

‘A good job in the railway’: Rockhampton Railway Workshops 1938 to the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

Many former employees of Queensland Rail look back fondly to pre-reform days and to what they believe was then ‘a good job in the railway’. Largely through oral history from former employees from the late 1930s, this paper examines the nature of working life in the Rockhampton Railway Workshops to the 1980s. The research reveals that, in that era, perceptions of a job there as being ‘good’ derived from the terms and conditions of employment but also extended into the socio-cultural realm, where mateship, pride in trade and perceived valued service to the State contributed to both work satisfaction and notions of identity.

Introduction

In June 2004, hundreds of former Queensland Rail employees in Rockhampton, including many from the workshops section, gathered for a weekend reunion in the city. Drawn from across the state and beyond, they toured the railway complex, including the heritage-listed Roundhouse, visited displays at local museums and rekindled shared memories of what they believed had been ‘a good job in the railway’. For Rockhampton Railway Workshops retirees, the focus of this paper, guaranteed lifetime security constituted the foundation of that belief; however, a position in the workshops provided additional benefits - both pecuniary and non-pecuniary and often unattainable in private industry or even elsewhere in the railway service - which far outweighed the drawbacks. Consideration of a job there as being ‘good’ also reflected the distinctive social and cultural context of the workshops where masculine camaraderie, craft pride and perceptions of valued public service not only contributed to job satisfaction but also helped shape their individual and collective identities. In view of the changed nature of employment there since the 1990s, when Queensland Rail adopted commercialisation and out-sourcing, with consequent job losses and contract employment, it is timely to examine what has become almost as much a casualty of workplace reform as the steam locomotives the Roundhouse once contained.

Theoretical perspectives and methodology

Studies of work and the workplace have traditionally been dominated by experts in labour process theory and employment and industrial relations theory positioned largely in the capital-labour dialectic (Patmore, 1991:131). However, as others have argued (Probert, 1989:1-3; Fox & Lake, 1990:8-11; Fox, 1991:ix; Shields, 1992:2,4), work is not a theoretical construct nor one that has intrinsic meaning or objective measurement; it is an historical, cultural and subjective concept. Historically, Australia’s capital-scarce business environment shaped government which was both a major employer and one whose purpose differed profoundly from private enterprise (Patmore, 1991:51; Fox, 1991:ix). The prime objective of government instrumentalities such as the railway was public service, while profit was a lesser concern as other sources of state income could compensate for an operating loss—in Queensland at least to the 1980s. Moreover, rather than being necessarily exploitative, onerous and alienating as the capitalist paradigm implies, work can bring satisfaction, fulfilment and friendship and can facilitate wider social relations (Fox and Lake, 1990:8-11). Work is integral to the formation of personal identity (Fox, 1991:x), generating feelings of attachment and, for men, notions of masculinity (Taksa, 1999:156-8). John Shields’ (1992:89) study of apprentice metalworkers in large Sydney industrial sites demonstrates a ‘collective self-image’ shaped by work as well, in particular a shared pride in craft skills. His writing and that of Alison Alexander (1992; 1999:41:184) on the Risdon Electrolytic Zinc Works identify the role of masculine camaraderie and pranks in such a context. Finally, work can influence others’ perceptions of people as well as stimulate a degree of envy for certain jobs. Indeed, as Janet McCalman (1985:22) identifies in her study of working-class Richmond, railway employment was commonly regarded as being ‘a good job’ of the highest order.

In recent years, Lucy Taksa has examined the now-silent Eveleigh Railway Workshops in Sydney where she explores 'the physical, social and mental layers' (Taksa, 1999:156) which provide the context for the execution of tasks and employment relations. On a lesser scale, and constrained here by limited wording, this paper explores the nature of work in pre-reform Rockhampton Railway Workshops between the late 1930s and early 1980s. During that period, the facility serviced rolling stock and provided manufacturing and maintenance services for the Central Division of Queensland Railways, as it was then known. At the height of the rail era in the 1950s, there were some 1,250 men in the workshops alone (Cole, 2004). There are now fewer than half that number, with more redundancies scheduled (PWC, 2001; ABC, 2004).

