensland before World War I was followed by the targeting of Queensland sheds by NSW contractors in the 1920s. By 1924 this was

⁷⁹ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 17/2/1916, p. 20; For another example, see *The Worker*, 6/5/1915, p. 19.

creating considerable consternation amongst Queensland shearers. Ruthless contractors were accused of cramming shearers into cars or onto the trays of lorries alongside a shearing plant. Contractors largely replaced squatters as the symbols of greed and exploitation: ‘The majority of them sport a new motor car every year, and enjoy a seaside residence for the summer months, all wrung from the sweat of the pastoral worker.’⁸⁰ John Durkin, an activist AWU official who was often at loggerheads with his superiors in the Brisbane office, spread a rumour that Frank Fitch, a manager for the Standard Shearing Company based in Winton, had been employed as a ‘special’ during the 1923 police strike in Melbourne. Fitch must have threatened legal action because the *Worker* subsequently printed a retraction.⁸¹

Sam Brassington from the Charleville office wound up 1924 with a tirade about the evils of contracting, which he said was assisting centralisation and draining population and wealth from country towns.

As usual the men recruited by the contractors in the Southern States have returned to their homes, after having enjoyed the pick of the shearing. Year after year the number of southerners increases, much to the detriment of local workers The position is becoming acute.

It was ‘bad enough when local labour was employed’ but things had gotten much worse:

Western towns have declined under its blighting effects, and there has been a steady drift of bushmen to the cities during recent years. The contract system has ably assisted centralization in the cities.⁸²

He wanted contracting declared illegal and district labour bureaus established to ensure local preference. It could be reinforced by building into the award provision ‘to pay fares actually expended’ by shearers from outside the district. The idea was that the obligation to pay fares would force employers to prefer local men. The cause was taken up by Randolph Bedford, a Labor member of the Queensland parliament, but no workable solutions were forthcoming.

There were, in fact, no solutions, or at least none that the AWU could contemplate. Queensland’s problem was that its sheep population, although large, was stagnating. This had a debilitating effect on the towns of the pastoral belt. Like many of the towns

⁸⁰ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 30/10/1924, p. 17.

⁸¹ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 30/10/1924, p. 14. Durkin was sympathetic to radical shearers groups in the 1920s and ‘30s. See Chapter 7.

⁸² *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 16/10/1924, p. 10.

in the wheat belts of New South Wales and Victoria there was a significant rural labouring population, but with more limited employment opportunities. In 1920 Queensland came under a more generous State Award which added to the flow of ‘southerners’.⁸³ The result in Queensland towns was a ‘chip on the shoulder’ sense of grievance - against graziers, against contractors, and against the world at large.

Woolsheds of the Twentieth Century

Despite widespread unease about contractors, money-making shearers benefited. The co-operatives hinted at by Bean were probably too much like socialism to work on a large scale. The whole point of contracting was that the farmer or the grazier could delegate complex arrangements to a specialist. The fundamentally hierarchical nature of shearing organisation could not easily accommodate communal decision making. Mateship bound shearers but the distinction between ‘boss’ and ‘worker’ remained.⁸⁴ Contract shearing needed an office to keep records, to co-ordinate applications. Arrangements had to be fine-tuned when the weather or breakdowns interrupted schedules. Shearers sometimes had to be dragged out of pubs. In the early days contractors also had to supply machines in many cases. Many bought a truck to transport shearers to the sheds. Clearly some capital and entrepreneurial ability was required. While a stake could be accumulated from a shearer’s earnings, an element of patronage from a wealthy grazier or commercial interests was helpful. Once established, many became inter-generational businesses. Despite the chain of command, relationships between the new contractors and shearers did not exactly replicate the old squatter-shearer divide. Very often shearers made the crucial step from employee to employer, and this gave them a ‘hands on’ familiarity with shearing culture. This was an important distinction from the older type of contracting business where supervisors were frequently wool-classers, or had backgrounds in pastoralism. Contractors increasingly considered this to be a disadvantage in handling shearers. For example, if the shearers were making a fuss about the machinery it was difficult to for a non-shearer to know whether the complaint was genuine. If the boss was an

⁸³ The origins of the Queensland Award are canvassed in Chapter 6.

⁸⁴ There is depicted in *Sunday Too Far Away*. The contractor for the shed was recently one of the shearing gang. He is in an awkward position when conflict develops between the shearers and the grazier, and has to distance himself from them.

ex-shearer he could grab the handpiece and shear half a dozen to call their bluff.⁸⁵ Graziers were sometimes ex-shearers, but demarcation between employer and employee continued nonetheless.

Contract shearing was not imposed on shearers by graziers or anyone else. Nor did union suspicion stall its advance. There is little evidence that pastoralist organisations instructed or otherwise cajoled their members to adopt it. Indeed, in the early days some influential graziers discouraged it. As the system expanded the graziers sought to corral it by establishing registration schemes, but many contractors survived without grazier approval. Grazier concerns that contractors could not discipline militant shearers were the mirror image of AWU fears that contracting was a squatter conspiracy. Both could not be right. In fact, the balance of power at the woolshed was more complex than most people thought. Interaction was not universally hostile. Shearers tended to go to the same sheds year after year, and an element of inter-personal rapport often existed – less so perhaps at bigger sheds.

⁸⁵ SLV MS TMS 557-8, Patsy Adam-Smith interview with Laurie Walsh, 1978,

SECTION III

The Arbitration System and its Enemies

Chapter 6: The Return of Instability and the Graziers' Response 1916-23

Calm before the Storm, 1907 to 1914

Between 1907 and 1914 the shearing industry was encouragingly calm. The possibility that contracting was a reason this was not widely considered. The union credited arbitration and the 1907 award was heralded as a gigantic achievement. An illustration on the front page of *The Worker* to mark the historic watershed featured pastoral bliss with feminised characters quite incongruent with the real outback or mateship culture (see Figure 6-1).¹ The award was updated in 1911 and, despite Thomas Waddell's intemperate outburst, reasonably well accepted on both sides.² Justice Powers of the Arbitration Bench praised the union's moderation and common sense in 1913. 'For many years past disorganisation and conflicts between employers and employees in the great pastoral industry by strikes have not taken place.'³ Ted Grayndler, who had taken over as General Secretary after Tommy White died suddenly in 1912, told the 1913 Annual Conference:

During the year the award has been firmly administered, and has worked satisfactorily as a whole, and only minor troubles, which are inevitable, were reported. The wet sheep trouble has been less in evidence, and there has been less friction than in any year of our history.⁴

It helped that wool prices were firm and stock numbers rising.⁵ Uncharacteristically, the usually passive New Zealand sheds were reporting strife.⁶ It was not just union propaganda that times were prosperous. A sheep breeder was quoted at the Sydney Sheep Show:

The pastoral industry continues in a flourishing condition. The season is propitious, and there is every prospect of a satisfactory lambing and wool yield. The prices for stock are high, and the outlook, generally, is very promising.⁷

It was too good to last. Some years later the same Justice Powers sang from a different song sheet, chastising the AWU's intemperate reaction to his award of 1922.⁸

¹ *The Worker*, 23/7/1907, p. 1.

² See Chapter 3.

³ *The Worker*, 22/4/1913, p. 19.

⁴ *The Worker*, 29/1/1913, p. 3.

⁵ *The Worker* published a table showing wool prices 75 per cent higher in 1907 than they had been in 1891, more than fully recovered from a 20 per cent drop between 1891 and 1894. *The Worker*, 4/7/1907, p. 17; 20/7/1913, p. 1. For wool production, *The Worker*, 1/10/1913, p. 2.

⁶ *The Worker*, 2/7/1913, p. 1.

⁷ *The Worker*, 9/7/1913, p. 1.

⁸ Union officials called it an 'outrage' and several of them were heavily fined for 'inciting strikes'. SMH, 19/5/1922, p. 11. See below for 1922 strike.

Figure 6-1: Worker Front Page July 2007

SPECIAL ARBITRATION AWARD EDITION

Official Organ of the Trade Unions
and Labor Organizations.

The Worker

Registered at G.P.O. Sydney, for
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TUESDAY, JULY 23, 1907.

TEL. 2827.
PRICE—ONE PEN



The AWU was aggressively expanding into other fields such as mining and transport.⁹ There was now a machine-like efficiency to the network of shed organisers. Officials visited all the larger sheds on an annual rotation, and a fair share of the smaller ones. They spread union doctrine and ruthlessly signed up members. ‘Shirkers’ who refused tickets were berated with lectures on mateship.¹⁰ W.G. Spence’s two books were published in this period.¹¹ Union rhetoric harped on about ‘the squatters’, how rich they were and how badly they treated pastoral workers, but this was largely a habit. Shearers shamed or coerced into joining were not necessarily taken in by the ‘great union’ mateship myth, but AWU membership had a practical side. The award was popular and graziers generally did not dispute it. Moreover, there was a collegiality amongst shearers largely independent of the AWU. In a sense, though, it bound them to it.

Graziers observed AWU expansion with disquiet, but old-guard tirades from Waddell and W.E. Abbott were unrepresentative of shifting opinion. In any case they were partly directed at claims for station hands and farm labourers for an award. This did disturb graziers and farmers, but unionisation of shearers was grudgingly acknowledged as a *fait accomplis* and perhaps for the best. A resurgent AWU and the shift to arbitration perpetuated the need for graziers to be organised. Pastoralists were first stirred to organisation in the 1890s when shearing unionism mushroomed. The ‘pastoralist unions’ were now morphing into the ‘graziers associations’ of the twentieth century, as the name change of the NSW body indicated.¹² They had to be able to present their side of the argument through the Court’s legal rituals of presenting evidence and cross-examining witnesses. It was a more civilised way of resolving class warfare than setting fire to woolsheds, and secreting ‘scab’ shearers past pickets in the dead of night under police escort, but irredeemably adversarial nonetheless.¹³ Some of the old ‘squatter versus shearer’ feeling was preserved in woolshed culture despite the moderating influence of closer settlement, and also contracting.

⁹ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 110-6.

¹⁰ For almost a century *The Worker* carried the ‘Bushworkers’ Budget’ segment in which organisers reported on their rounds of woolsheds. They are a chronicle of what was on their minds, both momentous and trivial. Indirectly, the moods of pastoral workers are also represented.

¹¹ Spence, *Australia’s Awakening*; W.G. Spence *History of the A.W.U.*, The Worker Trustees, 1911.

¹² See Chapter 2.

¹³ Waterhouse, *Vision Splendid*, pp. 109-11.

During World War I a number of factors disturbed the pond. Serious drought returned in 1914 and 1915 for the first time since 1902. Massive army enlistments depleted the workforce. The cumbersome procedures of the Arbitration Court used 'the war' to postpone award cases, while living costs were sharply inflated. From December 1916 (when the 1911 Award should have expired) graziers benefited from a surprisingly generous bulk purchase agreement with the British Government. The whole Australian clip was to be assessed on the basis of a 15½ pence per lb average. Half the profits on resale were to be distributed back to woolgrowers, but graziers were not saddled with any prospective losses! Most of the wool remained in store in Australia because of a shipping shortage, but growers received regular cheques based on assessed prices.¹⁴ On their own, these elements would have been enough to stir woolshed conflict, but the politics of the war, especially conscription, also energised the labour movement. Shearing sheds in pastoral districts became hot beds of discontent - less so in farming regions where local loyalties held sway over class envy and patriotism was taken for granted.

Discontent was partly imported. The IWW (also known also as the 'Wobblies'), had notable influences in Australia and New Zealand from about 1907. In Australian woolsheds the IWW seized on the militant streak in the bush union ethos with marked effect. The AWU no more welcomed this than graziers as it threatened its claim on pastoral worker loyalty and its carefully constructed commitment to arbitration. The recent MSU challenge from straight talking, no nonsense, money-making contract shearers had not conditioned the AWU for a revolt of this type. It had been axiomatic that mateship bound the more class conscious, discontented elements to bush unionism, as AWU rhetoric implied. In any case, who else had the organisation to make their protests effective? The fact that militant condemnation of AWU policies sounded eerily similar to past MSU propaganda contributed to the confusion. Agitators said that the AWU was more interested in politics and 'fat salaries' for officials than rank-and-file issues. The difference was that militants wanted 'direct action' whereas contract shearers had sought harmony and sane dialogue with the woolgrowers.¹⁵ The IWW was not likely to ambush the AWU with secret deals with

¹⁴ Christopher Fyfe, *Gentlemen's Agreements: Australian Wartime Wool Appraisements*, Lana Press, Dalkieth WA, 1996, pp. 1-13.

¹⁵ *Direct Action* was the name of the IWW propaganda sheet.

the squatters, but it brought organisational rigour to the AWU's Left-wing. From the graziers' perspective the proposition that arbitration would eliminate 'shearing trouble' was blown out of the water. However, rather than turn hostile to arbitration they became grimly determined to make shearers stick to its rules. This set the scene for renewed shearing conflict and a revival of the three-way test of strength that had seemed resolved. Graziers confronted a union movement once again split between moderate and militant constituents.

Grazier and Farmer Factions

Labour issues contributed to a narrowing of the old rift between squatters and selectors, but it did not disappear. Pestering strikes by wheat harvesters steered farmers towards the emerging anti-Labor Country Parties and rapprochement with their former enemies the wool graziers.¹⁶ As Tom Connors has shown, the compromise was less than fully consummated. Squatter-selector hatreds over land policy eased, but a grazier-farmer feud over price support and stabilisation schemes for primary products became the main contested ground in twentieth century rural politics. More fundamentally, it evolved out of the protection versus free trade differences of the Federation era and conflicting views on government intervention in economic affairs. Wheat growers, aligned to the Farmers and Settlers Association, were dogmatic supporters of wheat pooling and guaranteed prices. A fanatical faction with origins in Victoria, which Connors calls 'the radical wheat growers', drove farmers to seek government support. Larger woolgrowers tended to stay in the Graziers Association which vetoed all such schemes for wool until the 1970s. Woolgrowers were, nonetheless, deeply split according to a grazier-farmer divide. Federally, the Australian Woolgrowers and Graziers Council (AWGC) was a creature of the graziers associations, vehemently opposed to intervention. The Australian Wool and Meat Producers Association (AWMPA) represented farmers who persisted in agitating for it. Within the Country Party these profound differences were papered over in a semblance of unity. Wool marketing aside, protectionists mostly determined policy.¹⁷

¹⁶ SMH, 21/11/1913, p. 6; 28/11/1913, p. 9; 29/11/1913, p. 21; 4/12/1913, p. 8; 15/12/1913, p. 5.

¹⁷ Connors, *To Speak with One Voice*, pp. 2-5.

A critical factor keeping grazier-farmer differences in check was antagonism to Labor. In the 1890s selector hatred of the squatters had tended to spill over into sympathy for bush unionism, a process fuelled by selectors who were also shearers. Land taxes, a row in NSW over the threat to block conversion of leasehold into freehold, and attempts to unionise farm labour accelerated small farmer disillusionment.¹⁸ The ‘volunteer army’ of farmers from wheat districts who loaded trains and ships and hewed coal during the 1917 general strike viewed unions as grossly unpatriotic. In the matrix of sometimes conflicting loyalties to class and region shearers were touched by ‘countrymindedness’, even if most voted Labor.¹⁹ It was not unknown for farmers to vote Labor, or for Labor to hold rural parliamentary seats. One factor was the concentration of labourers in mining towns. Broken Hill is the outstanding example, and Donald Macdonell held the NSW seat of Cobar. Other rural Labor representation was more obviously based on selector support.²⁰ By the 1920s, however, notwithstanding some ongoing sympathy for underdogs, small farmers were often the most trenchant Labor-haters. Paradoxically, graziers were more likely to tolerate the AWU as a necessary inconvenience in shearing sheds, although this pragmatism did not extend to the Labor Party running the country. J.W. Allen, who served as the Graziers’ Association’s full-time General Secretary from 1915 to 1948, shaped the character of the Association with canny and meticulous administration.²¹ A more nuanced interpretation of the stereotype of ‘ruling class’ power exercised by prominent graziers such as Sir Norman Kater and Sir Graham Waddell is warranted.²² Attitudes to shearers, the AWU, and the Arbitration Court were essentially pragmatic, governed by getting the shearing done without disruption.

¹⁸ Ellis, *Country Party*, p. 23

¹⁹ D. Aitkin, ‘“Countrymindedness” – the Spread of an Idea’, *Australian Cultural History*, 1985, pp. 34-41.

²⁰ Jim Hagan (ed), *People and Politics in Regional New South Wales, Volume 1 1865 to the 1950s*, The Federation Press, 2006, pp. 281, 282, 284; Jack Hallam, *The Untold Story: Labor in Rural NSW*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983; See *The Worker*, 27/7/1916, p. 19 for a farmer who had been a miner in Lithgow and remained a staunch Labor supporter.

²¹ Allen began as a stockbrokers’ clerk in Adelaide around 1890. For decade he was a junior in the office of the Pastoralists’ Union of South Australia. His diligence was identified, and he was seconded to the Pastoralists’ Union of NSW to assist with the 1911 Pastoral Award case. He replaced John Mair as General Secretary, in 1915. ABL, E256/1647, ‘Recollections’. Also *The Worker*, 22/7/1915, p. 19.

²² Donald Horne, *Money Made Us*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Baltimore, 1976, pp. 76-80; Andrew Moore, Andrew ‘The Old Guard and “Countrymindedness” during the Great Depression’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 27, 1990, pp. 52-64. Graham Waddell was from a wealthy grazing establishment family, a nephew of the aforementioned Thomas, and prominent in the Graziers Association interwar.

Events between 1915 and 1923 were crucial to the graziers' view. Wrong footed by shearing shed unrest during World War I, much as the AWU was, they reconsidered strategy and tactics. The realisation that arbitration was not a panacea for industrial unrest energised Allen. It was a baptism of fire but he relished the challenge and the lessons proved valuable for the rest of his long career. Graziers resolved to make the arbitration system work. They would argue aggressively for their interests in the Court. They could not expect to get everything they wanted, but were determined that awards would be adhered to. This was preferable to the unpredictability of shed by shed negotiation, frequent conflict and periodic violence. On retirement forty years later Allen remembered Thomas Waddell's attack on Higgins in 1911 and the Judge's indignation as a blast from the past. 'There was a real old rumpus about that!', he laughed.²³ He did not always agree with the Court's decrees either, but cultivated the art of being most respectful towards the judges that imposed them.

Shearers and the IWW

The itinerant roots of the IWW in America roughly paralleled those of Australian shearers and miners. The rambling nature of the wool industry, its large and highly unionised sheds, suited IWW methods of 'boring from within'. Lacking a strongly organised industrial base of their own, militants operated within established unions instead of challenging them openly. The MSU had tried to establish a rival organisation and this contributed to its failure as the AWU identified its target and wore it down. There could be no significant success, however, without a plausible message for the grassroots. Rants on 'speeding-up' were unlikely to make much headway against the competitive instincts of shearers, but the traditional hatred of the 'squatter' did carry genuine promise. It was crucial that AWU organisers in Longreach and Bourke had radical leanings and could touch these nerves in shearing culture. These minor officials were constantly feuding with union heavyweights in Brisbane and Sydney. The IWW made sense to them and they took its message into the pastoral regions of Queensland and western-NSW where the bushworker legend was most potent. The IWW was hardly noticed in 'cocky sheds' in Victoria.²⁴

²³ ABL, E256/1647, 'Recollections', p. 5.

²⁴ The IWW had a major impact in the New Zealand mining industry from 1908, and radicalised the union movement generally. But it was a minor influence in shearing sheds, where the culture was were

At the 1916 AWU Conference IWW sympathisers were amongst the delegates. A. McNaught from the Queensland Branch, who admitted freely that he was an IWW member, stood against Spence for President of the union and attracted surprising support. Spence, accustomed to being re-elected unopposed, was outpolled in the pastoral stronghold of Longreach by 3,063 to 2,645, and voting in the Western Branch of NSW was desperately close (2,080 for Spence, 2,042 for McNaught).²⁵ Mick Kelly, an organiser based in Longreach, and Jack Cullinan from the Western Branch were amongst those supporting McNaught's radical motions. One proposal asked that incumbent members of parliament should not be allowed to speak at the conference. Another demanded that petitions of members could challenge executive decisions. Yet another sought that all rule changes be subject to rank-and-file plebiscite. McNaught referred to a 'star chamber bureaucracy for officials by officials'.²⁶ W. McCormack (himself a member of the Queensland parliament, later Premier of the State) was dismissive. McNaught's ideas were 'catchy', appealed mainly to 'belly-achers' and mitigated against 'leadership'.²⁷ Radicals had no hope of success, but a pocket of determined dissent clearly existed.

Having survived McNaught's candidacy, Spence began his presidential address with a reference to the war, paying tribute to fallen AWU members who had 'crossed the great border'. They had lost their lives 'fighting the battle of liberty and justice in the interests of the Empire of which Australia [forms] a part'.²⁸ Jingoism risked being out of step with rank-and-file sentiment, or even other AWU hard heads. Spence was a member of W.M Hughes' Labor Government. When Labor split over conscription later in 1916 he defected with the pro-conscriptionists, in effect becoming a 'Labor rat'. More in sorrow than anger, his colleagues required his resignation from the union he had helped found exactly thirty years earlier. Pro-Empire talk was certainly anathema to the IWW, and set the scene for their disgust at the rest of his speech which was a full-blown attack on its philosophy. 'Apart from [our] common foe the

more like Victoria than Queensland. E. Olssen, *The Red Feds : Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour, 1908-14*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, New York, 1988, pp. 4, 149, 199.

²⁵ *The Worker*, 3/2/1916, p. 19.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *The Worker*, 3/2/1916, p. 20.

²⁸ *ibid.*

Pastoralists' Union, there have been other mysterious forces at work', he noted. This sounded a bit like one of his past attacks on the defunct MSU, but once into his stride Spence displayed impressive familiarity with international socialism. He dismissed it, of course, as a 'shibboleth' and 'economic lunacy'. Condemnation of the four or five renegades voting for McNaught's motions was barely disguised.²⁹

Another McNaught proposal for the AWU to abandon arbitration for direct negotiation with the employers was vintage IWW dogma, a blatant assault on fundamental AWU belief. Such abject heresy was usually curtly ruled out of order, but a long and largely measured debate ensued. Perhaps AWU realists sensed unrest amongst shearers and felt the arguments for arbitration needed reinforcing. John Barnes relived the history of the 1890s recalling that the 1894 strike had almost 'knocked [us] out', the membership declining from 23,000 to a mere 8,000. To abandon arbitration would be 'folly'. Times had changed sufficiently, and he maintained that it was 'easier for [us] to capture the political machine than to allow the boss to do it'.³⁰ It was hardly surprising that Barnes held such views. He was a Senator of the Commonwealth and Labor was in power federally and in NSW. Before the end of the year, however, Labor split over conscription and its loyal remnants formed dispirited Oppositions.

Ernie Lane, younger brother of the radical polemicist of the 1890s, William Lane, had an insider's view of the tension within the AWU.

There was a virile militant minority of delegates at the first Queensland delegate meeting in 1914 since the amalgamation, who were opposed to the Arbitration system, strenuous advocates of industrial immersion on a definite working class basis who viewed with misgivings the growing dominance of the politicians.³¹

The amalgamation was the absorption of the Amalgamated Workers' Association (AWA) into the AWU. The AWA was a north Queensland bush union of 'miners, sugar workers and labourers', many of whom were itinerant and this was one source of IWW influence.³² Officials in the pastoral region contributed to 'the growing power of the militant section'. Lane specifically nominated Kelly and Cullinan.³³

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ E.H. Lane, *Dawn to Dusk: Reminiscences of a Rebel*, Shape, Brisbane, 1993 (first published by William Brooks & Co, 1939), p. 150.

³² Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 7, 112.

³³ Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*, p. 152.

Kelly, a fine speaker and capable organiser, always secured a big militant vote for delegate meetings and conventions. In debate he could more than hold his own with the AWU 'big guns' by whom he was regarded as a very dangerous man.³⁴

Jack Cullinan, Secretary of the Western Branch of NSW, was known for his 'pugnacious militancy, unshakable adherence to principle, and hatred of the intrigue and trickery of the AWU heads'.³⁵ Jack Durkin was another thorn in the side of the AWU hierarchy. He was an AWU organiser in 1916, promoted in the 1920s, expelled in 1924, and a prominent supporter of the PWIU in the 1930s.³⁶

Five votes (out of 21) for McNaught's anti-arbitration resolution at the 1916 Conference showed that the IWW power base was limited, although its popularity in the pastoral districts that Kelly, Cullinan and Durkin hailed from was hard to deny. The Labor Party's disintegration over conscription only reinforced the radical instinct.³⁷ A strong feature of IWW ideology was that parliaments and arbitration courts were a waste of time and workers had to engage the enemy at the point of production. Given the power that shearers sensed over defenceless squatters with sheep mustered - Bean's 'undercurrents' - it was an idea that resonated in hot and grimy woolsheds, and in the evenings sitting around squalid shearing quarters far from home comforts - debating the war, squatters' guaranteed prices, the cost of life's essentials, or whatever else cropped up.³⁸

Queensland Strikes, 1916 and 1917

The initial rumblings of protest in Queensland shearing towns in February and March of 1916 were barely noticed in the city. W.G. Spence, though, was aware of it and had already attacked militants at the January Conference. The AWU arrogantly declared that a detailed case for the Arbitration Court was in preparation and shearers should patiently wait for the new award. There was talk in the sheds that they had waited long enough. In late-March and early-April the restive mood took concrete form.³⁹ A meeting at Winton on 13 April despatched a telegram to AWU headquarters detailing grievances. The leaders dodged a face to face meeting with shearers, suggesting the

³⁴ Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*, p. 187.

³⁵ Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*, p. 188.

³⁶ Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*, p. 153. See Chapter 7 for the PWIU.

³⁷ *The Worker*, 24/2/1916, p. 20.

³⁸ For 'undercurrents' see Chapter 1.

³⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 23/3/1916, p. 6; 31/3/1916, p. 9.

men go back to work. Emphatically, no financial assistance for a strike would be available. Obviously concerned, pastoralists sought a special conference with the AWU, which was rejected on more or less the same grounds given to the shearers – the Arbitration Court would look after it. Another meeting at Hughenden Hotel ('attended by about 100 men') was presided over by Alick Short, described in the *Brisbane Courier* as a 'union delegate'. Not according to the AWU hierarchy! 'Short has no authority from the AWU to stop men from going to any shed. The union is advising men to accept the present award.'⁴⁰ This was wired to the dissidents by R. Bow, District Secretary in Longreach. Bow himself had some sympathy with the men, but the prudent course in the meantime was to reiterate official warnings against direct action.

A large open air meeting took place at Charleville on the west bank of the Warrego River. There was a mood of solidarity, and a taste for action. AWU officials 'took no part', and 'later announced that they considered the men ill-advised in their action.' Shortly afterwards Bill Dunstan, Secretary of the Queensland Branch, toured the west to explain the AWU's position.⁴¹ The *Courier* reported that Ted Grayndler, the General Secretary based in Sydney, wired all district secretaries to say discussions with pastoralists had now occurred and it had been agreed that the 'AWU will not countenance any alteration of the existing rates until the award expires'.⁴² J.W. Allen, as Secretary of the Graziers Federal Council, tried to pressure Grayndler into wiring the strikers directly, but Grayndler thought better of it. The last thing he was going to do was arm rebels with a telegram they could wave at meetings of rowdy shearers as living proof of AWU spinelessness. Gratuitously, he told Allen there was plenty of information published in *The Worker* outlining union policy and he could not be held responsible for what individuals chose to do. Surprisingly, Grayndler released the correspondence which was not very flattering, but it underlines how urgently he felt the need to be seen to be doing something.⁴³

The dispute centred on a demand for 32/6 per hundred, significantly above the prevailing award rate of 24/-. Rouseabouts were seeking 50/- per week rather than the

⁴⁰ *Brisbane Courier*, 14/4/1916, p. 6.

⁴¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 18/4/1916, p. 6; 26/4/1916, p. 3.

⁴² *Brisbane Courier*, 14/4/1916, p. 6.

⁴³ *The Worker*, 15/6/1916, p. 19.

award rate of 37/6. According to one report rouseabouts were ‘disgusted’ because, as far as they were concerned, shearers were already paid plenty, but this may have been misinformation.⁴⁴ Clearly there was grassroots support for the demands, but who or what gave them focus and cohesion? It emerged that Mick Kelly was the key speaker at meetings.⁴⁵ One of Kelly’s speeches was reported in a fair bit of detail. It provided a comprehensive history of shearing rates and previous awards. Essentially, Kelly was arguing a case similar to the one the AWU would take to the Court. Taking the cost of living and other factors into account, shearers were no better off in 1916 than they had been in 1891. He spoke strongly against any notion of a breakaway from the AWU and claimed that ‘the organisation never stood stronger’. It was not the speech of a revolutionary, beyond invoking the spirit of the men from the Broken Hill mine who had recently been able to get the Arbitration Court to act more promptly by threatening direct action.⁴⁶ Kelly was a bush unionist frustrated by the leadership’s conservatism. This was driving him into the embrace of the IWW, which was at least taking him seriously. *Courier* reports gave no hint of IWW links. Kelly resigned from the AWU as the strike crystallised.⁴⁷

The strike spread quickly. Graziers had sent sheep to the Darling Downs on agistment. Indeed there was little trouble getting shearers to work in selector country surrounding Toowoomba and Dalby and some western graziers realised they could escape their predicament this way.⁴⁸ By the beginning of May there was little shearing taking place from Cunnamulla all the way to Cloncurry. There were scattered reports of shearing at above award rates but in the main graziers were still trying to stand firm. Losses of stock weakened their resolve but it was some time before they realised that it was pointless negotiating with the AWU. They were further hampered by internal divisions. The Northern and Central branch of the Pastoralists Association was not co-ordinating tactics with the South Western branch.

Under constant pressure from Allen, Grayndler tried to end the deadlock. With Spence in tow, he travelled by train to Rockhampton to meet representatives of the

⁴⁴ *Brisbane Courier*, 1/5/1916, p. 6.

⁴⁵ *Brisbane Courier*, 9/5/1916, p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 18/5/1916, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 19/1/1916, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Brisbane Courier*, 22/5/1916, p. 6.

strikers. Rockhampton was a compromise location to save a day's travel inland, but the AWU leaders may well have been steering clear of Barcaldine and Longreach, towns full of idle shearers. Facing a handful of militant spokesmen was preferable to a hostile mob. The meeting, attended by 29 representatives from the various districts on Thursday 18 May 1916, was held behind closed doors. It went on all day and into the night, with reporters waiting outside. All they got was a stony faced statement from Spence that there was 'nothing to report beyond the fact that the position of the union had been placed before the men's representatives'. In fact, Spence and Grayndler had been rolled. A committee of three was formed to communicate the men's decisions to the pastoralists. Arrangements were made for an office to be set up in Barcaldine to conduct the committee's affairs. The AWU was to stay out of it.⁴⁹

Newspapers cottoned on that the dispute was 'not so much a difference with employers as a breakaway from the AWU'.⁵⁰ Apart from Kelly and the Barcaldine committee, no names were mentioned. The graziers now grasped that the AWU was not in charge, and things happened more quickly. The parties went through the façade of a conference involving the AWU and the Graziers Federal Council with Justice Higgins taking the credit for brokering a rate of 27/- per 100 sheep, but this was window dressing. At the end of May the Northern and Central branches of the Pastoralists' Association cabled Barcaldine offering a settlement at 27/- per 100 for shearing, and 50/- per week for rouseabouts (these were the same figures as the Higgins' 'compromise').⁵¹ It transpired that the settlement had really been brokered by a shearing contractor named Thomas Duffy acting as a neutral intermediary. Duffy was able to make all sides aware of the 'commercial loss and suffering caused to the community' and a formal certificate was drawn up to 'settle the trouble in an amicable manner'. Within a few days the offer was accepted. The South Western branch had little alternative but to follow suit and the strike was over.⁵²

It was a significant victory for militants, a serious embarrassment for the AWU, and for the graziers a very sobering experience. Higgins role was only token. The

⁴⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 18/5/1916, p. 9; 19/5/1916, p. 6; *The Worker*, 25/5/1916, p. 21.

⁵⁰ *Brisbane Courier*, 22/5/1916, p. 6; SMH, 22/5/1916, p. 16.

⁵¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 22/5/1916, p. 6.

⁵² *ibid.* See also, Tsokhas, 'Power, Law and Conflict', pp. 223-6, for an account of the 1916 strike using mainly grazier records at ABL.

contribution of Duffy should not be underestimated. It was a sign that commonsense could temper IWW radicalism. The clumsiness of the arbitration system rather than class hatred created a situation which gave militants traction, although social conditions in the towns were also factors. The AWU and the grazier bodies were hidebound by arbitration in ways that contractors were not. Contractors got the blame for not sticking to the award or for encouraging militants, even when commonsense suggested that the award defied market reality and was playing into militants' hands.

J.W. Allen represented the Federal Council, but the real reason he took a close interest was that the NSW shearing was imminent. Militants held a meeting in Bourke some time in May and resolved to demand above award payments. Shortly afterwards another meeting, this time stacked with AWU loyalists, passed a vote of confidence in the AWU and reversed the strike decision. More ominously, a meeting at Boorooma station near Walgett on 18 June 1916 voted to strike. By mid-August there had been agitation at Narrabri, Gunnedah, Barraba, and as far away as Bourke.⁵³

Not long afterwards a fiery meeting was held in Sydney. Who organised it is unclear, but the Trades Hall location rather than Macdonell House (AWU headquarters) points to the IWW. It had the mark of 'AWU-Rank-and-File' gatherings which became a thorn in the side of the official AWU in the 1920s.⁵⁴ The meeting aimed to bind shearers into striking if NSW graziers did not pay 30/- a hundred. The AWU had wind of it and the meeting was stacked with loyalists including two organisers, Arthur and Breen, who knew how meetings worked. The resolution for 30/- was inevitable in the circumstances. Even the graziers were resigned to this after Queensland, although Allen went through the motions of insisting that shearing be done at award rates. Arthur succeeded in moving an amendment to the '30/- resolution', lavishly praising the AWU and voting confidence in its leaders. This was too much for those running the meeting and the chairman closed it amidst shouting and disarray.⁵⁵

NSW shearing in 1916 took place without major disturbance, but only because graziers recognised that the award was unenforceable. The AWU claim was finally

⁵³ *The Worker*, 22/6/1916, p. 5; 1/2/1917, p. 20; SMH, 30/6/1916, p. 16; *Land*, 23/6/1916, p. 9.

⁵⁴ See discussion of the Bushworkers' Propaganda Group in Chapter 7.

⁵⁵ SMH, 24/6/1916, p14; *The Worker*, 13/7/1916, p. 20.

heard and the Higgins Award of 1917 reset shearing rates at 30/- from 28 June 1917.⁵⁶ This was barely in time for the 1917 shearing season in NSW. Early shearing in Queensland was long over and had endured two full seasons without a realistic award. Had there not been a strike in 1916 it is doubtful whether the machinery would have operated even this quickly. The AWU's request for patience in early 1916 had been thoroughly unconvincing. In his usual pedantic fashion Higgins went into detailed argument about how the new award had been calculated, but it was meeting the market. Graziers complained but most were already paying 30/- for shearing.⁵⁷

In 1917 shearing in Queensland was again disrupted for a protracted period between July and September, this time by shed hands. Again the hand of the IWW was present. Content with their 1916 triumph, shearers were not anxious to support the lowly shed hands, but they drifted down to NSW where there was plenty of shearing.⁵⁸ Unable to find shearers anyway, graziers stood firm. A few militants encouraged shed hands to dig in.⁵⁹ The result was tragic as they did not have the resources for a long siege. The lack of wage circulation told heavily on the local shopkeepers. Train travellers described desperate men at Jericho who had walked from Barcaldine. They were 'begging for tucker' and 'absolutely stony broke', unable to get work because the strike had shut everything down.⁶⁰ Queensland towns were eerily quiet. Locals had gone to the Exhibition in Brisbane while shed hands and a few remaining shearers were holed up in camps on the fringes. There were suggestions that secret ballots might nullify mateship pressure, but this never occurred. The AWU attempted to defuse the situation, approaching the Court to get the 44 hours provision brought into the award, but the Court was not interested. Ted Grayndler almost sounded like a pastoralist when he blamed the dispute on a 'few "red raggars"', and even had the gall to suggest that 'if the pastoralists had stood a little more firm last year, when they conceded 44 hours without consulting the AWU, it would have been better for them'!⁶¹

⁵⁶ CAR, Vol. 11, 1917, p. 389.

⁵⁷ W.E. Abbott's remarks reported in Chapter 3 may be regarded as typical.

⁵⁸ *Brisbane Courier*, 13/7/1917, p. 6; 21/8/1917, p. 7.

⁵⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 27/7/1917, p. 6; 20/8/1917, p. 6.

⁶⁰ *Brisbane Courier*, 6/8/1917, p. 6.

⁶¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 9/8/1917, p. 6.

On this occasion woolgrowers *were* standing firm. The twenty-seventh annual meeting of the United Pastoralists and Grazing Farmers Association of Queensland⁶² was held during the first week of August, as the strike was getting serious. If the President, Arthur Whittingham, had heard of Grayndler's gratuitous insult he ignored it, stating unequivocally that AWU policy should be followed. The backhander to the AWU came in his sarcastic rebuke to advocates of arbitration who claimed that it would eliminate strikes. 'As a matter of fact', he said, 'industrial legislation seems to have had the effect of developing a spirit of revolution against law and order, and of setting class against class'.⁶³ The graziers did not blink this time, and desperate strikers slowly caved in. By the beginning of September a few sheds were able to start, but heavy rain in mid-September again delayed things.⁶⁴ In any case there were few shearers left in the state, and graziers had to wait until the NSW sheds finished before they began to straggle north again, to clip the Queensland fleeces.

The tragic fate of the rouseabouts in 1917 notwithstanding, a new militancy was in the air. Another meeting of rebels at Trades Hall in Sydney in 1917 discussed tactics for the next season. An AWU man managed to get hold of details of the 'strike committee's' expenditure in NSW in 1916. Nearly £1000 of donations came from other unions (including £250 from 'Broken Hill Unions'). The largest source of donations, over £560, came from shearing sheds, and the rest from money collected in country towns and from individuals. Most of the money had been collected in northern and western NSW, although a significant amount - roughly £150 - had come from central-western Queensland.⁶⁵ These are significant amounts of money, but contrary to *The Worker's* accusatory stance, they hardly suggest that militants were rolling in money. Some £240 spent on wages in one or two months suggests an active organising effort. Perhaps six or seven full time organisers on a modest wage had been operating for a couple of months in NSW. Queensland grazing selectors were 'irritated' that larger pastoralists had given in too easily.⁶⁶ Key thinkers amongst the graziers realised they also needed to beef up their own solidarity.

⁶² This was an organisation of smaller growers and farmers, many from the Darling Downs.

⁶³ *Brisbane Courier*, 9/8/1917, pp. 8.

⁶⁴ *Brisbane Courier*, 4/9/1917, p. 8; 5/9/1917, p. 8; 6/9/1917, p. 8; 7/9/1917, p. 8; 8/9/1917, p. 6; 10/9/1917, p. 8; 11/9/1917, p. 7; 12/9/1917, p. 8; 13/9/1917, p. 8; 14/9/1917, p. 6; 17/9/1917, p. 6.

⁶⁵ *The Worker*, 18/1/1917, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Ruth Kerr, *Freedom of Contract*, p. 51.

The Graziers' Co-operative Shearing Company (Grazcos)

The contractors' achievement had been to rationalise complex shearing logistics, helping to soothe the anxieties of graziers while easing the frustrations of shearers. Arbitration was making a reasonable fist of weighing tricky arguments about the fairness of pay and conditions. However, the 1916 strike convinced some graziers it was not enough.

Contractors as a body, are a source of weakness rather than strength as the rivalry between them is not in the owners interest, so that it is desirable in the future we should secure control of the shearing through our own organisation.⁶⁷

They felt contractors too easily gave in to militancy. Contractors were bound by their agreements with graziers and earned respect (and therefore repeat business) on the basis that they could find shearers and control their moods. However, faced with a contractor out of his depth, graziers reluctantly agreed to concessions. This was not necessarily fair comment, because it was not done lightly, but it is what graziers believed. This was the exact opposite of what the AWU thought. In unionist eyes contractors were ruthless agents of the grazier class. It was also false, because shearer loyalty was an important factor in a contractor's viability.

