Research Report
Technology, Work, Gender and Citizenship at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops Precinct : an Historical Interpretation of Landscape, Identity and Mobilisation

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Although this report relates to a project that has been funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC), it builds on 16 years of intermittent interest in the Eveleigh railway workshops. My first contact with this site occurred in 1983 because of its association with the NSW General Strike of 1917, which was the subject of my Honours thesis. Later, during my PhD research, I focused more attention on Eveleigh because it offered a good case for investigating how scientific management was diffused in NSW prior to 1921. Why have I now decided to make these workshops the centrepiece of a major project? In part, my choice responds to the growing interest in space and place. But probably the greatest influence comes from my involvement with the conservation of Eveleigh's material heritage and the desire to draw broader attention to its cultural significance, particularly as an icon of labour history.

The Eveleigh workshops were built between 1880 and 1886 and operated until 1989. During this time, the site provided employment for tens of thousands of workers, while its operations touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of people mainly because it provided what Stan Jones, the Secretary of the Eveleigh Sub-Branch of the Australian Railways Union, referred to as the 'heart of the NSW Transport System'.[1] Eveleigh was not, however, simply central to the State's railway infrastructure. It also had a profound impact on the labour movement. Its employees participated in the Eight Hour campaigns, provided the foot soldiers and leaders for the Labor Party and raised substantial funds for its election campaigns. According to Stan Jones, it was at Eveleigh that the Railway Shop Committee Movement had its genesis in 1926.[2]

Where are these workshops and what makes them significant? Located approximately four kilometres south of the Sydney General Post Office and approximately 51 hectares in size, the Eveleigh precinct is bounded by the inner city suburbs of Darlington, Redfern, Alexandria, Erskinville and Newtown, running from Redfern Station in the northeast to Erskinville and MacDonaldtown Stations in the southwest, across the main railway corridor to Sydney Central Station. The Locomotive workshops, large erection shop, running sheds and foundry occupied the southern side of the railway lines, the carriage and wagon and paint shops, the northern side. The Locomotive workshops are now the home of the Australian Technology Park and the large erecting shop is leased from the State Rail Authority (SRA) by 3801 Limited, a group of railway enthusiasts who restore heritage trains and run tours around NSW.[3] The running sheds and foundry were demolished during the 1960s, while other portions of the precinct's southern side have been redeveloped for public housing. The fate of the now empty carriage wagon and paint shops, owned by the SRA, has yet to be resolved.[4]

The Eveleigh workshops provided me with my earliest experiences of oral history. The first two people who responded to my search for personal experiences of the General Strike were Sir William McKell, who worked at Eveleigh for a short time before World War 1 and Stan Jones, who followed his grandfather, father, uncles and cousins into the workshops during the 1920s and who became a leading figure in the Eveleigh shop committees. Needless to say I now despair about how little I knew then about interviewing and the workshops. Yet it was these two interviews that inspired me to trek out to Eveleigh and it was this personal exposure that sealed my fate - the sight and the noise of this huge industrial enterprise in action proved inspirational.

Much later, in 1996, while producing a social and oral history report on Eveleigh as part of the *Eveleigh Workshops Management Plan for Moveable Items and Social History*,[5] I came across the following description, written by Stan in 1939:

> Presses thump on, machines hum, and hammers clang that diverse elements may be united in mechanical action, ensuring that our natural wealth reaches the market and passengers are speedily conveyed to destinations. At the same time a parallel action is taking place. The men of Eveleigh are also being united by the processes of human relationships which, while not so apparent, are, in the long run, much more decisive than mechanical invention.[6]

Stan's article touched a sensitive nerve mainly because of the poetic way in which he depicted the 2,600 individuals who worked in the 'Row upon row of drab smoke-grimed buildings', as 'puny weaklings besides the machines they control'. Without these people, Stan wrote, 'the roaring giant would be but a whispering ghost'. By the 1990s, the roaring giant's 'throbbing energy' had been stilled.[7] In its place, silicon chips had begun to hum in the enterprises established at the Australian Technology Park.

Neglect of Place

Historians have considered the political and institutional framework in which the NSW railways operated, their industrial relations and management policies, the technological processes involved in the running, repair and manufacture of trains and the lives of some railway employees.[8] Yet few of these studies have focused specifically on the workshops that enabled the railways to operate efficiently.[9] Why has this neglect occurred? In 1991 Sharon Zukin argued that most modern cultures had trivialised or ignored the idea of place by submerging the experience of locality into a larger whole.[10] Yet, as Felix Driver and Raphael Samuel commented in 1995, 'conventional notions of place' have recently been destabilised by the dramatic economic and cultural transformations that have accompanied 'globalisation'. In the face of growing concerns about the conditions and consequences of this phenomenon, historians have begun

> to ask: what is a place? How do places get formed, and how do people become attached to (and detached from) them? How can we describe the identity of places? How can we represent the history of the local?[11]

The need to answer these questions has become increasingly important. As

developments in heritage conservation illustrate, people value attachments to specific places, particularly when their original nature and uses have been outmoded. Hence, we find that Eveleigh has been the subject of numerous heritage studies that have been prepared for government bodies since it was closed in 1989. Unfortunately, the historical research undertaken by consultant historians has been limited by the small amount of time and money made available for such purposes.[12] It is precisely for these reasons that I applied for a large ARC grant to investigate the site's history.