This paper is part of wider research into railway history in Rockhampton only recently begun. Unfortunately, holdings at Queensland Rail, State Archives and the Ipswich Workshops Museum reveal that most of the Rockhampton records have not survived. Therefore, while some material derives from union records and previous research, the paper draws heavily on oral testimony. However, as Shields observes in his work (1992:2), oral history can provide 'an almost palpable account' of the physical conditions of the working environment and an intimate view of day-to-day work practices and social relations unobtainable in written sources. To date, some 30 recorded interviews have been conducted with former railway workers and, from early in the process, the distinctive nature of workshops employment became apparent so the focus moved to that context for initial exploration. The accounts of a dozen workshops men are included here, there being no women employed during the period. Interviewees were either known from doctoral research or were subsequent referrals by old workmates. This admittedly has led to skewing towards sheetmetal workers but also includes coppersmiths, fitters, an engineer, blacksmith, wagon builder and carriage builder. Continuing interviews with boilermakers, plumbers and labourers will provide a more balanced sample. Where general aspects of railway employ are discussed or to highlight contrasts with other sections of the railway, testimony from non-workshops employees has been included. The oldest interviewee commenced work in 1938 while most began in the 1940s and 1950s. Some spent all their working lives in the railway, retiring as late as 2000; others were forced out through technological change in the intervening period. Those latter men in particular help bring into perspective the positive and negative sides of a railway job. Despite the bias to metalworkers and the inevitable distortions in recollection through the lenses of time and personal interpretation (Shields, 1992:3), one can ascertain enough commonality in these stories about work in the Rockhampton Railway Workshops to the 1980s—'before it started to change' (Bendall, 2004)—to explain their belief in having had 'a good job' there.

Working for life in Queensland Railways

In Rockhampton, as elsewhere, Queensland Railways readily attracted job applicants because it provided more opportunities than any other local employer. As one former union delegate concedes, while the department's real function was transport, 'manufacturing employment' was its de facto role (Tait, 2004). 'Blue' Seery (2004) recalls that, when he started as a wagon builder in 1947, 'the erecting shop was an anthill, just crawling with people'. When Brad Neven (2004) began as an apprentice blacksmith in 1945, there were 65 in his shop alone. Many youths applied for jobs before completing the Junior Public Examination. Workshops clerk Brian Cridland (2004) remembers Br Duggan, who was preparing his 1948 class for the exam, asking who had already applied for railway work. When 31 of the 40 boys raised their hands, the teacher retorted 'this is no bloody good to me' and stormed out of the room. During the 1950s and 1960s, the workshops alone apprenticed 100 youths each year for five years. Many remained as tradesmen while others, reluctantly, went 'outside' into private industry (Lawrie, 2003), many to reapply as vacancies occurred.

Like other forms of government work, a railway job was regarded as permanent and promised lifetime security (McCalman, 1985:2). Arthur Simpson (2004), apprenticed as a coppersmith in 1941, explains: 'You had to do something regarded as criminal to be put off.' That security became more appreciated as men married and took on mortgages. Banks, it seems, considered railway workers a good credit risk and readily lent money for home purchase; it was 'a way in, a green light' (Bendall, 2004). For Bob Hoare (2004), who came from Walter Reid & Co's tinshop, the railway provided more security than private enterprise. When work slackened off at Reids, management stood men down without pay or just 'kicked you out', apprentices included. Hoare

applied for a railway position in 1956 and, after a year's wait, was taken on until his retirement in 1995. Permanent work looked particularly attractive immediately after World War II when demobilised troops flooded the market. Blue Seery (2004) undertook a 14-month government trade traineeship for ex-soldiers and was thankful when the workshops took him on as a wagon builder rather than having to be an outside carpenter where, he says, you were 'out in the sun [or] out of work'. Changes in technology destroyed dreams of permanency for some, however, with the advent of diesel-electric locomotives in the 1960s making coppersmiths no longer in demand. Some moved to other roles but others, like Arthur Simpson (2004) who then entered the motor trade, had to find alternative work. Similarly, Bill Bloomfield's (2004) skills as a carriage-builder became redundant when metal carriages replaced wooden ones. Both recall their years in the railway fondly and still regret being forced to leave.