NSW graziers decided to form their own cooperative shearing company, which opened for business in 1919. Corresponding initiatives occurred in Queensland and South Australia, but not Victoria.⁶⁸ Victorian shearing occurred mostly in October and November, later than other regions, and strikes were less problematic. Nonetheless, the success of the Graziers' Co-operative Shearing Company impressed Victorian graziers and they lobbied for the company to establish a separate office in Melbourne in 1923.⁶⁹ While there is no record of inter-state consultation, the need for grazier control of shearing must have been much discussed at the Graziers' Federal Council.⁷⁰

The NSW service was offered only to Graziers Association members, who were asked to support it by offering their shearing contracts. Members were also leaned on to

⁶⁷ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 1/3/1920. W.F. Jacques at the inaugural Annual General Meeting in 1920.

⁶⁸ These were the United Graziers Shearing Company (UNGRA) in Queensland, and the Stockowners Co-operative Shearing Company in South Australia.

⁶⁹ Randell, *Teamwork*, pp. 50-1; ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 14/8/1922; 23/10/1922; 15/1/1923.

⁷⁰ There is some discussion of the Queensland initiative in Ruth Kerr, *Freedom of Contract*, p. 51.

stump up capital for shares, although the Executive drew back from making this compulsory. The company expected to pay its way but orderly shearing, not profit, was its primary purpose. Dividends would be paid out of cash surpluses but shares could not be traded. There was to be no question of competing against private contractors by quoting prices for contracts – indeed the founders believed that competition was the reason for their problems. Stations were to be charged on a ‘cost-plus’ formula. Costs were calculated strictly on award terms, with a fixed management charge added.⁷¹ Not by any means was it a text book example of liberal capitalism. Grazier class solidarity was countering shearers’ mateship, especially in its most virulent form.

The venture vaguely resembled office engagement, at least in spirit, but for both commercial and political reasons it was deemed prudent to keep the Graziers Association at arms length. Victoria’s labour bureau was explicitly rejected as a working model.⁷² Technically, shareholders were individual graziers rather than the Graziers’ Association, although the capital structure was later altered to a cooperative.⁷³ Communication with the Graziers’ Association was deliberately formal, but informal familiarities also governed the relationship. Directors often served jointly on both Boards, and meetings in Sydney were often on the same day.

If the motivation was ‘political’ it lacked the cloak and dagger, conspiratorial flavour that had dogged the MSU 15 years earlier. One of its objectives was to bolster the ranks of the Graziers Association. At the same time the ‘members only’ rule meant that it could not displace private contractors, but there was a presumption that by disciplined example, it would keep them up to the mark. With Graziers Association membership as a captive market it quickly became the dominant shearing company in the State, capturing about 10 percent of shearing in NSW within a few seasons.⁷⁴ The cutting edge of the expansion of contracting was already shifting to operators located in country towns, but the Graziers Company to an extent preserved Sydney’s role as the centre of gravity of shearing administration.⁷⁵

⁷¹ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes 24/3/1919; 9/2/1920.

⁷² ABL, E256/1647, ‘Recollections’, p. 11

⁷³ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 23/10/1922; 14/10/1924.

⁷⁴ ABL Z278. Company Minutes record total sheep shorn per annum

⁷⁵ ABL, Z278. Shearing Company Minutes from 1919 until the 1960s.

In its inaugural season the Shearing Company advertised for shearers in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and ‘principal country newspapers’, but *The Worker* refused the request for space ‘without comment’.⁷⁶ It made no editorial comment on what must have been a widely discussed development. Probably the ghost of the MSU frightened the AWU into a defensive reaction, although *The Brisbane Worker* carried a letter announcing the formation of UNGRA. It was written by J.M. Yates – the former Young’s manager last heard of in 1907 giving evidence for Federal Shearing.⁷⁷ He was appointed manager of the Queensland co-operative. Yates explained that the ‘aims and policy’ of the company (similar to its NSW cousin) were ‘to prevent any misunderstanding among the members of the AWU’, and it was dedicated to ‘amicable relations’ with shearers and providing runs of sheds. It was an honest statement but few unionists believed it.

At the 1927 award case, the manager R.C. Wilson provided a detailed picture of how the Shearing Co-operative functioned. ‘If a man came into a shed and shorn one sheep his name would be on our cards’, Wilson explained. It enabled the Company to locate and look after the fastest and most competent shearers. In 1926 the Company used 1,706 shearers. Wilson knew where they came from, how often they had shorn with the Company, and had a report on each from the overseer. About half of these did only one shed with the Company (although Wilson pointed out that they may have done sheds before or after with other contractors). Some did as many as seven or eight.⁷⁸ Meticulous records fed a union view that secret blacklists were kept, but for the most part it was merely sensible management, as much in the interests of shearers as the Company.⁷⁹ It was also, however, a convenient means of identifying militants.

Grazing regions of NSW and Victoria were divided into districts on a colour coded map which designated the months of the shearing season. The Company’s shearing teams followed the shearing rotation – in July sheds were yellow (the north-west), August was blue, ending up in Victoria (coloured brown) in November. Each shed had a spot on the map, and indicated the number of shearers it would require. Wilson

⁷⁶ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 24/3/1919.

⁷⁷ See Chapter 4.

⁷⁸ NAA, B1958/10, Transcript of 1927 Pastoral Award Case, Vol. 1, pp. 283-342.

⁷⁹ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 24/3/1925; 7/4/1925.

was able to sit in his office in Sydney and receive wires from his overseers about progress, estimate when teams would be free for their next assignment, and redeploy them from the blue zone into the red or green as they were required.⁸⁰ It was like a military operation, designed to make the best use of shearers when they were available. The company aimed to spread sheds as evenly as it could over the five or six months of the main shearing season, although grazier preferences meant that there was always considerable bunching in August and September. During World War II shearing starts were regulated by a government zoning system introduced because of the chronic shortage of shearers. R.C. Wilson was appointed to run it, but when the war ended graziers returned to their favourite shearing times.

Once the union got used to the idea *The Worker* frequently carried Grazcos advertising and notices, but editorially it was often criticized. Like the AWU itself, Grazcos was quickly integrated into the social and cultural networks of rural NSW. The possibility of regular sheds and a pathway to eight million sheep meant that, love it or hate it, few shearers could afford not to be on the Company books.⁸¹

There was a final twist to the 1919 debut which may have explained *The Worker's* snub. John Young, the pioneer of contract shearing and infamous figure behind the MSU, agreed to come out of retirement to get the Company onto an operational footing. He was paid a large salary, £1,500 per annum. Once again he was embroiled in rosters of sheds and confronting unionists.⁸² As shearing was getting into full swing in August 1919 he sensed the testy moods of shearers. He told the board:

...judging from my experience during the past month of the state of the labour market, you have not formed this company a day too soon. I find the condition of the labour market almost in a worse position to-day than it was twenty five years ago when wages were one half.⁸³

The 1920 season in NSW was seriously disrupted by strikes.⁸⁴ The season was not quite over, but the crisis had been weathered when Young asked the board if he could leave his post a few weeks early to catch the boat to England, a customary practice of

⁸⁰ NAA, B1958/10, Transcript of 1927 Pastoral Award Case, Vol. 1, pp. 283-342.

⁸¹ In 1924 the Company established a parallel wool sorting and handling operation which adopted the brand name 'GRAZCOS'. The Company became colloquially known as Grazcos. In 1948 the name was formally changed to the Grazcos Shearing Company. It was sold as a going concern to Dalgety & Co in 1985. The shearing department was subject to a management buyout and became National Shearing Services, based in Dubbo. At the time of writing the company still exists in this form.

⁸² ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 24/3/1919; *Brisbane Worker*, 22/1/1920, p. 16.

⁸³ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 11/8/1919.

⁸⁴ See below.

the grazier class in the inter-war period. The board readily agreed and recorded a ‘very hearty vote of thanks to Mr J.H. Young for his able management of the Company since its inception.’⁸⁵ This understated the profound gratitude these hard bitten graziers felt for one of wool’s greatest warriors.

The Queensland Award & Strikes in 1920, 1922

The obvious success of direct action in 1916 did not warrant abandoning arbitration. For the time being the 1917 Award was working. However, the Queensland Branch of the AWU had been rattled by IWW influence in its western sheds. The industry limped through 1918 and 1919, but as John Young’s comments indicated, tension was building. Labor swept into office in Queensland in 1915 and new arbitration legislation offered a lifeline for the AWU Branch.⁸⁶ If a State shearing award could be secured, Queensland shearers might escape the perceived tyranny of the Commonwealth Award.⁸⁷ This was a doubtful proposition legally, because it had to be established that disputes were exclusively Queensland affairs. Whatever this implied for Queensland graziers, it was potentially a nightmare for those elsewhere. J. W. Allen recoiled in horror at the thought of fighting strikes in northern-NSW if the award just over the border was higher. Consequently he was aghast when the UGA, panicked by 1916 and 1917, met the judge in chambers and advised him that they had no objection to a separate Queensland Award. This eventuated in 1920. ‘Queensland rates’ were fixed at 40/- per hundred, considerably more than the Commonwealth Award of 30/-.

Predictably, the 1920 NSW shearing was disrupted. The wider labour movement was striving to have the 48-hour week abolished in favour of 44-hours.⁸⁸ The NSW Branches of the AWU felt a need to trump the Queensland achievement. Short-circuiting the pedestrian process of logging a claim via the Court, the union sought a

⁸⁵ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 1/11/1919, 29/11/1919.

⁸⁶ For background on the Industrial Arbitration Act of 1916, Barbara Webster, ‘A “Cosy relationship” If You Had It: Queensland Labor’s Arbitration System and Union Organising Strategies in Rockhampton, 1916-57’, *Labour History*, No. 83, November 2002, p. 91.

⁸⁷ Tsokhas, ‘Power, Law and Conflict’, p. 227.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of the broader 44-hour movement and the attitude of the Arbitration Court see, Chris Nyland, ‘Worktime in the 1920s’, *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2, September 1987, pp. 37-55.

conference with the graziers to press for 45/- (a healthy premium on the recent Queensland award) and a 44-hour week. The shearing season in northern-NSW was already beginning. The graziers avoided such conferences if they could, but the union was obviously in a strong position. It was quite a gathering, held in Melbourne on 6 July 1920. Arthur Blakeley and Ted Grayndler attended for the AWU, but also the Presidents and Secretaries of the three regional offices directly involved. The Graziers Associations of NSW, West Darling, Victoria, and South Australia provided two delegates each.⁸⁹ The 45/- was an ambit claim and a settlement at the 'Queensland' level of 40/- was achieved. J.W. Allen felt that some resistance should at least be demonstrated, and stubbornly refused to follow the other associations' acceptance of the 44-hour week. Having driven a wedge between the graziers, the AWU response was public and combative.

The AWU stands for constitutional methods, but as the rates claimed and awarded in 1917 are totally inadequate for 1920, it [is] impossible to expect members to remain satisfied and contented to work....

A further conference was scheduled for 15 July, but Ted Grayndler made it very plain that 'a complete settlement, so far as NSW at least is concerned, is remote'.⁹⁰

Allen persisted. The legendary J.H. Young was still in charge of the Shearing Company, in only its second season of operation, and stood ready to keep both shearers and grazier clients in line. But the pressure was irresistible, and neither Allen's protestations nor the logistical strengths of the Shearing Company could persuade wavering woolgrowers to hold the line. The Graziers Association was mocked by a series of cartoons and articles in *The Worker*. One of these showed a donkey labelled the 'Graziers' Ass of NSW' (pun obviously intended) crashing head first into an impenetrable '44-hours' brick wall. Another showed a map of Australia in which there was only one black corner of grazier intransigence. Employment of Aborigines by one station inspired Henry Boote to pen a tasteless 'Blackfellows to the Rescue!' editorial.⁹¹ The Grazing Company did hold out with some success. Of 54 sheds and almost 900,000 sheep it handled in 1920, 25 were conducted on a 48-hour week. Of the remainder 12 were in '44-hour districts' and 17 were conducted on a 44-

⁸⁹ Norman Kater was one of those representing NSW.

⁹⁰ *The Worker*, 8/7/1920, p. 7; 15/7/1920, p. 17.

⁹¹ *The Worker*, 29/7/1920, p. 3; 5/8/1920, p3; 2/9/1920, p. 3.

hour basis 'at the owner's request'.⁹² However, this was a fraction of perhaps 20 million sheep in the contested region, and most contractors conceded the 44-hours with grazier compliance. Kosmas Tsokhas concluded that the 1920 strike was another union success.⁹³

The Shearing Company received letters of appreciation from some clients, but was not amused by the reaction of others. The owners of Collaroy station (one of those caving in to the union) refused to pay the ½ pence per sheep management charge. The Company solicitors were instructed to take whatever legal action was required to secure payment and retrieve costs. John Young was as mortified by the outcome as J.W. Allen. With the wool market shaky due to the overhang of wartime stocks, Allen was determined to steer shearing back to the relative sanity of arbitration. Between them they realised that they would have to stiffen the resolve of their members (who were also clients) to beat future strikes. Young retired but his successor, Clarence Spier, had worked for the Company since the beginning as its 'labour manager' and was up to the job. He said 1920 had been a 'strenuous fight' and devised better procedures for the next season. These included closer liaison with local secretaries of the Graziers' Association to schedule shearing starts 'so that sheds may follow one another' and to reassure waverers. The Company resolved to stick rigidly to award conditions, whatever they were. It would prosecute any shearers who refused to shear after signing agreements. The Graziers Association agreed that it would refund the Company for any additional 'strike expenses' incurred in the process of carrying out this policy. It had an authoritarian flavour, not unlike the mateship that the AWU expected of its members!⁹⁴

The 1921 season was additionally complicated by floods which seriously disturbed scheduled starting times in the north-west, and stations became impatient. By the beginning of September about half the sheds on the Company's order book had managed to get a start, but many had postponed twice and some three times due to the weather. Before the season got underway it was agreed that the 40/- would be continued, although well above award rates. However, they would hold out for the 48-

⁹² ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 7/2/1921.

⁹³ Kosmas Tsokhas, 'Power, Law and Conflict' pp. 227-8.

⁹⁴ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company AGM 7/3/1921; Shearing Company Minutes 7/1/1921; 7/2/1921; 7/3/1921; 21/3/1921; 28/6/1921.

hour week ‘at as many sheds as possible’.⁹⁵ Eighteen out of 25 sheds were shearing 48-hours, while there had been a genuine strike at only two. One of the 44-hour sheds was Egelabra, the merino stud owned by Norman Kater. No-one suggested that he was breaking ranks on fellow graziers, but it is indicative of the difficulties involved.⁹⁶ By December, with only a handful of sheds still to finish, the company had shorn 45 sheds at 48-hours and at only 24 was 44-hours conceded. Tighter management had led to a better outcome than 1920. In only its third season the Company was shearing more than one million sheep. What happened with other contractors can only be guessed at but most probably shored 44-hour weeks. Overall, Spier was pleased with the outcome. The assistance from local secretaries in the difficult ‘Northern part of the State’ had worked well.⁹⁷ However, it was an unsatisfactory position because 40/- - ‘Queensland rates’ – was far in excess of the designated Commonwealth Award. Although this had been agreed to in conference, the Company depended on an enforceable award as its legal lever. Moreover, the signs were that the effort to hold the line on conceding 44-hours was not working.

In 1922 the resolve of the graziers faced a more exacting test. The still fragile wool price convinced the Graziers Association to try to resolve the ambiguity over the shearing award.⁹⁸ Perhaps it had left it too long, because although the award was theoretically still fixed at the 1917 level of 30/- per 100, shearers had been getting ‘Queensland rates’ for two full seasons. The graziers went to the Arbitration Court for a fresh award and the outcome was the infamous Powers’ Award of 35/- per hundred. In AWU mythology this has been represented as a savage cut in shearing rates, and it was indeed a sizeable reduction from 40/- to 35/-.⁹⁹ But to Powers legalistic mindset 40/- was irrelevant: he was adjusting the extant Higgins’ award up to 35/-. Powers certainly took into account the uncertainty of the wool market and was convinced that restraint was necessary. However, he believed he was setting rates shearers should accept.¹⁰⁰ For this he was extravagantly condemned in *The Worker*, and in the public

⁹⁵ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 11/7/1921.

⁹⁶ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 8/8/1921; 22/8/1921.

⁹⁷ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 5/9/1921; 14/11/1921; 12/12/1921.

⁹⁸ SMH, 18/5/1922, p. 18; M.J. Keneley, ‘Woolgrowers, Brokers and the Debate over the Sale of the Australian Wool Clip, 1920-1925’, *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2001, pp. 41-2.

⁹⁹ *Worker*, 24/5/1922, p. 11; 1/6/1922, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ CAR, Vol. 16, 1922, p. 426.

utterances of union leaders. Henry Boote editorialised in *The Worker* that the prospects for a peaceful shearing in 1922 were ‘remote’. John Barnes, in his capacity as acting-General Secretary of the union, sought a meeting with the graziers, and when this was refused belligerently spoke of the need for a ‘full fighting policy’.¹⁰¹

The AWU response was conspicuously more belligerent than its ‘abide by the award’ mantra of 1916, but soon learnt that its commitment to arbitration seriously compromised its ability to resurrect the old fighting spirit of the 1890s and 1902. J.W. Allen was ready, providing a daily commentary to the *Sydney Morning Herald* while the AWU Executive Council was bunkered down in the union’s Melbourne office, dithering about what they were actually going to do.¹⁰² But in any case the 1922 strike was doomed to failure after Allen had successfully argued in the Arbitration Court for injunctions restraining the AWU or *The Worker* from inciting strike action. The Court imposed heavy fines on Barnes, Blakeley (the AWU President) and Boote, warning that imprisonment terms were likely if they continued to publicly condemn the judgement or actively promote a strike.¹⁰³ The leaders hastily back-pedalled, distancing themselves from the strike while endeavouring to spread the word informally to indignant rank-and-file shearers that they hoped it would succeed. It contributed nothing financially and officials steered clear of strike camps and rank-and-file gatherings. *The Worker* largely stayed silent. Frenetic attempts to give cohesion to the strike by militants failed, despite enthusiasm amongst the rank-and-file.¹⁰⁴ It was perhaps apposite that, as the strike limped to its ambiguous and litigious ending, the great bush poet Henry Lawson died in pathetic circumstances. Ignoring the irony of the AWU’s compromised position, *The Worker* reprinted Lawson’s ode to bushworker solidarity, ‘I’m too old to rat’.¹⁰⁵

Within the union the 1922 strike left a legacy of bitterness and confusion which militants continued to exploit. Shearers genuinely wanting to know what the union’s

¹⁰¹ *The Worker*, 24/5/1922, p. 11; SMH, 19/5/1922, p. 9; 24/5/1922, p. 11; 25/5/1922, p. 9. Barnes was acting for Grayndler who was on leave with illness.

¹⁰² Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘Power, Law and Conflict’.

¹⁰³ SMH, 26/5/1922, p. 8; 27/5/1922, p. 13; 7/6/1922, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Almost daily reports of events in shearing sheds were published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* between June and August. Although slanted by the probable source, the Graziers Association, it provides a clear picture of the course of the strike.

¹⁰⁵ *The Worker*, 6/9/1922, p. 9.

policy was were given mixed messages. Burnt by the fines and threat of deregistration, the AWU hierarchy just left the sheds to sort it out for themselves. Their unofficial attitude was that they wished shearers well in the fight, but they were not going to be seen saying so. This was not as simple for AWU organisers who had direct contact. For example, W.H. Atkins was confronted by the shearers at Tyrie station, a shed with over 20,000 sheep in the Dubbo region. They had signed on at award rates but were worried about being branded scabs. They asked Atkins how they stood. Atkins was an honest man and had been at other sheds where men refused to shear at the award. Atkins was blunt. Legally the Tyrie shearers were AWU members and that meant accepting the award. As far as he was concerned, however, they were 'not doing the right thing'. At other sheds men were 'sticking out' and Atkins considered that 'those working under the award were scabs'.¹⁰⁶ He was bitter at his own superiors for putting him in this position, although if J.W. Allen had had hard evidence of him saying such things in the sheds he, too, would have been before the courts for inciting a strike!¹⁰⁷ There were many such stories in 1922.

Graziers bore the brunt of strikes in 1916, 1917 and 1920, but by 1922 they had devised a strategy. The Shearing Company cajoled graziers to keep their nerve while Allen stood ready to apply the full force of arbitration law to make shearers think twice about following militant leaders. When militants succeeded in getting strikes started in early sheds others tended to follow. The corollary was that if a strike could be nipped in the bud, the dominos fell in the graziers' favour. The Shearing Company ruthlessly sacked troublemakers at early sheds and had fresh teams ready. Publicity of prosecutions, and the fines imposed on AWU leaders were a public relations triumph.¹⁰⁸ Strikes gathered momentum when moderates stayed at home after reading in the newspapers that shearing was held up. Radicals did their best to persuade shearers that they would be 'scabbing' if their brothers at other sheds were still 'out'. On the other hand, if the newspapers were full of grazier propaganda that shearing was underway, shearers said goodbye to their wives and hurried to the sheds. J.W. Allen had managed to establish a formula that he would stick to for the rest of his career. It did not prevent major strikes in 1930 or 1945, but these were exceptional

¹⁰⁶ He did not literally mean 'under the award', but under the strikers' demand of at least 40/-.

¹⁰⁷ *Worker (Brisbane)*, 27/9/1923, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ SMH, 7/6/1922, p. 11; 20/6/1922, p. 9; 21/6/1922, p. 12; 24/6/1922, p. 14; 29/6/1922, p. 9.

years.¹⁰⁹ The 1922 strike was also a useful test for the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company and it was pleased with its ability to mobilise shearers to work in sheds that militants had tried to close down.¹¹⁰

J.W. Allen was equally fearless in dealing with his own recalcitrant members. Meares and Pearson, owners of Quantambone station near Brewarrina, decided that it was imperative that their 100,000 sheep were shorn before the end of August. Nothing else mattered. Accordingly they were prepared to meet the strikers' demands. This appalled Allen and he promptly took legal action on the grounds that the station was breaching constitutional rules of the Graziers Association. It was rather brave to confront one of the biggest stations in the country in such a way, but in any case the squatters were too quick for him. They had already tendered their resignation from the Association and the court refused to issue the injunction. An exchange of correspondence between the Association and the station followed, in which Allen attempted a combination of threat and desperate pleading to change their mind. This correspondence was published in full in the *Sydney Morning Herald* – almost certainly leaked by Allen to shame the owners. The Graziers' Association was arguing collective responsibility against rugged individualism. Although the militant revival in the rank-and-file had lured it into flirting with direct action, this too was the AWU's position. Allen did not refer to Meares and Pearson as 'scabs' – only labour unions used such un-gentlemanly language. Nevertheless, his condemnation of them, also leaked to the press, was brutal enough:

My executive feel sure that you will realise the odium which would undoubtedly attach to your firm if its shed is the first of any consequence to grant the Union demands, as by so doing it would gravely prejudice the interests of every grazier in Australia, a position which my Executive feel sure you would not willingly bring about.¹¹¹

Badly bruised from its mauling in the courts, the AWU must at least have enjoyed the spectacle of the squatters airing their dirty linen in public.

Converts to Arbitration

As the years passed, J.W. Allen's familiarity with the arbitration system matured, and neatly counterbalanced the AWU's messianic belief in its virtues. His career with the

¹⁰⁹ Refer to Chapter 8.

¹¹⁰ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 15/1/1923.

¹¹¹ SMH, 20/7/1922, p. 7.

graziers spanned the entire period between the 1890s and the 1950s wool boom. The interwar period had been tumultuous, book-ended by world wars, both also strike-prone.¹¹² Interestingly, he looked back on it all as a narrative of order and concord rather than violence and chaos: ‘Then when Awards settled the conditions strikes faded out. We had occasional troubles but not many.’¹¹³ The extreme legalism of the Pastoral Award is glaringly apparent from a distance, but the parties caught up in the arbitration system became imprisoned by it. By 1948, when Allen carried the case for the graziers for the last time, he had an encyclopaedic memory of all the previous cases. The first 70 closely-typed foolscap pages of the transcript of that 1948 case – the whole document runs to nearly 1500 - deal only with the preliminaries of definition of terms and settling on what needed to be decided. This occupied a full morning, and it was not until the Court resumed after lunch that Tom Dougherty began to present actual evidence to support the union’s claim. The arguments sounded hard edged, but both sides were within long established comfort zones.¹¹⁴

The Graziers Association published pamphlets of advice for its members, and kept its solicitors occupied with a steady stream of cases.¹¹⁵ All this was costly, but it was not until late in the twentieth century when the pendulum of conservative economic ideas began to adopt ‘competition’ as its driving principle, that arbitration was considered too bureaucratic. Throughout the 1920s and ‘30s there was wider conservative disillusionment with arbitration. If unions retained the right to strike, what use was legal conciliation? The Bruce Government’s attempts to curb arbitration in 1926 and 1929 were motivated by this impulse, but graziers had little enthusiasm for it. Despite problems with shearing strikes from time to time they preferred the costs of heavy handed regulation to the unfettered market. While the AWU and the Graziers’ Association agreed on this, the radical genie let loose by the IWW continued to have an influence long after the IWW itself disappeared.

¹¹² Kosmas Tsokhas argues that graziers were frustrated by the ineffectiveness of arbitration in 1930, but more generally they made good use of it from 1922. He sees it as a vehicle for moderation and compromise overall. Tsokhas, ‘Shifting the Burden’, pp. 46-7; ‘Power Law and Conflict’, p. 231. Andrew Moore, who deals only with the 1930s takes the more radical view that graziers exploited it to crush the workers. Moore, ‘Pastoral Workers Industrial Union’, p. 67.

¹¹³ ABL, E256/1647, ‘Recollections’, p. 10.

¹¹⁴ NAA, 1958/7, Box 33, Vol. 1, pp. 18ff. Pastoral Award Transcript 1948.

¹¹⁵ See issues of the *Graziers Annual*, which contained detailed information on shearing regulations, award rates, and accommodation requirements. It also published tactical advice for dealing with disputes and encouraged graziers to keep precise records as evidence in litigation.

Chapter 7: Disruptionists and Troublemakers: Depression and War 1925-1945

‘Undercurrents’

The debacle of the 1922 strike drove the AWU back to arbitration, but it was soon obvious that the militant revival was more than a flash in the pan. The vacuum created by the demise of the IWW was quickly filled by various communist groups. Mateship was easily fashioned into a Marxist narrative of working-class rebellion against corrupt capitalism. The dysfunctional economy of the 1930s was kindling for radical ideas. AWU ‘labourism’, sullied as it was by factional intrigue, continued to be fair game for those in the labour movement charged with a pure revolutionary spirit. Shearers’ mateship was prickly in its dealings with outsiders as Charles Bean hinted when he wrote of ‘undercurrents’.¹ In the confined social climate of the woolshed there was a fine line between a strike-breaker and a strike-maker. W.G. Spence, went into some detail about how it operated.

Shearing sheds employ a varying number of hands, ranging from half-a-dozen to upwards of 200. Each shed, therefore, can be likened to a factory. Generally it is far from any centre of population, and is only used at shearing time, being locked up during the rest of the year. Counting each shed as corresponding to a factory, it is safe to say that more strikes have taken place in connection with shearing sheep than in all other industries combined. Probably 10,000 cases since 1886 would be under the number. These lasted from one hour to eight weeks. But one hour meant that the Unionists were prepared for a much longer term if necessary.

Sometimes the employer would be merely trying the men, and if they gave in, he profited; but if they held out he was not prepared for the risks of delay, so would come to Union terms. Up till 1890 there was no collective unity amongst pastoralists except the natural class feeling. Each had been so accustomed to having his own way that he took any interference unkindly, even though he admitted that the Union demands were reasonable. Some came to terms at once, and did well for themselves, as they got the pick of the men, who on their part showed their appreciation by more carefully looking after the Union employer’s interests.²

This neatly recognised the scattered and very localised nature of shearing activity. Spence shrewdly disguised the inherent power shearers exerted. Pastoralists were prepared to ‘come to terms at once’ if the ‘demands were reasonable’. There was an advantage in ‘getting the pick of the men’. Shearers were happy to shear provided the grazier paid fairly. The grazier was willing to be fair provided the shearer did a good job. Spence was describing his ideal union. His own moral compass required unionism to be flexible. He could not acknowledge that contractors were already

¹ See Chapter 5 for Bean’s description.

² Spence, *Australia’s Awakening*, p. 55.

performing much the same function. Participants were out to get the best bargain without necessarily being implacable enemies consumed by sectional hatred. But this depended on an underlying goodwill. Spence begs the question of what might happen if the element of mutual respect was absent. He refers to the employer 'trying the men', implying that the noble bushman, proud unionist though he be and loyal to his mates, would never demand anything unreasonable. He does not canvass the consequences of any or all of those 10,000 incidents being motivated by caprice or malice towards the grazier. Shearers had leverage and it was equally possible for them to 'try the boss'.

An Englishman looking back on his time as a jackaroo in southern Queensland provides useful insights into the power of the group, written with wry and penetrating humour.³ The year is 1926. It is a large station (22 shearers, and up to 50 people overall). The owner is a wealthy old pastoralist with multiple holdings, but he is an earthy sort of character, wise to all the tricks. The canny old grazier kept out of the woolshed during shearing, delegating direct supervision to inexperienced but reliable employees. It was a way of monitoring events without inflaming the pugnacious tendency in shearers. Thus a 21-year-old 'pommie jackaroo' came to be in charge of shearing while the grazier kept his distance in the homestead.

The boss had given firm instructions regarding the need to clamp down on shoddy shearing: 'It takes a sheep twelve months to grow a staple of wool, and those bastards one twelfth of a second to cut it in two.'⁴ Things go smoothly enough for a time: 'The shearers called me arse-licker and pimp behind my back, but were friendly enough otherwise.' Inevitably, a crisis eventuated. The jackaroo noticed one of the men 'shearing a sheep for the second time' - woolshed code for smoothing out unsightly 'ridges' with a second cut. With the boss's instructions still reverberating, he overreacted and told the man he was sacked. The shearer simply ignored him, grabbing another sheep. Hysterical protests to the head shearer, the union 'rep', only made things worse: 'Serves ya bloody right. Yew can't just walk up and sack a man, mate. That's Union business and has to be done through me as the men's Rep.'⁵ The 'rep',

³ G. A. W. Smith, *Once a Green Jackaroo*, Hale, London, 1975, Chapter 15, 'Annual Shearing'.

⁴ Smith, *Green Jackaroo*, p. 151.

⁵ *ibid.*

too, continued shearing. He was not unsympathetic to the young man's predicament, but it would offend the natural order to down tools at the quest of a jumped-up jackaroo. When the sheep was shorn the 'rep' strolled along the board: 'Hang it up, mate. Too much second cut.'⁶ That was all. The man gathered his gear and left without demur.

More 'undercurrents' were revealed when an AWU organiser came into the shed. It was obvious at once that he was generally despised, but also that the men were a little fearful of him. He was there ostensibly to check that conditions were satisfactory, but the real reason was to collect union subscriptions. 'AWU', as the jackaroo referred to him, had a piece of paper and a list of names. After a brief and unconvincing display of camaraderie with the 'rep', he pointedly walked along the board speaking to each shearer individually. If a member had managed to avoid 'AWU' last season he would be hit for a double amount. That was the union rule. The paper was then handed to the young supervisor, with 'instructions' for the grazier to make out a cheque payable to the AWU for total union fees – it was then up to the boss to deduct individual amounts from wage cheques. The organiser imperiously announced he would be waiting in the shearers' quarters. Few things enraged graziers more about AWU arrogance. Predictably the old man blew his stack, although he was already resigned to signing the cheque. But a smart young station book-keeper sitting around the homestead office had a bright idea for a bit of fun. On the back of the cheque he typed an endorsement for the organizer and the 'rep' to sign. In theory it required the union to refund the grazier if shearers refused to accept the deductions! It was only a token gesture, as everyone knew. But it succeeded admirably in riling 'AWU': 'We know our bloody rights. No smart squatter man's gonna put it over me.'⁷ But the 'rep' was now bored with AWU theatrics. Without further comment he signed the endorsement. 'AWU' continued to curse the squatters and the world in general, but it was only display. He snatched the pen and also signed.

The 'rep', it turned out, had rather enjoyed this joke at the expense of 'AWU'. As the young jackaroo explained:

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Smith, *Green Jackaroo*, p. 154.

Next day as I passed No. 1 stand, a voice hissed at me to stop. Without hesitating in his work, the shearers' rep said:

"My compliments to your Boss, mate. I didn't think he was such a cagey ol' bastard; and ask 'im if I can draw me pay when the time comes in one poun' notes"

The machine screamed on its way and the shearer swung his back to me as he commenced the Long Blow. He was one of the rare shearers ever to display a sense of humour to an outsider like me.⁸

Summarising the overall experience, the jackeroo said that it was:

A simple job - once one had learned the thousand and one rules the shearers have and had become able to condense them into the Shearer versus The-Rest-of-the-World theme.⁹

While elements of class underpin these tensions, the relationships are really more complex. There is also a large component of theatre or display. The shearers do not dislike the young English chap at all, but still talk about him as the 'arse licker'. Being sacked for poor workmanship was accepted, but a pretence of class solidarity had to be observed. The AWU is unpopular but they go through the rituals of mateship with the organiser. They never actually see the old grazier, but if they did familiarity would be minimal. He is not really hated at all, but his allocated part is 'the squatter man'. The 'rep' lets it be known that he enjoyed the prank on the AWU. But most of all, the shearers create a barrier between themselves and everyone else. It is a sinister form of mateship because there are rules – unwritten but powerful – to which they all conform. Notwithstanding ambivalence towards the AWU, this also seems to be central to the union's power.

This almost ethnographic picture of a shearing shed at work contains clues to the ways disputes developed.¹⁰ In this case the 'rep' had no intention of disrupting shearing. But he had considerable power to do so if four or five other shearers had backed him up. The jackeroo was not in control. There are endless examples of such disputes in J.W. Allen's correspondence, and also in the shed reports of AWU organisers published in *The Worker*.¹¹ They could be about a variety of issues – wet

⁸ Smith, *Green Jackaroo*, p. 155.

⁹ Smith, *Green Jackaroo*, p. 150.

¹⁰ For another insightful account of shearing shed insider/outsider atmospherics in 1927, see Don Whittington, *Strive to be Fair: An Unfinished Autobiography*, Australian University Press, Canberra, 1977, Chapter 3, 'Working Outback', pp. 26-46. Whittington was a Canberra political journalist in the 1940s and '50s. He worked as a rouseabout in the Riverina in the late-1920s, and as a jackaroo for H.R. Munro in northern NSW. The latter was elderly grazier who dabbled in the New Guard in the early-1930s, while Whittington lived on the station.

¹¹ ABL, Records of the Graziers Association of NSW. The Board Minutes of the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company, are also a valuable source of such material.

sheep was a perennial, but daggy sheep, faulty machinery or demands for tins of jam were others. Grievances were often genuine, but just as likely to be contrived. Outcomes varied widely. Sometimes the boss would talk diplomatically with the shearers and persuade them to resume. Sometimes he would back down and reinstate the sacked man. Sometimes the union would be called in. If the evidence was right charges were laid against the station for ‘wrongful dismissal’. The Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company had the capacity to turn the tables and prosecute shearers. However, it seldom paid a grazier to become petulant – that was always remembered. And it seldom paid a shearer to display too much independence of outlook – mateship was very unforgiving of mavericks.

The potential always existed for ‘undercurrents’ to be usurped by militant elements. The leverage of shearers was most potent in the immediacy of time and place. With a shed full of sheep and the weather threatening, squatters were always vulnerable to a show of solidarity. However, ‘us versus them’ shed-power was easily exaggerated as loyalty had other dimensions. Most attempts at general strikes were quickly defeated – 1916 and 1920 were unusual. Militants condemned cocky shearers as ‘scabs’ and ‘strike-breakers’, but to Victorians who wanted money for their selections it was common sense to shear at the rate set by the arbitration court (most drew the line at shearing below it). In 1926 the AWU was forty years old and arbitration was an article of faith, but rebels muddied the waters during the uncertain 1920s and ‘30s, and had a legacy beyond that.

Bushworkers’ Propaganda Group

The Communist newspaper published a *Shearers Strike Bulletin* in August 1922. This introduced a faction called the ‘Bushworkers’ Propaganda Group’ which gave the 1922 strike coherence. The Group contained ‘some of the militant members of the AWU’. It was ‘not opposed to political action’ but objected to ‘the activities of the Union making industrial action play second fiddle to the ambitions of secretaries and organisers to win seats in Parliament’.¹² Probably the same activists were responsible for ‘spurious circulars’ in 1920, ‘asking members to endorse an alternative

¹² *Shearers’ Strike Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 25/8/1922, published with *The Communist: Official Organ of the Communist Party of Australia*, 27/10/1922; see also SMH, 22/5/1922, p. 9.

conference' and criticising the AWU for not demanding 'Queensland rates'.¹³ Equally likely the movement was inspired by the 1916 strike and dissidents in the Longreach office of the AWU.¹⁴ The meetings at Trades Hall in 1916 and 1917 had the stamp of Bushworkers' Propaganda events of the 1920s. The strategy of operating as a ginger group within the AWU was out of the IWW 'boring from within' textbook. Durkin's and Kelly's actions illustrate some continuity between the strikes of World War I and militancy in the 1920s and '30s.¹⁵

The Propaganda Group had its own structure inside the AWU. J.R. Sullivan was elected Secretary, and George Bellamy was President. Significantly, Arthur Rae, a pioneer of bush unionism in the 1890s, was appointed Treasurer.¹⁶ The Group could claim ownership of the 1922 strike thanks to the mealy-mouthed efforts of the AWU. As a parasite within the AWU through the 1920s, AWU tickets remained the criterion for admittance to 'AWU Rank-and-File' gatherings, but the main purpose was to lambast AWU officials.¹⁷ Sympathisers such as Durkin helped to arrange meetings but as a rule AWU officials were kept in the dark. The Executive issued edicts not to attend, but it was hard for the grassroots to tell what was 'official' and what was not.¹⁸

Shearing shed frustrations were grist to the militants' mill, but deeper social trends must also be taken into account. The war was profoundly disturbing. All people were personally affected one way or another through enlistment, bereavement, and interpretations of patriotism. Problems of rehabilitating deeply traumatised returned soldiers festered behind closed doors. This spilled over into troubling political and social divisions, as people queried the direction of society and their place within it. The ideological clash of socialism and capitalism loomed as the cause of the next global cataclysm. Did the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 signify hope or catastrophe? The politics of class between the wars had a sharpness which later dissipated.

¹³ Harry Knowles, 'Arthur Rae: A "Napoleon" in Exile', *Labour History*, 87, November 2004, p. 112. The 'spurious circulars' comment is quoted by Knowles from *The Worker* 'Bushworkers Budget' page of 14/10/1920.

¹⁴ See Chapter 5 for Sam Brassington's campaign against shearing contractors. Also Chapter 6.

¹⁵ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 30/3/1916, p. 15; 6/4/1916, p. 16. Durkin's dispute with the Brisbane Executive is extensively reported but there is no actual evidence of involvement with the Bushworkers' Propaganda Group. *The Worker*, 9/2/1927, pp. 17-19; 12/10/1927, p. 11; Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*, p. 152.

¹⁶ See below for Rae's expulsion from the AWU in 1919. See Chapter 5 for Rae at Eremeran in 1909.

¹⁷ Various names were used: Bushworkers' Propaganda Group, Rank-and-File Union, Western Industrial Association, Law and Liberty Association. *The Worker*, 6/1/1932, p. 17.

¹⁸ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 12/3/1925, p. 12; 19/3/1925, p. 11; 20/8/1925, p. 10.

Flirtation with communism, which came to seem wrong-headed or naïve in more settled times, was not unusual. If there was communism, anti-communism was also given oxygen and a conservative over-reaction feared disintegration of social order. Many people were unswayed, one way or the other, and Australia always seemed to lurch back to the centre after flirting with extremes. Nevertheless, this was seriously tested in the 1920s and '30s when the hopes of dreamers on the fringes were aroused, and at the same time dark fears were activated. It has been referred to as the 'meanness of the 1920s' and 'a new dimension of fear in the 1930s'¹⁹

The Queensland shearing strike coincided with the first anniversary of the Gallipoli landing which gave rise to a new legend of Australian nationalism. Has the *Sydney Morning Herald* ever more accurately predicted the future with what it wrote on 25 April 1916?

Australia's great heart is throbbing today as it has never throbbed before. For April 25 – 'Anzac Day' – is a day that will live in our hearts and our history as long as Australia exists. And this is the first anniversary of Anzac day.²⁰

Shearers' larrikin ways and disrespectful trait drew them to anti-establishment causes, though, and a militant tradition was easily reinvented. The IWW was stridently anti-war and anti-conscription, and it had a following in Queensland shearing sheds. The AWU also opposed conscription, yet it is hard to gauge attitudes to the war amongst shearers overall. At Edgerol station, at Narrabri, in 1915, shearers refused to continue working with a man who had expressed anti-British opinions. He was sacked, obviously because the grazier felt pressured by the other shearers, and eventually convicted for making a 'statement likely to cause disaffection amongst the subjects of His Majesty the King'. The shearers' 'rep' gave evidence for the prosecution.²¹ How typical this was is impossible to judge, but there were surely many who reflected the patriotic jingoism of farming districts. In later years the AWU shamelessly lauded the exploits of pastoral workers at the front.²² Radical politics was more significant in coal mines, railway workshops, and the waterfront than shearing sheds, but shearing boasted one of the strongest traditions of unionism in Australia. For weeks at a time

¹⁹ Coleman, 'New Australian', pp. 5-6.