For railway 'lifers', the principle of seniority determined promotion through the ranks and was strictly applied in the workshops in particular where 'you went up the ladder in your turn' (Brown, 2004). Bob Hoare (2004), who started there in his mid-twenties, could never achieve promotion because there were younger men with more years than him. Yet most interviewees approved wholeheartedly of seniority because of its 'fairness' and transparency: all vacancies appeared in the Railway Weekly Notices and there was no divisive 'crawling to the boss' (Cole, 2004). At JM Smith, where Bob Cole (2004) served his apprenticeship, the boss's sons were in line for promotion rather than the senior man or even the most competent employee. The problem with seniority, they all concede, was that the appointee was not always the most competent. 'Some were dills,' admits Blue Seery (2004), 'but that's how it was.' Brad Neven (2004), who also worked at Mount Isa Mines, stands alone in considering that railway seniority 'stifled initiative'.

Other aspects than permanency positioned railway employment more favourably than private sector jobs in the minds of workshops men. Every payday at noon, their money would be waiting in the time-keeper's office, in small numbered metal tins until the 1970s (Cole, 2004). The pay was always correct, with all penalties paid and holiday pay included when due; 'You got what you were entitled to' (Hoare, 2004). As Des Bendall (2004) recalls of his years at Reids and Malleys in Brisbane, private firms expected men to work overtime but did not always pay extra unless the union intervened. That fact is substantiated in 50 years of union reports (Webster, 1999:267-268). In some of the firms he later worked in, claims Arthur Simpson, men did not last long enough for holidays, being dismissed before Christmas. In the days before long-service leave and superannuation in the blue-collar workforce, railway men had accumulated leave paid on retirement. When Bob Cole (2004) finished as a sub-foreman in 1977, he received a 'useful' cheque for \$20,000.

The generally higher rate of pay under state awards advantaged railway men above tradesmen on federal awards in the private sector. On one occasion in 1948 when that was not the case, combined action to force the federal flow-on precipitated a nine-week rail strike across Queensland. It was the collective power of railway unions to defend their members' interests, former workers believe, that made working life there better than in the private sector (Webster, 1999:268,280; Tait, 2004). The annual 'privilege' was a bonus for railwaymen also. Every employee obtained a free pass for family rail travel each year. Surprisingly, while they recognised this 'perk' as something outsiders envied, comparatively few of the workshops men availed themselves of the benefit, finding accommodation on a trip away too expensive or preferring to go camping at the beach (Fitzpatrick, 2004). More useful was the quarter-fare pass several interviewees' daughters exploited to travel together to university in Brisbane (Tait, 2004).

Weighed against these advantages were less appealing aspects of railway employment. While bureaucratic red-tape did not worry most workshops men who simply completed their daily job sheets, Bob Hoare (2004) found the system much more onerous than at Reids: 'Everything [was] in writing on memos. Outside, you just went and argued with the boss.' Having a second job contravened government policy and anyone pencilling at the races or doing a milk-run, for example, received 'a [cautionary] bluey' if found out. Nevertheless, blacksmith Brad Neven (2004) delivered milk for three years—with full knowledge of his workmates—until told to decide between jobs. The punitive powers of the Commissioner for Railways to dismiss, suspend, transfer, fine, demote and reduce pay for neglect of duty, misconduct or breach of any rule or by-law were always present (QS, 1965).

None of the workshops men interviewed had so incurred the wrath of the Commissioner but the case of four men suspended for 'idling and playing cards on duty' (MB, 1957) indicates those powers were still exercised in the post-war era. It seems, though, bosses usually gave a caution, as apprentice fitter Ray Harris (2004) experienced when blamed for a cracker thrown 'under the bum' of a pedantic tradesman. Des Bendall (2004) still hears the roar of the engineer 'threatening to suspend me [for] idling my time [by] reading a newspaper'. In cases of fines for petty offences in the 1950s—'£2 or so out of your pay [which] private bosses couldn't do'—workers could appeal, but the odds being stacked against them was a widely held belief (Bendall, 2004; Cole, 2004). Nevertheless, in outside business they could be dismissed without redress. Petty theft of railway property meant prosecution and dismissal as it would in a private enterprise but the government practice of summary dismissal for a criminal conviction, however minor, seems to be double-punishment inflicted on railway workers. Yet most interviewees concur that this was appropriate; 'You couldn't have criminals there,' opines sheetmetal worker Fred Brown (2004). That view appears somewhat ironic in view of accepted practices in the workshops, discussed below.

The workshops environment

While the nature of railway employment considered to this point reflects common conditions in the service, those in the workshops were distinctive in several respects. Indeed, interviewees saw their existence as being almost as different from that of other railway workers as it was from that of fellow tradesmen in private enterprise. The whistle dictated daily workshops routine. 'There were whistles for everything,' Des Bendall recalls of his 37-year career: whistles to start, to stop, for smoko, dinner, washing hands, going home. The physical environment remains fresh in the minds of men years after their last day on the job as well. 'The dirt, heat, dust, lumps of coke,' recalls Brad Neven. 'Dirty clothes, soot and diesel,' recalls Len Reddy. 'The noise...hammers on metal,' replies Bob Hoare. 'Mrs Boswood insisted I wash my own overalls. She said "the job's dirty but the money's clean",' reminisces Charlie Lawrie of his days as an apprentice fitter. When Bob Cole arrived home every afternoon, he had to scrub to the elbows with Solvol before going upstairs, despite a wash time before knock-off. Even so, the author recalls the 'railway smell'—a pungent blend of solder flux, diesel fumes and sweat—lingering until bath-time.

The corrugated iron buildings were hot in summer, draughty in winter and often had cinder floors until the 1960s (Cole, 2004), although some private firms were considered far worse (Hoare, 2004). In the old Roundhouse, converted to workshops, boards covered old service pits where rats sometimes nested and were only baited when unions complained. Health inspectors did not visit government premises so conditions prohibited in private industry prevailed (Simpson, 2004). As late as the 1950s, union complained about leaking guttering, stinking urinals and blocked sewers and the absence of showers, lockers and drinking fountains (AEU, 1952). The toilets feature vividly in recollections; plentiful in number but with doors removed to prevent idlers smoking and reading. 'There wasn't a lot of privacy...you used to sit along in a row...but you got used to that' (Lawrie, 2004). Bob Cole never got used to it and waited until he got home. After years of eating lunch at their benches or squatting in the shade of the big water-tank, the men obtained canteen facilities in the 1950s when the combined unions set up facilities in a building erected and equipped by the department. From then, they could eat a cheaply purchased three-course meal (Cole, 2004). Overall, though, both the administration and unions ranked good conveniences a low priority (Webster, 1999:281).