²⁰ SMH, 25/4/1916, p. 5.

²¹ *The Worker*, 16/9/1915, p. 8.

²² See Chapter 1.

men congregated together in small groups. The solidarity of mateship in these conditions was particularly potent.²³

This was the world in which ‘Trucker’ Brown, a convert initially of the IWW and later a communist, moved with ease. Almost nothing is known about him now, but he was well recognised in shearing sheds between the wars.²⁴ A shearer himself, he came from Cobar. Brown was first noticed by the AWU when he refused to buy a union ticket at Tiltagoona station in the Cobar district in 1920, suggesting the Bushworkers’ Propaganda Group was already active.²⁵ By the mid-1920s he was its most prominent missionary in shearing sheds. He became a foundation PWIU organiser in the 1930s, but fades from view in the late-1930s. Brown was often later remembered in *The Worker* as a ‘disruptionist’, but never again as a participant.²⁶ He combined traditional anti-squatter bush unionism with a trenchant international radicalism fanned by the controversies of the war.

Cobar was a copper and gold mining centre with a population of over 4,600 in 1911, but it declined rather rapidly and in the early-1930s had barely 1,000 people.²⁷ In 1916 the engine drivers went on strike, frustrated by a wait of more than two years for a claim to be heard in the Arbitration Court. This practically closed the town down putting 1,500 out of work, while unattended mines began filling with water. Even the normally unsympathetic *Sydney Morning Herald* concluded ‘the result will be disastrous unless the dispute is speedily settled’.²⁸ Justice Powers of the Arbitration Bench was less forgiving. The legality of the strike had yet to be tested but he considered the claim was excessive. With the divisive conscription crisis stirring, Powers branded it ‘inexcusable, tyrannical and disloyal’. He was not finished, condemning strikers as ‘enemies to Australia and the brave men who are fighting to defend Australia and the Empire’.²⁹ Such comments could only inflame the battling underclass of Cobar and Broken Hill and further alienate the likes of ‘Trucker’ Brown. Powers was later the author of the Pastoral Award decision which caused the

²³ See also wharfies in northern Queensland. Webster, ‘Cosy Relationship’, p. 99.

²⁴ Neil Byron spelt it ‘Browne’, see Byron, *All Among the Wool Boys*, p. 10.

²⁵ *The Worker*, 7/1/1925, p. 17; *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 20/3/1929, p. 10.

²⁶ See Chapter 8 for fragments of ‘Trucker’ Brown’s later life.

²⁷ The copper mine re-opened around 1933. Employment recovered. Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: An oral record of the 1930s depression in Australia*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1978, p. 284.

²⁸ SMH, 7/6/1916, p. 12.

²⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 24/6/1916, p. 8.

1922 strike, by which time Brown was active with the Bushworkers' Propaganda Group.³⁰

Arthur Rae described the social climate of the region when he visited Eremeran station in 1909.³¹ He passed through Nymagee, a town neighbouring Cobar. It also was once a significant copper mining centre with a population of 2,000, now in decline.³²

The stoppage for the last eighteen months of the big copper mine which has supported Nymagee had brought about an awful deadness of this once lively mining town.³³

Rae was delighted that the town 'still supports a little radical newspaper, *The Peer*, whose editor, owner and staff – all one man – is gallantly working and waiting for the good time coming, and reminded me of the Henry Lawson hero of "The Camberorra Star"'. It is unlikely that Rae met 'Trucker' Brown on this visit, although they became well acquainted in the 1920s. However, it provides a glimpse of the kind of world that shaped Brown. The surrounding pastoral country was bleak with extremes of heat and cold. Settlement was dominated by a handful of large holdings (including Eremeran and The Overflow – made famous by 'Banjo' Patterson) and a scattering of grazing selectors battling drought.³⁴ The woolsheds, rather like Queensland, had been comprehensively colonised by shearing contractors. A letter to *The Worker* in 1911 complained that all the sheds between Cobar and Ivanhoe were contract and this was cutting out local men.³⁵ Apart from mining and pastoral work there had been employment for railway construction but this also was no longer.³⁶ Despondency predominated, and in the case of Brown angry frustration. Survival of a militant newspaper in such an isolated setting indicates there were others like him. The much larger mining centre of Broken Hill further west ensured a population of militant shearers. Rae's reference to Henry Lawson provides a useful clue to the way communism and bush folklore could be linked.

³⁰ See Chapter 6.

³¹ See Chapter 4 for his unease about the method of shearer recruitment.

³² <http://www.abc.net.au/rural/telegraph/content/2006/s1720953.htm>. For Cobar see Duncan Waterson, 'The Northwest' in Hagan (ed), *People and Politics*, p. 274.

³³ *The Worker*, 14/7/1909, p. 4.

³⁴ Grazing patterns from *The Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1913.

³⁵ *The Worker*, 26/7/1911, p. 2.

³⁶ Waterson in Hagan (ed), *People and Politics*, p. 273.

Rather more is known about Arthur Rae (1860-1943).³⁷ In contrast to most bush union pioneers of the 1890s Rae remained unambiguously radical, so much so that he was expelled in 1919 and spent the rest of his life as one of the AWU's ideological enemies. Rae's parliamentary career was rather unusual. He served three single terms each separated by an interval of 15 or 16 years. As one of the wave of Labor members elected to the NSW Legislative Assembly in 1891 he had not been re-elected in 1894. When the Fisher Labor Commonwealth Government gained power in 1910 Rae was elected as a Senator. Fisher, having lost office briefly, was swept back to power in 1914 as World War I was declared, but Rae lost his Senate seat in the same election, allegedly because of his outspoken opposition to the war. Finally, largely through his association with the Lang splinter faction, Rae re-entered the Senate in 1928 a year before Scullin Labor's landslide in 1929. By then Rae shared little in common with mainstream Labor and was a vocal critic of Scullin. He lost the seat in 1935. During the late-1890s Rae had briefly held the post of Secretary General of the AWU, and during this middle stage of his union career seemed to be developing the conservative authoritarianism typical of Macdonell, Grayndler and others.³⁸ Whether he supported the union's shift to arbitration in 1907 is unclear, but by the time the Bushworkers Propaganda Group was formed he was vigorously opposed to it.

When Arthur Rae lost his Senate seat in 1914 he was still an AWU folk hero. He made a guest appearance at the Annual Convention in 1915, telling them what they wanted to hear. 'I would rather be out of Parliament than out of the AWU', he declared to rousing applause.³⁹ Already, however, he was becoming disillusioned with the AWU. His political positions indicated empathy with the IWW, at least, but the diminutive Rae seldom acted quietly and there is no evidence he was involved in the 1916 strike. The Bushworkers' Propaganda Group was not altogether separate from broader ideological struggles within the labour movement and the rise and fall of the radical One Big Union movement. This resulted in Rae parting company with the Labor mainstream. He balked at the pledge of loyalty insisted on by the Executive Council, and was formally expelled from the AWU in 1919. By 1922 he was prominent on the Bushworker Group 'strike committee'. As radical elder statesman,

³⁷ Most of the detail is from Knowles, 'Arthur Rae' p. 112.

³⁸ Merritt, *Making of the AWU*, p. 279.

³⁹ *The Worker*, 25/2/1915, p. 17.

he was an ideal President of the PWIU in the 1930s, making good use of the free rail pass he held as a Commonwealth Senator. Arthur Rae provides a link between the mateship of 1890s bush unionism and the shearing shed communists of the 1930s, as do the Longreach AWU organisers of 1916.

Norman Jeffery (1896-1966) was another IWW follower who later became a communist. Jeffery was not a shearer, although he may have done shed work from time to time. Brown was more successful as a grassroots organiser while Jeffery attended to administration and political strategy. He was said to have been involved in the 'Red Flag Riot' in Brisbane in 1919 and was described many years later by a prominent fellow traveller as 'a colourful activist who never quite graduated out of the larrikin IWW school'.⁴⁰ There is no evidence that either 'Trucker' Brown or Norman Jeffrey had been involved with the Queensland strike in 1916, but they were both prominent during the strike in 1922.

By 1925 the Bushworkers Propaganda Group was operating more or less openly as an independent organisation, but retaining the 'AWU Rank-and-File' identification. It was relatively easy for 'Trucker' Brown to enter shearing sheds and call meetings, and difficult for the AWU to prevent.⁴¹ The helpless tone of Henry Boote's plea for militants to stay in the fold underlined the predicament.

We need their enthusiastic advocacy of fundamental principles. We need their courage – the dynamic force of the faith that they hold with fervid intensity, but they need us.

THE ALP IS THE ONLY HOPE OF THE MILITANTS, to save them from presenting to the world the pathetic and humiliating spectacle of enthusiasm lavishing itself as a delusion, and of energy dispersing its strength on barren heroics.⁴²

More often the AWU aggressively condemned 'bogus' gatherings of 'rank-and-file misrepresentatives'.⁴³ Undoubtedly this was behind the Executive Council's 1924 edict recycling the 1920 loyalty pledge.⁴⁴ Chaired by Arthur Rae, December annual general meetings were held at Trades Hall or sometimes Marx House, but never Macdonell House.⁴⁵ Ted Grayndler called them gatherings of the 'Christmas Communists'. At the 1928 meeting – two years before the formal PWIU schism – the

⁴⁰ Edgar Ross, autobiographical memoir, www.cpa.org.au/special/ross-biog.doc, accessed 29/1/2008.

⁴¹ *The Worker*, 2/7/1924, p. 20; 7/1/1925, p. 17; 14/1/1925, p. 7; 25/2/1925, p. 21.

⁴² *The Worker*, 25/2/1925, p3 (capitalised words in original)

⁴³ *The Worker*, 4/1/1928, p. 16.

⁴⁴ *The Worker*, 25/6/1924, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Marx House was the headquarters of the Communist Party of Australia.

connection to the AWU was already tenuous, although the ‘AWU Rank-and-File’ moniker was still used. These conferences were no more ‘democratic’ than AWU affairs although they claimed to resurrect ‘the once glorious spirit of the AWU’.⁴⁶ The AWU succeeded in finding some dirt on the Group’s financial affairs. Pastoral workers were encouraged not to renew AWU tickets in favour of ‘special tickets’ of the ‘Rank-and-File Movement’, on an undertaking that 80 per cent of the money would be forwarded to the AWU ‘if the AWU Executive Council granted certain demands’. Reportedly, £400 had been deposited in a trust account with the NSW Labor Council, but on 13 December 1928 the Council disowned further responsibility – only £200 was left so the AWU was never going to get its 80 per cent.⁴⁷ The figures are probably accurate enough. At a very rough guess perhaps 1,000 pastoral workers had contributed - a tiny hole in the AWU’s vast membership base of over 100,000. Nevertheless, the mid-1920s wool boom had already ended, economic security was deteriorating rapidly, and the nuisance was becoming a major headache.

The Depression and the PWIU

Early sheds surrounding Moree, Walgett, Coonamble and Brewarrina were fertile territory for Propaganda Group agitation. Midkin station near Moree, and Wingadee at Coonamble, two of the biggest sheds in Australia, were frequently targeted. Shearing was just beginning when Justice Dethridge’s cut in shearing rates was announced in July 1930.⁴⁸ AWU offices were inundated with telegrams of indignation and requests for instructions. Several sheds ceased work immediately, assuming that such a dastardly move by the Court was completely unacceptable. But the tsars of the AWU, while expressing their disgust, were undecided. They concluded, probably with good reason, that direct action would be disastrous, and they also apprehended Allen’s legal victory the last time they sought to thwart the Court. John Bailey, President of the NSW Branch, announced that he was heading to Melbourne where the Executive Council would meet. An announcement would be made when everything had been weighed up.

⁴⁶ *The Worker*, 20/4/1927, p. 19; 2/1/1929, p. 3, 18; 6/2/1929, p. 17; 20/2/1929, p. 3. The *Labor Daily* quotation is as reported in *The Worker*.

⁴⁷ *The Worker*, 2/1/1929, p. 17.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 3.

The AWU approached the Scullin Labor Government to reconstitute the arbitration court, and said it was considering a High Court challenge. While the Government was keeping quiet, ‘Federal political circles’ (meaning Labor backbenchers, of whom Senator Arthur Rae was one) were claiming there was deep unease within the caucus. It was suggested that a select committee should investigate removing Dethridge from the Bench on the grounds that he was ‘temperamentally unsuited’ to consider arbitration cases.⁴⁹ Such was the cancer of instability destroying the Government. With militants stirring up woolsheds, and an equally determined mood amongst financially stressed graziers to shear at ‘new’ rates, AWU indecision seemed pathetic.

J.W. Allen was again decisive. Summonses were issued to men who had left sheds. The cases would soon be heard in Moree and Coonamble. The *Labor Daily* was acting as a mouthpiece for militants and published an article on 3 July headlined, ‘Sixty Thousand Shearers May Go on Strike’.⁵⁰ An application was made for an injunction to prevent the paper from printing ‘anything by way of encouragement or incitement to strike’. Allen fed information to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, creating an impression that the strike was very limited in scope and unlikely to succeed, although this was probably true enough. Allen asserted (accurately) that the strike was being promoted by ‘professional agitators’, rather than the AWU, but this did not stop him from contributing to AWU embarrassment. He mocked it, reminding the public of the union’s published policy that shearers should abide by decisions of the arbitration court. Cheekily, he assured the press that the AWU would be true to its word.⁵¹

When the AWU finally tried to clarify its position it satisfied no-one. The union did not support a strike, advising members to work at (reduced) award rates, but in a veiled concession to militancy suggested shearers bargain for higher rates if they felt they could get them! Given the dreadful unemployment situation caution was realistic. However, the unemployment outlook was so bad that it bred a perversely belligerent mindset - there was nothing to lose. Desperation and anger fused into a potent mix. ‘Trucker’ Brown toured the shearing districts stirring up support. Arthur Rae, the father figure, said the real enemy was the AWU rather than the graziers! There would

⁴⁹ *Labor Daily*, 21/7/1930, p. 1.

⁵⁰ SMH, 30/7/1930, p. 7; *Labor Daily*, 3/7/1930, p. 1.

⁵¹ SMH, 31/7/1930, p. 9.

be no more standing ovations at the AWU Conference for the aging radical.

The strike in NSW remained confined to the north and west. According to one assessment there were about 1000 men in strike camps, but it quickly lost momentum. But if sullen strikers could do little about the equally sullen scabs which the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company transported in, grass roots indignation at the pay cut remained high. The duplicitous stand of the AWU and the failure of the strike were catalysts for the formation of the PWIU out of the Propaganda Group embryo. The strike campaign was not taken south to Victoria which was not fertile ground for militants. John Durkin's speech at Wee Waa on 16 August 1930 ended all pretence that the strike was run by the AWU. The PWIU took formal shape at Trades Hall in December 1930.

J.W. Allen was kept informed by the clandestine services of T.J. Lonsdale. Lonsdale was a contemporary of Grayndler as a shearer and AWU official, although he had fallen out with the union in 1915, and became a pariah.⁵² He was a well enough known figure in rural Labor circles and mixed freely with shearers, as well as unionists he had known. He was able to drop in on Arthur Rae for a chat, and was on friendly terms with Jack Durkin, whom he had known since his days in Queensland during the war. From around July 1930, when the NSW strike was still in full swing, Lonsdale had an arrangement with J.W. Allen to report militant goings-on. Lonsdale was getting on in age, it was the Depression, and needed the money which Allen had ready in a sealed envelope. But he also seemed to be driven by a grander purpose. An old style bush unionist, the AWU had treated him badly, but he wanted moderate unionism to survive in the shearing industry. His writings revealed nostalgia for the old blade shearing days, and the 'true spirit' of bush unionism. While feeding information to Allen he supplied the rural press with a barrage of articles under his own name, condemning militant unionism. In part these were to generate some income, in part to impress Allen, but also to spread his own views. Allen instigated the slightly ludicrous practice of filing Lonsdale's intelligence under 'Mr. X'. He read

⁵² He became secretary of the Carriers Union, unsuccessfully stood as an independent against Labor in the Queensland State seat of Maranoa. His articles in the *Brisbane Courier* in 1923 have been cited in Chapter 4. *The Worker*, 25/6/1904, p. 7; 26/11/1911, p. 1; 9/9/1915, p. 20; 16/9/1915, p. 20; 3/8/1916, p. 20; 16/1/1935, p. 17; *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 20/1/1916, p. 5; 27/1/1916, p. 14; 8/9/1921, p. 11; 16/2/1922, p. 19.

the letters carefully, marking key passages with a crayon-type pencil. While some of Lonsdale's breathless revelations had minimal impact, others left a deep impression on the wily servant of the graziers. Allen saw the 'Red' union as a nest of reckless troublemakers, and liaised with his close ally R.C. Wilson of the Graziers' Shearing Company about how to deal with them.⁵³

Following the capitulation in NSW firebrands toured Queensland. The Queensland Award had been slashed in November 1930 from 40/- per 100 sheep to 30/-. 'Trucker' Brown and Arthur Rae, making further use of his rail pass, spent five weeks in central Queensland during January and February.⁵⁴ The 1931 season shaped up as a showdown between militant unionism and graziers with the AWU again relegated to the sidelines. A workers' meeting at Longreach on 2 January 1931 voted to strike.⁵⁵ According to the newspaper report, 40 or 50 strikers piled into six cars when the meeting ended and sped out to White Hill station where, the word was, shearing was underway. Presumably the purpose of the convoy was to 'request' that work stop forthwith. Trouble was anticipated because a lone constable was already stationed there. There must have been spies at the union meeting because Senior Sergeant Maloney and four additional constables arrived at virtually the same time as the mob. After a vigorous exchange the situation was diffused and shearing continued.⁵⁶

Only a few days later shearing was to start at Crossmere station near Blackall with 21 men. The grazier, with police providing escorts, had a complicated plan to smuggle shearers in, but they were 'intercepted' by strikers. There was initially some confusion in the newspaper reports about whether shearing had started. It transpired that it had, but with only six shearers. Whatever form 'persuasion' took, it had been partially successful. Police allowed militants to address shearers but tried to prevent physical contact. Not always could they arrive in time. At Mildura station police had '[found]

⁵³ Lonsdale's hand written letters to J.W. Allen, with Allen's scribbled comments are held in ABL, E256/237.

⁵⁴ *The Worker*, 29/5/1929, p. 19; *Labor Daily*, 14/2/1931, p. 8.

⁵⁵ See also, Beris Penrose, 'The Communist Party and Trade Union Work in Queensland in the Third Period: 1928-1935', PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of Queensland, June 1993, pp. 167-88; Brian Costar, 'Two Depression Strikes, 1931', in D.J. Murphy (ed), *The Big Strikes: Queensland 1889-1965*, Queensland University Press, St Lucia Qld, 1983, pp. 186-201.

⁵⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 5/1/1931, p. 9.

it necessary to produce their revolvers, and one of the strikers [had] his nose badly bruised'. Graziers claimed that only a few sheds actually had to call shearing off.⁵⁷

An ugly situation arose at the Capella railway yards, two miles out of Emerald, at the end of January. A 'special' train was being used to move about 200 shearers destined for sheds in the Clermont district. It was a highly organised manoeuvre, with the rail yards being used to prevent agitators approaching passengers. As the train pulled out it was met with a 'fusillade of stones' which broke several windows. A policeman was struck in the face, his nose was broken, and he suffered a serious eye injury. Sleepers laid on the track derailed a bogey wheel and the departure was delayed for an hour-and-a-half, but the overall plan to get scab shearers through worked. At about the same time a nasty assault on shearers working at Noorindoo station, near Surat, took place. Few detailed descriptions survive, but episodes such as the following were common.⁵⁸

Shortly after 5 o'clock yesterday morning, the 12 men who constitute the shearing gang at Noorindoo shed, 10 miles from Surat, were roused out of their sleep by an invasion of about 40 strikers, who had travelled from Surat in seven motor cars. The men swarmed into the hut, and in threatening tones ordered the men to pack their swags and "clear out". Several of the men were defiant, and a fierce fight was soon raging, the strikers endeavouring to forcibly eject the men from the shed. Although hopelessly outnumbered, the loyalists stood off their assailants with their fists, as well as they could, but they were roughly handled by the enraged strikers. The floor was soon a mass of struggling figures, and boots were freely used to supplement fists. Amid the confusion several shots were fired. A number of the strikers were armed apparently with revolvers. Fortunately, the shots went wild, no one being injured by the shooting. In the middle of the turmoil two members of the police force from Surat, who had followed the strikers, arrived by car. They were powerless to prevent the ejection, which followed, although their presence undoubtedly had a restraining effect. Vainly they exhorted the strikers to depart, but all attempts at conciliation were useless. The strikers compromised by sending a delegate to warn the men in the hut that unless they left immediately, firearms would be resorted to, and that, in effect, they would be literally shot off the premises. Deeming resistance hopeless, and overawed by the threatening attitude of the strikers, the men immediately packed their swags and left the shed.⁵⁹

In a 'jubilant' mood the strikers subsequently visited two other sheds in the area. In both cases 'the men were either threatened or cajoled into departing, without offering any resistance'. Police were present at each of these raids.

Grazier resistance was also efficient. In early January, before the shearing season had even begun, a meeting of the Maranoa Graziers' Association was held at Roma, and

⁵⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 6/1/1931, p. 13.

⁵⁸ The *Courier* published articles virtually daily from 5 January until 17 February. Probably it was getting information from graziers, and some from the AWU. It is unlikely that it had access to the inner sanctum of the PWIU. On this occasion a reporter was present, probably on a grazier tip off.

⁵⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 30/1/1931, p. 11.

the mood was noticeably belligerent. One speaker claimed that ‘shearers at the present time [are] able to make considerably more than the man on the land’. Others boasted that shearing at award rates could readily be arranged.⁶⁰ As the dispute persisted graziers formed ‘local defence committees’, which conferred with local contractors and drew up plans for the recruitment of shearers (mainly from NSW) and discussed the logistics of transport and protection. Police were kept informed, and escorts were provided. In late January the *Courier* published photographs of NSW shearers at Springsure Railway Station, packing their gear into lorries and cars to be taken in convoy to Meteor Downs under police escort. What looks like at least 30 PWIU men looked helplessly on, on this occasion, and ‘booed lustily as the strike breakers proceeded on their way’.⁶¹ There is not much doubt that the AWU actively assisted the graziers. Unlike the NSW Branch’s equivocal stance six months earlier, in 1931 the Queensland Branch issued emphatic public statements advising shearers to return to work at award rates.⁶² The actions of Messrs Clark and Tait, large station owners in the Blackall district, show how detailed planning could be. Graziers held a meeting on 20 January without any public statements. Forty-five cars, lorries and utilities from as far away as Barcaldine and Tambo were quietly assembled in the railway yards to meet a special train carrying 120 shearers and shed hands. Police were on hand but ‘apart from jeering and hooting the crowd was very orderly’.⁶³ How ‘neutral’ the police were is open to interpretation. Kosmas Tsokhas provides a careful analysis of the police role during the 1930 NSW strike concluding, ‘even the police were not totally pliant tools of the employers’.⁶⁴

Little is known about who strike-breakers were. The Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company brought ‘southerners’ in. In oral histories it is rare for any shearer to openly admit to shearing during a strike – some almost protest too much that they did not. Intimidation in the towns inhibited Queensland shearers who would otherwise have been ready to shear, and the risk of being branded a ‘scab’ on the mateship grapevine deterred others. Nevertheless, the AWU’s strong condemnation of the strike was a moral justification to defy the ‘bogus disrupters’ for those brave enough. It is clear

⁶⁰ *Brisbane Courier*, 5/1/1931, p. 13.

⁶¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 28/1/1931, p. 16.

⁶² *Brisbane Courier*, 21/1/1931, p. 15; 23/1/1931, p. 13; 27/1/1931, p. 13.

⁶³ *Brisbane Courier*, 29/1/1931, pp. 11, 13.

⁶⁴ Tsokhas, ‘Shifting the Burden’, p. 44.

that in many cases graziers compromised standards. The employment black hole of the Depression ensured a ready supply of men who had little shearing experience, and in some cases none at all.

Oral histories by Wendy Lowenstein 40 years later illustrate the dilemmas of mateship and survival. ‘Nugget’ Humphries was a shearer scratching rather unsuccessfully for opal at Lightning Ridge, living on damper and seriously malnourished. He contacted a Brewarrina shearing contractor who gave him a pen despite his obviously poor physical state. ‘One thing, there was plenty of good food in the sheds’, he said and his health quickly improved.⁶⁵ Humphries took up share farming on a bank foreclosure block in the Hillston region, but it was far too small to make a go of it. He got hold of ‘a little popping-jenny, a portable shearing machine, and a double horse lorry’, and went cocky shearing. Few farmers had any cash because banks controlled their cheques and wheat was only ‘one and ninepence’. The award was irrelevant. ‘Worst conditions I’ve ever shore under, and the worst pay’. Barter was the norm - a bag of wheat to feed a pig or chooks - ‘Take that. The bank doesn’t know it’s there’! If a man was a credible shearer it was not necessary to endure these indignities and eventually Humphries wrote to the Graziers Shearing Company – this must have been 1933 or 1934 – and was sent to Barcaldine Downs, a big pastoral company station in Queensland. The bank manager in charge of the Hillston selection tried to persuade him to stay – banks were hated by selectors but mortgagee eviction was actually a last resort. Someone had to run the properties. Humphries, though, had had enough: ‘I’m going where I can get some money! I might get fifty pounds for the [shearing] season. I’m making nothing here.’⁶⁶

There was no question of anything but award rates with the Graziers’ Company and two decent sheds would have earned £50. Humphries stood to make as much as £150 if he got a run of sheds and, say, 10,000 sheep. He was careful to say that he had not scabbed in 1930 or 1931, although it is easy to see how he might have if he thought he could get away with it. Others like him certainly did. Cockey shearing for bags of seed was technically scabbing, but shearers had a capacity to see small flocks in farming

⁶⁵ Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour*, p. 156.

⁶⁶ Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour*, p. 158.

districts as completely separate worlds from grazier sheds.⁶⁷ Sheep had to be shorn and shearers were better off than most during the Depression.

Another of Lowenstein's subjects, Arthur Burgess, had an even sharper nose for shearing's value as a safety net. He had invested £1,400 in a picture theatre at Cobar. It was a financial disaster, but he could shear so he decided to try contracting 'to keep the billy boiling'. Apparently a good talker, he borrowed a plant from a farmer at Nymagee on the understanding that he would shear his 2,500 sheep before the end of the season (it turned out to be 3,000!). He telephoned an acquaintance in Orange, a shearer called Fred McIntyre. Between them they managed to secure a shed of 14,000 at award rates with 'tucker, tobacco and matches thrown in'. Suddenly they were in a league beyond cocky shearing with a portable plant, and there was quite a panic to arrange enough shearers, rouseabouts and a cook. The train which brought them arrived around midnight, hours late, and somehow they had to be transported to the woolshed, and the plant set up in time for the morning. Stores worth £75 were somehow secured on a storekeeper's credit.

But from then on we're home on the pigs back. In twelve months from that first shed, we shored a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and we never lost one minute from the weather. You never heard anything like it. Talk about the angels sitting on your shoulder! And I'll give the cockies here credit, they stuck to the locals. At the end of twelve months I'd cleared the picture show up, paid it right off and I'd paid a thousand pound deposit on a talkie plant.⁶⁸

Burgess had the misfortune to be badly injured in a road accident shortly afterwards, but by 1933 the mine in Cobar had re-opened employing 300 men. Having no further need for the complicated life of a shearing contractor, Burgess expanded into talkies, built a shop, and 'never looked back'.

The Later 1930s

Despite the fire and brimstone, PWIU achievements in Queensland in 1931 were meagre. In 1932 the mood in early shearing sheds was again edgy. The Graziers' Shearing Company was concerned about the usual trouble spots around Moree, Brewarrina and Coonamble. The Pastoral Award was due to be adjusted again on the cost-of-living formula, which in the Depression economy would drive them lower in nominal terms, not up. R.C. Wilson anticipated 'an outcry' but 'did not expect any

⁶⁷ See also the example of Don Munday in Chapter 9.

⁶⁸ Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour*, p. 284.

serious trouble'. Nor did he think that the PWIU was a spent force.⁶⁹ The whole mood was complicated by another award claim in the pipeline, an attempt by the AWU to reverse the Dethridge cut of 1930.⁷⁰ A win in the Court would nullify PWIU criticism. The chances were not any better (ultimately it failed) and, with the new season rapidly approaching, the timing was awkward.⁷¹ Shearers delayed signing on in the hope that higher rates would eventuate. Some were simply staying at home because there would be no shearing. Wilson received a letter from Norman Jeffery, Secretary of the PWIU at the end of May, stating that a 'mass meeting' had resolved to strike from 1 July if a detailed list of demands were not met. Again, radicals were pre-empting the Arbitration Court as well as the AWU, whose position was that shearers should do nothing to distract the Court from its important work. Jeffery's letter had been copied to the Graziers Association in any case, but Wilson quickly alerted J.W. Allen. Allen was unlikely to be complacent, but Wilson saw fit to ensure his close attention by enclosing a copy of the *Red Leader* full of reports about the threatened action. The Shearing Company was sufficiently nervous to open its seasonal offices in Moree and Dubbo 'a little earlier than usual'. Engagement was slow and by the end of June only 60 per cent of the usual number of men had come forward. More worrying from the Company's point of view was that many of those presenting themselves were only 'fair shearers' rather than the 'the usual number of good fast shearers'.⁷²

It was the first real sign of a significant problem for the Company in the 1930s. The policy of fostering fast shearers with a strong work ethic had paid off but under the PWIU influence previously reliable money-makers realised the Company needed them more than they needed the Company. Quality shearers were going with private contractors who were prepared to pressure graziers to pay above the award. The Company fielded complaints that its shearers were too slow and began to lose clients.⁷³ During World War II, when an acute shearer shortage developed, it got worse. Wilson told his Board in 1945 of rumours circulating in New England that the Company 'employed a low type of shearer, and therefore had trouble in its sheds.' Wilson thought it unfounded, and after sending one of his top managers Bill Payne to

⁶⁹ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 9/2/1932; 23/2/1932.

⁷⁰ *The Worker*, 27/1/1932, p. 18; 3/2/1932, p. 18; 24/2/1932, p. 16; 2/3/1932, p. 20; 9/3/1932, pp. 8, 18; 16/3/1932, p. 18; 23/3/1932, p. 8; 13/4/1932, p. 14.

⁷¹ *The Worker*, 4/5/1932, p. 20; 22/6/1932, p. 17.

⁷² ABL, Z278, Shearing Company minutes, 31/5/1932; 14/6/1932; 28/6/1932; 12/7/1932.

⁷³ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company minutes, 15/11/1932.

investigate, the Board decided that ‘some action should be taken to refute these rumours’.⁷⁴ Both the Shearing Company and the AWU tended to be wrong footed by delays in Arbitration Court proceedings. Shearers had meaningful bargaining power, even during the Depression, and money-makers were seduced by militancy.

The AWU and the Shearing Company adopted remarkably similar strategies to rally their supporters. R.C. Wilson addressed the local Boorowa branch of the Graziers Association (near Young) on 13 August 1932.⁷⁵ Likewise AWU meetings were held in Walgett and Bourke which, at the urging of AWU officials, passed resolutions opposing Jeffery’s strike.⁷⁶ George Buckland, Secretary of the NSW Branch, officially advised members throughout 1932 that the union was against a strike and they should not be misled by Jeffery’s propaganda.⁷⁷ In the event shearing began without much difficulty in the 1932 season, but Wilson and Allen were well aware that there could be future problems. Seasons from 1933 to 1935 were relatively quiet, a long spell of wet weather in 1934 being the only complication.⁷⁸ In 1935, AWU organisers reported that shearers were again buying AWU tickets.

However, shearing was disrupted in both 1936 and 1937. In April 1936 the Company Board was told that ‘shearing is going along alright’ in Queensland, but ‘owing to the flies being very bad and everyone wanting to shear at once there had been an acute shortage of shearers’. There was an attempt ‘to cause some trouble’ at Barcaldine Downs, Wilson said, and he thought ‘it would be advisable in future to have more Southern men in the teams as a lot of the trouble seemed to be caused by local men’. The situation was managed by addressing the complaints and a major walkout was avoided. There were complications in running this shed because Tait, a powerful owner who liked to get his own way, asked the company not to use NSW men because of local unemployment. He also pressured the Company to be lenient towards the local manager Holmes, who had been caught dishonestly booking merchandise to the Company. The Board felt there was no alternative but to sack him but Tait asked

⁷⁴ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company minutes, 23/1/1945

⁷⁵ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company minutes, 9/8/1932.

⁷⁶ *The Worker*, 24/8/1932, p. 16; 31/8/1932, p. 17; 7/9/1932, p. 17.

⁷⁷ *The Worker*, 24/2/1932, p. 16. The notice was repeated several times. Also 22/6/1932, p. 16; 29/6/1932, p. 16; 3/8/1932, p. 8.

⁷⁸ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 11/12/1934.

the Company to wait until Barcaldine Downs was finished. Holmes was well thought of and had a knack of controlling unruly shearers.⁷⁹

When the focus shifted to early NSW sheds the Company faced a co-ordinated strike in the Bourke district. The men were ‘determined to make a stand for 37/6 per 100 (the award was 32/6). The situation was sufficiently threatening for Wilson himself to travel to Bourke where he addressed a local Graziers Association meeting. He noted that ‘a big number of shearers’ had gathered in Bourke and Brewarrina, and was in no doubt that this was a PWIU operation. The men were being organised into gangs who would ‘[do] their best to intimidate the men who want to go to work’.⁸⁰ When he got back to Sydney he requested an urgent meeting of the Graziers’ Association’s Strike Committee.

Shortly after this a classic PWIU kidnapping raid occurred at Charlton station as shearers were taking up residence to start shearing. A man named Statton was arrested and eventually sentenced to 4 months prison (suspended on payment of a good behaviour bond and witness costs). Bob Morgan, president of the PWIU and well known to Wilson and Allen, was prosecuted for inciting a strike at Dunumbral. To Wilson’s frustration administrative delays held up the case for six or seven weeks by which time crucial witnesses had dispersed. However, charges were laid against nine men for trespass at Collymogle on the day of the start. Presumably this was another intimidation/kidnapping attempt by PWIU fanatics.⁸¹ The Company’s efforts had been enough to prevent a major strike, but Wilson ‘felt that it was more than likely’ that ‘the Communists would try and cause trouble again’ in 1937. Wilson also felt that the PWIU was seizing every opportunity to harass the AWU, and noted wryly: ‘Due to the age and ineptitude of the present AWU leaders the PWIU [is] meeting with some success.’⁸²

In 1937 a slowly proceeding award case provided another opportunity for militants. The Shearing Company adopted its usual precautions in consultation with the Graziers Association. Provisioning of a strike committee was organised by F.B.

⁷⁹ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 14/4/1936.

⁸⁰ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 23/6/1936.

⁸¹ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes 21/7/1936.

⁸² ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes 1/9/1936.

Fleming (conveniently he was Treasurer of the Graziers Association as well as Chairman of the Shearing Company). The Melbourne office of the Shearing Company was put on stand-by so that Victorian shearers could be mobilised to go into the strike-prone early-shearing districts of north and western NSW if they were needed. The co-operation of the Graziers Association of Victoria and Riverina was sought and agreed to. Wilson prepared a detailed 'history of strikes in the shearing industry since the War', reviewing the Company's experience and the lessons learned. The key was 'sending men from unaffected areas in order to make sure of key sheds starting'. He expressed misgivings that drawing too heavily on Victoria's resources would interfere with the smooth operation of shearing in the South. This had been canvassed with Douglas Boyd of the Victorian Graziers Association who was confident that they could 'work such teams back into the southern sheds when the trouble was over'.⁸³

Once again newspaper reports had an influence on events when the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that a strike would start on 15 June.⁸⁴ Wilson suspected Norman Jeffery was feeding the press misinformation. Another report said that 11 men (out of 24) had walked off Bangate station, but this was a Company shed and Wilson knew that only one shearer had left after the PWIU 'visit'. He wasted no time advising the *Herald* and it printed a lengthy statement of Wilson's version of what happened.⁸⁵ In addition to feeding a 'false statement about this Company's sheds', as Wilson put it, Norman Jeffery had spoken at least twice on the Labor-owned radio station 2KY. Old boy networks were activated to prevent more publication of falsehoods. Sir Fredrick Tout, Chairman of the Graziers Association, and Wilson approached Hubert Fairfax, a prominent grazier from southern Queensland, coincidentally a board member of John Fairfax Ltd., owners of the *Herald*. Fairfax reassured the Company, in writing, that any further articles on shearing strikes would first be referred to the Graziers Association. Pressure was applied to the Minister of Broadcasting and Jeffrey's access to 2KY also ceased. Meanwhile the one shearer who had broken his agreement at Bangate was prosecuted in the Walgett District Court. Nothing was being left to chance.⁸⁶ Seven shearers, including Ted Irvine, were jailed after a nasty incident at a

⁸³ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes 19/2/1937.

⁸⁴ SMH, 16/6/1937, p. 13.

⁸⁵ SMH, 17/6/1937, p. 8.

⁸⁶ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes 22/6/1937; 6/7/1937; CPD, Vol. 153, 1937, pp. 493, 696, 833. The Minister was Robert Menzies.

shed near Nyngan.⁸⁷ There was some trouble at Guisley station in July and a third team had to be put in to complete the shearing. The incident was a good example of how the PWIU could exploit the delicate sensitivities of mateship, but the Company also felt that the station manager had unnecessarily antagonised the shearers. It was a costly exercise in which the usual careful attention to detail was inadequate.⁸⁸ The 1937 shearing season, although not without drama, was the PWIU swan song.

World War II and Communist Infiltration

During World War II these tensions were suppressed to some extent, but they certainly did not go away, and late in the war they exploded. As in World War I, bulk purchase of wool by the British Government for the allied cause provided a comforting platform of wealth. Shearing was a proscribed occupation, but shearers still became extremely scarce. The shortage of shearers was a fresh opportunity for militants. Most of the ex-PWIU activists returned to the AWU although some were later expelled. As the 1940 shearing season approached rumours circulated that militants were planning to strike. R.C. Wilson was asked what he thought. He played it down, suggesting that for the past few years ‘the shearers and the graziers have worked happily together’, and that all agreed that the best way was to be guided by the rates set down by the federal Arbitration Court. However, behind the scenes the Company was concerned. It was only two seasons since the PWIU folded and Wilson was well aware that its activists had regrouped inside the AWU.⁸⁹

Lest there be any doubt, he gave the *Herald* a very comprehensive description of how militants operated. They organised meetings of ‘local committees’. These were called ‘AWU’ meetings, but they were not usually organised by, or under the control of AWU officials. As soon as the NSW Branch hierarchy became aware of them, they were condemned as ‘bogus’, and members were strongly advised to have nothing to do with them.

Though the PWIU is dead, its leaders are carrying on. Now they are inside the AWU and proud of their new respectability, but their technique in creating trouble is exactly the same

⁸⁷ SMH, 7/7/1937, p. 8; *The Worker*, 23/6/1937, pp 18,19.

⁸⁸ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 17/8/1937; 31/8/1937; 28/9/1937; 9/11/1937.

⁸⁹ ABL Z278, Shearing Company minutes, 20/2/1940; 23/4/1940; Reference Committee Meeting, 3/2/1940.

way. They are flooding the back country of New South Wales with long yellow pamphlets headed 'The Case for Higher Wages in the Pastoral Industry'.⁹⁰

As it turned out, the 1940 season was relatively quiet. The Shearing Company's well rehearsed tactics of isolating militants and prosecuting to deter others continued to work. However, there was persistent trouble in the sheds throughout the war. The overall level of prices rose by about 25 per cent over the five years of the War, and shearing rates were adjusted in fits and starts by roughly the same amount. Kosmas Tsokhas has shown, on a limited survey of sheep station accounts, that actual shearing wages probably rose by more the 40 per cent. The Shearing Company's policy of sticking to the award meant that it was losing sheds to private contractors, who were more willing to acknowledge market realities.⁹¹

Despite the AWU's best efforts to prevent it, there was a significant strike in 1945. Early shearing in Queensland was affected, and from April 1945 spread to the perennially troublesome sheds of northern-NSW. In 1945 a particularly severe drought meant that graziers were anxious to shear. Again the AWU had claims in the pipeline for alterations to both the federal and Queensland awards, and as usual argued that shearers should wait for the outcome of these cases. The Arbitration Court 'upped the ante' to some extent, by insisting that it would not consider the case at all unless all shearing strikes were called off. This hardly deterred the militant-minded, who argued that the Arbitration Court was a big part of their problem, and were spoiling for direct confrontation. In their eyes it was the disease rather than the medicine to cure shearers' grievances.