Workshops tasks were often dangerous. Arthur Simpson (2004) recalls the intense heat and claustrophobia of crawling into a steam engine to fit copper pipes with the fire going. Bill Bloomfield (2004) lost a finger in a carriage-shop accident; Bob Hoare (2004) has industrial deafness. He claims that before the 1980s, when management began to issue protective equipment, workers were oblivious to the danger of noise and, even when later alerted to the risks, had to request, sign for and share ear-muffs if they wanted them. Several coppersmiths have died and others suffer emphysema, reputedly from inhaling fumes from hydrochloric and nitric acid used in brazing boiler tubes (Simpson, 2004). The work was heavy too. Other than cranes in the lifting, erecting and boiler shops, there was little mechanical equipment, although this is a point of disagreement and indicates changes over time and differences between individual occupations as much as vagaries in recollection. Nevertheless, doing heavy, dirty and dangerous work was an accepted part of the job; after all, they were workers and men and 'that's what working men did' (Bendall, 2004).

Innovation proved very slow in the workshops. Ron Fitzpatrick (2004) describes cutting metal sheets with 'the big knife', a guillotine operated by two or three men swinging on the handle. He brought back pop rivets from National Service in 1955: 'Nobody had ever seen them before. I tried to get the engineers to buy them to make the job easier but they kept on with the old solid hand rivets.' In the sheetmetal shop, everything was done by hand until into the 1980s when 'technology came in' (Reddy, 2004). Reflecting on standards before the 1980s when management started 'spending big money' (Bendall, 2004), former Workshops Superintendent Charlie Lawrie (2004) states: 'We had top men and the equipment was adequate. We had everything that was needed.' Outside industries had more plentiful and more modern machinery but undertook 'boring, repetitious' (Hoare, 2004) manufacturing work in a narrow range of items. As well as repairing engines and rolling stock, workshops men made a wide range of items to service the entire Central Division, from pigeonholes in the offices to sanitary pans for country railway quarters (Bendall, 2004). This diversity, together with the number of tradesmen available, underlay their belief that apprentices received better training in the workshops than in private industry where greater specialisation prevailed (Hoare, 2004). Workshops men also appreciated being able to complete many tasks individually rather than doing only one stage of an item. As a carriage builder, Bill Bloomfield (2004) liked to 'make the thing holus bolus instead of picking out one thing and [having] someone else finishing it. That happened a lot in furniture making.'

One marked difference between the workshops and private enterprise was the pace of work. 'They didn't crack the whip' is Blue Seery's memory of building wagons. Men who started in private industry tell a common story. 'My [railway] workmates said "Don't break any rules in here. You've got to gear yourself to our pace." You fell into a system,' says Des Bendall (2004). That system was a set output per day—the darg—based on a specified time for producing each item or completing each task. Times were listed in a large book kept by the sub-foreman: eight minutes for a pay tin; 16 hours for a roof ventilator; with decreasing times for multiples. Outside, a higher rate was expected due to using, and having to keep up with, machines (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Bill Bloomfield (2004) paints a vivid picture of the boss's son patrolling Tucker and Tuckers' furniture factory, where he worked for a short time. 'He belted his trouser leg with a big stick. He'd report you to the foreman if you weren't working all the time and have you write every minute on the job sheet.' Workshops clerk Brian Cridland (2004) can still quote 'eight handlamps per day' whereas outside workers would be expected to do 12 to 14, 'slaving their guts out'. Bob Hoare (2004) recalls his first weeks in the workshops and quickly learning to toe the line on pace:

When I came from Reids [where] you'd work flat-strap 7 to 4, I was given 200 slush lamps to make. I finished nearly a day ahead of the time limit. I couldn't go any slower. The others told me to slow down [because] if you finished fast, you'd get another job. You just went along with it. As long as the job was done properly, that's what mattered in the railway.

Demarcation disputes between rival unions caused stoppages at times: between tinsmiths and coppersmiths, between 'sheeties' and boilermakers, and where wood met metal. In Bob Hoare's experience: 'Demarcation got on my goat when I first went in...damn ridiculous but you got used to it. Outside [it was] never a union issue; you just did it.'

A commonly accepted practice—and drawing a coy laugh with denial or requests for anonymity from interviewees—was 'doing a foreigner'. That entailed making items for yourself or a mate during lunchtime or smoko, typically using off-cuts from completed work or 'making improvements' to legitimately purchased materials before removal from the premises. Taking scrap pine chips home for the bathroom water heater 'courtesy of Quentin Reynolds' was a variation in the 1950s. 'Unless they were large items,' remembers one worker, 'they went out in your [tin] port. A lot went out over the years.' Most were small items like fishing sinkers or cake tins, but rotary clothes lines and washing machines were not unknown, being placed over the fence or concealed in the surge of bicycles at knock-off time. Sometimes the time-keeper looked the other way. Bob Cole recalls a search at the gate: 'Ports opened, stuff went everywhere' in the crowd before the men left. By the time engineers had fetched the General Manager, 'everything had been spirited away' by men on overtime. Most workers distinguished between 'pinching off the shelf' and 'doing foreigners'; the former was dishonest but the latter was not. Yet both constituted theft and could bring criminal charges and dismissal. However, one retiree comments: 'If anybody got caught, it was through his own stupidity.'

Those who worked in large private industry claim 'foreigners' happened there too (Neven, 2004) but Arthur Simpson (2004) believes it was difficult in smaller outside shops with 'the foreman overseeing you eight hours a day'. Len Reddy (2004) recalls: 'You couldn't do it [at JM Smith's] in my experience...not in daylight hours at least.'

Socio-cultural dimensions

As the willingness to tolerate and cooperate in 'foreigners' indicates, camaraderie ranked as one of the most satisfying aspects of a workshops job. While 'security' was the pragmatic response to such a question, the reply that sprang unqualified and immediate from the heart was 'mateship'. Railwaymen in general were 'like brothers...if you run across a railwayman you could talk to him for hours' in the view of Charlie Lawrie, but the level of camaraderie in the workshops was absent from the administration (Cridland, 2004) and running crew (Tait, 2004). In Fred Brown's (2004) opinion, 'the workshops was one big family. Everyone knew everyone across all the shops.' Those who had spent time in private industry found relations markedly different in the railway. Where tasks were concerned, 'there was always somebody to help you if you got stuck in a job' (Bloomfield, 2004). Arthur Simpson (2004) agrees, finding his coppersmith colleagues 'very loyal... they'd go out of their way to cover up for you. If you made a mistake bending a pipe, they'd stick together and share the blame'. This contrasted with his later experience in a panel-beating shop. 'If you were in trouble [there], the happier they were. You never heard a railway worker criticising his mate but when I went outside it was dog-eat-dog.'

Loyalty was paramount in the workshops ethos (Lawrie, 2004), especially 'not dobbing in' anyone (Neven, 2004). 'Comradeship meant you never split on anybody' to Blue Seery (2004). He recounts the story of a 'wild' workmate who picked a fight with a new man. When the victim complained and witnesses were called for, not a man would come forward. The engineer reputedly announced: 'I've never seen so many blind bastards in all my life. A thousand of you here and not one of you has seen anything!' Bob Cole (2004) recalls a fight between two men to settle a dispute the manly way, organised in the boiler shop and complete with gloves, referee and hundreds of witnesses. The bosses did not investigate, he believes, because they knew nobody would give evidence against either combatant. As these examples show, camaraderie was overtly masculine, reflecting as it did both the nature of the work and the demographics of the workshops; there were no women there until the 1990s other than a female nurse in later years (Lawrie, 2004). Even during World War II, women were not employed as munition workers in Rockhampton as they were in other railway workshops (Cole, 2004). According to Bob Hoare:

We were getting a few girls at end...creeping in as boilermakers. I wouldn't like my daughter working there...too rough for a girl although it's probably better now. It was pretty wild... language and that stuff.