While the agitation was at its peak, R.C. Wilson, the General Manager of Grazcos, spoke to a group of graziers at Young, NSW. He described how the communists operated and outlined what he thought their motives were. This fuelled the conservative prejudice of his audience, but had a basis in first hand knowledge.⁹² The first move was to get some kind of stoppage started. Agitators were adept at exploiting ambiguities about who they really were, and adopted personas that implied they had some sort of status within the AWU. A favourite trick was to circulate

⁹⁰ SMH, 16/5/1940, p. 5.

⁹¹ Tsokhas, 'Myth of Wartime Harmony', pp. 218-9, 222.

⁹² ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 17/4/1945. Wilson called his address 'The Danger of Communism to Australia and the Trouble in the Shearing Industry'. A copy of the speech has not been found, but Wilson described militant tactics to the press, SMH 30/4/1945, p. 4.

whispers that the AWU hierarchy supported shearers' demands and was in favour of direct action, but could not do so openly as it did not want to be attacked for damaging the war effort. By the time the AWU got around to countering these calumnies, troublemakers had usually persuaded a nucleus of sheds to strike. The tactic then was to keep isolated wildcat stoppages rolling. When a majority in a shed voted for a return to work, it was put to them that it would be 'scabbing' if other sheds were still 'out'. It would not be fair to your mates to start before other strike committees had wired through start-work motions from other sheds. Few shearers relished odium of the 'scab' label, and the ruse usually worked.⁹³ Another technique, which had recently been seen in Queensland, was to require written clearances from strike committees before they could work in other sheds. This had created a backlog of between two and three million sheep over a matter that was relatively trivial.

The Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company endeavoured to see that its shed managers were not put in the position of the hapless 'pommie jackaroo'. The Company usually had the capacity to bring in a fresh team at short notice, avoiding the weakness of the lone squatter. Rarely did the incoming team refuse to shear - the Guisley case mentioned above being an exception. Secondly, the Company was prepared to call the disrupters' bluff. The risk of prosecution for breaking an agreement was enough to curb the militant instincts of many. Graziers Association members were advised to do everything by the book and to keep notes. It all depended on the evidence, and J.W. Allen did not waste Association money on cases it could not win. The system had to be sensitively managed. It was up to the shed overseer to judge whether the grievance was 'genuine' or 'contrived' - complaints by shearers were not always a 'try on', and it was in the Company's long term interests not to create grievances unnecessarily. As the AWU had much the same attitude, the arbitration system intersected with the reality of the woolshed floor. Both the AWU and the Graziers Association, for all their apparent mutual hostility, were committed to resolving matters within the arbitration system. Both took victories and defeats in their stride.

⁹³ SMH, 16/4/1940, p. 5.

The 1945 strike was an escalation of the industrial friction graziers were accustomed to. Recently demobbed soldiers helped the labour supply situation. Shearing was not held up for long, and it did not affect the sheep-wheat belt in NSW (which usually sheared in August and September) or Victoria (a bit later). However, it signified that a militant culture survived into the post-War era. Wilson's assertions of a communist influence were not entirely misplaced, but the mindset of shearers also owed something to the 'bush nomad' tradition. By now shearers were not 'nomads' and for the most part were family men. They lived in Moree, Bourke, and other towns of north-western NSW and central-western Queensland. Relationships with these rural communities were complex – they were part of them, yet they continued to resent graziers, who they often still called 'squatters'. Their manners were coarse, and although they could often be influenced by 'communist agitators', their bonds with the authoritarian, male-chauvinist, old-unionism of those who actually ran the AWU were in fact rather strong.

Chapter 8: The Wool Boom and the 1956 Strike

Militants after the War

Economic aspects of the 1950s wool boom have already been canvassed in Chapter 3. The AWU saw it as a not-to-be-squandered opportunity to improve the lot of pastoral workers. The union was still feeling the sting of its militant critics and needed to demonstrate that its tribal mantra of arbitration could deliver results. The PWIU was dead but its foot-soldiers had insinuated themselves back inside the AWU during the war, and arguably that was worse. Their most recent enterprise of note, the 1945 strike, was reminder enough of their troublemaking antics. Returned soldiers were slow returning to the sheds and country workers were lured into more secure jobs in mining and construction. At the woolshed, where graziers, contractors and shearers came together, ‘them and us’ attitudes persisted.

Militancy in shearing sheds was a very minor side of a larger picture. In 1947 the Labor Party, beleaguered by trouble in coalmining, sensed the looming electoral damage for incumbent Federal and State Governments. *The Worker* published grave warnings about ‘Cuckoos in the Nest of Labor’ and condemned ‘Commo’ disrupters’.¹ Bill Wilson, Secretary of the NSW Branch, was speaking generally about coal mines and the waterfront when he referred to the communist influence in unions as ‘the greatest orgy of scabbery ever known in the industrial life of Australia’.² Tom Dougherty, General Secretary from 1944, was even more strident when he attacked communists, most of it directed at their infiltration of the wider labour movement.³ While none of this had much to do with shearing sheds, both the AWU and the Graziers Association were keenly aware that PWIU remnants were still very active.

It was now about 30 years since the Bushworkers’ Propaganda Group had surfaced and some of its leading lights were no longer around. Arthur Rae died in 1943 – radical to the end. Norman Jeffery was still occasionally sighted, and the AWU kept

¹ *The Worker*, 26/3/1947, p. 1.

² *The Worker*, 2/4/1947, p. 10.

³ Radio address, ‘The Menace of Communism’, *The Worker*, 2/1/1946, p. 6.

tabs on him.⁴ In 1939 a letter appeared in *The Worker*, indicating that he still regarded the AWU membership as fertile territory for his activism. Jeffery lived until 1966, but apart from a suggestion that he was behind an attempted shearing strike in 1948, his involvement in the pastoral industry in the 1950s was minimal.⁵ What became of ‘Trucker’ Brown is unknown. Edgar Williams, a Queensland AWU stalwart and implacable foe, claims that he ended up as a ‘squatter’. Probably this meant no more than a small plot of land on which he reared a couple of horses. Neil Byron, a militant shearer from the 1930s, who died only in 2005, knew ‘Trucker’ Brown, and apparently he talked about him often. Unfortunately little of this ended up in his autobiography.⁶

The AWU had a vivid recall of Brown’s nefarious past right back to 1919. In 1952, in yet another denunciation of ‘Red Blacklegs in Shearing Sheds’ and ‘Commo Stoges’, *The Worker* published a highly pejorative account of the Propaganda Group and PWIU which was at pains to paint Brown unfavourably. Connections to the Communist Party were rehearsed, and the 1930 strike. ‘The PWIU’, it said, ‘played a role of unparalleled scabbery, and did all it could to provoke trouble and cause disunity’. Agitators were accused of deserting strikers at the most critical stage (‘poor deluded dupes’). When the Graziers Association initiated prosecutions, it claimed, the AWU ‘was called upon to defend hundreds and hundreds of men, some of whom afterwards showed base ingratitude by linking up with the traitorous PWIU and attacking the organisation that had befriended them’.⁷ While the tirade was plainly self-serving and wildly exaggerated, this version of history rang true. Regardless, it was a sure sign that PWIU influences were still – in the 1950s – worrying the AWU. Grazcos, whose shed managers confronted militancy on a regular basis, was not in any doubt either, that ‘communists’ were still active in shearing.⁸

⁴ Security authorities probably monitored him also. Moore, ‘Pastoral Workers’ Industrial Union’, p. 64.

⁵ *The Worker*, 11/1/1939, p. 18; 7/4/1948, p. 6.

⁶ Cecil Wallace (Edgar) Williams, *Yellow Green and Red*, The Worker Newspaper Pty., Brisbane, 1967, p. 9. Byron, *All Among the Wool Boys*. The writer acknowledges communications in June 2007 with Drew Cottle, who knew Byron, for some of these details. SMH, 21/12/2000, p. 26.

⁷ *The Worker*, 21/5/1952, p. 8.

⁸ ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 26/11/1946; 1/4/1947; 17/2/1948; 1/7/1952. The Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company was formally renamed Grazcos in 1948.

Ted Irvine, Bob Morgan, and Lit Connors had been radicalised in the 1930s.⁹ What they called the ‘Progress Committee’ was based in Dubbo. The tactics of these ‘bogus disrupters’, as the AWU called them, were much the same as in Bushworker Propaganda and PWIU days, focussed on early-sheds. Midkin (in the Moree district) and Wingadee (just north of Coonamble) were still very big sheds in the 1950s.¹⁰ One aim was to discourage shearers from leaving home by spreading rumours of a strike. If shearing towns were awash with men contractors could find shearers prepared to start. But if there were mainly ‘hotheads’, as Grazcos called them, group pressure against ‘scabbing’ was stronger. If a shed voted not to strike men could still be persuaded to wait for other sheds to start. Few shearers wanted to be labelled ‘scabs’. Fiery oratory, threats and physical intimidation were all used at different times.

The AWU was forced to show the flag with meetings organised in towns such as Moree, Narrabri, and Gunnedah. Bill Wilson’s oratory condemned ‘a few ill advised individuals with limited knowledge and small vision’. One meeting at the Returned Servicemen’s Hall in Moree, held on a Saturday at the end of March in 1947, was a lively affair. Militants had arrived first and tried to persuade those attending not to let Wilson in. According to Wilson this was easily overcome (whether a physical scuffle took place, he did not say). Once inside he was able, he said, to quickly dispel the spurious logic of the militant case for direct action.

Probably it was foolish to expect them to do the decent thing, as they were incapable of such a course. Members generally had no time for such filthy tactics, and the signs were that in all areas throughout the State they would pay more attention to officials and the advice of the Union than ever before.¹¹

Wilson concluded with a pep talk about the coming 1949 election and the need to fight to retain the Labor Government. He linked the Liberal Party, the Country Party, and the Communist Party with the ‘common objective’ of defeating Labor.¹² It had,

⁹ See Chapter 7 for their raids on woolsheds.

¹⁰ *The Australian Pastoral Directory*, 1954, lists both as properties of the New Zealand and Australian Land Company. Midkin stocked 46,974 sheep and 2,276 cattle, and Wingadee 60,906 sheep and 2,352 cattle. The greater emphasis on cattle compared with the inter-war period is notable, but by 1950s standards these were both very large sheep flocks. See also McKenzie, *Wingadee*, p. 53; ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 25/6/1946; 28/6/1949.

¹¹ *The Worker*, 9/4/1947, p. 10.

¹² This was soap box rhetoric. The communist scare certainly helped Robert Menzies’ Liberal-Country Coalition defeat Labor in that 1949 election, and retain office through the entire 1950s and ‘60s. Convenient as it was, there is no evidence that Menzies actually colluded with communists in this devious way. In the shearing industry Graziers Association and Grazcos saw it as vital to their interests that the AWU survived, despite the low opinion of its leaders. See, R.C. Wilson’s dismissive ‘age and ineptitude’ remark quoted towards the end of Chapter 7.

further, been necessary to expel some of these ‘persons’ from the AWU, because letters had been published with ‘false information’, and because of ‘fifth column activities’. It was all very cloak and dagger, but Wilson said he was constrained from saying more because there was an appeal against the expulsions pending in the Courts. This case dragged on for another 20 months and it was not until December 1948 that Bill Wilson was able to brag that the High Court had upheld the AWU’s right to expel the ‘agrarian Commos’.¹³

Skirmishes between the AWU and the ‘Progress Committee’ were first reported in 1946 and continued well into the 1950s. In January 1947 Dougherty produced a copy of a letter from F.A. Nash & Co, a well known shearing contractor based in Sydney, in which a shearer was told he needed clearance from the Dubbo ‘Strike Committee’ to be employed. This was part of the wash-up after the 1945 strike. As far as Dougherty was concerned the idea that rebels demanded money from shearers for clearances was brazen in the extreme.¹⁴ Six years later ‘phony circulars’ were still being distributed in the Broken Hill region.¹⁵ In 1954 Dougherty told conference that resolutions had been submitted ‘purely for the purpose of Communist propaganda’. Using whatever pretext he could these were kept off the conference agenda and publication in *The Worker* blocked. This, he said, prevented the union becoming a vehicle for communist propaganda in the general press.¹⁶

The 40-Hour Week and Scabby Mouth

Just as the source of trouble in the early 1920s had been the 44-hour week, in the late-1940s it was the 40-hour week. The AWU’s position was that it was in favour of the 40-hour week, but there was no advantage, either to shearers (paid by piecework) or shed hands (paid by the week), unless higher rates of pay were first won in the arbitration court. A 40-hour week was no good without 44-hour pay! This was the source of bitter acrimony between AWU leaders and the militant fringe.¹⁷ While the AWU eventually won the 40-hour week at the Arbitration Court, Dougherty was

¹³ *The Worker*, 8/12/1948, pp. 1, 6, 7.

¹⁴ *The Worker*, 1/1/1947, p. 3.

¹⁵ *The Worker*, 22/4/1953, p. 6.

¹⁶ *The Worker*, 10/2/1954, p.8.

¹⁷ Byron, *All Among the Wool Boys*, pp. 24-5.

forced into adopting a more aggressive stance. The matter became urgent at the 1947 AWU Conference. The application to the Court had been made in March 1945, so impatience was mounting. Dougherty decided to go onto the front foot, and moved that the AWU would call a strike if the Court did not grant the 40-hour week. Clarrie Fallon wanted an even stronger motion, but Dougherty managed to prevail. Official instructions were issued for shearers to sign agreements only on a 40-hour basis. As it turned out, the Court delivered, but had it not, direct action was almost inevitable. Constant attacks by militants goaded him in this direction, although Dougherty never ceased to abuse them. Whether the Court also took this into account is a moot point.¹⁸

Shearer anxiety about a disease in sheep known as ‘scabby mouth’ was also exploited. Scabby mouth was an unpleasant condition in which sheep developed cancerous sores. It had long been known, although it became more prevalent in this period. It was widely believed that the infection could infect humans, although the scientific evidence was inconclusive despite extensive inquiries. Graziers accepted that it was unreasonable to ask shearers to shear infected animals, but often there were only two or three in a mob with symptoms. The AWU adopted the stance, which graziers accepted, that diseased sheep should be drafted out. This was not entirely from goodwill, because if whole mobs were rejected there would be little shearing in some districts. The militant view was that the whole mob could not be shorn, primarily to maximise inconvenience to the grower. Graziers firmly believed that disputes over wet sheep were often contrived, and this was similar. Scabby mouth was a genuine problem, but ready made for those intent on mischief.¹⁹

Fighting Talk at the Arbitration Court

The Pastoral Award had not been overhauled since 1938 (although there had been periodic adjustment of pay rates to keep them broadly in line with retail prices). Shearers were restive. The AWU initiated a claim in 1947 but bureaucracy moved slowly. Early in 1948 rumours were deliberately spread that the AWU had itself lost patience with the Court and was planning a strike. This was right out of the PWIU

¹⁸ *The Worker*, 9/4/1947, p. 10; ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 14/5/1946; 13/5/1947.

¹⁹ *The Worker*, 1/1/1947, p. 11; 15/1/1947, p. 11; 31/12/1947, p. 11; 28/1/1948, p. 8; 17/1/1951, p. 9; ABL, Z278, Shearing Company Minutes, 26/11/1946; 1/4/1947; 20/1/1948; 31/8/1948; 6/9/1955.

manual - insinuate unofficial AWU approval to sway moderate attitudes. Bill Wilson corrected this falsehood and vilified ‘unofficial strike-mongers’. If members were duped they would only succeed in delaying matters even further as the Court refused to sit under such threats. It was reminiscent of the corner the union had been painted into in 1922.

While condemning ‘communists’ AWU policies subtly shifted leftwards. Dougherty’s opening address in the 1948 award case adopted the risky strategy of doing just what Bill Wilson had warned members against – using the threat of militant disruption to pressure the Court. He opened with a request for an interim award of an extra 5/3 per hundred. Increases were ‘long overdue’. Dougherty was subtly – or perhaps not so subtly - reminding the Court of the edgy mood in the outback. He went on in much detail about ‘subversive organisations which [have] always attempted to cause industrial trouble and industrial strikes when the Union was in Court with a claim to improve the wages and conditions of pastoral workers’.

There [is] such a little coterie operating now in the pastoral industry, and [I] want to make it quite clear to the Court that the Union completely [dissociates] itself from any intimations, instructions or advice given under the name of the AWU by this Communist cell which [is] working in the pastoral areas of the Commonwealth.²⁰

This bore remarkable resemblance statements that J.W. Allen and R.C. Wilson, the Grazcos manager, had made both in public and private. Dougherty read from a pamphlet ‘which had been flooding the pastoral areas’. The perpetrators were controlled by the Communist Party, the Court was told. They had based themselves at Dubbo, and the pamphlet was a report of a ‘Pastoral Workers Conference’ held on 6 and 7 March 1948. The leaders were six men, four of them known communists, who had been expelled from the AWU. The contents were spelled out in detail, including a proposal for direct strike action, and collection of money. ‘There never has been a pamphlet put out from these people unless there has been a bite at the end of it’, Dougherty confided to the Judge. He assumed the money ‘went into the funds of the Communist Party’. The postal address on the pamphlet was that of a communist cell associated with Norman Jeffery, of 22 Garden Ave, Glebe. Not that anybody present really needed reminding, it was explained that Jeffery was the ‘self-styled’ Secretary of the Agrarian Section of Communist Party, and formerly Secretary of the PWIU. An

²⁰ *The Worker*, 7/4/1948, p. 6.

article titled 'Shearers Plan State-wide Strike on Wages' had appeared in a Communist newspaper on 17 March 1948. All told, Dougherty was laying it on thick.

We do not want to be embarrassed by the persons who were attempting to bring about a strike and we do not want to create the impression that we were in any way using those persons to obtain advantages on behalf of members.²¹

Perish the thought, any more than Commissioner Donovan could admit to taking the bait. Donovan protested that he knew of no case that had been 'more expeditiously handled'. However, he did agree to listen carefully to Dougherty's argument for an interim award. Dougherty obliged with a lengthy analysis of movements in wool prices and indexes of the cost of living, but the important work had been done. He had succeeded in using the militant threat to intimidate the Court, and gotten away with it. The interim award was duly granted and Dougherty made sure that this was on the front page of *The Worker* with another diatribe about 'communists'. As the case droned on the AWU was having it both ways, using the threat of militants to put pressure on the Court, while keeping its own hands clean.²²

As wool prices accelerated the AWU successfully pressed for higher shearing rates. The introduction of a Wool Value Allowance in 1949 was a formula for boosting shearing rates whenever wool prices exceeded a benchmark annual average of 39.5 pence per lb. It added 9 pence per hundred for every extra penny on wool. It seemed a modest enough bonus, but it boosted shearing rates £3/15/- per hundred in the extraordinary circumstances of 1951. As the wool price started to recede application of the formula cut shearing rates anyway but the graziers also began to clamour for the formula itself to be watered down, the first application along these lines being made in 1952. The union response was to accept the impact of the formula, but to argue aggressively for increases in the general rate to compensate. After the 1945 strike shearing rates were 45/-. Once they passed 100/- (£5) in 1950 it was easier to talk in pounds rather than shillings. The Wool Value Allowance drove them to the extraordinary level of 174/- (£8/14/-) in 1951. By mid-1952 the formula cut them to 127/6 (£6/7/6) although the counter claim soon raised them in July to 140/- (or £7) per 100. Still, history had shown that in any economic circumstance shearers were unruly when shearing rates were cut.²³

²¹ *The Worker*, 7/4/1948, p. 6.

²² *The Worker*, 7/4/1948, pp. 1,6; 14/4/1948, p. 10.

²³ *The Worker*, 2/7/1952, p. 1.

The 1952 award case was unusual because the Court's entourage travelled out to Moree and Coonamble for the convenience of witnesses. Parallel meetings of AWU members provided intriguing reactions to whatever was said in the Court. After three or four days of hearings at the Moree Courthouse, 98 pastoral workers attended a meeting in the Moree Town Hall on the Sunday. There might have been more had heavy rain not made it inconvenient to travel. A reduction in rates – according to the Wool Value Allowance formula – had already been announced, effective from 19 May (the next day). The AWU was making a counter claim, and hoped this would restore rates. A motion was passed, noting 'hostility' to the reduction, but agreeing to continue working under protest until the union's claim was heard. Dougherty claimed that the 'Red stooges' had dodged a confrontation with him. Hearings were resumed at Coonamble Courthouse on Wednesday 21 May. After the adjournment Dougherty, Charlie Oliver (the NSW Secretary) and Harry Delany (the local organiser) faced an awkward meeting of members in the local hall. There were 108 at the gathering, including 'a large group representing Warren', known for its fiery opinions. Under Jack Andriski's chairmanship (just what his sympathies were, is not indicated) there was a unanimous resolution *not* to accept work at reduced rates. Dougherty, Oliver and Delany carefully explained the award and AWU policy. Technically, although the headline rate for shearing was going down this was because of the link to the wool price. It was not, strictly speaking, an award reduction (this nicety had not inhibited Dougherty from boasting when they were going up).²⁴ The Moree meeting was lively, but toed the official line. At Coonamble they were stroppier. Questions were asked and eventually the desired vote of loyalty and confidence in the AWU was forthcoming.²⁵

For the entire period between 1945 (the last major strike) and 1956, buoyant wool prices, shortages of shearers, and militant activism were an industrial powder keg. The arbitration court and contractors between them struggled to maintain the peace, but on the whole managed to do so. Shearers were seen as a surly lot, especially in the bigger sheds. As long as the money flowed – which the AWU tried to see that it did –

²⁴ When Justice Powers reasoned along these lines in 1922, union leaders did not accept it either. See Chapter 6.

²⁵ *The Worker*, 28/5/1952, p. 6.

a tense peace prevailed. Rates set by the Court were still largely linked to inflation, despite the Wool Value Allowance. Market forces were driving wages and shearers felt they were in a strong position. Actual payments for shearing were often well above award rates.²⁶ It was not an environment in which the AWU could easily pontificate to its members (as the graziers thought they should) that it was ‘fair’ to engineer lower shearing rates. These circumstances festered for several years, and eventually precipitated the strike in 1956.

The 1956 Strike²⁷

The UGA successfully applied for removal of the so called ‘prosperity bonus’ in Queensland, announced in November 1955.²⁸ The AWU, departing from its longstanding support for awards, indicated that it would back strikers refusing to shear at ‘new’ (lower) rates. Anticipation around the shearing sheds was electric with anticipation as the early shearing approached. Tension spread rapidly through NSW as speculation mounted that the Commonwealth Arbitration Court would also cut Pastoral Award rates. This occurred in February 1956 and the NSW Branch of the AWU was equally belligerent in its condemnation of the Court.

Thus began the most significant shearing strike since the 1890s. It lasted for six months in NSW and ten months in Queensland, much longer than any shearing strike in Australian history. It was a very different to the 1890s, or the rowdy but short-lived crises of the 1930s. The AWU tactic of allowing shearing to take place, provided shearers were paid according to the ‘old’ (higher) award schedule, made it difficult for contractors. Mateship was very effective in policing sheds and condemning ‘new raters’ as ‘scabs’. Roy Ryan ensured that he had a signed guarantee from a contractor

²⁶ Tsokhas, ‘Concessions, Conflicts and Collusion’, pp. 289-304.

²⁷ It is not possible to give a full account of the strike here. The following sources are valuable. Joy Guyatt, ‘The Labor Government and the Queensland Shearers Strike of 1956’, *Labour History*, 33, November 1977, pp. 53-64; Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, Ch. 11, ‘The Meaning of Mateship: The Shearers Strike and The Split in Queensland’, pp. 237-57; Tsokhas, ‘Concessions, Conflicts and Collusion’; Ruth S. Kerr *Resolute and Rugged: A History of the Warrego Graziers’ Association*, Warrego Graziers’ Association (Union of Employers), Charleville (Qld), 1991, ‘The Shearers’ Strike of 1956’, pp. 37-41; Kerr, *Freedom of Contract*, Ch. 13, ‘Shearers’ Strike 1956’, pp. 164-72; Byron *All Among the Wool Boys*, ‘The Big Strike of 1956’, pp. 39-52; Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland from 1915*, pp. 139-53. To mark the fiftieth anniversary ABC National Radio broadcast a documentary on 22/9/2006. Transcript downloaded from www.abc.au/rural/telegraph/ in September 2006.

²⁸ Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland from 1915*, p. 141.

that his work had been paid at the union rate.²⁹ Sheep owners, increasingly desperate to get the wool off, grudgingly conceded at the woolshed, although the official stance of the UGA and the Graziers Association did not bend. Unlike the 1920s and 1930s, this was a time of full employment and shearers were able to find work in other industries.

The complex machinations of the Labor Party ‘split’ of the 1950s, largely unrelated to events in woolsheds, were an additional factor.³⁰ The AWU had been obsessively anti-communist since the 1920s. Under Dougherty the union was vehement in its condemnation of the ‘reds’, as has been noted. On the face of it the union was a natural ally of Catholic zealots infiltrating unions in order to undermine communist control. Joe Bukowski of the Queensland Branch had worked closely with ‘The Groups’ from the late-1940s.³¹ But when the Labor leader H.V. Evatt embarked in October 1954 on a spectacular attack on B.A. Santamaria, Dougherty vigorously supported him. Santamaria was a shadowy and enigmatic character about whom little was known at the time, but much has since been written. A crafty political manipulator he was the mastermind behind Catholic anti-communist activism.³² Dougherty launched a scathing attack on Santamaria in *The Worker* which left readers in no doubt that ‘Groupers’ were now enemies of the AWU.³³ Probably he was concerned they were becoming too influential in the union movement, and saw them as a threat to his own power base.³⁴ Dougherty had not gone ‘soft’, but the AWU nevertheless veered towards a more militant approach in shearing sheds as a reaction to its influence.

Pressure was applied to Bukowski and he rapidly backed away from his thuggish activities in support of Groups in Queensland. The Labor Premier Vince Gair was and remained in the Santamaria camp. A poisonous mutual hatred between Gair and Bukowski destroyed the usual prospect that the dispute over shearing rates could be

²⁹ NLA MS 9139, Roy Ryan Papers. Roy Ryan is introduced in Chapter 1. This endorsement is one of the few pieces of memorabilia kept with his diaries apart from his shearing tallies.

³⁰ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 250-7; Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland from 1915*, pp. 139-153.

³¹ Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland from 1915*, p. 140.

³² Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland from 1915*, p. 123.

³³ *The Worker*, 20/10/1954, pp. 1, 11; 1/11/1954, p. 1.

³⁴ *The Worker*, 1/12/1954, p. 1.

sorted out behind closed doors. Graziers accordingly lost faith in Gair's capacity to resolve the problem.³⁵

The relevance of all this to the 1956 strike was that the AWU was on unusually amicable terms with Left-leaning factions of the labour movement. It was able to persuade the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council to support 'black bans' imposed on and wool shorn at 'new' rates. This meant that even if graziers managed to get sheep shorn by 'scabs', getting wool trucked to the ports and loaded for export was almost impossible. Downstream assistance from other unions boosted AWU morale and increased financial pressure on the graziers.³⁶ To graziers it was 'industrial sabotage'. They felt victimised, while hotheads of various persuasions were off the leash. There were murky incidents involving the hijacking of trucks carrying 'black' wool. Accusations of intimidation at woolsheds, and brawls in pubs, were regular occurrences.³⁷

Hearn and Knowles see the strike, reinforced as it was by the co-operation of other unions, as a form of social progress. The political and industrial power of labour had come of age to counter reactionary forces.

The tables of 1890 had finally turned. In 1956 there would be no triumphant procession of graziers, protected by the forces of the state, to the Sydney wharves.³⁸

In fact it was less clear cut. The Queensland Labor Government, to the everlasting disgust of the AWU, declared a state of emergency in October 1956 which pressured the union to accept a settlement. The strike was not the only influence, but there was a catastrophic split in the Queensland Labor Party and it lost power in 1957 after four decades of electoral dominance. Labor did not regain power in the State for another 25 years. However, the settlement was close enough to pre-strike shearing rates for the AWU to claim that it had 'won'.³⁹ Moreover, the graziers would certainly think twice about again trying to get the Court to cut shearing rates. Ruth Kerr argues a different case, suggesting any victory was hollow. She quotes the *Toowoomba Chronicle's* lament of March 1956 that future prosperity depended 'in the days of keen competition on our ability to find some reasonable method of co-operation

³⁵ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 255; Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland from 1915*, p. 140.

³⁶ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 248-9.

³⁷ Byron, *All Among the Wool Boys*, pp. 44-6.

³⁸ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 248-9.

³⁹ Fitzgerald, *History of Queensland from 1915*, pp. 143-4, 145-7, 150.

between capital and labour'.⁴⁰ This certainly was lost, and is a better clue to the strike's long term legacy. Bitter as it was, it lacked the incendiary nation-changing quality that has gripped most understandings of the 1890s strikes. Rather, it entrenched the system's resistance to change.

Adding to the Legend

The 1956 strike passed into AWU legend. The spirit of the times is well represented in *Sunday Too Far Away*. The movie ends with a bar room brawl when Ivy, the publican, against her better judgement, refuses to serve beer to scabs. A message rolls:

THE STRIKE LASTED NINE MONTHS
BUT IT WASN'T THE MONEY, IT WAS THE INSULT⁴¹

This view of the 10 shilling cut was endorsed in 2006 by Bill Ludwig, President of the Queensland Branch but a young shearer in 1956. 'You would spill it out of your glass on Friday night. But it was the principle of the thing, you know.'⁴² Militants with PWIU backgrounds like Neil Byron considered AWU backing for the strike had been ambivalent, but this did not stop Tom Dougherty claiming the high moral ground. He boasted to the 1957 Annual Conference that the union had 'scored one of the most momentous victories during the seven decades of its existence'.⁴³

Mateship culture in its post-1956 form was inherently conservative. It was intensely loyal to the AWU and not obviously linked to the militant activism of the 1920s and 1930s, which it had expressly condemned. However, the militant unionism of the 1930s had drawn on the mythology of nineteenth century bush mateship, and there is explicit evidence of these links in the participation of Arthur Rae and 'Trucker' Brown. AWU officials also drew constant parallels with the same history in their own propaganda. Accordingly there were common cultural connections between the 1956 strike and the strikes of the 1930s. This enabled the AWU to link its activism of the 1890s with 1956. The fact that it had pilloried radicals of the 1930s as disloyal agents of the pastoralists was quietly glossed over.

⁴⁰ Kerr, *Freedom of Contract*, p. 165.

⁴¹ Dingwall, *Sunday Too Far Away*, p. 119.

⁴² 'Fifty Years Ago' documentary broadcast by *Bush Telegraph* program on ABC National Radio, 22/9/2006. Sound file downloaded from www.abc.net.au/rural/telegraph/content/2006/s1745191.htm.

⁴³ *The Worker*, 23/1/1957, p. 6.

A neat example of this is the career of Alf Kain, who was interviewed by Patsy Adam-Smith for *The Shearers*. Kain had grown up in Auguthella (just north of Charleville) in the 1920s and by the age of 15 was learning to shear. In 1931 he was in the thick of the shearing strike organised by the PWIU, and recalled with considerable relish his experiences in the strike camp at the Emerald depot. When the strike was over Kain adopted a false name, Green, for a time, fearing contractor black listing. These difficulties were quickly overcome and he found sheds, eventually settling in as a full time shearer with Bob Wedgewood, one of the better known contractors in the central-west. For the next decade Kain averaged over 30,000 sheep per annum. Although militants were still very active he kept his head down, shearing for money.⁴⁴

By 1946 his re-invention was complete as an AWU organiser, and in 1956 was at the organisational hub of the strike. This gave rise to another collection of colourful ‘mateship’ stories for the benefit of Patsy Adam-Smith, which were grafted seamlessly onto his earlier biography.⁴⁵ Kain’s persona of AWU loyalist was further illustrated in 1961 at the AWU Conference. Clyde Cameron, who was actively engaging with rank-and-file protest in the Broken Hill district, had earned the wrath of Tom Dougherty. Edgar Williams, the Queensland Branch Secretary, spearheaded an attack on Cameron. Alf Kain now playing the roll of loyal off-sider in the ritualistic denigration of Cameron, recalled visiting a shed where Cameron’s supporters were vilifying the AWU. After fielding these complaints and, as he put it, ‘outlining [the] facts’, a motion of confidence in the General Secretary was carried. The shed resolution had not been unanimous, as ‘one or two ... refrained from voting’.⁴⁶ Alf Kain, now around 50, was the antithesis of a 1930s radical, a tribal AWU hatchet man for Brisbane headquarters. The PWIU shenanigans of 1931 were in the distant past.

It was two decades later, in 1980, when he was interviewed by Patsy Adam-Smith. The role he played then was elder citizen of the AWU, an authentic source of grassroots experience during the Depression, and one with inside knowledge of the

⁴⁴ SLV, MS TMS 559, 560, 561, Patsy Adam-Smith interview with Alf Kain, 1980.

⁴⁵ SLV, MS TMS 559, 560, 561, Patsy Adam-Smith interview with Alf Kain, 1980; Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, p. 241.

⁴⁶ *The Worker*, 15/2/1961, p. 9.

1956 strike. Adam-Smith herself seemed oblivious to the contradictions implied by these various roles. Her confusion, though, is understandable, as there is an approving voice in the background – probably one of Kain’s younger colleagues in the AWU office. Kain is retelling his many yarns about sabotage, intercepting ‘scab trains’, and life in the strike camp in 1931. Occasionally he is prompted for extra detail to ensure that the picture is sufficiently colourful for the famous novelist. Kain has similar anecdotes about 1956, although this implies no disloyalty because it was an official strike.⁴⁷ It is all harmless enough, but it indicates the complexity of the AWU persona. The union vehemently rejected extremism while it also made constant use of the tradition of bushworker militancy. In the milky glow of hindsight the ‘disruptionism’ of the 1930s was recast as mateship half a century later. If a touch of thuggery had been required, so be it. This too could be acknowledged by the respectable lady writer with a knowing nod and a wink. AWU mythology claimed ownership of events that it had done its darnedest to prevent. But it also meant that it spent much of its emotional energy living in the past.

Neil Byron is another who bridges pre-war PWIU attitudes and 1956. Byron’s first experience of shearing was in 1929 in NSW, and he too experienced the excitement of 1930s militancy. He knew ‘Trucker’ Brown. Unlike Alf Kain, Byron consciously remained on the militant fringes during the war and in the early 1950s, associating with Ted Irvine, Lit Connors and Bob Morgan. During the 1956 strike Byron was elected into a full time role as the strike co-ordinator in Bourke. He recalled with relish many actions of thuggery, including one incident where a truck loaded with ‘black’ wool from Queensland was hijacked on its way through Bourke. Neil Byron considered that AWU support for the 1956 strike was ‘lukewarm’ and its legal assistance in his trial over the hijacking episode was grudgingly provided.⁴⁸

Finally, in a bizarre twist Ted Irvine, who had spent most of his life as a savage critic of AWU leaders and had been expelled from the union in 1944, applied for readmission in 1960. Rather surprisingly, Charlie Oliver supported his application. This was greeted with dismay by other hard heads within the AWU. Oliver replied that he knew Irvine’s history better than anyone, and he was not going soft. However,

⁴⁷ SLV, MS TMS 559. 560, 561, Alf Kain interview, Patsy Adam-Smith, 1980.

⁴⁸ Byron, *All Among the Wool Boys*, pp. 10, 39-53; Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 242-3.

he believed that Irvine was sincere in his belief in communism, and anyway he could do no harm now, as union rules protected the AWU from any engagement in ‘undesirable activity’. Irvine had joined the AWU as a young man, he said, and was angry against the system but misguided, and this led him into the PWIU and the Communist Party. Allowing him back into the AWU was a ‘human issue’. He had mellowed with age and wanted to die in the union. Delegate Duncan seconded the motion, saying that he had known Irvine personally for six years, and been in close contact during the strike in 1956. It is hard to imagine how ‘softer’ AWU men could possibly be! There is no obvious explanation for Oliver’s rush of charity and forgiveness, because it was not his usual style.⁴⁹ Whatever it was, his colleagues did not buy into it and the motion to readmit Irvine was resoundingly defeated. The most intriguing element of this episode, however, is the sentimental attachment of Irvine himself to the AWU and its mateship myth. Possibly he thought 1956 had redeemed it, although Neil Byron did not think so.⁵⁰

Shearing Competitions

Feats of extraordinary speed and endurance in the large sheds of Queensland and western-NSW were as much a part of shearing legend as the rise of bush unions. The most legendary of all was Jack Howe’s tally of 321 (with blades) in a day at Alice Downs, near Blackall, in 1892. Howe’s was not the only remarkable performance. Newspapers (including *The Worker*) reported extraordinary shearing tallies from time to time, invariably accompanied by appropriate historical comparisons.⁵¹ In 1911 a shearing contest in Toowoomba, reportedly for prize money of £600, was organised by an entertainment promoter and drew a large crowd.⁵² Generally, however, ‘records’ were not created at formally organised contests, but emanated from the woolsheds. This tradition continued in the inter-war period, and the associated competitive individualism persisted. While mateship prospered in the afterglow of 1956, the times were also ripe for money-makers and cocky shearers who saw little point in quibbling with the graziers.

⁴⁹ Marilyn Dodkin, ‘Charlie Oliver: A Political Biography’, MA Thesis, University of Sydney, 1990.

⁵⁰ *The Worker*, 17/2/1960, p. 5.

⁵¹ *The Worker*, 4/1/1928, p. 20.

⁵² *The Worker*, 22/2/1911, p. 5.

The Toowoomba extravaganza of 1911 and the hype surrounding Jack Howe in large woolsheds are only loosely connected to modern competitive shearing. Stronger roots are traceable to farming rather than pastoral districts. In November 1934 Henry Salter won a Shearing Championship staged by the Pyramid Hill Agricultural Society in northern Victoria. It cost 5/- to enter and the first prize was £5 (subsidised by a prominent grazier). Whether this was ‘the first Shearing Championship ever organised in Australia’, is questionable, but evidence of anything earlier is hard to find.⁵³ By the late 1930s the farming towns of Victoria and the Riverina hosted a circuit of competitions. Arranged to liven up the local ‘show day’, they were not inherently gladiatorial, although they soon became intensely competitive.⁵⁴ In 1934 Salter was just a two-stand contractor from Kerang. He did not think of himself as a gun shearer at all, but having been persuaded to enter took it quite seriously.⁵⁵ As much to his surprise as anyone’s, he nudged ahead of the other 13 entrants. Subsequently competing in regional shearing competitions around Victoria and the Riverina in the late 1930’s, he was consistently successful.

Shearing competitions steadily became more serious and more organised. The first shearing contest held at the Royal Melbourne Show took place in 1946 (also won by Henry Salter). Newspapers reported that 2,000 people watched the event. Corporate sponsorship boosted the prize-money as competitions became a useful advertising vehicle in the increasingly complex nexus between agriculture and the merchandising of fuel, farm machinery, fertilisers, pesticides and rural finance. Financial support was also rendered by grazier interests who recognised an opportunity to modernise the status of shearers and to address the shearer shortage.⁵⁶ Their grandfathers had conspired long ago to back the MSU, and later formed the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company. This was a different approach to encouraging ‘better types’ into shearing. Ted Irvine was reputed to be a 300-a-day shearer and may well have done very well against Henry Salter.⁵⁷ But communists and fellow travellers were unlikely to demean themselves by performing as ‘show ponies’ at the Melbourne Show, for the sake of the prize-money the capitalists condescended to dangle.

⁵³ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, p. 28.

⁵⁴ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, pp. 29-31.

⁵⁵ See Chapter 5 for Salter’s early life and shearing contracting.

⁵⁶ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, pp. 33-6.

⁵⁷ SLV MS TMS 562, 563, Patsy Adam-Smith interview with Jack Nicholes, 1978.