Practical jokes and 'horsing around' held a special place in the memories of workshop men. More innocent pranks played on apprentices included sending them to the store for a 'left-handed hammer' or a 'long weight' or having them hold the end of a heavy plank and then pretending to go for tools for ten minutes or more (Cole, 2004). Of a more physical nature was tit-for-tat dumping of a messenger from another shop in the water trough, while Christmas breaking-up day traditionally brought a spate of water-bombs (Brown, 2004). Around 'cracker night' in November, a favourite trick was to place a double-bunger in a soldering fire-pot during lunch so that, when the device was re-lit in the afternoon, the consequent explosion blew the chimney off and gave everyone 'a hell of a fright'. Reflecting on these acts, many men agree that they were juvenile but 'innocent...[and]...done in a fun context' encouraged by the relaxed workshops fraternity (Bendall, 2004). However, they also acknowledge that some actions, like lighting a ball of newspaper and floating it down the open sewer below the row of occupied toilet seats (Cole, 2004) or setting a fire under a tank in which a riveter was working (Brown, 2004), did endanger lives and would never be tolerated today. At the time, though, bosses accepted it and turned a blind eye; these were blokey stunts in a 'blokey' environment (Bendall: 2004).

Mateship extended beyond work hours as well. Men regularly went fishing or played cricket or football together, while more than a few visited adjacent hotels after knock-off to share a cold beer (Simpson, 2004). Des Bendall (2004) recalls that when he started as a tinsmith in 1963, colleagues invited him to play in a weekend cricket game against the coppersmiths. Having

come from several private shops, he found out-of-hours fraternisation highly unusual, even in a work-based activity. He and others joined a plethora of official railway sporting clubs—football, rifle-shooting, swimming, tennis (Cole, 2004); the Railway Recreation Club which also catered for wives and children with gymnastics, callisthenics, boxing, netball and archery (Seery, 2004); and the Queensland Railways Institute which organised pool, darts, bowls, dances and holiday accommodation (Hoare, 2004). Participation in railway ambulance and fire-fighting teams further cemented workshops men into a close unit. Brian Cridland (2004) missed that convivial atmosphere when he transferred to the pay office where people spoke only to the classifications immediately above and below and never socialised. Len Reddy (2004) sums up the spirit of the workshops: 'You worked in a team environment. You made a lot of friends for the rest of your life.' Bob Hoare concurs, 'I had a lot of good mates there. That was the worst thing about leaving.' So much a part of their life, and indeed part of their identity, were the railway workshops that friendships remain strong over the years since retirement. Until security passes were required, some men made regular visits to workshops to savour the old atmosphere, to catch up on railway gossip (Hoare, 2004; Cole, 2004) and, most likely, to get the odd foreigner done.

Another feature of the workshops environment which made work there enjoyable was the generally good relationship between bosses and men during these decades. That situation was in marked contrast with the other major worksite, Lakes Creek Meatworks, where the meat union insisted all communication with the foreman went through the delegate (Webster, 1999:353). In the workshops, men readily fraternised with foremen, often playing cards at dinnertime and sometimes going fishing at weekends. What fostered the close bonds in the workshops was respect generated by the knowledge that bosses had also served their time and had come up through the ranks. 'We had mighty bosses,' says Fred Brown (2004) with depth of feeling. At the meatworks, on the other hand, foremen garnered little respect, rarely sharing the meatworkers' practical skills and often having obtained a position through family connections or by taking a short course in, say, meat inspection at the technical college. Respect also extended to senior railway management, especially to former Commissioner, Jim Goldston, who started in the local workshops as an apprentice fitter and progressed to 'the top job' in Brisbane throughout his long career (Lawrie, 2004).

Respect for those who had gone before them indicates the high value placed on traditional skills by the workshops men. Paradoxically, while they complain of a lack of machinery over the years, doing things by hand—using their craft as they had been trained—was key to their satisfaction as workers. Des Bendall (2004) nostalgically enjoyed doing:

real sheetmetal work, the old work I'd known [at technical college] when I served my time. We set out the patterns...cut and folded and soldered. You had to improvise but that was pleasurable because you were using your brain and your natural skills.

Ron Fitzgerald (2004) displays with great reverence a notebook in which, over the years, he drew diagrams of all the items he learned to make, as well as entering their respective times. If there was no pressure for speed in the workshops, there certainly was with quality. Restating Bob Hoare (2004): 'The job [had to be] done properly, that's what mattered.'

Camaraderie and trade skill gave a strong sense of job satisfaction and permeated the identity of workshops men but so too did pride in being a railway worker. 'We felt proud to be part of something big...something important...a service,' claims Ted Tait (2004). They reflect on the value of their work to Queensland Railways and, in turn, to its role in the development and prosperity of the state. For many years, in their recollection, only their Central Division turned a profit, and one large enough from coal haulage to sustain the entire service (Cole, 2004).

Older workers also look back proudly on their wartime service in a protected industry and their invaluable contribution to the nation in constructing massive munitions-making toggle presses (Cole, 2004; Brown, 2004). For Ron Fitzpatrick (2004), railway identity is in the blood with five generations of rail workers in his family; others both came from and married into railway families, compounding the association with railway (Cridland, 2004). In what was essentially a railway-and-meatworks city, a railway job with its permanency and regular pay and, specifically, being a workshops tradesman was considered 'a cut above' the rest. Some men concede their parents-in-law thought they were 'a good catch' (Cole, 2004).

But workshops men of later years acknowledge accusations from other quarters that the railway was 'a bludger's paradise' (Bendall, 2004) and allegations of being 'loafers' (Seery, 2004). Certainly there were some slack times when men had 'a bit of a sit down and talk' (Bendall, 2004) and Charlie Lawrie (2004) concedes the workshops were 'overstaffed, so some people got it easy'. Nevertheless, the work was 'dirty, heavy and hard' and they believed they deserved a rest at times (Seery, 2004). Some felt a reputation for laziness was based on sights of 'porters hanging around the station' by those who had never entered the workshops (Brown, 2004); others put it down to envy of a good job. Brian Cridland (2004) recalls 'a continual stream' of people to the enquiry desk seeking employment, while there were 'people knocking on my door all the time', says union representative Des Bendall (2004). That high demand from the wider community for a job in the railway, confirms their belief that it was indeed 'a good job' and perceived as such by others as well as themselves.

Conclusion

The opinions of employees in the Rockhampton Railway Workshops revealed in this research substantiate the adage of 'a good job' in the railway in the pre-reform era. The men enjoyed a permanent and secure existence, albeit with some terminations through technological change; and, despite some drawbacks of working for a large government instrumentality, they consider the terms and conditions of employment there were better and more equitable than those of their fellow tradesmen in outside industry. While the physical side of the job—heavy, hard, noisy, dirty and sometimes dangerous work in spartan conditions—may have repelled lesser men, those in the workshops saw it as fundamental to their identity as workers and as men. Consideration of a job there as being 'good' also reflected the distinctive social and cultural context of the workshops where camaraderie and craft pride were essential features. Those characteristics, together with perceptions of valued service not only contributed to job satisfaction but also helped shape their individual and collective identities as workshops men, of which they were proud and, seemingly, the envy of others. This study reflects the findings of other researchers, but in a hitherto unexamined provincial context, that work is not necessarily onerous, exploitative and alienating as the capitalist model implies. In no small part shaped by an environment where service prevailed over profit, employment in the Rockhampton Railway Workshops to the 1980s is a clear example of work providing personal satisfaction, fulfilment, life-long friendships, a sense of attachment and notions of identity. Without exception, all of the interviewees assert that, if they could have their working lives over again, they would willingly offer themselves for the job—but only under pre-reform conditions. As Bob Hoare (2004) concludes: 'It was a good job...I enjoyed my time there. I've got no complaints.' Ted Tait's summation, in a 50-year-old ditty he and his work mates once sang, is more poetic:

*See that Garrett roll down the track, five hundred tons upon her back.
The railway life, she's good enough for me.*

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