The alliance between woolgrowers and commerce seemed likely to arouse the suspicions of the AWU. However, the union was initially supportive of a trend which, after all, genuinely lifted the status of shearers. On the competition platform they seemed to be genuine professionals with conspicuous skill and integrity, a far cry from the ruffians of repute, who drank and gambled and cursed. To this degree the objectives of the AWU and the graziers almost converged. The AWU did not want the Ted Irvines in the industry either. In the early-1950s the Victorian Branch showed little indication of disapproval. *The Worker* publicised main regional competitions and reported results.⁵⁸

The movement towards a national competition was strongly supported by Tom Dougherty, largely as a consequence of a dialogue that developed in *The Worker* following reports of a 'World Shearing Championship' in Chicago in the United States. It was incomprehensible to Dougherty that anyone but an Australian could claim such a title. Momentum built and it seemed likely that an international contest would be arranged. It was belatedly suggested that perhaps New Zealanders might also be invited. There were awkward problems in defining what sort of sheep should be used, and the rules. Not insignificantly, the equipment needed to be specified. The Americans rather naively suggested that wide combs all round would be fair, obviously unaware how sensitive this was in Australia.⁵⁹ Perhaps this was the reason the anticipated international 'shear-off' never took place. However, while the idea was still alive it was imperative, national prestige being at stake, that a credible mechanism for selecting the best Australian shearers be established. This was a distraction from the AWU's main concerns of combating militants and award applications, but it underpinned union support for the transformation of the annual event at the Melbourne Royal Show into an Australian Shearing Championship in 1953. Henry Salter was the inaugural title holder the runner up was a very youthful Kevin Saare. The winner's medallion was donated by the AWU.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *The Worker*, 12/8/1952, p. 1; 3/9/1952, p. 7; 12/8/1953, p. 1; 3/11/1954, p. 5; 18/9/1957, p. 1; 27/11/1957, p. 11.

⁵⁹ *The Worker*, 16/1/1952, p. 2; 13/8/1952, p. 4; 31/12/1952, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *The Worker*, 31/12/1952, p. 1; 7/10/1953, pp. 1, 8. See Chapter 5 for their backgrounds in northern Victoria.

AWU magnanimity did not last. In 1955 the union asserted direct control of shearing competitions via the Shearing Competition Federation of Australia (SCFA), a body entirely controlled by the Executive Council. All competitions would be subject to SCFA supervision. Competitors were compelled to join for a fee of 10/-, and were also required to be members of the AWU. The circle of control was closed by writing it into AWU rules that participation in unauthorised contests was forbidden. The SCFA approved the rules for competitions, emphasising points for quality rather than speed. The takeover had apparently been conceived in haste because the list of affiliated organisations was not quite ready. This consisted of the many local competitions held at Agricultural Shows and presumably some had yet to be ‘notified’ of the new arrangements. There was no legal basis for the manoeuvre and there appears to have been little consultation with interested parties. The union was able to get away with it because AWU membership was effectively an entry permit into the shearing workforce. Ostensibly the motivation was to ‘encourage active participation’ and to achieve ‘uniformity’ in the rules.⁶¹ The union, however, was reacting to its longstanding primeval fear of influences that blurred its mateship myth. A long history of unease about shearers’ individualism was also reflected in its suspicion of contracting, ownership of machines, broad gauge combs and cocky shearers. Interwar radicals despised them as much as the AWU, and also tugged it in this direction.

Competitions were held on Saturdays and Sundays, but AWU rules and the award both prohibited weekend shearing. Should entrants be paid award rates for the sheep they shored? If these concerns seem trivial, or perhaps absurd, the AWU mindset was constantly on guard against grazier trickery aimed at shearing on the cheap. There was method to this as there was genuine grassroots resentment, and in some cases hostility, to competitions. A variant of mateship denigrated championship shearers as show offs while ‘real’ shed shearers were unheralded. In the backblocks of Queensland shearers had little in common with Henry Salter or Kevin Saare. It was typical of the AWU that it did not seek to ban competitions but to control them. Outright prohibition would have alienated some members. The logic was twisted to portray the opportunity to enter competitions as a benefit of AWU membership. Critics of AWU control were despised ‘cocky sons’ who could no longer compete

⁶¹ *The Worker*, 7/9/1955, p. 11; 21/9/1955, p. 9.

because they were not members of the union. Bringing competitions under union control was a subterfuge to corral the beast of liberalism. Conference resolutions to close down competitions altogether were always defeated. Freer spirits were peeved at the dictatorship, but for the time being put up with the odium of AWU control.

Shearer Training

Learning to shear constitutes a lively opening chapter in most shearer biographies. Shearing tended to run in families, so sons learnt from their fathers. They also came from farming (but less often grazier) families where there were sheep to practice on. However, there was a difference between being competent enough to knock out 50 or 60 a day when the occasion required it on the home farm, and the 120 that was the minimum to hold a regular stand with a reputable contractor. ‘Barrowing’ was the established way for a young shed hand to get a feel for the handpiece, but the industry cried out for a more structured system of instruction, or possibly some form of apprenticeship. There was provision in the award for a proportion of stands to be allocated to ‘learners’, but it was often given only lip service. Contractors were unwilling to waste a stand on a slow shearer if they could get away with it. The AWU, conscious that it derived some of its power from the ‘shearer shortage’, was not unhappy with a system which made entry difficult.⁶²

By the late-1940s Henry Salter had achieved some renown throughout rural Victoria (he was unknown anywhere else). The State Electricity Commission invited him to conduct shearing demonstrations with an electric plant throughout the Mallee region to promote the new power network. It was handy income for Salter, who was paid £25 for each event, but he quickly detected the latent demand for shearing instruction.⁶³ Mallee farmers sent their sons and came along themselves for advice from an acknowledged master. Salter approached the Principal of Kerang High School as well as the local Agricultural Society. Graziers were co-opted to offer woolsheds and supply practice sheep.⁶⁴ By 1950 arrangements were in place for a formal nine-week course for which boys were charged £7/10/-. Training schools were eventually held in

⁶² The union consistently denied that there *was* a shortage.

⁶³ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, pp. 26-7.

⁶⁴ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, pp. 37-8.

up to 20 different places around Victoria. In the absence of any subsidy from either Government or woolgrowers (or the union), fees were inescapable.⁶⁵ When he retired from teaching in 1970, after 22 years, one report claimed that Salter had instructed 4,639 young men, of whom ‘over 1,100 still shear regularly’.⁶⁶ Ron Arnold, Salter’s rival two-stand plant contractor from Lockington had also won Championships at the Royal Melbourne Show on three occasions. He was the uncle of Kevin Saare, and also ran shearing classes at the Echuca Technical School from 1949, probably pre-dating Salter’s first formal course in Kerang.⁶⁷

As with competitions, shearing schools made the AWU apprehensive, although nothing definite happened until the Executive Council decided in 1966 that ‘it is against every principle of this Union for any person to pay any other person or organisation to be taught to shear sheep’. The stated concern was that attendees at schools should be paid ‘the rate provided in the Awards for learners’.⁶⁸ In April 1967 an AWU official upbraided the boys in a class at Sale for ‘breaking union rules’. Salter complained that he had never been consulted, and suggested that the AWU investigate to see how the classes were run. While AWU organisers privately expressed support, Salter was summoned to report to ‘Brahma’ Davis, the Victorian Secretary. Their positions were too polarised for any sensible compromise and harassment continued. Graziers who supplied sheep were threatened with having their properties declared ‘black’ and the 1967 school in Kerang was cancelled.⁶⁹ Salter limped on for a year or two, but without AWU approval the schools were becoming untenable. By the time he retired (in 1970 he was 63) the union had practically closed him down. The plant was purchased by Ross Hann, whose sons had been taught by Henry Salter, but after legal threats the operation was closed in 1975. So comprehensive was the strangulation that few remembered that the shearing schools ever existed.⁷⁰ Salter was still alive in 1987 when he was ‘struck dumb’ by news items claiming that ‘Australia’s first Shearing School [is] now being conducted at

⁶⁵ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, pp. 38-48.

⁶⁶ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, p. 54.

⁶⁷ O’Brien and Ross, *Pursuit of Excellence*, p. 10.

⁶⁸ The quotes are from *The Worker*, 24/8, 1966, article reproduced in facsimile form in Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, p. 49.

⁶⁹ *Kerang New Times*, 5/5/1967, article reproduced in facsimile form in Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, p. 50.

⁷⁰ Day, *Quick Go The Shears*, pp. 51-4.

Werribee'.⁷¹ The Victorian shearing schools were a flame which burned for two decades until AWU pressure snuffed it out. There had been other attempts to formalise shearer training in Australia, notably by Grazcos, but they too withered on the vine.

Kevin Saare and Tally-Hi

Shearing schools did not thrive but competitions did. Ron Arnold, had been giving Kevin Saare lessons since he was 11 and it was soon obvious that he was a brilliant shearer. His father envisaged him going to university, but the shearing plant intervened and he began working with the Arnold and Saare team in 1948, when he was 15. He made a living working with his father and uncle, but rapidly gained a reputation on the expanding competition circuits, often vying with the much older Henry Salter for the prize money. Saare exhibited few of the characteristics associated with mateship, often shearing alone when he worked as a contractor. From a very young age, had been intensely analytical about shearing technique and this was one of the reasons for his consistent success in competitions. He shore 327 (with machines) at Hopefield station near Pyramid Valley in Victoria in 1957, to become the formal holder of Jack Howe's 'world record'.⁷²

When, he went to New Zealand in 1961 as a member of the Australian team invited to the first Golden Shears Championship, this was a watershed. There was certain amount of excitement surrounding the national shearing championships he had competed in, but it paled compared to the frenzy that accompanied the Golden Shears. Saare came into contact with Godfrey Bowen, the inventor of the 'Bowen technique' which was said to have revolutionised shed shearing in New Zealand.⁷³ Bowen's methods were not necessarily appropriate for the body-type and wool of Australian merinos, so Saare was engaged by the Wool Board to lead an intensive investigation

⁷¹ Strictly speaking, the Victorian shearing schools of the 1950s were not the first either. The Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company had attempted to establish a formal shearing training system in the 1920s. Almost certainly there were others.

⁷² O'Brien and Ross, *Pursuit of Excellence*, pp. 8-28. It was not a 'world record' at all. This was already claimed by Godfrey Bowen of New Zealand for a tally of over 500. Such comparisons were virtually meaningless because of different types of sheep, different equipment, and different hours of work.

⁷³ O'Brien and Ross, *Pursuit of Excellence*, pp. 52-6.

into merino shearing. The ‘Tally-Hi’ shearing method was formally launched in 1964 and teams of instructors, including Saare, toured the nation to give demonstrations. Just how influential this was in increasing shearers’ tallies and the quality of shearing is impossible to judge accurately, but it was a concerted program conducted over several years. Arguably, its impact for shearers who adopted the technique was as profound as the influence of wide combs 20 years later.⁷⁴

As might be expected, there was debate about Tally-Hi within the AWU, but Tom Dougherty was reasonably supportive. Inevitably shed shearers were sceptical but there were many converts. Mateship culture could also be openly hostile despite the qualified support of the AWU. Saare was demonstrating the method in western Queensland and sensed the derision of a group of local ‘gun’ shearers. Unwisely thinking it would ease the tension, he challenged them to put up their fastest shearer. The crowd warmed to the idea and a shearer was pushed forward. The world champion easily proved superior but the humiliation of a local was not exactly welcome. The crowd insisted on putting up another shearer, who was duly defeated. Returning to his motel later in the evening, Saare had to take to his heels to avoid a bashing from thugs waiting to ‘teach him a lesson’.⁷⁵ The success of shearing competitions, the demand for shearing schools, the development and uptake of Tally-Hi, and the careers of Henry Salter and Kevin Saare, demonstrated a rich vein of self-improvement in shearing culture in the 1950s and ‘60s. Equally though, the more destructive side of mateship and its insider/outsider codes were impenetrable.

Australian Sheds in the 1960s

The cost-price squeeze and the annoying attitudes of shearers accentuated woolgrowers’ sense of victimisation. They scoffed at a campaign, to mention one example, to have woolsheds equipped with air-conditioning.⁷⁶ There was fault on both sides. As profits faltered woolsheds were locked in the past. Perhaps it was a little mischievous to expect sheds to be air-conditioned, but was it so unreasonable for the

⁷⁴ O’Brien and Ross, *Pursuit of Excellence*, pp. 57-62. Kevin Saare and his colleagues who developed the method spent two weeks coaching eight shearers in 1964, and claimed that their daily tallies had improved by 40 percent.

⁷⁵ O’Brien and Ross, *Pursuit of Excellence*, p. 61.

⁷⁶ *The Worker*, 10/3/1965, p. 9.

accommodation huts? It was a bit rich to have the idea ridiculed out of court when workers in city offices and retail shops increasingly enjoyed modern environmental comforts. Industrial and construction sites in Sydney had lunch rooms and shower facilities that made many shearers quarters appear medieval, despite a hundred years of agitation to improve standards. Sterling work had been done agitating for accommodation improvements during 'Big Bill' Wilson's time as the Secretary of the NSW Branch in the later 1940s. Despite these efforts conditions lagged society at large by quite a margin. In 1995, forty years after the 1950s wool boom, a television reporter, Janine Perrett, was presenting a piece on a new attempt at co-operation between the graziers and the AWU. She stood to camera in a shearing shed, arms extended, in a scene not in the least surprising to country folk. But to city people it was archaic. 'Look at this. It hasn't changed for a hundred years!'⁷⁷

Militants such as Ted Irvine who were very active in the decade preceding the 1956 strike, had faded from the scene by the late-1950s. In the absence of radicals inflaming the rank-and-file, the AWU thus had an opportunity to reshape its approach to the arbitration and grazier organisations, but it did not do so. It is true that between 1959 and about 1965 there was the constant irritation of Clyde Cameron's activities in the sheds surrounding Broken Hill. Cameron, had been a federal MP since 1949 but remained active in AWU affairs, was a constant critic of Tom Dougherty, and a stickler for encouraging the union to be forthright in its insistence on accommodation standards and prosecuting graziers for breaches of the award. Cameron was a dedicated supporter of the ban on wide combs, for example.⁷⁸ Arguably, however, the bigger danger to AWU control of shearing sheds, was the largely unnoticed undercurrent of money-making of which the increasingly successful shearing competitions and Salter's shearing schools were visible signs. Instead, it persisted with a strident, if not quite militant, form of advocacy.

The rise of 'suburban shearing' made the erosion of conditions self-reinforcing because shearers' huts fell into disuse. Amongst shearers there developed a new social division between 'expedition' and 'suburban' shearing. Those who still travelled to

⁷⁷ *Sunday* program, "Shearers' Last Stand", screened 26/3/1995, Channel 9 TV. Tape in possession of writer.

⁷⁸ Hearn and Knowles, *One Big Union*, pp. 263-8.

the far away sheds and used accommodation were more fanatical about mateship than those who lived at home and travelled 20 or 30 miles every day to whatever woolshed they were shearing at. Expedition shearers resented suburban shearers, as well as maintaining an undercurrent of disdain for graziers. In the heat and dust of the outback these attitudes consolidated. This was not so much militancy, but a rough-and-ready mateship ethic formed by a group sensing the world passing them by. There was an element that still revelled in the excitement of the 1956 strike, and even a few who remembered the strikes of 1930 and 1945. Those in the Kevin Saare mould were not nostalgic at all. By and large, though, they paid their union fees and kept quiet.

Graziers mostly saw hardcore unionism. This was not altogether fair. In fact, under Dougherty's reign the AWU consulted with industrial officers of the Graziers Association to curb disruptive elements. Cameron called it collaboration. For example, in the early-1960s the AWGC noticed that shearers were leaving sheds early. There was an 'entirety of contract' clause allowing employers to withhold wages, but the Victorian Branch was challenging contractors in the courts over the matter. As often happened, Ted Cole, industrial officer for the graziers, sought informal talks with Dougherty to clarify matters if not necessarily to resolve them. To Cole's utter amazement, Dougherty indicated that he completely agreed with the graziers' interpretation, and offered to protect them from gratuitous prosecutions. When the Victorian Branch went ahead with a claim against Grazcos, Cole rang Dougherty to see if he was as good as his word. Dougherty advised him to stand firm, and in a display of the dictatorial arrogance for which AWU leaders were renowned, the general Secretary surprised Ted Cole yet again: 'If it comes to a matter of prosecution, the Victorian Branch will refer that to me at head office and you can take my assurance, you will never hear any more about it.'⁷⁹

Given Dougherty's reputation for Machiavellian intrigue, such high-handed control was a mixed blessing. Deals were not always honoured. The union's central purpose was a ruthless pursuit of mass membership. While in the formal sense AWU 'preference' did not apply in NSW, in practice it was almost impossible to shear

⁷⁹ This episode is described in more detail by Tsokhas, 'The Shearing Labour Process in the 1960s', p. 42. The quote is reproduced from Tsokhas, who gives the reference as ABL E266/50, p. 136.

without a union ticket.⁸⁰ Graziers in pastoral districts had little concern about this. As far as Grazcos was concerned, it made for a more orderly industry if shearers were bound by the award. Most farmers accepted as a ‘fact of life’ that shearers needed representation in the arbitration court. However, there were also pockets of entrenched anti-unionism. In districts where shearing was done by farmers’ sons, it was anathema to be coerced into union membership. The strangulation of Salter’s quite harmless shearing schools was the kind of AWU action that inflamed these passions. It took an episode in one of the most out-of-the way places to bring it to national attention.⁸¹

In the early 1970s Kangaroo Island was a community of mostly post-World War II soldier settlers. Most were comfortably prosperous, but were certainly not ‘wealthy squatters’ as AWU propaganda made them out to be. Perched in the colder southern ocean, shearing time was November or December and it was unheard of to ‘import’ shearers from the mainland. What was called ‘bother with the union’ arose at one of the sheds in 1970 when a visiting AWU official, Jim Dunford, failed to persuade two shearers to join the AWU. A scuffle developed. Dunford was thrown out and told he would be ‘tarred and feathered’ if he returned.⁸² The AWU ‘black banned’ the property, preventing all goods from leaving or arriving. After an eight week siege the shearers relented and joined the AWU, but obviously under considerable sufferance. The community was seething.

By the next season, Dunford was Secretary of the South Australian Branch, and seemed intent on making an example of the backwoods cockies. The farce was repeated at Brian Woolley’s shed in November 1971. Woolley’s said that he had no objection to shearers joining the union, but it was entirely up to them. The AWU ‘offered’ to send union shearers from the mainland, but to Woolley and the Islanders this was outrageous. A ‘black ban’ was imposed on Woolley’s property, but the

⁸⁰ Nicholls Truelove, ‘A Manpower Study of the Shearing Industry’, M. Econ Thesis, University of New England, 1975, pp. 162-3.

⁸¹ Unless otherwise indicated sources for the Kangaroo Island affair are: Bill Kelly, ‘The History of the Black Ban applied to Farmers on Kangaroo Island in 1972’, The Proceedings of a Conference of the H.R. Nicholls Society at The Terrace Adelaide Hotel 20th - 22nd September 1991, downloaded from H. R. Nicholls website; Trudi Plaschke, ‘The Woolley Wool Ban’, c 2003 (written by Brian Woolley’s granddaughter, copy in possession of writer).

⁸² Clyde Cameron, *Unions in Crisis*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1982, p. 329.

Kangaroo Islanders had had enough. Community funding enabled Woolley to challenge the ban in the South Australian Supreme Court. Legally it hinged on a technicality of tort law rather than any rights of union preference. The case dragged on to May 1972 and did not provide a clear cut resolution. The Judge instructed the parties to attempt an amicable settlement, but this proved impossible and the rift deepened. At one stage union ‘black bans’ were imposed on the whole Island because of their professed ‘anti-union attitudes’. By now the matter was attracting national publicity and in country districts, especially, it fanned the flames of anti-unionism. For its part the union showed little sign that it might temper its approach. This is only amplified by Clyde Cameron’s gratuitous portrayal of Dunstan as the martyr in the affair due to ‘smart-alec lawyers’ engaged by the farmers.⁸³ Dunford justified refusing to pay fines on the grounds that ‘there would be more to follow and we would not be able to put a ban on anywhere’. He added, ‘I prefer to go to goal rather than pay these farmers a penny’.⁸⁴ The South Australian Labor Government of Don Dunstan eventually footed the bill.

The AWU attempt to describe its stance as sticking up for the underdog was a public relations disaster. The Kangaroo Island affair exposed the AWU’s bullying style at a time when public opinion was becoming less tolerant of unions. Seldom did it get much publicity, but obstructive AWU procedure in woolsheds was routinely part of rural experience. Jim Clune was a young Western Australian presser in the 1960s used to the non-union culture of the wheat belt. He expressed his first experience at a union shed thus:

We had to buy a union ticket. One of the shearers was a very strict unionist; I think he’d come from the Eastern States. We had to have a meeting for this and a meeting for that, a vote on this and a vote on that. That was an eye-opener, especially coming from cocky sheds.⁸⁵

Union rules precluded the ‘give and take’ that rural society felt made woolsheds harmonious. If there was a bit of dew the shearers would vote the sheep wet, and you could never be sure when they would agree to start. If there were only a handful of sheep left at the bell, it was against union rules to put in an extra hour for the sake of cutting them out. On the other hand, if there was the slightest fault with the machinery, or if the clock in the woolshed was not set correctly, they would hold a

⁸³ Cameron, *Unions in Crisis*, p. 334.

⁸⁴ Cameron, *Unions in Crisis*, p. 329.

⁸⁵ Hobson, *Across the Board*, pp. 65-6.

'meeting' or ring the AWU office for advice. All this was justified on the grounds that if standards were not enforced they were on the slippery slope to the 'bad old days' of squatter exploitation. Mrs. Lorraine Fysh, a grazier from Muttaborra, recalled tense dealings with shearers in Queensland in the 1950s.

I can tell you there was very little love lost between the graziers and the shearers. They probably regarded us as arrogant and we certainly regarded them, to a certain extent, as troublemakers who were not too keen on work.⁸⁶

The post-1956 polarisation was damaging in the long run because the union was slow to grasp the significance of changing social norms amid the climate of general prosperity that lasted through the 1960s.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ EVASI Inquiry Hansard, p. 1377.

⁸⁷ For contemporary treatments of the wool crisis see: Ronald Anderson *On The Sheep's Back*, Rigby, 1966; Ronald Anderson *Crisis on the Land*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1972; Peter Robinson, *The Crisis in Australian Capitalism*, VCTA Publishing with The National Times, Melbourne, 1978; Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *The Australian Sheep Industry Survey 1970-71 to 1972-73*, Australian Government Publishing Services, Canberra, 1976; Owen Thomson, *The Wool Crisis: A National Survey of the Australian Wool Industry*, Australia News House, Sydney, 1971; *The Land*: 9/4/1970, p. 3; 16/4/1970, pp. 3-11.

SECTION IV

The Regulated Economy under Siege

Chapter 9: Money-Making Oases: Western Australia and New Zealand

Western Pioneers

In faraway Western Australia sheep numbers did not exceed 10 million until 1950. Sheep grazed in selected patches, vast in their own right but covering less than a quarter of the territory (see Map 2-1 in Chapter 2). Geographical separation from the east generated its own peculiarities. Queensland shearers were an important presence in the west early in the twentieth century, but as time wore on habits tended to be more home grown. Western Australia bore the mantle of its isolation and different history of land settlement. In the early twentieth century farmers took up blocks east of Perth in what became known as ‘the Wheat Belt’ without having to displace squatters. As a pastoral and agricultural frontier it lacked the squatter-selector polarisation that drove passions in the east. Rural battlers in the west fought the elements and the banks as their counterparts in eastern Australia did, but the government was an unambiguous ally.¹ The pioneer legend was accordingly less jumbled with elements which also fitted nomad tradition. Shearers from this social environment reflected similar traits.

Two distinct sheep populations could be identified in 1926, when the AWU lodged a claim to bring Western Australia under the Federal Pastoral Award for the first time.² The pastoral region scattered to the north and west of the Great Sandy Desert, miles and miles to the north of Perth carried about 2.5 million sheep by World War I. This

¹ Sean Glynn, *Government Policy and Agricultural Development: A study in the role of government in the development of the Western Australian Wheatbelt 1900-1930*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands WA, 1975; J.P. Gabbedy, *Group Settlement*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands WA, 1988; George L. Sutton, *Comes the Harvest: Half a century of Agricultural Progress in Western Australia 1900-1949*, Periodicals Division of Western Australian Newspapers Ltd for the Western Australian Historical Society, Perth, 1952; Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Conference of Producers*, Perth, 1898; Leopold Zunini (edited and translated by Margot Melia and Richard Bosworth), *Western Australia as it is Today – 1906*, University of Western Australia Press and the Charles and Joy Staples South West region Publications Fund, Nedlands WA, 1997.

² The transcript provides a useful picture of the Western Australian shearing industry in the mid-1920s. NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926. Shearers’ memoirs and oral histories also illuminate a distinctive picture. Don Munday, *Tin Dog, Damper and Dust: A Shearers Life*, with an introduction by Charlie Fox, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1991; Jim Carson, *Battling Around*, St George Books, Perth, 1983. Christopher Fyfe, ‘Shearing in the Pastoral Country’, *Early Days*, 1996, pp. 223-40; Valerie Hobson, *Across The Board: Stories of Western Australian shearing as told by the people who worked the sheds*, Back Track Books, Guildford, WA, 2003.

grew steadily to about 5 million by the 1930s.³ The Wheat Belt was starkly different. It carried roughly the same number of sheep – around 3 million in the mid-1920s – but these were in small flocks on cropping farms rather than vast acreages. The Wheat Belt fanned out from Perth for two or three hundred miles before it got too dry to contemplate farming or grazing at all. Its northern edge adjoined the southern perimeter the pastoral country. The north did not breed its own white shearers, and initially relied on local Aborigines before unionised white bushworkers took over. Over time the pastoral zone depended heavily on the farmers of the Wheat Belt or their sons. There were some parallels, therefore, to the eastern States where shearers came from farming areas into western-NSW and Queensland, but in the west the pattern was sharper.

A huge part of the State lay to the south of the Wheat Belt but this did not become important in the wool industry until after World War II. The historical complication is that by the 1960s it dominated everything else. Earlier endeavours to clear forest in the south-west corner for agriculture were disappointing as were attempts to farm sandy plains north of Esperance on the far southern coast.⁴ Eventually, though, scientists solved the problems inhibiting agriculture in the region.⁵ Between 1955 and 1975 sheep numbers in Western Australia trebled to over 30 million. There was a chronic shortage of shearers for these rapidly multiplying flocks. In other circumstances militant unionism might have emerged. But shearing culture had roots in the Wheat Belt where bushworker legend did not fit the remembered facts very neatly.

Pastoral North in the 1920s

The first sheep stations on the De Grey River were established in the 1860s, but there was little relevant history before 1890.⁶ There was a smattering of stations in the

³ Sutton, *Comes the Harvest*, p. 6.

⁴ Gabbedy, *Group Settlement*; Alan G. Brunger and John Selwood, 'Settlement and Land Alienation in Western Australia: the Shire of Denmark', *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1997, pp. 478-95.

⁵ Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *The Economics of Land Development on the Esperance Sand Plain Western Australia*, Wool Economic Research report No. 17, 1970; Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *New Land Farms in Western Australia*, Wool Economics Research Report No. 26, 1975.

⁶ Fyfe, 'Shearing in the Pastoral Country', p. 223.

Kimberly and around Port Hedland before World War I, and parts further south.⁷ The Ashburton, Gascoyne and Murchison River areas developed into a more consistent but spread-out grazing zone in the 1920s. The Kimberly stations were spacious, each carrying 50 to 100,000 sheep, separated from the rest of the pastoral north by the desert which reaches out to the coast between Port Hedland and Broome. ‘The Gascoyne’ and ‘the Murchison’ sit between the western edge of the desert and the vast arc of coastline from Geraldton to Port Hedland, and flocks were not quite as large, mostly between 20 and 40,000 sheep. For example, George Gooch, a leading light in the Pastoralists’ and Graziers’ Association (PGA), ran two properties in the Gascoyne within a radius of about 100 miles from Carnarvon in 1926, and these were reasonably typical. Wandagee covered a huge area of 454,000 acres and carried 24,000 sheep. Manberry was 211,000 acres for 18,000 sheep. Gooch had taken up these leases around 1915.⁸ Angus Campbell was a grazier on Billabalong station near Mullewa in the Murchison. It was 500,000 acres for 30,000 sheep.⁹

Early station shearing was dominated by Aborigines until machines and unionism combined to drive them out.¹⁰ A Western Australian Branch of the AWU was first formed in 1908. This arose out of a prosecution of shearers for refusing the shear wet sheep. Without a union such cases were seldom contested, but L.T. Brown happened to meet up with two of the shearers in western-NSW and persuaded them to fight it. Local Kimberly solicitors refused to upset pastoralists by representing them, but this energised Brown to convene a meeting in Perth. Fifteen attended, and this became the nucleus of an AWU Branch. Within a year there were 600 members, a small but useful base. The first delegates attended the AWU Conference in 1909.¹¹ One of the first resolutions from the Western Branch aimed to end ‘the system of indenture of blacks to the pastoralists’, but this was not country where white labour was readily available. The branch enrolled white cooks whenever it could but ‘in the West

⁷ Carter, Tom (extracts from diaries) *No Sundays in the Bush: An English Jackeroo in Western Australia 1887-1889*, Lothian Publishing Company, Melbourne, 1987. There are a number of interesting photographs which probably date from the period around World War I.

⁸ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, p. 823. Gooch’s history in the pastoral north went back at least to the late-1880s. Tom Carter worked for him on Wangadee in 1888. There is a considerable amount of detail of Gooch’s operation and the Carnarvon district in the Carter diaries, including an undated photograph of Gooch (at a mature age). Carter, *No Sundays*, pp. 72-129.

⁹ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, p. 903.

¹⁰ Fyfe, ‘Shearing in the Pastoral Country’, p. 225.

¹¹ *The Worker*, 6/1/1909, p. 2; Carter, *No Sundays*, pp. 30, 34-5, 93.

Chinese [do] nearly all the cooking', Brown explained.¹² The problems of running a union with Queensland-style discipline were indeed formidable. Communications were diabolical. While the 1909 conference was in progress Brown received wires from Perth where the office was in turn trying to communicate with shearers in the Kimberly about what rates to demand. Shearers on the spot were split, a group of them considering it 'inadvisable' to demand union rates as pastoralists were making arrangements to shear with blacks.¹³

By the end of World War I there were few blacks left in northern woolsheds. This came about through a combination of AWU pressure for 'union rates' (which in effect meant that station owners were no longer willing to employ Aborigines as shearers) and the desire to introduce machine shearing which was facilitated by contractors.¹⁴ Perth based contractors had taken total control by about the end of World War I and the AWU ensured that unionised white shearers filled the stands. They came from Perth, and quite a few from the eastern States, especially Queensland.¹⁵ Queensland shearers in the west were likely to be more interested in unionism and sometimes they were disliked, perhaps because of this, but also because they boasted about Queensland. Some were veterans of the 1890s and they did inculcate pastoral sheds with elements of the bush union ethos. From the 1920s on shearers increasingly came from the Wheat Belt.

Remoteness and the extreme difficulty of transport, paradoxically, led to a very cohesive, efficient contracting system. The logistics of moving to the early sheds as well as from shed to shed were entirely in contractors' hands rather than individual pastoral workers. This could not have been established before motorised transport. While parts of the Murchison could be reached on the rail network it was more usual to travel by boat to Geraldton, Canarvon, Karratha, Port Hedland or Derby, and thence inland on the back of a contractor's truck. The two biggest operators in the 1920s were the Pastoral Labour Bureau (PLB) and Synnot and Dunbar.¹⁶ They sea-freighted trucks to Derby for the Kimberly sheds. Once the shearing team was

¹² *The Worker*, 3/2/1909, p. 5.

¹³ *The Worker*, 17/2/1909, p. 3.

¹⁴ Fyfe, 'Shearing in the Pastoral Country', p. 225.

¹⁵ Western Australia for a time was a refuge for shearers who had been blacklisted as a result of their activities in the 1890s.

¹⁶ Fyfe, 'Shearing in the Pastoral Country', p. 226.

assembled – usually eight shearers and about 20 men altogether - it stayed together as it rumbled southwards. Photographs of a contractor’s truck with up to 20 pastoral workers occupying seats mounted on the deck, or alternatively manning a rope to pull it through a river are quintessential scenes from the Western Australian runs.¹⁷ As in Queensland the hot dry climate facilitated virtually year round shearing (apart from the wet season in the tropical north).

Station shearing persisted in the 1920s on some of the Gascoyne and Murchison stations. George Gooch described how this worked in his area. A co-operative rotation was worked out with five or six neighbours. They tried to get the same shearers year after year and Gooch usually confirmed arrangements months in advance while he was in Perth on business.¹⁸ The graziers hired trucks to meet the shearers in Carnarvon for the run of sheds. In most respects, these private arrangements were mimicking what the contractors did. As in eastern Australia there was an outbreak of militancy between 1916 and 1923. A major strike in 1916 resembled the Queensland strike of the same year. As in Queensland there were signs of IWW involvement – and the AWU certainly tried to prevent the strike. Graziers on the Gascoyne and the Murchison were unprepared, as were their counterparts in Queensland, and were forced to come to terms. There was another strike in 1921, for which the PGA had a more effective response. At this time there was no arbitration award in Western Australia, and the strike was due to failed conferences between the AWU and the graziers, complicated by the activities of militants.¹⁹ Almost certainly this was the main impetus for the formation of the PLB in 1923. This was a grazier owned co-operative modelled on the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company in eastern Australia. After it was established the PLB rapidly expanded to cover just over half the sheep in the pastoral area, because it was filling another recognised need.²⁰ By comparison the Graziers Co-operative Shearing Company never exceeded about 10 percent of sheep in NSW. PLB sheds tended to be the smaller and more isolated ones,

¹⁷ Fyfe, ‘Shearing in the Pastoral Country’, p. 224.

¹⁸ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, p. 849. Arranging shearers was not Gooch’s only reason to visit Perth from time to time. He would have needed to consult his bank, his accountants, his wool broker, and attend meetings of the PGA. Perhaps he had other investments.

¹⁹ Details of these strikes are not widely known. Unpublished research by Glen McLaren has been of great assistance.

²⁰ Harry Doyle’s evidence to the Arbitration Court in 1926 was comprehensive. NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, pp. 926-76. He also gave evidence in 1927.

which private contractors and their gun shearers avoided. Set up as a service for PGA members, PLB was not able to refuse these sheds. As a result its shearing teams were more often 'average' 100-a-day men.²¹ A cost-plus pricing formula meant that PLB was not out of pocket.

Contractors' expeditions had a touch of the military about their organisation. Shearers travelled as a group on the contractor's truck and according to the contractor's timetable. Synnot and Dunbar rationed beer to two bottles per day. The longstanding manager of the PLB, Harry Doyle, was one of the better known and liked characters in the northern pastoral zone, but he kept order in the manner of a benign dictator. Teams stayed together as they worked their way from the Kimberly to the Murchison. The temperature was often unbearably hot during the day (although on the Gascoyne and Murchison it could also be fiercely cold at night). Travelling involved long journeys on extremely rough roads, but there was a strong sense of purpose and camaraderie in these gangs. Mateship was arguably stronger than it was around the campfires of eastern bushworker legend, and there was no 'suburban shearing' to undermine it after World War II. There were barely three million sheep in the whole of the northern pastoral zone in the 1920s and these were handled by about a dozen shearing contractors, and perhaps 300 shearers. As well as the tight cohesion of the travelling groups, shearers often assembled in the pubs of Carnarvon or Port Hedland as they were travelling north, or in known 'shearers' pubs' in Perth between expeditions.

Despite the hardships, these were probably the most lucrative runs for professional shearers in Australia, lasting up to 10 months. The sheep were also good from a shearers point of view – less so the graziers – because they were small with light fleeces.²² Woolsheds had fewer stands for the same number of sheep than in the east, where squatters disliked shearing dragging on for months. Noonkanbah in the Kimberly was probably the largest shed in the north with 20 stands, but there were 100,000 sheep to shear – 5,000 per man. It was more usual for woolsheds to only have eight stands (for 40-50,000). In the west 4 to 6,000 per man was the rule rather than

²¹ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, p. 1090.

²² Fyfe, 'Shearing in the Pastoral Country', pp. 229-30.

the exception. In the east 2,000 per man was considered a good shed.²³ Gun shearers were able to mass impressive tallies, and if shearing rates bore a rough relationship to award rates in eastern Australia it was ideal for money-making. Patrick Molloy's runs with contractors Gosden and McGinnity in 1924, and with Doyle's PLB in 1925, illustrate these points.²⁴ Private contractors were fussy about getting top shearers, but the PLB provided employment for average shearers provided they were competent. In a rhetorical flourish during the 1926 arbitration hearings J.W. Allen pointed out to Justice Powers that shearers were attracted from the east to Western Australia, 'which is regarded by shearers as the Shearers' Paradise'. This grated with Ted Grayndler who quickly interjected, 'Queensland is the Shearers' Paradise!'²⁵ They were of course interpreting the known facts differently. Grayndler was thinking of the generous Queensland State Award, which from Allen's perspective made it a nightmare rather than a paradise. Nevertheless, his characterisation was not far wide of the mark. It had a lot of inconveniences for a family man, but it was an excellent cash generator for wheat cockies during the Depression. It was a life that free spirits loved, and an opportunity for younger men to save money for deposits on farms in the Wheat Belt.

Shearers of the Wheat Belt

The small sheds of the wheat belt painted a very different picture.²⁶ The rail network linking it to Perth was comprehensive and its social environment entirely shaped by rural towns surrounded by small land holdings. Wheat cropping was the first priority of farmers and new settlers focused on clearing enough ground to sow grain. As they could afford it they bought a few sheep. Wool provided a little additional income, but the main purpose of sheep was to clean up wheat stubble, to occupy land not yet sufficiently cleared for cropping, and to fertilise before the plough. Flocks contained as few as 200 or 300 sheep. As farmers became more established they expanded the wheat acreage, but the flocks also got larger. W.L. Sanderson, representing the PGA

²³ A shed in Queensland comparable to Noonkanbah was more likely to have 40 stands than 20.

²⁴ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, pp. 695-703. Molloy's average daily tally over five months in 1925 was about 100, but he shored more than 12,000 sheep. Faster shearers earned big money.

²⁵ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, p. 1215.

²⁶ Apart from the 1926 Transcript, additional material on Wheat Belt shearing in the 1920s is from Munday, *Tin Dog*.

in the 1926 arbitration case, quoted 1925 statistics of 5,812 flocks in the wheat belt with between 1,000 and 2,000 sheep. Wheat Belt farmers strongly objected to the AWU's attempt to cite them as respondents in the award claim. The Court agreed to hear evidence from an advocate appointed by them to explain their circumstances.²⁷

Shearing was often done without hiring shearers at all. Co-operative arrangements between neighbours, or the engagement of local labour accounted for virtually all the activity. Boys who grew up on farms usually left school when they were 13 or 14 and earned wages from the various farming jobs that turned with the seasons, and those associated with breaking in new blocks. Land clearing, tank sinking, fencing, wheat sowing and harvesting were the staple tasks. Farmers were short of cash, but loans from the Agricultural Bank financed much of the development work. One of the annual jobs was shearing and most country lads had a go at it. Even flocks of 1,000-plus were often shorn co-operatively, although more likely to be shorn for wages. Sanderson explained it in the following terms.

A man may be working in the district as an ordinary farm hand, and at shearing time there is a certain amount of shearing to be done. And he naturally does that work in order to make more money, and then he goes back to his ordinary work. He may be only a week or a fortnight on shearing work, but he still gets high rates of pay.²⁸

Shearing rates in the Wheat Belt bore only a loose parallel to awards (remembering that no award applied in the west before 1926), but this did not mean pay was low. In spite of the generally cash-strapped status of wheat farmers in the 1920s, the accepted rate for shearing was £2 a hundred.²⁹ Accommodation, however, was primitive if it existed at all, and sheds were makeshift. On the other hand cockie shearers were well fed and ate at the farmer's table. This was all hand shearing. Machines were non-existent in the Wheat Belt before the arrival of two-stand plants. It was possible for young wheat belt men, including some who had blocks of their own but sought farm work for cash income, to be reasonably fully employed in this fashion.

Those attracted to shearing, though, looked to the long contracting runs of the pastoral north. Not any shearer could get a stand in these gangs, but contractors were prepared

²⁷ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, pp. 76-77.

²⁸ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, p. 76.

²⁹ NAA B1958/10 Box 2, Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, p. 37; Munday, *Tin Dog*, pp. 45-9, 95. The Pastoral Award was set at 40/- in 1926 and raised to 41/- in 1927. But since 1923 it had been 38/-. That was about when Munday began shearing in the Wheat Belt. How accurate is memory was may be questioned but he claimed that £2 a hundred was obtainable in the 1930s after the Award was slashed.

to give sons of wheat farmers the benefit of the doubt. It was common to begin as rouseabouts, and learn by observation. Don Munday got his first stand on one of Frank Lund's teams in the Murchison in 1925. Munday was 22 and had been shearing with blades around Yealering since he was 14, but had never before actually seen shearing machines. Lund was fussy about shearers, but this did not bother him.³⁰ Another option was to invest in a two-stand plant and shear in the Wheat Belt. Two-man contracting teams with their own plants were common by the late-1920s. It was a world with a lot of similarities to Henry Salter's in Victoria. Like Salter the small scale contractors bought electric plants as they became more confident. But the Western Australian Wheat Belt was more geographically self-contained than agricultural Kerang. While it was possible to venture into the Murchison, in much the same way that Salter spread into the more pastoral Riverina, the PLB, Synnot and Dunbar, and the other bigger contractors kept a reasonable stranglehold on the southern perimeter of their long northern runs. It was often better for a Wheat Belt shearer to join one of these gangs rather than contemplate self-employment.

The shearers of the west exhibit interesting similarities and differences from their eastern counterparts. Methods and technology of shearing, woolshed custom, and group mateship were the same. The presence of Aborigines was a difference as was the timing of significant developments. Machine shearing was introduced much later and there was no conflict amongst white shearers over it. Machines in the east were, initially, expected to undermine militants but there were few militants in the west to worry about. They were instrumental in the displacement of Aboriginal shearers which the AWU recognised as very convenient, although from the sheep owners' perspective this was secondary to its central purpose of shearing efficiency. There was no woolshed conflict on the scale and intensity of the famous 1890s conflagrations. Yet eastern history was brought into western sheds by drifters from Queensland, and the AWU successfully put down roots around 1909 largely as a result. There was less conflict between contractors and the AWU. Contractors and a small army of gun shearers were able to rip through the sheep on long runs while they both raked in the money. There was no parallel to the Queensland situation of the 1920s, in which in shearers from the 'south' meant unemployment for local shearers. In effect, there

³⁰ Munday, *Tin Dog*, p. 61.

were no 'local' shearers. If anything, mateship reinforced the pioneer ethic as gun shearers and contractors bonded on eight month expeditions. In the Wheat Belt, the AWU had some presence, but there was not a history of large landowners on which to build a stronger sense of class grievance.

Militancy, though, was not completely absent. Significant strikes took place in 1916, 1921 and 1930, but in between times niggling confrontation of the kind that was common in eastern Australia was largely absent.³¹ This is despite clear signs of class distinction between graziers and Wheat Belt shearers. While there were cases where inter-personal relationships were perfectly amicable, there is enough comment from shearers about the arrogance of pastoralists (as in the east they were invariably referred to as 'squatters') to suggest that social disparities were keenly felt. A glaring example of this was experienced by Don Munday on the Murchison in 1930. Munday had a significant farm in partnership with his brother at Hyden, and they were keeping it going with cash from the shearing runs.

The owner, Bert Lukin, was a proper squatter snob. He somehow found out I had a farm and came out with one or two snide remarks about cockies.³²

This was no more than verbal jousting until 400 15-month-old-rams were presented for shearing.³³ The union rule was that rams earned double rates but Lukin said they were not worth it and he would not pay. The shearers were all farmers, it was the Depression and they agreed to shear them at ordinary flock rates, including Munday. However, while they were working Lukin could not resist another jibe at the lowly wheat cockies. He blurted out that he had heard on the '12 o'clock news' that 'wheat prices have taken another nosedive' adding, 'you'll have to shear a lot of squatters' sheep now to keep your old farm solvent'. Munday admitted that this 'well and truly got on my goat' and he told Lukin that the deal on the rams was off. The other shearers refused to shear them also – a demonstration of mateship - although Munday explained that he would hold no grudge if they did. The result was that Lukin had to draft off the rams for his station hands to shear with blades after the contractor had gone. Munday's own account rings true.

³¹ Shearing shed tension of the kind related by 'the green jackaroo', as described in Chapter 7, was not typical of the west.

³² Munday, *Tin Dog*, p. 90.

³³ It was due to mismanagement of the tailing muster. Normally unwanted male lambs would be sold long before. These 'mickeys' were not fully grown and no more difficult to shear than other sheep. Technically, according to the Award, they should be paid double.

I suppose I should have kept my mouth shut, and under ordinary circumstances I would have, but over the previous three or four days I'd had a gutful of Lukin's jibes about cockies and grabbed the chance to knock him down a peg or two and show him up in front of the whole team, including some of his own station hands.³⁴

Shearers could still be sensitive about this in the 1950s. Harold Christensen had grown up on a sheep station in the Murchison in the 1940s.

When wool did boom, those same people who had been controlled by stock firms became wool barons overnight. As well as the price change, their attitude changed. It was amazing. They became 'the chosen race'.³⁵

These attitudes and the presence of Queenslanders ensured that sheds in the pastoral zone were unionised, but their remoteness and the overall cohesion of the contracting system meant that it was harder for PWIU methods to penetrate.

The 1930 Strike

There was another prolonged and at times nasty strike in 1930. Don Munday was shearing with a contractor in the Murchison at the time. He had anticipated the cut in shearing rates, but when it was announced thought it rather severe. However, in his mind there was no need to strike over the matter.

The shearers lost badly, and the price came down to 26/6 a 100. It was a big drop but still good money at the time, when there was practically no wages to be had at all.³⁶

Equally, he was not likely to 'scab' and Vic Johnson in the Perth AWU office was cabled for advice. They were initially told to 'carry on' but some days later it changed to 'all shearers pulling out'. This was June and Munday had been shearing since April so he had some cash, although the position at home was grim. He weathered the strike by going back to Yealering and saw no contradiction in doing shearing while he was there.³⁷ As soon as he heard the strike was over he telegraphed the PLB and got an immediate reply that there was a pen waiting. Munday 'couldn't get down to Perth quickly enough', where Harry Doyle had booked him onto a plane for the cost of £15/10/- to get him up to the North West Cape, to get started on the backlog caused by the strike.³⁸

³⁴ Munday, *Tin Dog, Damper*, p. 91.

³⁵ Hobson, *Across The Board*, p. 49.

³⁶ Munday, *Tin Dog*, p. 91.

³⁷ He seemed confident of getting £2 a hundred although whether farmers were still paying this must be doubtful. In any case he did not agonise over whether or not it would be 'scabbing'.

³⁸ It is not quite clear from the account whether Munday or the PLB paid the fare, but it was probably PLB. In any case it was a substantial amount – almost 1,200 sheep at the reduced shearing award, or 7-9 days work for a shearer of Munday's ability.

When he landed at Carnarvon, Munday was met by one of the owners and they were quickly on first name terms. There was none of the squatter condescension that was sometimes experienced. Munday noted this himself, but he soon worked out why when he met the other shearers: ‘Christ, what a motley mob lined up on the board next morning. All of them were scabs and not one of them went by his right name.’ Nonetheless, he was unperturbed by the fact that the station had been shearing during the strike and Doyle was replacing the incompetent Depression unemployed with genuine shearers as fast as he could. A PWIU man would have declared the station ‘black’, or at the very least notified the union office. Rather, Munday sniffed at the ‘bit of a clique’ who resented him ‘butting in on their shed’. He spent the evenings with ‘old Harry who was a damned nice chap’. They played cards and drank whisky. Munday avoided going into Carnarvon where strikers and scabs were still fighting in the pubs. He had no sympathy with ‘the hard-core unionists’ who could not accept that the strike was over. Despite his low opinion of the shearers in his own shed, he had some sympathy with the ‘poor cows’ the unionists were attacking. They were ‘dead broke and flat-out to get a job away from the depression-hit city’. He seemed to regard the pastoral zone and the Wheat Belt as mutually exclusive zones. When he was in the latter he behaved as a farmer rather than a unionist. But even when he was a unionist he was not a grassroots activist. He simply contacted the office for guidance.

The strike lasted for two months and was at times very violent. Harry Doyle’s PLB did go to a lot of trouble to keep shearing with scabs and this provoked confrontation. On one occasion PLB was transporting 35 men to a shed ‘in various cars and trucks’ when Doyle got word (how he did not say) that they had been intercepted by strikers and given an ultimatum to join the strike camp ‘or be dealt with’. Somehow Doyle organised a party of graziers and ‘pastoral workers of the Carnarvon district’ to rescue his team from their kidnappers. He also informed the police. The two lots of vigilantes clashed at 3am on the road 175 miles out of Carnarvon. Details of the ‘stunt’ are sanitised, but Doyle succeeded in rescuing his shearing team.³⁹ Strike tactics have the mark of the PWIU, but there is no evidence of continuing PWIU activity in Western Australia in the later 1930s or during World War II. Wheat Belt shearers like Don

³⁹ Doyle’s description of ‘stunts’ are quoted in unpublished research of Glen McLaren. He cites a PLB report dated 9/12/1930, p.1, held in the PGA Archives.

Munday were not the only influence but were becoming the main force in the pastoral districts. In 1956 there was hardly any disruption to shearing at all in Western Australia.⁴⁰

Expansion of Wheat-Sheep Farming

Agricultural development of the sand plains north of Esperance had been tried but was unsuccessful. There had been a brief period of prosperity when Esperance was a supply centre for the Western Australian gold fields in the 1890s, before the railway from Perth to Kalgoorlie was completed in 1897. Jim Carson took up 5,000 acres at Grass Patch in 1923 but walked off after 10 months – he was only 22 at the time and wrote it off to experience. The Government was putting a railway through to Esperance from Kalgoorlie, and neighbouring blocks had all been taken up by land speculators, hoping to cash in when the region boomed. None of these blocks were ever occupied. Carson was one of those who learned the hard way that the country would not support sheep (it was not known at that stage why), and it was poor country for wheat.⁴¹ The Western Australian Department of Agriculture established the Esperance Downs Research Station in 1949, where scientists eventually identified a phosphorus deficiency that could be rectified with fertilisers. This led to ambitious projects, initiated by the State government in 1956 but these also faltered. However, by the late 1960s the Esperance sand plains finally delivered the land boom that the 1920s speculators had gambled on, and the region became a centre of phenomenal growth. Table 9-1 gives a sense of the dramatic impact this was having at the local level by the mid-1960s. Esperance Shire supported a mere 12,000 sheep in 1947, and well over a million by 1968. It was one district prospering with a formula based on the enthusiasm of young family farmers judiciously subsidised by the state.

Exponential expansion seriously stretched the supply of shearers. Interpreting Table 9-2, the most interesting row is the third where the number of medium sized flocks (2 to 5,000 sheep) expanded from under 1,000 to about 4,000 in two decades. Translating this into shearing terms, this was a quadrupling from about three million sheep to 14 million in this group. The shearing season in Western Australia was

⁴⁰ Hobson, *Across The Board*, p. 6.

⁴¹ Carson, *Battling Around*, p. 35.

Year Ended June	Number of Holdings	Crop Area (acres)	Sheep & Lambs Shorn (thousands)	Beef Cattle (thousands)
1922	na	3	34	na
1935	na	19	33	na
1947	52	4	12	0.4
1952	54	9	24	0.5
1957	112	14	49	2.5
1962	273	49	207	14.6
1966	470	142	667	23.6
1967	493	166	882	29.9
1968	508	180	1120	37.8

Source: Wool Economics Research Report No. 17, January 1970

August to November.⁴² These farms were largely mixed enterprises, and shearing had to fit between wheat harvesting and other priorities. Part-time shearing by farmers was one way of addressing the shortage, but obviously they were not available at other busy periods.⁴³ It was an opportunity for enterprising contractors who could attract shearers prepared to break the rules.

The west's 11 million sheep in 1950 were dwarfed by the 53 million in NSW and approximately 100 million in the eastern states overall. However, it was beginning to catch up. The west had one sheep for every in five in NSW; fifty years earlier it had only been one in ten. By the 1960s Western Australia was on a remarkable growth curve and by the mid-1970s supported over 30 million sheep. NSW, meanwhile, had slipped from a peak of 70 million to 55 million (and was still falling). As the wool industry overall was increasingly in the grip of the profit squeeze, aggressive state assisted agricultural development created quite different results in the west. Eventually weak markets and rising costs, as well as land degradation problems,

⁴² Neville Kinnane, "The Impact of Technological Change on Employment in the Shearing Industry in Western Australia 1980-90", October 1980, submission to Senate Inquiry, Inquiry Hansard, pp. 875-6.

⁴³ EVASI Inquiry Hansard, pp. 843, 959.

slowed things down but in the twenty years between 1955 and 1975 Western Australian sheep numbers trebled. Shearers perfected the money-making habits they had learnt on the Wheat Belt, and increasingly discarded the union solidarity that had mostly been practiced in the pastoral north. For much of the twentieth century Western Australian idiosyncrasies can be seen as interesting but unimportant variations. However, as sheep rearing in the west became the mainstay of the wool industry's expansion, western deviance had a bigger impact on the national picture.

Table 9-2: Number of Flocks by Size in Western Australia

	1956	1966	1978
Below 500	3455	2680	1834
501 to 2000	7201	6953	4324
2001 to 5000	921	3181	4105
Above 5000	325	697	1312

Source: Yearbooks of Western Australia

Shearers of Aotearoa

In 1984 Rollo Arnold argued that, in the 1890s, New Zealand shearers were 'yeomen' while the Australians were 'nomads': the one *petit bourgeois* and individualistic; the other geographically rootless, bonded by mateship, and inclined to collectivism. The Pastoralists' Union, he argues, readily recruited strike breakers in New Zealand in 1891, while Australian unionists achieved limited success in their goal of forming a New Zealand branch.⁴⁴ James Bennett has since countered this interpretation, in part drawing on John E. Martin, who has written extensively on nineteenth century New Zealand rural labour, including shearers. Bennett's argument is that swarms of radicalised Australians migrated to New Zealand in the early-1900s and introduced fresh vigour to shearing unionism, 'contaminating' any residual 'collaborationist'

⁴⁴ Rollo Arnold, 'Yeomen and Nomads: New Zealand and the Australasian Shearing Scene 1886-1896', *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 18, No. 2, October 1984, pp 117-142.

tendencies.⁴⁵ ‘Contamination’ is a jibe at ‘arrogant assertions regarding the superior work ethic of New Zealanders’.⁴⁶ This is part of a larger criticism of a labour historiography trapped by national boundaries, and ignoring the strong ‘transnational’ element or ‘common front’ energising labour movements on a trans-Tasman basis between 1890 and 1940. The broader proposition is not considered here, but Bennett’s treatment of shearers is pointing in exactly the wrong direction. Nonetheless, Arnold’s approach is one-dimensional and lacks nuance. It is necessary to address this controversy to make sense of the clash between mateship and money-making which came to a head in Australian shearing sheds towards the end of the twentieth century.

New Zealand had not been affected by the financial hurricanes of the 1890s to the same extent as Australia, largely because there was no drought. Sheep stations endured severe losses in a snowstorm in 1895, enough to call an inquiry, but it hardly matched the despair wrought by Australia’s environmental disaster.⁴⁷ There had been a notable shearing strike at Benmore Station in 1893⁴⁸, but woolshed conflict on the scale and intensity of Australia’s did not occur. Legislation enabling industrial arbitration was introduced a decade earlier than the Australian acts, encouraging the belief that strikes were an Australian affliction – the genesis of a different legend. In the case of shearers, though, this did not necessarily mean they were better treated than they were in Australia. In any case the complacency about industrial harmony was seriously challenged by the 1912 Waihi mining strike and the spectre of militant unionism in 1913. The reforming Liberals who had introduced arbitration and encouraged land settlement were at last out of office. Bill Massey, a small farmer from South Auckland led a conservative government from 1912 to 1924. Notoriously anti-union, his early premiership was characterised by confrontation with militant unions. Still, shearers did not actively participate in these upheavals which were

⁴⁵ James Bennett ‘The Contamination of Arcadia? Class, Trans-National Interactions and the Construction of Identity, 1890-1913’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 1999, pp 20-42. James Bennett, *‘Rats and Revolutionaries’: The Labour Movement in Australia and New Zealand 1890-1940*, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 2004, pp. 24, 29-30, 32-33, 37, 93-94. See also John E. Martin, ‘The Struggle for £1: The Emergence of Shearers’ Unions in the 1870s’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1970, p. 57.

⁴⁶ Bennett, *Rats and Revolutionaries*, p 37.

⁴⁷ Tom Brooking, *Lands for the people?: the Highland clearances and the colonization of New Zealand: a biography of John McKenzie*, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 1996, p 257.

⁴⁸ John Martin, *Tatau Tatau – One Big Union Altogether: The Shearers and the Early Years of the New Zealand Workers’ Union*, New Zealand Workers’ Union, Wellington, 1987, p. 19.

driven by militant socialist hostility to the arbitration system.⁴⁹ Ultimately the loyalty of shearers to arbitration was betrayed by the Sheepowners' Association, the reverse of what happened in Australia.⁵⁰

There was also a quieter but more profound revolution in rural New Zealand. In Australia closer settlement had a patchwork pattern, but in New Zealand it comprehensively transformed rural settlement in the 1890s – again in advance of Australia by more than a decade. Wool remained an important output, but agricultural prosperity was just as solidly anchored to frozen lamb, and to butter. Largely this was because New Zealand had a suitable climate for smaller holdings to be viable, and the agricultural economy capitalised on new refrigeration and shipping technologies that made it possible to supply the British market with perishable produce. This was also true for the closely settled regions of Australia, but pastoral country could not be as successfully used to raise fat lambs or dairy cows. New Zealand's agricultural frontier shifted decisively to the North Island during this period. Pakeha acquisition of Maori land in the Waikato, King Country and Bay of Plenty was in full swing, vividly described by Tom Brooking as 'bursting up the greatest estate of all'.⁵¹ John Martin's *Forgotten Worker* does not run very far into this period, but he acknowledges 'tremendous changes in the rural economy' as the new century dawned. James Bellich calls it the 'the rise of the farmer backbone'.⁵²

The social environment in which shearers worked was quickly becoming quite different to Australia. A 10-stand shed was unusually large and many were four or less. It was taking the sting out of any residual militancy and shearing strikes became rare events.⁵³ James Bennett's 'contamination' article begins with a quotation from the *Australian Pastoralist's Review* which lauds New Zealanders as being keen to work while Australians are unreliable and work-shy. This is dismissed by Bennett as

⁴⁹ Olssen, *The Red Feds*, pp. 149, 199.

⁵⁰ Martin, *Tatau Tatau*, pp 45-58; D.T. Macnaughton, 'The New Zealand Shearers' Union and the Crisis in the Shearing Industry 1910-1916', *Auckland University Historical Society Annual*, 1971, pp. 33-5.

⁵¹ Brooking, *Lands for the People*, pp. 130-56.

⁵² John E. Martin, *The Forgotten Worker: The Rural Wage earner in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand*, Allen and Unwin/Trade Union History Project, Wellington, 1990, p 197; James Bellich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Allen Lane & The Penguin Press, Auckland, 2001, pp. 146-56.

⁵³ Mark Hearn, 'Mates and Strangers'; Richard Waterhouse, 'Shearers and the Birth of Mateship'.

‘stereotyped’, which is fair comment, yet there are enough resonances of it in what others say to suggest that attitudes in shearing sheds were often significantly different. What farmers called thrift and moral fibre unionists called weakness and feeble subservience. Arthur Brogan, an Australian shearer, wrote from Oamaru in 1908:

I have been shearing in Canterbury and Otago, and do not find this country as good as it's cracked up to be. The rates and conditions of shearing are years behind good old Australia, the only country worth living in. The shed hands, having no organisation, are practically at the mercy of the boss. Considering the time lost, the price of shearing (16/6) is ridiculous. The boss seems to do pretty much as he likes with wet sheep and other matters. Harvesting conditions are little better. The men on the mills work the same brutal hours and have wretched accommodation in most places.⁵⁴

Jim Lambert, a shearers' cook, made similar complaints from Timaru in 1915.

Up the Ashburton Gorge two wool rollers refused work on New Years Day, and the boss sacked them, and did the wool rolling himself. The shearers went on shearing and said nothing!What sort of men were they?[The shed hands] are just as bad as the shearers, and if a good man or two gets amongst them he is outed. More vigorous union effort is required over here.⁵⁵

Charley Pike's letter from Longridge Station in 1902 complained that shearing rates were only '15/- and found'. He thought a union in New Zealand was badly wanted.

His words might be seen as an example of 'Australian attitude':

The tucker is the worst imaginable, and the cooking is done by contract. Nearly all the shearers at Longridge are Victorians. The owner tried to force them to shear to six o'clock on Saturday, but the lads gave him a taste of Australian unionism by refusing. The owner then told those who refused to shear that they could leave. Every Australian picked up his shears at once and left the board. The boss then climbed down and begged them not to leave him.⁵⁶

E.L. Barnes enjoyed New Zealand rather more on an extended trip in 1904 to both South and North Islands. Most of the shearers in the South Island were Victorians, but most of the North Island was 'monopolised by the Maoris'.⁵⁷ Australians were widely regarded as troublemakers. Barnes himself was very opposed to the radical element within the AWU and had to overcome ingrained prejudice against Australians.⁵⁸

New Zealand Workers Union (NZWU) official, Mick Laracy, an Australian émigré, has been described as being a bit of a disappointment to the rank-and-file in 1913 for backing off direct action in solidarity with the 'Red Feds' but a different interpretation has been suggested. Laracy had no confidence at all that if the union took on the employers, the rank-and-file would stay the course. Perhaps this was bluff, an attempt to save his hide. More likely he knew his shearers pretty well, and understood that

⁵⁴ *The Worker*, 5/3/1908, p 23.

⁵⁵ *The Worker*, 18/2/1915 p 19.

⁵⁶ *The Worker*, 11/1/1902, p. 3. Emphasis added.

⁵⁷ *The Worker*, 27/9/1933, p 20.

⁵⁸ SLV H17273, Box 125/1, E.L. Barnes, *Shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves*, unpublished, 1949, pp. 211, 284.

many of them did not hate Bill Massey quite as much as dinkum radicalism required.⁵⁹

All this suggests that Australians and New Zealanders did have different views on unionism, and perhaps other matters. Of course, the small farming districts of Victoria were also notoriously apathetic to unionism, and organisers got stick in many parts of NSW. But Victoria was different to New Zealand in that the AWU did exert considerable control, and nobody was ever allowed to forget that shearing unionism had first taken root there.⁶⁰ Even E.L. Barnes, a Victorian, was a member, and in fact quite happy to be. The union in New Zealand could never build equivalent mythology or organisation. Perceptions of difference and actual differences may not be the same. But there was certainly talk of different national traits, and perhaps some of it had substance.

Nonetheless, it is not possible to read John Martin's account of the 1893 strike at Benmore Station, for example, and continue to believe that there was no conflict between the large estates and shearers.⁶¹ Shearing trouble in Australia was more widespread and certainly more violent, giving some weight to Rollo Arnold, but not enough. The Pastoralists' Union got some of its scabs from New Zealand, but most came from Victoria. And as Martin reminds us, it was not unknown in a crisis for Canterbury run holders to bring shearers over from Victoria. But by about 1900 it was all starting to change. By 1897 shearing unionism in New Zealand had gone strangely quiet after feisty beginnings.⁶² Inward migrations of Australians certainly occurred but any radicalising effect is easily overstated.⁶³ Still, Australian émigrés dominated shearing unionism for the next three decades and it might not have survived at all without Mick Laracy, Charles Grayndler (a brother of Ted Grayndler), and Arthur Cook. They seemed more honourable unionists than the despots running the AWU, yet it continued to be heavy going for them. Partly this was because New Zealand farmers were more vehement foes than the AWU's pastoralist enemies. Small farmers

⁵⁹ Eugenie & Hugh Laracy, "Mick Laracy: Shearer and Unionist in Australia and New Zealand", *Labour History*, 38, May 1980, p 51.

⁶⁰ *The Worker*, 5/1/1936, p. 17; 12/2/1936, p. 4; 19/2/1936, p. 17; ABL N117/361(a), Butler to Mitchell, 19/6/1981.

⁶¹ Martin, *Forgotten Worker*, pp. 188-196.

⁶² Martin, *Forgotten Worker*, p. 194.

⁶³ Bennett, *Rats and Revolutionaries*, p. 93.

did not take Sundays off, so why should farm labour? Bill Massey's supporters left Australian graziers for dead when it came to union-hating.

But there was also something else in the air. Shearers increasingly came from small farmer backgrounds. The trend became dominant in the 1920s and '30s. Profiles of retired shearers in *Shearing Magazine* provide valuable insights into the culture.⁶⁴ Gangs of three or four moved around the King Country, Wanganui and the Bay of Plenty. Shearing on the Canterbury Plains and Southland also changed. They were interested in shearing technique and the latest gossip about tallies more than union politics. There was a strong ethic of upward mobility and many shearers succeeded in becoming farmers themselves. The life should not be excessively romanticised. Arguments arose over pay and conditions. Accommodation was often very poor. On the other hand meals were likely to be wholesome, often cooked by the farmer's wife and eaten in the farm homestead. Problems and grievances were more likely to be addressed face to face, rather than via the union. Membership of the NZWU was probably reasonably common, although many seldom saw a representative.

Claude Waite was a typical example. He was born in the Wanganui area in 1911 and learnt to shear in 1926, aged 15. He became a full time shearer in 1931, and provides interesting details of the tough life working for a contractor based in Marton, running six to eight shearers in two gangs. Fred Ackerman seems to have been a pretty stern boss, but in Waite's view fair. Parallels with Harry Doyle, martinet of the Western Australian PLB, are worth noting.

Fred was the head shearer, and whatever he did, everyone else had to do or you weren't good enough to stay with him. Bosses were hard in those days because they knew if you didn't come up to standard, there were plenty to take your place. I've seen five or six shearers sitting on the landing waiting for someone to get the sack. Fred was loyal to good workers. If you did the job you were there forever. If you didn't he would fix your gear for you, give you a warning, but the next time he would kick you out.⁶⁵

Bill Richards was from this kind of background, growing to maturity on a 400 acre hill country farm in the Raglan backblocks. But he had also inherited folklore from the Waihi strike. His father (also known as Bill) had been a miner in Ballarat and Kalgoorlie in the '80s and '90s, and in 1903 settled his young and expanding family

⁶⁴ *Shearing*, Vol. 8 No. 1, 1992, p. 37; Vol. 9 No. 3, 1993, pp. 18-19; Vol. 14 No. 1, 1998, p. 8; Vol. 14 No 2, 1998, p 29.

⁶⁵ *Shearing*, Vol. 9 No 3, pp 18-19.

in Waihi. With his brothers Bill senior worked the mine on contracts and made quite a lot of money. Young Bill was born in Waihi in 1907. A contractor rather than a wage labourer, his father was not directly involved in the 1912 strike. But he sympathised with the grievances of the waged workers, stopped work in solidarity, was branded a 'striker', and forced to leave Waihi during the climax of the affair. Old Bill was not politically radical, anything but. Nevertheless, he exhibited underdog solidarity of a kind associated with Australian bush unionism.⁶⁶

Bill Richards's wrote of what happened to the family after it left Waihi:

It was during this period that their thoughts and ambitions turned to land and farming. Why, I do not know, as it was completely foreign to their way of life. As far back as I can trace, I can find no reference to any of them having had any experience or knowledge of farming. While they were still tunnelling at Western Springs the Government opened up for settlement a large block of Crown land at Te Akau. The land was virgin bush. The holdings were surveyed into approximately 400 acre blocks to be allocated by ballot. In most cases the farms were very isolated, lacking in roads or any other means of access. The only requirement of the Government was that the successful applicant pay the first 1½ years' rent. The main requirement of the settler was to have a stout heart. The brothers decided to pool their resources and they, together with their womenfolk, put in for a ballot. My mother, Florence Mabel Richards, was the successful applicant and drew No. 7 block, Ruakiwi, Te Akau.⁶⁷

A knockabout Australian family had flirted around the IWW flame at Waihi, but ended up in the New Zealand bush.⁶⁸ Shearing was an obvious choice for young Bill in the 1920s. His world view, though seasoned with a taint of the Australian egalitarian spirit, was fundamentally shaped by dour pioneers of the North Island hill country. The sheds were more about taming the forest, and producing wool and fat lamb for 'the old country' than class war. One of Richards's adventures was a shearing trip to Australia in 1930s, described with humour and gusto.⁶⁹ If he had in him an instinct for bush unionism, there is no sign that he had any interest in the radical PWIU, then in its hey-day in NSW. Indeed, he makes no mention of it at all, although it is hard to believe he could have shorn at Gurley station in the Moree area and not been aware of its activities. The shearing gangs Bill Richards was associated with in New Zealand were similar to those already described. Parallels can be found in the lives of many North Island pakeha shearers from the mid-1920s to the 1950s.

⁶⁶ Bill Richards, *Off the Sheep's Back*, Lindon Publishing, Auckland West, 1986.

⁶⁷ Richards, *Off the Sheep's Back*, pp. 10-1.

⁶⁸ 'Bush' has a slightly different meaning in New Zealand than Australia, where it is a generic synonym for rural districts or society. In New Zealand it usually refers to the forest before clearing. Once turned into pasture it was more likely to be called 'hill country'.

⁶⁹ Richards, *Off the Sheep's Back*, pp. 110-8.

This was also the world from which the Bowen Brothers, Godfrey and Ivan, emerged. Before they became famous through exploits in shearing competitions in the 1950s, the Bowens made a living in the late 1930s and during the war as two-stand plant operators in the Hawkes Bay and Bay of Plenty. Accordingly, it is easy to draw comparisons with Henry Salter in Kerang, Kevin Saare's father and uncle, or two-stand contractors in Western Australia. Of the two, Ivan was widely considered the better shearer, but Godfrey was more extrovert. He could talk about shearing even better than he could do it. Between them they established world record shearing tallies which were huge by Australian norms, achieved of course in very different types of sheep. The extraordinary combination of speed and skill developed while they were unknown shearing contractors, became known as 'the Bowen method'. It was entirely a result of them trying things out, observing others, and synthesising the results. With wool prices booming in the 1950s the New Zealand Wool Board was concerned, as was its Australian counterpart, about the supply of shearers. Godfrey Bowen was hired on a full-time salary to establish a national shearer training system, and to promote better shearing skills. Despite the fact that Bowen was to some extent lampooned by common shed shearers, he had an enormous impact on the broader image of New Zealand shearers in the 1950s and '60s.⁷⁰

New Zealand did not have much history of shearing shed strife after the 1920s. There is evidence to the contrary. In 1921 the arbitration court cut shearing rates after a fall in wool prices, and in 1928 the NZWU came to an agreement with sheep owners to fix rates according to a formula tied to the price of wool. The system then lasted until 1964. Such a formula could never have worked in Australia. Indeed the bitter strikes of 1922 and 1930 were triggered by cuts in shearing rates following wool market reverses. AWU attempts to persuade shearers to accept these awards, however unpalatable, only enraged the militant element and magnified the abuse thrown at officials.⁷¹ New Zealand shearing rates were adjusted downwards in the early-1950s

⁷⁰ Bill Carter & John MacGibbon, *Wool: A History of New Zealand's Wool Industry*, Ngaio Press, Wellington, 2003, 'In the Woolshed: Training, Competing & the Bowen Brothers', pp. 155-70; *Shearing*, Vol. 10 No. 1, March 1994, pp. 4-6; Vol. 14 No. 1, March 1998, pp. 18-19; *New Zealand Herald*, 30/3/1983, Section 2, p. 1; NLNZ, OHInt-0509/02, Ivan Bowen interview; Writer's conversation with Laurie Keats, February 2003; Williams, *Top Class Wool Cutters: The World of Shearers and Shearing*, Shearing Heritage Publications, Hamilton, 1996, pp. 144-146.

⁷¹ Carol D. Fuller, *The Shearer Labour Force in New Zealand*, Student Research Papers in Industrial Relations No. 2, Industrial Relations Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, 1974, p. 5; CAR, 1930, p. 277.

without major disruption. Nothing remotely comparable to the 1956 strike occurred, although economic conditions and inflationary pressures were much the same.⁷²

The dominance of Maori shearers on the North Island's East Coast from the nineteenth century seems clear, but they were increasingly important, mixing with pakeha, in the hill country culture discussed above. Family based shearing gangs organised on patriarchal lines, and utilising women and children as shed hands are mentioned by John Martin and Witi Ihimaera's novel *Bullibasha* has similar descriptions.⁷³ Conditions could be very primitive, as this account by the Australian Jim Lambert in 1915 suggests.

There was one big room for sleeping in, without bunks, but with ferns tossed in to doss on. You had to burrow in like a rabbit. They were all Maoris, except two of us - Maori women rolling and picking up and a Maori woman classing. All sleep in one room, married couples in one corner, single girls in another, and single men in another. The boss said he put bunks in, but the Maoris pulled them out. He said anything does them, so if we got there we get it rough. The tucker was as rough as the place.⁷⁴

It was a system that enabled the family to operate as a ready made contract gang, and to negotiate directly with stations without dependence on the union. Of course the role of the union in establishing benchmark awards was not irrelevant, or unappreciated, and Arthur Cook's organising of Maori shearers must be acknowledged.⁷⁵ However, there is also evidence that the Maori regarded the union as another pakeha institution to be treated with suspicion. Charles Grayndler described them in 1915 as 'one of the special problems of the Union in New Zealand. In some districts they have enrolled splendidly, in others they have proved difficult to approach' and 'as to the Maori shearer, I found him at times loth to part with his silver for a ticket'.⁷⁶ In 1925 a union organiser visiting the remote East Coast got a civil but cool welcome. The Maori did not get the same attention as pakeha members, they suggested, and 'strongly objected' to paying full price for a union ticket. Why had 'the head' not come to see them - the general secretary or the president of the union should make an appearance at the start of the season.⁷⁷ For insightful observations on Maori shearers in more recent times,

⁷² In 1951 there was a notable confrontation on the waterfront which angered the farmer dominated National Government. Shearers were not militant during this period.

⁷³ Martin, *Forgotten Worker*, pp. 38-43; Witi Ihimaera, *Bullibasha! King of the Gypsies*, Penguin, Auckland, 1994.

⁷⁴ *The Worker*, 18/2/1915 p. 19.

⁷⁵ Martin, John E., 'Cook, Arthur (1885-1943)', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, updated 7 April 2006, URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

⁷⁶ *The Worker*, 4/2/1915, p 18.

⁷⁷ *The New Zealand Worker*, 24/6/1925, p. 11.

Shearers Motel by the Australian novelist Roger McDonald, contains an account of his own experience as the cook for Maori shearers in the early 1990s. A television documentary ‘The Kiwi Shed’ made by the ABC is also useful.⁷⁸ More research is desperately needed on Maori shearing but suggestions that they formed part of a radical labour front are not promising.

By the 1950s, then, New Zealand shearing culture was noticeably different. A training scheme set up during the wool boom under Godfrey Bowen gave shearers national status in the export drive. In Australia woolshed disruption culminating in the 1956 strike perpetuated their ‘agitator’ reputation. The durability and strength of shearing unionism in Australia through the twentieth century sits in stark contrast with its tepidity and weakness in New Zealand. This was not simply a matter of union membership, which in both countries was probably quite high much of the time, but of who controlled shearing sheds. Rural social circumstances contributed to this difference. James Bennett’s Australia-New Zealand common front of organised labour was non-existent, and mateship was much more likely to occur between non-union shearers. The severe shortage of shearers in Western Australia in the 1960s lured New Zealand shearers into the one part of Australia where, despite differences in landscape and climate, the Wheat Belt shearing culture was most like their own. This created a compelling chemistry which eventually undermined a century of AWU domination of Australian woolsheds.

Over time some New Zealanders made Western Australia their permanent base, but some migrated backwards and forwards annually. By 1980 they were fully integrated into the rural social fabric. The Western Australian Department of Agriculture calculated that the state needed a core of about 2000 shearers and estimated that about 700 regular visitors from New Zealand contributed to the effort required.⁷⁹ The Western Australian Government was keen to see that the migrations continued and made special arrangements to make it convenient for them to travel, to put in tax returns, and to find contractors. Tax was a delicate matter, and farmers found ways to pay them in cash without necessarily bothering the Tax Office at all! There was little

⁷⁸ Roger McDonald, *Shearers’ Motel*, Picador, Chippendale, NSW, 1992; ABCTV, “The Kiwi Shed”, A Big Country, screened 28/6/1991, ABC film archives, Accession Number 216648.

⁷⁹ ABL N117/357(a), Ingleton to Hollis, 15/4/1980. .

difficulty about rates of pay – mostly it was above the award. On other matters of conditions and regulations that got in the way of money-making they were not so particular. It was not unknown for woolshed lights to be on late into the night. Sometimes flocks were finished off on a Sunday, to facilitate a clean start on Monday morning at the next shed. Kiwis had little inkling that their approach to shearing would be regarded as a form of ‘leprosy’ by unionists in Queensland and NSW.⁸⁰ After all, what they did more or less followed Wheat Belt practices. Although there were over 30 million sheep in Western Australia, there were 150 million in the other States, reportedly also in need of shearers. They soon discovered that shearing sheds in Longreach and Blackall were very different places from those in which they had learned their ways, in Taihape and Heriot.

⁸⁰ See Chapter 10 for origin of ‘leprosy’ comment.

Chapter 10: Mateship's Last Stand: The Wide Comb Dispute 1970-1990

'Foreign' Invasion

Grazcos resented its strike-breaker reputation, but the truth was that it spearheaded grazier tactics in all shearing disputes from 1920. In the 1970s many from both sides were still telling stories about 1956. The wide comb dispute of the 1980s was the last of these dramas in the twentieth century. Grazcos was locked in a love-hate relationship with the AWU but they needed each other. No full time shearer could afford not to shear Grazcos sheds. Yet the Company was perennially short of shearers, testing the patience of shed managers whose job it was to keep shearing on schedule. Just as in J.H. Young's day, graziers yearned for a less irritable brand of shearer.

There had been some recruitment of New Zealand shearers during the 1956 strike but it did not influence the course of events.¹ The wool establishment was aware of Godfrey Bowen's training system, and toyed with replicating something like it in Australia. The 'Tally-Hi' initiative was the one direct consequence.² The AWU's lukewarm attitude to training tempted the Australian Wool Board to flirt with radical ideas of displacing shearers altogether. Millions were spent investigating robots and 'chemical shearing'.³ The New Zealand Wool Board was just as capable of wasting money, but had no need for robots. With hindsight Australian graziers were slow to realise that the answer lay less in reproducing New Zealand's training regime than hiring its 'graduates'. Either way, however, AWU hegemony over woolsheds was likely to be a serious barrier.

After Federation there was a general dilution of contact between Australia and New Zealand on a number of levels.⁴ Trans-Tasman migrations of shearers persisted until World War I but waned in the 1920s. Wartime travel restrictions and the adoption of

¹ Kerr, *Resolute and Rugged*, p39; G.W. Lilley, *Story of Lansdowne: The History of a Western Queensland Sheep Station*, The Lansdowne Pastoral Company, Melbourne, 1973, p132; EVASI Inquiry Hansard, p 351.

² *The Land*, 11/5/1978, p. 21.

³ *The Australian*, 24/11/1992, p. 22; Truelove, 'Manpower Study', pp. 110-1.

⁴ Denis McLean, *The Prickly Pair: Making Nationalism in Australia and New Zealand*, University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 2003, pp. 145, 150-5.

conscription in New Zealand in 1916 triggered the decline.⁵ Still, shearers are wanderers and it was not unusual to find New Zealanders in Australian sheds or *vice versa*.⁶ Indeed, there were examples of more significant contact. An annual migration of mainly Western Australians to the New Zealand High Country emerged in the 1940s. Ironically, given the storm that blew up 25 years later, this was a consequence of New Zealand's attachment to the wide comb. High Country stations carried New Zealand's only remaining merinos, which owners preferred to shear with narrow combs. Kiwi shearers avoided going near them and contractors looked to Australia, where there were plenty of merino specialists.⁷ Quips that New Zealanders were 'too useless' to shear merinos were part of the fun and Australians were warmly welcomed. Harold Christensen took his first trip to Central Otago in 1953: 'The sheep farmers were there to meet us; they treated us like kings, an entirely different experience to Western Australia.'⁸ He could not resist comparison with aristocratic graziers who 'only tolerated the shearers because they were an absolute necessity'. While regular movement increased in the 1950s, the appearance of New Zealanders in Western Australia during the 1960s was the first significant migration in that direction for perhaps half a century.⁹

New Zealanders subsequently drifted into NSW and Queensland, but there was no systematic effort to recruit them until the mid-1970s. Major flooding throughout western-NSW and Queensland in early-1974 was, inadvertently, a catalyst. Newspapers called them the 'worst floods this century'. Thallon in Southern Queensland received 15 inches of rain in 24 hours. Rivers in the upper catchment of the Darling rose and a major flood worked its way across western-NSW, bursting levees at Brewarrina, Wilcannia and Bourke. Families were evacuated from Coonamble, Narrabri and Goodooga. Many homesteads were isolated and stock losses were substantial.¹⁰ Laurie Walsh, a contractor from Broken Hill, recalled 30-40 inches of rain which made the surrounding country an 'inland sea'. He had shearers stranded

⁵ *The Worker*, 5/10/1916, p. 17.

⁶ Bill Richards, *Off the Sheep's Back*, Ch 8, "Aussie Rules"; Daniel O'Connell (ed.), *The Confessions of Clyde Cameron 1913-1990*, ABC Books, Crows Nest NSW, 1990, p. 21.

⁷ *Shearing*, Vol.1, No. 2, Autumn/Winter, 1985, p34; Vol. 12, No. 3, November 1996, p9.

⁸ Hobson, *Across the Board*, p. 52.

⁹ *Shearing*, Vol. 10, No. 3, November 1994, p. 8; Vol. 14, No. 2, August 1998, p. 29; Vol. 14, No 1, March 1998, p. 8; Vol. 14, No. 3, November 1998, pp. 36-7.

¹⁰ SMH, 9/1/1974, p. 1; 10/1/1974, p. 3; 11/1/1974, p. 1; *Sun Herald*, 13/1/1974, p. 1.

for almost a month, dropping supplies by helicopter.¹¹ While not the main season, one of the many problems of besieged graziers was the accumulated shearing backlog. With AWU agreement, Fokker Friendships were chartered to bring shearers over from New Zealand.¹² It was a great success and the union later rued cooperating with the graziers in their moment of crisis. The Chairman of Grazcos lavishly praised the Kiwi shearers. ‘Their performance was particularly good and it was only through the *attitude* of these men that it was possible to get all the sheep shorn.’¹³

Whether or not this was the only factor, it hastened systematic recruitment. In 1976 Grazcos sent its Victorian Shearing Manager to New Zealand for a five week visit. While the purpose was vague, he was to attend the Golden Shears and ‘generally study shearing’.¹⁴ In the late 1970s Grazcos routinely sent a manager to the Golden Shears, New Zealand’s national shearing competition held annually in the Wairarapa town of Masterton, to organise whole teams of shearers.¹⁵ Word spread independently, and in an era of more frequent air services an invasion of the Australian outback was underway.

Graziers could not believe their luck. Like the Australians in Central Otago, New Zealanders were treated like kings and it escalated into a major issue for the AWU.¹⁶ During 1979 it was openly canvassed that well trained New Zealand shearers might bring badly needed innovation. A report outlining their impact in Western Australia gave weight to these opinions. Professor Keith Campbell of Sydney University suggested, a little idealistically perhaps, that farmers and unions need not be ‘antagonists’. But he was realistic enough to note that past wounds were ‘deep’. On the same occasion Ian McLachlan was less diplomatic. At that stage he was speaking as Chairman of the Australian Wool Council. He declared that farmers were threatened by the power and size of unions. Another speaker ventilated an issue which, hitherto, few outside woolsheds understood or cared about - unofficial use of ‘3½ inch combs’ was increasing each season. In Western Australia they were already doing 80 percent of shearing, it was claimed. Apparently this was one of the

¹¹ Patsy Adam-Smith interview with Laurie Walsh, 1978, SLV MS TMS 557-8.

¹² EVASI Inquiry Hansard, 1993, pp. 639, 1176, 1433, 1540.

¹³ Emphasis added. ABL Z278/19 Grazcos Annual Report, 1974.

¹⁴ ABL Z278 Box 18, Grazcos Travel File.

¹⁵ Mulholland interview, 2003.

¹⁶ EVASI Inquiry Hansard, pp. 1378, 1381, 1433.

innovations, but it was not universally welcomed. This was not a gathering sympathetic to the AWU, but Ian Cuttler, Secretary of the Victoria and Riverina Branch, felt compelled to put the union view. He was obdurate - 'wide combs' were 'not on'. There was a whiff of militancy in the audience of woolgrowers. 'Times have changed!', someone yelled.¹⁷

The dispute over wide combs was really about something more fundamental. New Zealanders were conspicuously uninterested in union ritual – electing 'reps', holding 'meetings', having a 'vote on this and a vote on that'. 'Squatter hatred' was not part of their historical baggage.¹⁸ They had already been marked as efficient and co-operative shearing teams. One of the most notorious reputations Kiwis earned concerned 'wet sheep' voting. New Zealand is a land of, at times, almost incessant rain. There are sayings about the weather such as that applied to Mount Taranaki (previously Mount Egmont). If you can see the top of the mountain it is going to rain – if you can't it already is raining! It became a standing joke that it was almost impossible to get a New Zealander to put in a 'wet' vote if conditions were at all marginal. In New Zealand shearers spent many hours sitting around waiting for sheep to dry. Queensland shearers, Kiwis thought, would 'vote sheep wet if they were out in a heavy due a couple of nights before'.¹⁹ Ballots were theoretically secret, but in practice everyone knew how votes fell. New Zealanders did not deliberately offend mateship codes, but nor did they mind the notoriety of difference. John Mulholland, a shearer from Central Otago (actually, a region with an arid climate), enjoyed recalling that if there were five Aussies and three Kiwis, voting was always 5:3.²⁰ As the invasion progressed it was just as likely to be 3:5, in which case the Aussies had to accept decisions of the Kiwi majority.²¹

The overtone of nationalism was inescapable, but insiders and outsiders were not simply defined this way. New Zealanders were not actually the most aggressive

¹⁷ *The Land*, 30/10/80, p. 13; 1/3/1979, p. 11; 3/5/1979, p. 14; 31/5/1979, p. 8; R.J. Lightfoot, A.M. Ingleton, R.A. Mills, N.M. Marney, & M. A. D'Antuono, *Preliminary investigation of shearing merino sheep with combs of varying width and design*, Western Australian Department of Agriculture, Perth, 1978.

¹⁸ *Shearing*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 1985, pp. 44, 46.

¹⁹ *Shearing*, Vol. 16, No 1, March 2000, p15

²⁰ John Mulholland interview, 2003.

²¹ Shearers were not to be prosecuted for breaking agreements if 'in their honest opinion' sheep were wet.

promoters of wide combs in eastern Australia between 1979 and 1981. Robert White was born in 1946 into a small-farming and rural labouring background at Mount David near Bathurst and took up shearing in 1969. A knockabout larrikin he married young and became a devoted family man. He was a skilled shearer with a highly competitive approach to money-making. He discovered the wide comb in Western Australia, then set up a contracting business in Mandurama when he returned to NSW in the late-1970s. White gathered around him a team of crack shearers and it was an open secret that wide combs were used.²² The sense that they were cherry-picking the most lucrative sheds, avoiding smaller flocks or ones with difficult sheep, was a factor in the vitriol he attracted. There was no question of White's shearers undercutting award rates – high quality shearers were in short supply and there was no need. Inevitably, though, they cut corners on rules and regulations if they thought no one was watching. Graziers aided and abetted their misdemeanours.²³ Western Australians were also involved. The Arbitration Commission Bench was taken aback when Western Australians were bracketed with New Zealanders as 'foreigners' by an AWU witness.²⁴ There were in these developments, echoes of John Leahy's MSU, and the shearing at Coombe Martin and Wellshot in 1904, so long ago.²⁵

History of the Wide Comb Ban

Although the wide comb ban was paraded as a symbol of the AWU's century of struggle against the graziers, the history of it was only vaguely understood.²⁶ It had existed, or so it was thought, since 1926. In fact, AWU rules had opposed 'broad gauge combs' (as they were mostly referred to before World War II) since the early 1900s when they were invented. In 1926 a clause was included in the Federal Pastoral Award for the first time, but the union rule was the relevant sanction historically. The 1926 case was primarily concerned with the 'double bent tooth' comb, a quite

²² A University of Melbourne scientist was asked to conduct tests, and contractors' were surveyed. This suggests that wide combs were already coming into use. Truelove, 'Manpower Study', pp. 107-8.

²³ AIC Wide Comb Case Transcripts 1982, pp. 122-48. White's evidence was summarised in a document held in NAA called 'Summary of Transcript – Wide Comb Matter', pp. 4-5.

²⁴ AIC Wide Comb Case Transcripts 1983, pp. 1775a.

²⁵ See Chapter 4 for blade shearers' problems adapting to machines.

²⁶ Participants seemed unaware of the pre-1926 union ban. The history as it was understood was summarised in Julia E. Gibson, *Aspects of the Use of Wide Combs in the Australian Wool Industry*, Farm Management Report No. 16, Department of Agricultural Economics and Business Management, University of New England, Armidale, 1982, pp. 5-6.

different issue which worried graziers, not the AWU. Largely in deference to the longstanding AWU rule, a maximum width of 2½ inches was formally incorporated into the award but it was merely ratifying established practice and excited little argument or discussion. The union's abhorrence of the wide comb is better accounted for, but no more easily explained, by a longer historical process.

The comb and the cutter are detachable items screwed onto the handpiece of the shearing machine. The comb is fixed while the cutter (attached to 'forks' sometimes called 'chicken feet') oscillates across its face. Friction between the sharpened edges of the teeth cuts the wool. While there have been many refinements of this mechanism, the working principle developed in 1888 still survives.²⁷ It is high precision equipment and as the edges of the teeth are blunted by constant shearing, combs and cutters need to be ground regularly on a rotating emery stone to restore their cutting efficiency. When worn out they are replaced.

Knowledge of machines differentiated modern shearers from some of the customs passed down from the nineteenth century blade men.²⁸ T.J. Lonsdale remembered his days as an AWU organiser in Bourke before the Great War:

With the changing from blade-shearing to machine-shearing came also a change in the class of men; and their outlook was altogether different from the outlook of the 'Knights of the Blade'.²⁹

He was referring to the ruthless money-making attitude of contract shearing gangs which hastened the advance of machine shearing early in the twentieth century.³⁰ However, it was not quite that simple. Blade shearers were also 'money-makers'. Jack Howe, famous for a 'world record' with blades at Alice Downs in 1892, was not one to look backwards. By 1900 he was 'doing some good tallies with machines', and later still became a publican and something of a local mover-and-shaker in Blackall.³¹ Simultaneously, mateship traditions influenced machine shearing attitudes as the militancy of the PWIU and the 1956 strike suggested. *Sunday Too Far Away* and Patsy Adam-Smith's *The Shearers* captured these traits of shearing culture rather

²⁷ For the history of shearing machinery, A.D. Fraser, *This Century of Ours*, Dangar, Gedye and Malloch, Sydney, 1938, pp. 174-214.

²⁸ Twentieth century shearers were more mechanically minded than blade shearers. As well as shearing machinery they were familiar with farm implements and cars. Day, *Quick Go the Shears*, pp. 55-6.

²⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 14/7/1923, p. 18.

³⁰ See Chapter 4 for Lonsdale's observations.

³¹ Fraser, *This Century of Ours*, p. 198.

well. Mateship and money-making were for the most part reasonably compatible, but sometimes when the two currents met, it stirred up a rip-tide. The dispute over 'carrying machines' had been an early example. Wide combs divided shearers along similar lines.

Pragmatic engineering considerations established the 'narrow gauge comb' as the Australian norm. Just as electricity power points, spark plugs, electric drills, and a host of other mechanical age gadgets have standardised forms, so combs and cutters needed to fit the handpieces of any of the three or four manufacturers. Each produced a range of models and these multiplied as new versions were developed.³² The practicalities of cutting efficiency led to shearing combs between 2¼ and 2½ inches wide, with 10 teeth evenly spaced to facilitate movement through the wool. Matching cutters had three prongs (or teeth). The power of the motors and the human capabilities of the shearer governed the options. There were no regulations governing the matter, nor any need. In shearing culture, machines and blades divided the old and the young in the decade before World War I. The design of machinery parts, though, was left entirely to the manufacturers.

Standardisation notwithstanding, ongoing competition for an expanding market left plenty of scope for adaptation and improvement. Shearing plants – that is, the motors, the overhead gears, and pulleys - were advertised in newspapers read by graziers and farmers such as *The Pastoral Review* or *The Land*. Handpieces were more often promoted in the union newspaper *The Worker*. Shearers made the decisions that mattered about combs and cutters. There were endless possibilities for bevelling, shaping and rearranging the teeth. Advertising always insisted that the latest modifications were sure to lead to bigger tallies. The importance of a money-making ethic amongst shearers demanded nothing less, while the AWU, publisher of *The Worker*, took no offence. Personal choice governed the combs that were used and it was perfectly acceptable for a man who liked the Wolseley to shear alongside a mate who used Listers. Nobody thought anything of it.

³² Fraser, *This Century of Ours*, pp. 199-200; Godfrey Bowen, *Wool Away: The Art and Technique of Shearing*, Van Nostrend Reinhold Co, New York & Whitcombe and Tombs, Wellington NZ, 1974 (first published 1955), pp 100-3.

The ‘broad gauge comb’ – later called the ‘wide comb’ – appeared in the early 1900s. Probably the first version was manufactured by Burgon and Ball, but this is not certain. It was an inch wider than the standard comb and had 13 teeth instead of 10. The cutters featured four prongs rather than three. The same handpieces were used, but adjustments had to be made to the ‘forks’ (the mechanism allowing the cutter to oscillate), so that the ‘throw’ (a term used to describe the sideways movement) accommodated the full cutting potential of the wider comb. Most shearers were capable of carrying out this relatively simple transformation but it took a little time and once the change was made there needed to be a good reason to return to the narrow comb.³³

E.L. Barnes refers to them during his account of shearing in New Zealand in 1904. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that he developed an early version.

It was at Te-Mata that I designed and used a new type of shearing machine comb and cutter for use in large open-woolled sheep, such as those in the north island of N.Z. and other countries where sheep are bred for their carcass, rather than for their wool. At this time the large open-woolled sheep were being shorn with the same type of machine to which were fitted the combs and cutters of the same width as those used on the small close-woolled sheep of other parts. It appeared to me that it would be an advantage to use combs and cutters of a wider type on the large open-woolled sheep, as the shearing machine could easily cut the extra width and so take the wool off the bodies with a fewer number of 'blows'. I had a wider set of comb and cutter made and tried it out with great success. Through a patent agent in Hastings, I applied for a provisional patent for this improvement, at a cost I could little afford at the time; but I did not receive any benefit from it. Some years later a wide comb and cutter, that was a success, was put on the market by an American firm, and I am told they are very widely used in N.Z. and wherever large open-woolled sheep are shorn and crutched.³⁴

These comments allude to the early uptake of the wide cutting comb in New Zealand and the accepted wisdom it was unsuitable for shearing Australian merinos. They also point to the most obvious advantage they offered – faster shearing.

The AWU’s reaction was surprisingly swift and by 1910 the union had a rule:

No shearer shall use a broad gauge machine unless all other shearers employed in the shed are supplied with similar machines.³⁵

The mateship meaning of this is clear but it also implicitly recognises the practice of competing for tallies. It was not ‘fair’ if some shearers got the advantage of the wide comb and others did not, although this belies the fact that different designs of narrow

³³ AIC Wide Comb Case Transcripts 1983, pp. 1447, 1588-1589, 1996.

³⁴ SLV H17273, Box 125/1, Barnes, *Shirtsleeves to Shirtsleeves*, p. 305. Fraser, *This Century of Ours*, p. 201, refers to a ‘Barnes handpiece’ which first appeared in Australia in 1899, but this is probably not the same inventor.

³⁵ AWU Rule Book, 1910-11

comb also displayed different shearing efficiencies. The rule was not actually an outright ban, and was worded to apply in any particular shed rather than sheds in general. It did not address, arguably, the greater evil – full teams of wide comb shearers roaming the outback at the expense of ordinary shearers. Evidently it was not an issue although this is puzzling. This is precisely the time that the legion of MSU men were coming back into the AWU and it is surprising that they did not question the rule. In 1910 union leaders would have been cautious about antagonising the MSU men, but it also had many members who felt threatened by contract shearing, and who viewed with alarm any innovation that made the fast men faster. The deep emotional commitment to the narrow comb can hardly have been fully formed at this time, yet the rule had materialised within a year or two of wide combs first appearing. The intention resembles the rule against private handpieces introduced in the late 1890s. Despite the received wisdom that wide combs were not much of an advantage in merinos, there is a clear recognition of their potential to boost shearing output. This view of broad gauge combs was expressed in forceful terms by Jim Laracy at the 1911 AWU Conference.³⁶

There is evidence that wide gear was available in Australia between 1908 and 1918. How universally is conjectural. Advertisements for the ‘Cooper Wide Cut’ appeared during 1908. The illustrations clearly reveal it as a 13-tooth model although the width is not actually mentioned. This was probably before the union rule, but the advertisements do not reappear in 1909, suggesting the comb did not catch on with shearers.³⁷ Wide combs appear in the 1913 Australian Catalogue for Dangar, Gedye & Co, agents for Lister machines.³⁸ AWU organisers encountered wide combs in the sheds from time to time. Conomodine shed (a farming property in the Molong district with about 6,500 sheep) had five shearers using ‘broad cut forks’ in 1909. The organiser was not surprised because ‘it [has] always been regarded as a “scab” shed’. Apparently, half-hearted unionists were likely to be wide comb shearers. In 1910 at Brindingabba, a shed of about 50,000 sheep in far-western NSW, three shearers were caught using broad gauges. They had fitted a special plate to attach them to the machine and the ‘rep’, F.H. Peters, objected. A shed meeting was called and two of

³⁶ See Chapter 5.

³⁷ For example, *The Worker*, 2/1/1908, p. 7; 9/1/1908, p. 28.

³⁸ Private correspondence with Jim Donaldson, editor of *Blades and Shears*, a newsletter for amateur collectors of old shearing machinery.

the offenders succumbed, no doubt reluctantly, but the third was obstinate. Rule 103 was still new and there was an argument about its meaning, so Peters wrote to the General Secretary for an interpretation.³⁹ They shore on for several days waiting for Macdonell's reply, continuing to argue the point and getting on one another's nerves. The ruling when it arrived was emphatic. Broad gauges must not be used without everybody's agreement.⁴⁰

The practice of 'pulling combs' was a way of getting around the rule. Shearers developed methods of bending the teeth of a standard comb. One way was to put the comb in a vice and apply a blowtorch to soften the steel for bending with pliers or tongs. One shearer explained how he put a horseshoe into the fire until it was red hot. He then lodged the outside tooth of the comb in a nail hole for leverage. He tempered the teeth with a candle flame before subjecting them to the horseshoe treatment. Others were known to carry a piece of blowpipe which was useful as the lever.⁴¹ 'Pulled combs' seldom replicated factory engineering and graziers considered them a danger to the sheep.⁴² For its part, the union considered them an insult to mateship. Shed organisers continued to complain from time to time about the 'widespread' practice and it was periodically condemned in resolutions sent to AWU conferences. The original rule did not define precisely what a broad gauge machine was and in 1915 the wording was sharpened up, defining it as 'wider than the standard Wolseley, Moffatt, or TUS'.⁴³ This still left room for interpretation, although the whole matter never seemed likely to become a major controversy.

Innovation by manufacturers continued to test boundaries. In January 1921 union discipline in the Clermont district of Queensland was wearing thin. 'Almost everywhere in this district members are breaking some rule of the union or the award', complained the local organiser. Many were 'using a certain bent-tooth comb'.⁴⁴ He was referring to a Cooper comb in which the bottom tooth was kinked at

³⁹ This was before telephones were widely available to shearers.

⁴⁰ *The Worker*, 5/10/1910, p. 7.

⁴¹ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 24/1/1924, p10. The 'horseshoe' method was still being used in Western Australia in the 1950s. Hobson, *Across the Board*, p. 172.

⁴² Hobson, *Across the Board*, p. 94.

⁴³ AWU Rule Book, 1915/16.

⁴⁴ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 3/2/1921, p. 21.

Figure 10-1: 'Cooper' Advertisement 1921

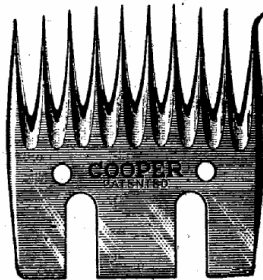
SHEARERS A.W.U. CONVENTION 1921

Makes a ruling that any Comb in excess of 2½ inches from outside to outside of teeth be declared a broad gauge Comb.

The *Cooper* Patented Bent Tooth Comb

IS NOW WITHIN THE UNION WIDTH

The Cooper Bent Tooth Comb secures maximum results with minimum effort. It will give better results than any comb within the Union width. Sells for only 4/- each and uses a Standard Cutter at 1/- a piece.



← THIS PATENTED CURVED TOOTH

is unanimously pronounced by Shearers all over Australia to produce results that no other Comb, regardless of width, has ever been able to produce. In opening up it catches no wrinkles. You can keep out from the horns and save points. No coming back for that cut on the long blow. No stabbing under the shoulders. Trims a sheep quicker. Leaves no ridges on the body. Saves nerves and saves worry, and helps you generally.

Obtainable from Contractors and Storekeepers Throughout Australia, or by Post Direct Same Day Your Order is Received.

Cooper Engineering Co., Ltd.,
129 SUSSEX STREET, SYDNEY.

Clark & Fauset Ltd., Brisbane. N.Z. Loan Co., Hughenden,
Townsville, Rockhampton, Longreach.

Source: *Queensland Worker*, 21/4/1921, p 21

the end in order to draw in more wool (see Figure 10-1). This made the comb fractionally wider than the 'standard Wolseley'. But was it a 'broad gauge comb'? In every other respect it was a normal 10-tooth comb. Shearers liked the Cooper and the AWU was loath to prevent them using it, and the rule was changed to accommodate the 'Cooper Patented Bent Tooth Comb'.

The meaning of broad gauge combs shall be any comb exceeding 2½ inches from the outside of the top tooth to the outside of the bottom tooth.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ AWU Rule Book 1921-22.

For the first time the rule was explicit. It was a line in the sand, and a clue to the enduring puzzle of future attitudes to wide combs and union policy regarding them. The union did not care what the properties of the teeth were but it would control the width of the comb. It had now put a number on it – 2½ inches. This gradually assumed sacred status while other features of shearing machinery could be varied without attracting any protest whatsoever. The Cooper Engineering Company seemed to appreciate the delicacy of the matter. The comb ‘is now within the union width’, chirped its advertisement, while dancing around the issue of whether it was faster. The potential for superior workmanship and a reduction in ‘nerves and worry’ were emphasised. Few shearers would have missed, however, the subliminal message in the suggestion that one of the cuts on the long blow might be eliminated.⁴⁶

Meanwhile the practice of ‘pulling’ combs and the occasional sighting of a wide comb continued to be admonished. In 1923, Sam Brassington, another Queensland organiser, complained that ‘every brand and breadth of comb [is] used, which [is] very unsatisfactory to all concerned’. He related an instance of a man who had been shearing ‘150 to 160’, who got a daily tally of 212 after fitting a broad gauge and this was ‘altogether unfair to members [of the AWU] in that shed’.⁴⁷ Brassington’s suggestion was that the standard size of the comb should be restricted to 2¼ inches, which would have outlawed the Cooper with the patented bent tooth. He argued that an extra ¼ inch led to unemployment as it took fewer men to shear the same number of sheep. This was the crux of the matter. The wide comb rule was partly intended to protect rouseabouts because the wool came off faster, forcing them to work harder. But it was also intended to ensure a ‘fair’ distribution of sheep (and therefore income) amongst shearers. Brassington was one of the loudest voices opposing ‘southerners’ in Queensland sheds in the 1920s.⁴⁸ He was answering to a constituency that had already taken root in Queensland, and no doubt elsewhere, which conflated past notions of rural grievance with current experiences of disadvantage. For some shearing was a mechanism for upward mobility, but there were also those who felt entrapment. This was not purely economic, because part of it was the perceived

⁴⁶ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 21/4/1921, p. 21.

⁴⁷ The claimed effect of the broad gauge seems exaggerated. Many years later when authentic controlled tests were done, wide combs added 20 to 30 sheep to a shearer’s daily average, not 50 to 60 as this example implies.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 5.

condescension of the grazier class and city slickers. Brassington put the union view in a form which resonated with IWW-type rhetoric.

The constitution of the union [aims] at the complete emancipation of all workers, but under this speeding-up system how [can we] hope to emancipate [our] workers? To secure [this] end the speeding up must go.⁴⁹

However, most shearers did not have to be forced to ‘speed up’ by a nasty boss, they did it naturally. Yet the term was consistently used year after year at the AWU Conference – condemning contracting, advocating the universal tally and other such causes. Still, the AWU Conference refused to get very excited about these supposed betrayals of mateship. Brassington’s motion failed to get up. In 1924 Jack Durkin, who was very much a fellow traveller with Brassington, explained that shed committees in his Western District of Queensland had been actively policing the matter and fining offenders. But when he brought a motion to the conference floor for an increase in fines and more rigorous enforcement of the wide comb rule it lapsed without a seconder.⁵⁰ Likewise the abolition of contracting and the introduction of a universal tally never got very far. The leaders of the AWU seemed to regard these outbursts as a useful means of allowing its Left-wing to let off steam.

Flushed with the success of the ‘bent tooth’, Coopers introduced the ‘Marvel’, featuring a ‘double bent tooth’ (see Figure 10-2). This was also popular with shearers, but brought graziers into the equation. The ‘Marvel’ had a pinching effect as the wool was drawn in to be cut, leading to unevenness or ‘ridging’, especially when used by shearers with poor technique. There was also a risk, they contended, that the bent tips would cut the skin or sever the teats of lambs. This was denied by the manufacturer, and by the AWU when a case was brought to the Arbitration Court in 1926. The Court heard a large amount of evidence on these points, by no means all of it consistent. The strongest evidence against the comb was provided by R.C. Wilson, General Manager of the Graziers’ Co-operative Shearing Company. This carried weight with Justice Powers.⁵¹ In 1927 the AWU attempted to have the clause abolished, but Justice Dethridge, like Powers in 1926, was unmoved.

⁴⁹ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 24/1/1924, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Durkin has already been introduced in Chapters 6 and 7 as a radical influenced by the IWW and the PWIU.

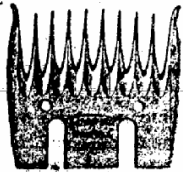
⁵¹ ABL NAA B1958/ 10 Box 2 Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, pp. 299-300.

Figure 10.2: The 'Cooper' Range of Combs 1924

JUST WHAT THE SHEARER WANTS !

Just what the shearer wanted in Combs and Cutters could only be evolved after years and years of earnest study of shearing requirements, backed by the closest attention to every detail of design, material, and workmanship.

Because such methods of investigation and manufacture have been consistently pursued in their making, COOPER COMBS and CUTTERS are recognised everywhere as standing alone for fast, easy cutting and long lasting.



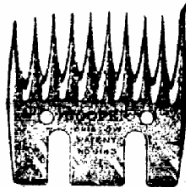
"THE MARVEL"

Cooper "Marvel" Comb

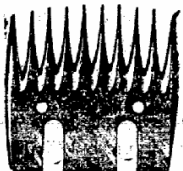
Gives the full 2½ inch union width without losing the correct teeth spacing, and takes any 3-prong Cutter.—The extended teeth are specially shaped to take the wool more easily, and to ride smoothly over the ridges without danger of stabbing or picking up. They make shearing easier and bigger tallies possible.

Cooper Single Long Tooth Comb

Chosen by many shearers, particularly for use in "very hard" sheep. For this class of shearing it may be had with the extended tooth set straight instead of curved as used in the freer sheep.



THE SINGLE LONG TOOTH COMB



THE BENT TOOTH COMB

The Famous Cooper Bent Tooth Comb

Continues to remain popular. Its high quality steel and improved finish enable it to give splendid cutting and lasting results.

The Latest Cooper Cutter

is quite on a par with the popular Cooper Combs. Everywhere it is used it gives the highest degree of satisfaction.



COOPER CUTTER

Cooper

**COMBS
AND
CUTTERS**

Give Faster Shearing, Easier Work, Last Longest

MARVEL COMB, 5/-, LONG TOOTH, 4/9; BENT TOOTH, 4/-; CUTTER, 1/-

Get your supply from the local Store or Contractor or direct from any of the undermentioned:—

Clark & Fauset Ltd., 79 Eagle St., Brisbane

New Zealand Loan & Mercantile Agency Co., Ltd.

HUGHENDEN — TOWNSVILLE — ROCKHAMPTON

COOPER ENGINEERING CO., LTD.

129 SUSSEX STREET — SYDNEY

THIS ADVERTISEMENT (*The Worker (Brisbane)*, 28/8/1924, p18) CONTAINED NO SUGGESTION THAT ANY OF THESE COMBS OFFENDED THE AWU RULE.

Graziers were concerned about the bend in left hand tooth. It was always "in the wool" and shearers could not effectively control it. This was banned in the 1926 Award. The "Marvel" was a modified 10-tooth comb, not a 13-tooth broad gauge comb.

The graziers did not object to this. The longer outside tooth was not considered dangerous because it was on the shorn/unshorn margin. It was mostly "out of the wool" and visible to the shearer.

This comb caused debate in 1921. The AWU had modified its broad gauge comb rule so that shearers could use it.

The 3-pronged cutter was used with all three combs. Broad gauge combs used a 4-pronged cutter.

Shearers called as witnesses by the AWU were an interesting bunch. As the union was opposing the grazier claim, witnesses were ‘freedom of choice’ money-makers. The usual diehards of mateship who thought things had to be even to be fair were not required. Those chosen duly performed, explaining the great benefits of the Cooper ‘Marvel’ and downplaying its faults. But in the process these witnesses, of varying age and experience as shearers, let slip a few home truths that Jack McNeill, conducting the case for the AWU, might have preferred were not aired. With surprising frankness several of them volunteered that they pulled the teeth on standard combs when the ‘Marvel’ was not available. Pulling combs was explicitly forbidden by AWU rules, but they had no shame in admitting to it. The 2½ inch limit was coming in without any debate, but this begs a question that the AWU’s own witnesses, if pressed, might have revealed views that were embarrassingly politically incorrect. L. Benson, for example, told the court that he had never used the double bent tooth himself, but this was only because he had other preferences. ‘I bend the teeth of [standard] Wolseley combs myself’, he brazenly stated. Slightly nonplussed, McNeill asked if this might extend the points ‘beyond the measurement’. Benson denied it, but it was not a reply that would have convinced anyone present.⁵²

Most of this evidence contradicted what grazier and contractor witnesses said, and Justices Powers and Dethridge both chose to reject it.⁵³ Probably the shearers were a bit too cavalier in denying some of the problems that the graziers had raised. For example, James McIntosh denied that ‘ridging’ was exacerbated by the combs, suggesting that ‘other things’ also caused it ‘such as the headgear and faulty duplicates’.⁵⁴ S.B. Turnbull, who was a convert to the ‘Marvel’ having previously been ‘prejudiced against it’ was also asked about ridging. ‘No. A man who ridges the wool [with] one of those combs will ridge it with any comb.’⁵⁵

Both men were very experienced shearers and no doubt their opinions were solidly based. J.W. Allen himself acknowledged that the double bent tooth was not a serious problem in the hands of skilled shearers, but he was asking the court to regulate on the

⁵² ABL NAA B1958/ 10 Box 2. Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, p. 609.

⁵³ The clause on combs came into the Pastoral Award in 1926 under Powers. In 1927, when the AWU applied for it to be removed, Dethridge was presiding.

⁵⁴ NAA B1958/ 10 Box 2. Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, p. 450.

⁵⁵ NAA B1958/ 10 Box 2. Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, p. 559.

basis that most shearers were not of this calibre. Benson, the same man who had virtually boasted about pulling Wolseleys, fell into a trap under crafty cross-examination by Allen. Had he ever cut off the teats of a ewe with a double bent tooth? ‘I have taken off a few with it’, the shearer admitted freely, ‘but I have taken a few off with the others’.⁵⁶ It was a good answer, but a bit too candid in the circumstances.

The result of all this byplay was a new clause in the Award.

The shearer shall not, without the consent of the employer, use any comb wider than the standard size of two-and-a-half inches, nor shall he use any double bent teeth comb.⁵⁷

‘Without the consent of the employer’ was inserted to accommodate farmers who had crossbred sheep rather than merinos. This reflected the New Zealand experience, where coarse wool breeds prevailed and wide combs had already practically eliminated the standard narrow comb from its woolsheds.

The Court heard no evidence at all on the effect of wide combs on shearing. J.W. Allen’s lengthy submission in which the (mostly bad) effects of the double bent tooth were analysed with forensic detail, contained but a single reference to the wide comb. He merely pointed out that as the union had a rule against it, he assumed it would not object.⁵⁸ Justice Powers could say no more:

As to the first part of the claim [i.e. the standard size of two and a half inches] no objection has been made.⁵⁹

From there, however, it was more complicated, but Powers more or less adopted the script that J.W. Allen and R.C. Wilson had provided.

As to the second, the union strongly objects to the claim, and many shearers prefer the comb referred to. It is speaking generally a new comb, and the employers are almost unanimous in their objections to it – many of the objections are serious ones. The comb gathers more wool than the ordinary 2½ inch standard comb, and is therefore contrary to the first part of the claim agreed to. The weight of the evidence is clearly against the double bent comb, but not against the comb bent on one side only, which is useful as a guide.⁶⁰

Ted Grayndler for the AWU did not deign to refer to the wide comb at all – not even to thank the Court for enshrining one of the union’s longstanding rules. Grayndler also argued with some passion in defence of the double bent tooth. Shearers should be free as individuals to use whatever gear they wished.⁶¹ Again, debate concerned the

⁵⁶ NAA B1958/ 10 Box 2. Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, p. 610.

⁵⁷ CAR 1926, p. 468. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸ NAA B1958/ 10 Box 2. Pastoral Award Transcript 1926, pp. 1141, 1144.

⁵⁹ CAR 1926, p. 469.

⁶⁰ CAR 1926, p. 469.

⁶¹ NAA B1958/ 10 Box 2. Pastoral Award Transcript 1927, pp. 405-6.

double bent tooth and entirely ignored the width of the shearing comb. It was already taken for granted that there was little point in wasting time arguing about it.

Thus began the career of the clause in the award. Never before had the Court adopted an output restricting measure, or even been asked to. Condemnation of the evils of contracting, and the quest for a weekly wage rather than piecework were perennially floated at the Conference. Flirtation with the ‘universal tally’ in the 1930s was still occasionally revisited in the 1950s. However, the AWU leadership understood that these preoccupations of mateship alienated its more conservative agrarian wing, and always blocked them before it got anywhere near the Arbitration Court. Except for Allen, the wide comb ban would have met the same fate. Possibly this explains Grayndler’s graceless acceptance of this gift from the graziers, but if he sensed it would cause trouble he gave no hint of it. However, nor was there reason to believe that broad gauge combs were a matter of much importance. Only half a century later did it blow up as the most poisonous issue dividing shearers since the MSU days.

From time to time further refinements occurred. In 1936 there was a modification to assuage fresh grazier concerns about new combs without altering the overall thrust of the restriction. As in 1926 and 1927, width was hardly mentioned. The award now excluded:

... any comb having a longer tooth on the lower side or in which the space between the last two teeth on the lower side is different from the other spaces in the comb.⁶²

What this actually meant hardly matters. During the hearings J.W. Allen had asked his witnesses to comment on the pros and cons of several different combs and the court felt that it was creating reasonably intelligible parameters.⁶³ Grayndler was not at all concerned that some shearers might have an advantage over others, arguing that ‘you cannot make them equal’, whatever regulations apply.⁶⁴ More significantly, in 1938 the prerogative of the employer to allow restricted combs was removed.

The shearer shall not use any comb wider than 2 ½ inches between the points on the outside teeth.⁶⁵

The wide comb ban was now absolute, but in 1948 it was made even more emphatic by placing the onus on the employer as well as the shearer.

⁶² *The Worker*, 13/5/1936, p. 17.

⁶³ *The Worker*, 20/5/1936, p. 17.

⁶⁴ *The Worker*, 20/5/1936, p. 19.

⁶⁵ Gibson, *Use of Wide Combs*, p. 6. Emphasis added.

The shearer shall not use, nor shall the employer permit a shearer to use any comb wider than 2 ½ inches between the points on the outside teeth.⁶⁶

This was insurance against the union's fear that unscrupulous contractors, perishing the thought, might still try to coerce shearers into using the forbidden instrument. In the meantime, in 1942, the union's rule was also changed to remove all room for discretion. What was now Rule 122 simply said:

No member shall use a broad gauge comb and cutter.⁶⁷

No 'ifs', not 'buts'. What could be simpler than that?

It is not clear why these modifications were made. They occurred as the PWIU was disintegrating and militant shearers were moving back into the AWU, and then as wartime shortages of shearers fuelled woolshed conflict. There was no sign yet that the graziers or Grazcos saw wide combs as a way of alleviating shearing problems. This was still at least 20 years away. Incidents involving 'pulled combs' and wide combs continued to be reported but there is no sense that it was an escalating issue. Probably, the wide comb rule was now seen as part of a long tradition, and references to it in the award and union rules were tidied up. Gradually a quite new idea lodged in the minds of militant unionists, that the ban had been one of their most cherished victories over the squatters. The truth was that the squatters had given it to them on a plate 20 years earlier. For non-militants – the majority – the conventional wisdom that wide combs were not effective in merinos held sway. There was thus no forceful opposing interpretation. That, too, was two decades away.

In 1961 a revealing debate at the AWU Conference indicated how entrenched attitudes had become. Clyde Cameron, at the time Secretary of the South Australian Branch, moved that the union seek to have the provision prohibiting 'bent teeth' deleted. The reason, he said, was that there were combs on the market within the allowable width, but which might be technically illegal because of the bent nature of the bottom tooth. They were popular with shearers and it was suggested that the award be altered to facilitate their use.⁶⁸ It was an eerie echo of 1921.

⁶⁶ *ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁶⁷ AWU Rule Book 1942/43, p. 40.

⁶⁸ *The Worker*, 1/3/1961, p. 12.

The delegates discussed Cameron's motion at some length. Charlie Oliver of NSW warned that 'convention should not fiddle with a provision that had stood the test of time and *meant so much to the Union*'.⁶⁹ He pointed out that Coopers had been forced to withdraw a comb which featured a bent tooth because when tested it was 'fractionally over 2½ inches'. This was probably a reference to the problem with the Cooper Patented Bent Tooth Comb many years before.⁷⁰ Despite the slight inaccuracy, nothing was ever forgotten by the AWU! The Tasmanian delegate, Ramsey, asked Cameron whether he was absolutely sure that the combs in question were under the allowed 2½ inches. Cameron was not so easily caught out – he had double checked his measurements. 'Yes, a shade', was the triumphant reply. That was good enough for Ramsey, and he said he was in favour of the motion. Delegates were prepared to contemplate a change to the 'bent tooth' provisions if shearers wanted it, but under no circumstances imaginable could the width rule be tampered with. They were all speaking to the converted and saw no need to elaborate. It is possible to scour AWU debates and find little that explains why this mattered so much. To the uninitiated the emphasis on fractional variations in width might have seemed bizarre. Certainly the rule on wide combs was of long standing and the difference between 2½ and 3 inches had a meaningful impact on tallies. 'Pulled combs' had always been a bone of contention amongst shearers and the matter had always been policed. But it was a marginal issue at best. Offenders had received little encouragement from graziers or contractors over the years. As a union cause it did not have a history of bitter struggle against the odds. It does not remotely compare, for example, with the long and honourable campaign the AWU waged to get improvements in accommodation. Nor did it remotely replicate the angst that had been generated over the years about wet sheep. In the end the delegates agreed that the matter was too touchy for the conference to settle in open debate and Cameron's resolution was hived off to the Executive Council, and to oblivion. The 'bent tooth' rule remained, but what really mattered was that the wide comb ban was safe from meddling interference. It was manifest that it had become a sacred cow of some significance.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Emphasis added.

⁷⁰ *The Worker (Brisbane)*, 21/4/1921, p. 21.

⁷¹ *The Worker*, 1/3/1961, p. 12.

As the myth became more powerful in the twenty years after 1945, the circumstances which sustained it began to unravel. For most of its existence the rule had few formidable enemies. Neither graziers nor money-making shearers seriously questioned it. The first sign of a crack in the consensus occurred in 1967 when the Graziers Association asked the Court to approve wide combs. This failed, but it was a telling sign. New Zealand shearers were beginning to make their mark in Western Australia and this eventually ended the truce which had existed for fifty years.

Wide Combs Infiltrate the West

Wide combs were brought to Western Australia by New Zealand shearers. Their use exploded in mid-1970s. It is clear that Western Australian shearers adopted them willingly. In the eastern states union diehards ensured that pulling combs was not widespread. In the west it was common before the New Zealand invasion. Terry Harper's shearing career began in the late-1950s with the contractor Eric Kennedy.

Everyone shored with pulled combs. If they said they didn't they're liars. When Eric Kennedy told us the union organiser was coming at about 11 o'clock and to put our straight combs on, I wouldn't. Tommy Reeve, Paddy Tuppin and Hank de Kliver all changed to straight combs while the organizer was there. He fined me; he said, 'You know you're doing the wrong thing'. I told him he knew I'd been shearing with them for years and I wasn't changing!⁷²

None of the other shearers referred to were New Zealanders. Tommy Reeve who began shearing in the early-1950s was more circumspect, but likewise thought of the union in much the same way as a grazier. 'I've never had much trouble with unions. Only once for pulled combs.'⁷³ 'Snow' McMeikan went on his first shearing trip in the Western Australian pastoral country, also with Eric Kennedy, in March 1952. 'Nearly all the shearers used pulled combs', he observed and could only remember one exception. He had only contempt for 'the red-hot union men' from Queensland who provoked vicious arguments over pulled combs.

There was a terrible fight one night between the poor old learner, Stan Blatch, and a *troublemaker* from Queensland; Stan took a nasty beating. It made me feel sick in the stomach to see his face. It took a long time to heal.⁷⁴

New Zealanders soon realised they could get away with wide combs, and before long their Western Australian brothers were using them.⁷⁵ Arguments that wide gear

⁷² Hobson, *Across the Board*, p. 116.

⁷³ Hobson, *Across the Board*, p. 257.

⁷⁴ Emphasis added. Hobson, *Across the Board*, p. 167.

precluded high quality shearing were quickly refuted - or perhaps brushed aside – as were assertions of wrist and forearm injuries. Valerie Hobson’s interviewees mention wide combs and the New Zealand influence. Most commented favourably, some enthusiastically. There are dissenting opinions, and some disapproved of law breaking while accepting that wide combs were not inherently bad. Astute observers realised that different skills were needed to manipulate wider gear, and only the better shearers could develop these quickly. This was relevant to the long-running furphy that they were ‘harder to push’. If wide combs had produced roughly the same advantages to all shearers they might not have been regarded as quite so evil.

Union objections were not a serious handicap, the only real problem being a supply of wide gear. New Zealand shearing equipment was mostly imported from the Sunbeam plant in western-Sydney. It was unthinkable for Sunbeam to defy a union ban, and a black market in re-imported combs developed.⁷⁶ One of the AWU’s problems was that its organisers were too thin on the ground. An organiser in the pastoral country found shearers working on a weekend, and was treated with contempt. The accepted union procedure was to take names and impose fines, but he decided it was futile, and would distance the union even further.⁷⁷

Graziers in the pastoral zone belonged to the PGA, which in the late-1970s had about 600 members. They were bound by the award, but farmers belonging to the Farmers Union of Western Australia were not formal respondents. There were about 7,000 of these and they owned most of the sheep in the State, now over 30 million.⁷⁸ If shearers were members of the AWU they had to be paid the award but non-members were outside it. Farmers were paying award rates or higher, so for shearers wanting to flout the rules it was a massive loophole which accelerated the spread of wide combs and drained AWU membership. Too late, when wide combs were already having an impact in the east, the AWU tried to ‘clean up’ the west. A ‘Roping In’ claim in the Commission aimed to bring the Farmers Union under the Pastoral Award. The claim succeeded – in fact, the farmers did not contest it - but faltered in one vital respect.

⁷⁵ AIC Wide Comb Transcript 1982 p. 452. ‘Summary of Transcript – Wide Comb Matter’, p. 16.

⁷⁶ This did not stop the AWU from ‘black banning’ the company in 1982.

⁷⁷ ABL, N117/380, Butcher to Keenan, 20/5/1985; N117/378, General Secretary to Executive Council, 2/1/1985.

⁷⁸ AIC Wide Comb Transcript 1982.

Commissioner Barnes concluded that wide combs were so ubiquitous that she exempted the whole of Western Australia from the ban, at least for the time being! She did direct the parties to confer amongst themselves to see if they could reach a satisfactory outcome. All was not lost for the AWU, but it was a serious blow.⁷⁹

Showdown in Eastern Australia

One of the objections to wide combs was that they were not effective in merino wool. It was a matter of design because wide combs had been manufactured for New Zealand wool.⁸⁰ The teeth were too thick to move easily through finer wool, and there were other issues. In the evenings after shearing Robert White spent hours on the grinder experimenting with different ways of ‘touching up’ the combs to improve their performance. These innovations were ultimately adopted by Sunbeam to mass manufacture a merino-type wide comb. By the mid-1980s there were several makes producing satisfactory results and much useful advice on shearing methods.⁸¹ White and the New Zealanders always believed in this possibility, whereas unionists – many of them very accomplished shearers – flatly denied it.⁸² At this stage of the affair, White was acting ‘outside the law’ – as Charlie Oliver pointed out – and the AWU at least could claim the high moral ground.⁸³

In 1980 a NSW grazier observed that a shearer doing 200 a day with wide combs had been getting about 150 with narrow gear. He considered the wide comb work ‘a lot cleaner’, although he noted that they needed to be ‘used by experienced men’. With more wool coming off he was reducing his average cost of shed hands. The AWU was equally attached to the *status quo*. Union rallies in NSW towns drew large crowds. In January 1980 Dave Hollis, an AWU stalwart from Western Australia, gave a spirited account of the ‘Situation in Western Australia practiced by Scab Shearers including New Zealand shearers and assisted by Employers’. The key message was that if wide combs were allowed in, it was opening the way for other provisions to be lost. He put his concerns on paper for the NSW Branch Secretary in a document titled ‘How The

⁷⁹ CAR, Vol. 241, p. 557.

⁸⁰ Nonetheless, wide combs had been used in the United States and probably also Argentina, where merino was the predominant breed.

⁸¹ *Shearing*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn/Winter, 1985, p. 56; Vol. 5, No 1, May 1989, p. 23.

⁸² Conversation with Gail White 2004.

⁸³ ABC Television News Item May 1981, Archive Accession No. 334973.

West Was Lost'. New Zealand practices, he said, were a 'leprosy' that would spread throughout Australia if wide combs were not stopped.⁸⁴

The Livestock and Grain Producers Association (LGPA) sought modernisation of the wide comb clause.⁸⁵ The matter was handled in a diplomatic, even conciliatory manner, insisting that it did not want to impose wide combs against the wishes of the AWU. It suggested trials could be conducted with scientific objectivity to settle any questions arising. The AWU refused to co-operate so a formal application was lodged with the Industrial Commission get legal underpinning for a series of experiments to test the efficacy of the wide comb. This coincided with the 'Roping In' case, in which the union was signalling its desire to reinforce the ban rather than wind it back. Woolgrowers still believed there were grounds for optimism, despite union posturing.

Both matters were combined before Commissioner Barnes. A settlement of sorts was reached. The application for trials was reserved, basically because the union would not concede it, but the union did not get quite what it wanted in Western Australia, as noted above. Nothing had been properly resolved but nor were any doors slammed shut. Barnes sent them away to confer, and come back to the Commission with suggestions. If both matters could be resolved without further Commission intervention, so much the better. Barnes must have thought she had done the trick, because the Commission heard nothing more for 15 months. Industrial relations reformers at the NFF began to focus on the wide comb issue. However, neither the NFF nor the Commission quite realised that the AWU would man the barricades over wide combs.⁸⁶

If it was quiet at the Industrial Commission, out in the bush feelings were on the boil. A number of union rallies were held and Ernie Ecob became the public face of the anti-wide comb cause. He had recently been promoted to NSW Branch Secretary after a long career as an AWU organiser at Coonamble. He was steeped in 1956 mateship folklore, fumed about squatters, scabs, and 'Western Australians and New

⁸⁴ ABL N117/357(a), Mawbey to Mitchell, 23/6/1980, Hollis to Mawbey, 1/7/1980.

⁸⁵ The LGPA was formed in 1978. It took over the functions of the old Graziers Association which were amalgamated with wheat grower organizations. Such an alliance would have been unthinkable once, but times were changing. The present Farmers Association of NSW now speaks for these various interests. Connors, *To Speak With One Voice*, p. 207.

⁸⁶ Gibson, *Use of Wide Combs*, pp. 11-18; ABL N143/8.

Zealanders'.⁸⁷ Inertia rather than militancy probably best describes the AWU Executive Council, but they all reflected the same ingrained prejudice against wide combs that the debate in 1961 had revealed. Certainly none of them sensed the wider social shifts that the graziers' new stance reflected, or the risk that they were digging themselves in.⁸⁸ As the NFF interest intensified any realistic possibility of a deal was being poisoned, but it was slow to realise it. Accordingly the situation drifted without the resolution expected.⁸⁹ The AWU was already set against compromise when Houlihan reported to his Executive Committee:

The Union is as sick of it as we are and if we give them an honourable way out they will accept it. This presupposes that we don't have any major flare-up over wide combs before we are able to coax the matter into the Commission for them to direct trials to take place. Credit must be given to the LGPA for the way it has managed to keep the issue off boiling point in NSW particularly in light of Charlie Oliver's frequent calls to arms on this issue.⁹⁰

Oliver's private assurances to Houlihan were at odds with his militant rhetoric in a speech at Dubbo. 'You have the law on your side, you have the Trade Union Movement, you have never changed, so don't change now'.⁹¹ Dennis McIntosh remembers it as an inspiring oration. Whether the meetings expressed rank-and-file opinion or had been stirred up by Ernie Ecob is debateable. There is no doubt, however, that Ecob and Oliver were popular figures amongst the AWU faithful.⁹²

The flare-up soon occurred. There had been constant friction when AWU officials visited woolsheds at shearing time. If shearers were using wide combs they were usually doing so with the full approval of the grazier and AWU intrusions were resented. One case was the focus of an ABC 'Countrywide' program in May 1981. Properties shearing with wide combs had been 'black banned' by the AWU and were unable to receive vital supplies of stock-feed. Other farmers were helping, a telling sign that graziers were in a militant mood. Robert White was often the contractor in these skirmishes and was 'black banned' after an episode at Rockdale station. He

⁸⁷ For biographical details on Ernie Ecob: SMH, 6/9/2000, p. 39; *Coonamble Times*, 30/8/2000, p. 7; Mawbey to Mitchell, 24/6/1980; Mawbey to Mitchell, 25/6/1980, ABL N117/357(a); Mawbey to Mitchell, 31/3/1980; Ecob to Mitchell, 2/6/1981, Minutes of meeting of Pastoral Workers, 1/11/1981, N117/362; Mitchell to McIntosh, 4/8/1982, N117/365(b); Minutes of Pastoral Workers Meeting, 26/4/1983, N117/368(b).

⁸⁸ ABL Mawbey to Mitchell, 31/3/1980, N117/357(a); Minutes of Pastoral Committee, 8/12/1980, N117/358(a); *The Land*: 26/6/1980, p. 11; 31/7/1980, p. 6; 31/8/1980, p. 9; 30/10/1980, p. 13.

⁸⁹ ABL Mawbey to Mitchell, 31/3/1980, N117/357(a); N117/381(b).

⁹⁰ ABL N143/12 Industrial Committee report, 19/10/1981.

⁹¹ Telephone conversation with Paul Houlihan, July 2003; ABL, Minutes of Pastoral Workers Meeting, 1/11/1981, N117/362.

⁹² Communication with Dennis Mitchell, 2008.

claimed his shearers were not using wide combs but the union claimed he was in breach of AWU rules merely by talking about wide combs.⁹³ Despite his leper status White was still a union ticket holder. He was summoned to the Executive Council to explain himself. Surprisingly he agreed to appear, writing a long letter in advance explaining why his activities were in the long run interests of shearers. The AWU was convinced he was collaborating with the NFF. He was certainly personally known to NFF officials, and they in turn were enraged at the way he was victimised. It was becoming clear that the AWU was implacably opposed, even to trials of the wide comb and the LGPA returned to the Commission in November 1981 with a claim to lift the wide comb ban unconditionally. The gloves were off. The AWU retaliated by re-listing its claim to have the wide comb banned in Western Australia. The peace settlement Commissioner Barnes had hoped for had evaporated, but it was now Commissioner Ian McKenzie's problem. For the AWU the ban symbolised past victories over the squatters. For NFF it represented much of what they detested about 'union power'.⁹⁴ In a series of hearings and appeals officials of the NFF and the AWU haggled in the Industrial Commission for almost three years – from November 1981 to July 1984.

1982 Arbitration Case

The initial case ran from November 1981 to the middle of 1982. The evidence was tedious, and at times farcical. Both side brought in legions of witnesses, shearers and others selected to say what they wanted the Commission to hear. Hour after hour, day after day AWU loyalists bemoaned the poor quality of shearing and the extra strain imposed on their wrists and forearms. It would be bad for the wool industry. Why interfere with something that had been around so long? They said less about what was really on their minds – that it was unfair, or a secret plot of the NFF to reduce shearing rates – although the notion that it was 'divisive' and upsetting the 'harmony' of the industry did get considerable air play. Witnesses included a sprinkling of graziers and contractors who wanted things left as they were. McKenzie received

⁹³ White may have been bluffing, but anyway, Commissioner McKenzie later opined that this was a dubious proposition.

⁹⁴ Countrywide, 1/5/1981, ABC TV Archives, Accession number 334973; Gibson, *Use of Wide Combs*, p. 16; ABL N117/362, LGPA Press Releases, 29/9/1981, 8/10/1981; AIC Wide Comb Transcripts 1981 (copies held in ABL N117/362, N117/365(b)).

enough correspondence, over an above what he heard in evidence, to convince him that opinions were firmly held and that some violence was occurring. The NFF brought in a corresponding stream of witnesses who said exactly the opposite – shearers who insisted it made the work easier, and graziers and contractors who declared there was no problem with the quality of the shearing provided the practitioners knew what they were doing.

Hearings adjourned and the parties had to wait several months for McKenzie to sift the evidence. Perhaps he, too, was having trouble understanding what the fuss was over. Houlihan told his superiors he was confident the Commission would rule in their favour. Eventually it did just that on 10 December 1982. Robert White heard that it was imminent and drove all night to be in the court. McKenzie's judgement was lengthy and quoted extensively from the transcripts.⁹⁵ In his view the extensive use of wide combs in Western Australia could not be ignored. Evidence given by equipment suppliers was 'strong and compelling'. The formal change to the clause was not all that breathtaking, and amounted to reintroducing the employer prerogative that had been removed in 1938. Few employers in 1982, however, would refuse any shearer wanting to use wide gear. The effect of it was that the 56 year ban was lifted. The union rule of over 70 years still applied, but Robert White and his followers would not be taking any notice of that.⁹⁶

The decision provoked an immediate crisis within the AWU and it issued a belligerent statement calling the decision 'repugnant' and an appeal was launched. Over two months a Full Bench listened to a detailed review of the evidence but, on 23 March 1983, upheld McKenzie's decision. The appeal judgement ran to nine pages, and was savagely critical of the AWU. The union's stance was 'hedged in by conservatism and tinged with hysteria'. The Bench considered that restrictions were 'calculated to smother the development and manufacture of more efficient combs'.⁹⁷ Finally, it saw the union's complaint in the appeal proceedings that there had been no trials for what it was.

⁹⁵ The AWU appeal claimed McKenzie had ignored critical evidence.

⁹⁶ CAR Print F1367, pp. 200-201.

⁹⁷ CAR Print F2060, p. 7.

In light of the implacable opposition of the AWU to any such trial and its refusal to attend, should they have been conducted, the sincerity of this submission is open to question.⁹⁸

The 1983 Strike and Aftermath

The Executive Council met in crisis to consider this calculated insult, but it had already created a situation it could not control. Telegrams poured into the office condemning the Commission. A strike was called, and the dispute was now a test of will.⁹⁹ Violence underlined bitter feelings between unionists and ‘scabs’. A *Land* photograph showed the battered face of Bill Allen, a 50 year old overseer at ‘Mutaroo’ in South Australia. McLachlan and Houlihan saw the strike as an opportunity to break ‘compulsory unionism’. Grazcos co-ordinated the supply of strike-breakers, some of them brought in from New Zealand. Security ‘precautions’ were arranged. Neil Ellery, a New Zealander operating in Western Australia, came over to do a run of sheds. He made enemies not only of the AWU, but contractors who were cut out of sheds. The AWU used spotter planes to identify sheds where shearing was taking place. Raids on ‘scab sheds’ were often undisciplined, spontaneously decided on during drinking sessions. Woolshed arson occurred. Shotguns, iron bars or heavy sticks were used on occasions. There was claim and counter claim as to who was to blame for violence. On balance, though, shearing continued.

The Shearing Contractors Association adopted a more neutral stance, mindful that when it was all over people would have to work together again.¹⁰⁰ The strike was looking shaky when the AWU Executive Council met on 5 May 1983. The Commonwealth Government was pressing for a settlement. While the meeting was in progress a letter from K.J. Crawford, Secretary of the Shearing Contractors’ Association, was hand delivered. The message was brutally frank. Headed “MOST

⁹⁸ CAR Print F2060, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁹ *The Land*, 16/12/1982, p. 7; AIC Wide Comb File Houlihan to McKenzie 16/11/82; ABL N117/365 (b), Executive Council Resolution, 23/7/1982; Allen to Ecob, 10/5/1982; Allen to Mitchell, 4/5/1982, CAR Print F1367, pp. 198, 200.

¹⁰⁰ ABL N117/368(b), Account of Meeting at Dubbo, 26/4/83; *Sunday Telegraph*, 24/4/83, p. 28; *The Age*, 22/4/83, p. 5; *The Land*: 5/5/1983; 12/5/83, p. 3; 9/6/83; 21/4/83, p. 7; 24/3/1983, p.5; *Australian Penthouse*, September 1984, pp. 35-41, 160.

¹⁰⁰ Conversation with Ian McLachlan, Tupra Station, August 2003.; *The Land*: 7/4/1983, p. 5; 14/4/1983, p. 3; 21/4/1983; p. 35/5/1983, pp. 3, 4; 12/5/1983.

CONFIDENTIAL URGENT”, it went on: ‘hundreds of members are willing to defy Union direction and return to work as a mass body.’ This was from friends, not NFF propaganda. The letter suggested shearers were now concerned about ‘Hire Purchase, Bank Cards, Housing Loans, etc. High interest rates etc.’ It contained a garbled but penetrating appraisal of trends in shearing culture:

At the same time this is 1983, not 1956, in the younger generation of shearers the nostalgia does not last as in the past, reason being Suburban shearing. The traditional yarn around the fire, to keep the pot simmering, like the fire has gone out.¹⁰¹

The AWU’s legal advisers explained that its position was weak.¹⁰² Having stirred up rank-and-file passions, it did not have an exit strategy. McKenzie was also sensitive to grassroots passions, and reluctant to rely on the Commission’s overarching legal power. This was the crutch that enabled the AWU to take the matter back to the Commission for another arbitration marathon. At the behest of the new Federal Minister for Industrial Relations, Ralph Willis, a conference was held. It was chaired by McKenzie, and attended by officials of the Union, the NFF, the LGPA, and the Minister’s Department. The six point agreement ending the strike accepted that the risk of shearers’ injury might still be an issue, and the Commission agreed to hear more evidence. It was emphasised that this was not a ‘re-hearing’ but an opportunity to assess aspects not previously considered. The Commissioner was not prepared to restore the wide comb ban while arbitration was continuing, but, aware of the potential for violence, stipulated that employers were required not to discriminate against shearers who might still want to use narrow combs. Correspondingly, wide comb shearers should not be intimidated by AWU organisers.¹⁰³

Hearings for the next phase of the legal battle began in June 1983 and continued until April 1984 – another 10 months of remorseless testimony, little of it shedding new light. The Shearing Contractors Association had finally decided that change was for the best and Ivan Letchford’s testimony had a deep impact on McKenzie.¹⁰⁴

Contractors feel the wide comb is a great technological advancement with tremendous assistance to all concerned in the industry: the shearers, the grazier, and above all the animal itself. These are the considered opinions of the executive committee of the Shearing

¹⁰¹ ABL N117/376(b) Crawford to Mitchell, 5/5/1983.

¹⁰² ABL N117/368(b), File note; ABL N117/376(a) Commins & Co. to Mitchell, 28/3/1983.

¹⁰³ CAR, 5/6/1984, Print F5655, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁴ The copy of the transcript in the AIC archives is marked with red ink and an orange highlighter. It makes clear that some testimony particularly influenced McKenzie.

Contractors' Association of Australia, after a discussion at our annual meeting and a survey of our members.¹⁰⁵

Letchford added that contractors would always shear to the award and abide by arbitration. Commissioner McKenzie handed down his final decision on 5 June 1984.

I am satisfied that the conclusions reached in my decision of 10 December 1982 were correct and to return to the exclusive use of 64mm combs would be against the weight of evidence.

and:

I again stress that this industry cannot remain impervious to technological change.¹⁰⁶

AWU will to fight was now tempered by fatigue, but it was not quite the end of the haggling over combs. In a last ditch stand the AWU argued that there was an argument for standardisation, echoing the members' rule of 1910 that everyone should use the same. The NFF strongly opposed it but the Commissioner, uneasy about continuing woolshed disturbances, established a committee to investigate. The wide comb dispute as such lost momentum, but the parties continued to bicker. Houlihan thought the AWU was internally divided on how to define a standard comb. Shearing machine manufacturers were already producing a variety of combs and shearers were establishing preferences dictated by individual taste, the type of sheep, and the condition of the fleece. Already combs were exceeding 86 mm, but width was only one of many parameters. Regulation was no longer practicable. The committee met spasmodically in the second half of 1984, but the discussion went round in circles and no concrete proposals emerged. The wide comb dispute, *per se*, had run out of oxygen. But it certainly was not the end of vigorous AWU protest against the workplace regime the NFF was relentlessly promoting. Opposition transmogrified into a campaign against New Zealand shearers that lasted for another decade.¹⁰⁷

The Court of the Bush

Meanwhile, in the 'court in the bush', a separate battle raged.¹⁰⁸ While the first phase of hearings was dragging on tension in the regions persisted. Sheep still had to be shorn – wide combs at this stage were still illegal, but how long would this be the

¹⁰⁵ AIC Wide Comb Transcript 1984, p. 2392.

¹⁰⁶ CAR, Print F5655, pp. 85, 86.

¹⁰⁷ Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs, *Employment of Visitors to Australia in the Shearing Industry*, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, February 1994.

¹⁰⁸ The expression was used by a witness at the Commission. Arbitration Commission, AIC Wide Comb Transcript 1983, p. 1899.

case? Robert White was the victim of a number of violent attacks, and he bought guard dogs and carried firearms. Shearers were in two opposing camps. Ken Prato from Ballarat discovered this when he returned to shearing in 1982 after an absence of three or four years. The first question anyone asked when he applied for a job was ‘Wide or Narrow?’ Prato was a very competitive shearer, but was also a stickler for unionism with finely judged ideas of solidarity. By no means could he be called a ‘hot-head’ but he believed shearers should stick up for their rights and firmly believed wide combs were a sinister plot to undermine conditions. He remained loyal to the narrow comb system.

During the strike and immediately after some of the worst violence occurred. *Australian Penthouse Magazine* published a graphic insider’s account of Ellery’s gangs in the Bourke and Brewarrina areas during the early months of 1984. By now wide combs were legal. However, at dispersed woolsheds the Commission’s ideal of fair play according to the six-point plan was not easily enforced. Both sides accused each other of underhand practices. According to the NFF the majority of shearers simply accepted the Court’s decision, experimented with wide combs, and found them convenient to use. Manufacturers reported that they could not keep up with the demand for wide combs. The union countered that suppliers had flooded the market with wide combs, effectively denying shearers a choice. Grazcos was accused of not employing narrow comb teams. The reality was that an overwhelming majority of shearers had already switched to wide comb use, although some may have done so reluctantly.¹⁰⁹ Contractors who had been sceptics mostly changed their minds.

Ken Prato was one who could not accept the ruling and he remained a narrow comb shearer for the 1984 season. He had been working with a contractor who did not employ wide comb shearers, so he was able to get sheds. It was, he acknowledged years later, ‘partly from fear of change and partly from the ingrained staunch anti-scabbing philosophy we had always followed’. As the season progressed, ‘stories of

¹⁰⁹ *The Land*, 9/6/1983, 30/6/1983, p. 10; 19/4/1984, p. 4; ABCTV Countrywide, 14/3/1984, Accession No. 4910; South West News Pictorial (Young) 7/5/1984, p. 1; 14/5/1985, p. 1; 16/5/1984, pp. 1,3; 18/5/1984, pp. 2, 5; 23/5/1984, p. 5; 8/6/1984, p. 5; Canberra Times, 11/5/1984, p. 3; 12/5/1984, p. 1; 11/6/84, p. 3; The Advertiser, 13/6/1984; *Australian Penthouse*, September 1984, pp. 35-41, 160.; *The Worker*, 29/2/84, p. 1, Presented to AIC as Exhibit W2; AIC Wide Comb Transcript 1983, pp. 1701-7, 1731-7; AIC Wide Comb File: Nankervis to Manning, 21/2/1984; McAfee to Mackenzie (sic), 7/3/1984; Alan to Manning, 24/2/1984.

the tallies being shorn by quite average shearers began to filter through'. He heard of one man, who he knew as 'someone who had usually snagged along at 120-130 a day in quite good sheep', getting his 'first 200'. Prato was a highly competitive shearer, despite everything, and there was only so much of this he could take. Apart from the acknowledged conservatism, his main fear was the often stated one of extra physical stress. But he 'began to rethink'. He resolved to finish off the season, but to have a go with wide combs in 1985.

The contractor was finding it harder to get shearers, and seemed relieved when Prato broached the subject with him. They mutually agreed - 'we have had our heads in the sand a bit'. Even so, Prato felt a disquieting guilt on his first day on the board with a handpiece fitted with wide gear. 'That first big wide blow down the belly seemed like a swipe with a lawn mower'. It did take time to develop the necessary tricks. He still thinks that narrow gear, overall, does a cleaner job, but his own tallies lifted by about 20 a day. Like Letchford the contractor, Prato was critical of the AWU. The strike would have been more effective, many thought, if conducted in the main part of the shearing season (July or August).¹¹⁰ This is doubtful. Strikes had been tried in August in 1922, 1930 and 1945 and all had been easily broken. Robert White, Neil Ellery and Grazcos would have been just as busy in August as they had been in April. No matter, it was a widespread view and the AWU suffered mass defections from previously loyal members. White and his friends no longer felt the need to bother, and Ellery had been a conspicuous anti-unionist from the beginning.¹¹¹

Resistance to wide combs was driven by deep emotion as much as by reason. Blanche D'Alpuget toured western-NSW in 1987 with a photographer to compile a coffee-table book called 'The Workers'. Inevitably, it included shearers. Grievances from the wide comb dispute were still raw, and she wrote:

From the outset the AWU leadership treated the wide-comb dispute as an argument about values – is it moral? – and not about facts – is it efficient? The narrow comb was made to symbolise Truth, Beauty and the True Shearer, the Archetypal Mate. The wide-comb was described by AWU officials as 'immoral and repulsive'. It was Satan's thing.¹¹²

The AWU was reacting to, and to some extent stirring up, feelings running though the gruff sentimentalists in its ranks. This group romanticised mateship but the most

¹¹⁰ Written statement by Ken Prato prepared for Paul Williams, 25 April 2003, pp. 1-2.

¹¹¹ *Business Review Weekly*, Vol. 11, No. 20, 26/5/1989, p. 32.

¹¹² Blanche D'Alpuget and Oliver Strewe, *The Workers*, Collins Australia, Sydney, 1987, p. 116.

obvious manifestation of this was a surly, and sometimes thuggish attitude to outsiders. There was a strong sense that the 1956 strike had proved that union strength could be asserted if the arbitration court got things ‘wrong’. Over and over again the mantra was repeated that concessions to graziers risked an erosion of conditions achieved through years of struggle and group solidarity. That wide combs might benefit shearers - an increasingly widespread opinion - was rejected out of hand. If the graziers wanted the rule changed there was an ulterior motive. The NFF did indeed have an ‘agenda’, but it was doing it less than justice to suggest that the primary goal was to return shearers’ conditions to the ‘bad old days’.

A year after publication of *The Shearers* Patsy Adam-Smith, as the extant expert on shearing culture, was asked to enlighten mystified urban Australians about the wide comb dispute. ‘There is no art, craft or calling so little understood as shearing’ – an air of mystery seemed appropriate but she was warming to an exposition of the bushworker legend:

The shearers’ way of life has been with us almost since the coming of the First Fleet. It is a true grassroots industry. The shearer is the epitome of the traditional Australian and has had a greater effect on our national ethos and history than almost any other character.¹¹³

The rest of the article repeated union propaganda about the evils wide combs embodied, and drew a parallel between the present strife and great union battles of the past:

History is repeating itself and if a solution is not found swiftly, the wheel will have turned full circle back to the 1890s when the cause of the flashpoint was similar to today’s and the result was tragic for a nation with worker pitted against worker, shearer against ‘free labour’, [and] farmer against shearer.¹¹⁴

What was in fact happening was that the last vestiges of the mateship myth were being stripped away. It was disintegrating under the weight of changes in the way society was ordered. This was not as out of sync with grassroots opinion as Patsy Adam-Smith believed and some sections of it were actually driving the revolution.

Conclusion

The narrative of underdogs battling power and privilege is a stock-in-trade of Australian nationalism. It has spawned a reverse snobbery denigrating elitism, the

¹¹³ *National Times*, April 8 to 14 1983. pp. 9-10.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

‘cultural cringe’, and pretentiousness. Indeed, there is a certain pride in unrefined manners and levelling humour. Selected from a much quoted paragraph in the opening pages of *The Australian Legend*, this in part was how Russel Ward characterised his ‘typical Australian’.

He is a ‘hard case’, sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better, and so he is a great ‘knocker’ of eminent people unless, as in the case of his sporting heroes, they are distinguished by physical prowess. He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen.¹¹⁵

It rings true, both to people who admire Australian society and those who belittle it. Possibly its penetrating accuracy explains the enormous success of Ward’s work. He finds the legend in convicts, Irish migrants, gold miners, bushrangers and ‘nomad’ bushworkers. Ward saw it, too, in nineteenth century shearers, but the type is easily recognisable in the twentieth century.¹¹⁶

‘Mateship’ was vague enough and sufficiently adaptable to fit various conceptions of Australian culture. Hirst’s ‘Pioneer’ type is associated with settlement rather than itinerancy, but had a lot of Ward’s ‘practical man’ who is ‘willing to have a go’¹¹⁷. The Anzac legend utilises comparable elements of the egalitarian impulse. Australian soldiers were disrespectful towards officers, yet seen as effective fighters; self-reliant pioneer selectors resented rich squatters and miserly banks; shearers formed a powerful union to get fair conditions from those who would deny them.

In shearing sheds there were class divisions with origins in the different social and economic positions of squatters and selectors in the nineteenth century, which persisted into the twentieth as they became graziers and farmers. Ward’s legend captured elements of this, but so does Hirst’s. Early in the century C.E.W. Bean recognised the ‘autocracy’ of the homestead which kept station hands and jackeroos subservient, and the ‘republic’ of the woolshed. Squatters, if they were wise, took shearers ‘meetings’ seriously. There was a strong countervailing strain of meritocracy in the shearing workforce. Bean called it ‘the genius of the Australian character’, but others thought genius lay in the attribute which Bean criticised - the collective

¹¹⁵ Ward, *Australian Legend*, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ For example, Bill ‘Swampy’ Marsh, *Great Australian Shearing Stories*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2001.

¹¹⁷ Ward, *Australian Legend*, p. 2.

willingness to stand up to the squatters.¹¹⁸ Social evolution roughened the edges of these distinctions and evened some of them out.¹¹⁹

Meritocracy did not have to be invented. It was always present. Historians of all ideological shades agree that the 1890s Queensland strikes failed because pastoralists engaged ‘free labour’ (‘scabs’ to the unionists). Shearers were easily found in the agricultural districts of Victoria, Tasmania – and also New Zealand.¹²⁰ While some were unemployed and others from cash-poor struggling selections, the Marxist interpretation of them as an exploited low wage reserve army is unconvincing. Certainly, the MSU shearers of the decade before World War I cannot be characterised this way. Nor can Jack Howe and his ilk from the sheds of the 1890s. During the twentieth century the mantle of the desperate farmer continued to be seen amongst soldier settlers and amid the ruins of the Great Depression. Equally, there is evidence of strong upward mobility within the shearing workforce, and of farming families which profited from land settlement policies. The biographies of the wheat farmer, Arthur Cosh, and the shearing contractor Raymond Stibbard have similar elements. Both were from New England. Many shearers came from similar backgrounds. They had good relationships with the shearers they employed.¹²¹ In the aftermath of the 1956 strike, competition shearing and innovations such as Tally-Hi were symptomatic of a largely unnoticed strengthening of the meritocracy instinct.¹²²

On the other hand, there were pockets of disadvantage which harboured ongoing and deep grievances, especially in Queensland and western-NSW. This was manifest in a number of ways. Shearers from Longreach and Barcaldine had inherited their culture from the strike camps. In the 1920s they resented contract shearers from ‘the south’. Much later, they resented wide comb New Zealanders even more.¹²³ The Bushworkers’ Propaganda Group and the PWIU were never mass movements, but

¹¹⁸ Recall discussion on ‘Representations of Shearers’ in Chapter 1. Original reference is Bean, *On the Wool Track*, pp. 81-110.

¹¹⁹ See Chapter 2.

¹²⁰ Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, Macmillan of Australia, South Melbourne, 1968 (first published 1940), p. 128; R.J. & R.A. Sullivan, ‘The Pastoral Strikes, 1891 & 1894’, in D.J. Murphy, *The Big Strikes: Queensland 1889-1965*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1983, p. 87; Arnold, ‘Yeomen and Nomads’, pp. 117-142.

¹²¹ Cosh’s depot shearing shed, Chapter 2, and Stibbard’s shearing runs, Chapter 5.

¹²² See Chapters 5, 8.

¹²³ See Chapters 5, 10.

sufficiently irritating to both the AWU and the graziers to preoccupy them for almost four decades.¹²⁴ Militants were especially annoying because they claimed some of their authenticity from bush union myths which the AWU felt it owned. This lured the AWU into a greater degree of belligerence towards graziers and farmers than situations warranted. This was especially true, it is argued, of the 1956 strike.¹²⁵

For a union that had built its considerable influence around the arbitration system, the stubborn refusal to accept Commission decisions during the wide comb dispute was out of character, although this was also true of 1956. It did so, apparently, because it believed there was substantial grassroots opposition to wide combs. Ernie Ecob certainly convinced the Executive Council and reports of violence gave credence to the view. But violence also alienated unionists from their rural communities, and the gruff threatening tone of AWU rhetoric did not play well on television.¹²⁶ Many union members were profoundly uneasy about the implications of wide combs, but very few supported a militant approach. Commissioner Ian McKenzie was very cognisant of violence out in the woolsheds. He thought the AWU case thoroughly unconvincing, but he did not want a decision that was unenforceable. The AWU is a large and powerful union operating in many industries, but its heart and soul had been defined by its historic shearing roots. From this perspective the wide comb dispute was disastrous. Shearers of all shades of opinion deserted it over its handling of the issue. Statistics are not available but one union official admitted, ‘There was a lot of disillusionment after that dispute. It gave a good excuse to many shearers not to continue paying union dues’.¹²⁷

Unionism had always found money-making uncomfortable and wavered between trying to suppress and accommodate it. In the long run, though, individualist ambition was actually more influential in shaping the culture of woolsheds than class conflict and its fellow traveller the arbitration system. Although in its earliest form contracting was linked to pastoralists, the class enemy, shearers immediately took to it, some a

¹²⁴ See Chapter 7.

¹²⁵ See Chapter 8.

¹²⁶ *60 Minutes Program*, ‘Wild and Woolly’, screened on 19/4/1983 by Channel 9 TV. Tape in possession of writer.

¹²⁷ By the 1980s shearers were 5 per cent of AWU membership, although in some rural districts it was 20 per cent. This, and quote from Mick Madden interview in 2005 from Robert Tierney, ‘The Central West’ in Hagan, *People and Politics*, pp. 173-4; Conversation with Laurie Walsh, 2004.

little unwillingly it must be acknowledged. The evolution of country based contractors followed closer settlement and farming, but this was also possible because of the pre-existing individualistic elements within shearing culture.

Similarities between the legends have been noted but differences, and perhaps even more, contradictions within them, are just as intriguing. Free of ‘old world’ social hierarchies, Australian ideas of democracy differed noticeably from winner-take-all American-style freedoms centred on meritocracy. Ted Graynder commented in 1927 on the brutality of American industrial relations. Probably there were nods of agreement from employers as well as his AWU mates.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, opportunity in Australia, no less than in America, could not always guarantee that the outcome would be ‘fair’.

The wide comb dispute’s role in the economic transformation of Australia in the 1980s was minor. Wool was no longer the pivot of the economy. Nevertheless, the timing and symbolism were exquisite. ‘Laborism’ had reigned for eight decades and the heavy hand of centralised arbitration and protection of employment intensive industries defined the practicalities of the Australian ‘fair go’. A Labor Government was now setting about its destruction. That the ‘Deakinite’ consensus of the Federation era would disintegrate in the late-twentieth century will perhaps become as interesting to economic and social historians as the economic, social and environmental turmoil of the 1890s which led to its creation. It has, rightly, already been categorised as ‘a peaceful revolution’.¹²⁹

Graziers were amongst the first to re-embark on the *laissez faire* bandwagon, but shearers provide a more interesting insight into the social values which made such a revolution possible. Their culture of mateship had elements which were highly collective, and others which were intensely individualistic. They had played a major part in defining the egalitarian ‘fair go’ in the first place, and staunchly resisted attacks on its integrity from 1916 to 1956, and after. There was a rear guard action, of course, but when the moment of truth arrived, the money-making individualism which

¹²⁸ Refer to Chapter 3.

¹²⁹ Christopher Lloyd, “Regime Change in Australian Capitalism: Towards a Historical Political Economy of Regulation”, *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3, November 2002, p. 238.

had always been part of their ethos triumphed over mateship. Contract shearing, which predated the arrival of arbitration, glided into the new era, as always virtually unnoticed.

The union's failure reflected bigger social forces. The Hawke Labor Government swept into office at the very moment that the wide comb matter erupted into open conflict.¹³⁰ The new government, with the ex-shearer Mick Young in Cabinet, did not want its 'Economic Summit' compromised by inconvenient associations with 'old' unionism. While Hawke's government maintained a touching faith in arbitration through what it called 'The Accord', it liberalised financial controls and slashed tariffs, accelerating the exit of the old economic order. There is no more poignant indicator of the predicament that confronted the AWU in 1983 and 1984. Society had moved away from the rigidly regulated economic system which tried to deliver an egalitarian outcome. Nonetheless, the mythology of the shearers' fight for a 'fair go' from the squatters still resonates in general attitudes to income distribution and social justice. The struggle goes on in the hearts and minds of a well-paid consumer society where the 'underdog' has long triumphed. Yet the shearers themselves had always resisted this approach.

¹³⁰ The federal election was on 13 March 1983. The appeal decision which led to the strike was announced on 23 March 1983.

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New Zealand Herald
New Zealand Journal of Agriculture
Pastoral Review
Shearing Magazine,
Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)
The Australian
The Bulletin
The Coonamble Times
The Land
The New Zealand Worker
The Shearer
The Sunday Telegraph
The Western Herald
The Worker
The Worker (Brisbane)

The AWU newspapers have been used extensively as primary material. Since 1892 there have been variations in the masthead (eg *The Worker*, *The Australian Worker*) with a range of subtitles. Moreover, for most of the twentieth century there were separate publications for NSW and Queensland. For consistency of referencing the NSW publication is cited as *The Worker*, and the Queensland paper as *The Worker (Brisbane)*. For the most part the papers were accessed via the microfilm collections held at the State Library of NSW and Fisher Library at the University of Sydney. Hard copies held in storage by the Fisher Library were also used.

Likewise the newspaper for pastoralists has existed under various names: *Australian Pastoralists' Review*, *Pastoralists' Review*, *Pastoral Review*, and *Pastoral Review and Graziers' Record*. For consistency it is cited as *Pastoral Review*.

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Diaries of Roy Ryan

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State Library of Victoria

E.L. Barnes manuscript *Shirtsleeves to Shirtsleeves*
 Oral History tapes, Patsy Adam-Smith

Abbreviations used in citation

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABL	Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University
AIC	Australian Industrial Commission
CAR	Commonwealth Arbitration Report
CPD	Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (Hansard Reports)
EVASI	Inquiry into the Employment of Visitors to Australia in the Shearing Industry (Hansard Reports)
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NLA	National Library of Australia
NSW PD	NSW Parliamentary Debates (Hansard Reports)
NSW PP	NSW Parliamentary Papers
QPD	Queensland Parliamentary Debates (Hansard Reports)
QPP	Queensland Parliamentary Papers
SMH	Sydney Morning Herald
SLV	State Library of Victoria