'a democratisation of historical practice'[13]

The project, which I called 'Work, Technology, Gender and Citizenship' to emphasize the various interrelated areas I wanted to investigate, formally began in early 1998. From the outset it has been underpinned by a multi-disciplinary perspective because Eveleigh's significance traverses a large number of different fields. Briefly, this significance relates to Eveleigh's century of use for railway purposes and its continuing public ownership; its role in the formation of Australia's industrial infrastructure; its association with manufacturing and managerial innovation; its service to the empire and nation through munitions manufacture; the multi-racial and multi-cultural profile of its workforce, which included Aboriginal Australians and migrants from the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia and the Middle East; its association with women's industrial employment; its enduring social networks fostered by recruitment policies that favoured family and religious ties; the close links between it and labour movement institutions; the large number of Labor politicians who began their working lives there; and its impact on the demography and social life of the surrounding localities.[14]

In order to deal with the complexity and inter-related nature of each of these areas, this study draws on the disciplines of history, industrial relations, sociology, political science, women's studies and cultural geography. One of the benefits of this conspicuously interdisciplinary approach is that it makes it possible to incorporate Aboriginal workers in Eveleigh's historical landscape, both as employees and nearby residents.[15] Indeed, one of my aims is to investigate claims that Aboriginal habitation in this vicinity was related to earlier employment with the railways in country districts and that the conditions and pay of Aboriginal workers at Eveleigh were worse than those experienced by other employees.[16] Heather Goodall's work on the relationship between white railway builders, fettlers and Aborigines during the 1870s provides a good starting point for a more detailed analysis of Aboriginal urban employment with the railways from 1887, which will eventually supplement the existing historiographical work on the pastoral, mining and maritime industries.[17]

Life narratives provide a useful way of obtaining information on the occupational, workplace and political identities of Eveleigh's male employees, as well as for unlocking the hidden experiences of the Indigenous Australians, women and migrants who worked there. While it has been fairly easy to find and interview male employees, some of who were migrants, it has been extremely difficult to locate the women and Aboriginal employees. To help in this process of identification, I have examined the holdings of the State Rail Authority Archives (SRAA), the Records Office of NSW, the Australian Archives and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Biographical Index, used the mass media to publicise the project and also mobilised a range of community organisations and networks.

In thinking about how to approach interviewing in a way that supports what Driver and Samuel refer to as 'a commitment to an enlarged vision of access to historical knowledge', I decided to expand on accepted approaches to oral history.[18] Oral historians have traditionally interviewed individuals to obtain background information on specific events and developments, biographical details and insights into personal experiences. They have tended to avoid conducting group interviews because of the logistical difficulties and financial costs associated with their transcription. But as numerous scholars have pointed out, 'all memory is structured by group identities'.[19] In fact, I would argue that it is the combined effect of personal and collective experiences and memories that transforms particular spaces into places of attachment. For this reason I sought funding to undertake both individual and group interviews and also to film the latter in order to overcome the problems associated with their transcription.

I discovered the value of this approach in 1996 when I collaborated with Summer Hills Films and the NSW Department of Urban Affairs and Planning on the filming of a group walking tour of seven retired employees at Eveleigh.[20] Through the use of film rather than audio tape, it was easy to separate out multiple voices. But the benefit of this approach was not simply technical. It also provided a way of pursuing a more democratic intellectual effort. And it is in this regard that group interviews have important methodological implications. They provide a means for altering the balance of power between interviewer and interviewee. Simply by force of numbers they decrease the tendency for the interview to be a contested terrain, negotiated by both 'the teller and the told'. Relatedly, group interviews provide a way to circumvent the orthodox masculine paradigm, which renders both interviewer and interviewee as depersonalized participants in the research process and construes the interviewee as a passive individual, subject to the interviewer's direction. Because they are able to interact with each other, interviewees are in a better position to challenge what Goodall refers to as the 'politics of information control'.[21] On three separate occasions I have found that the group context enhances the interviewees' authority, as well as their recall; they appear to be more able and willing to talk about shared experiences and feelings, or social practices, particularly those that would now be considered unacceptable.

Landscape, Citizenship and Identity

How can spatial and subjective processes be incorporated into Eveleigh's history? One way is to represent it as a three-tiered landscape composed of physical, mental and social layers, which Henri Lefebvre describes as 'lived, perceived and conceived' spaces. As a lived space the Eveleigh railway workshops precinct was made up of a particular concentration of people who engaged in everyday activities and social practices associated with or affected by its operations. It connected work, home and recreation through kinship and religious ties, labour movement organisations and social clubs. Its employees formed a range of local networks and allegiances that passed through it 'in different directions and for different distances'. As perceived space, it provided a source for symbolic representations by its 'users' and 'inhabitants', particularly in the articles, poems and cartoons published in the journals associated with unions and shop committees. On this plane cultural values were articulated and promoted. These two sorts of expression were not, however,

simply a reflection of the physical lived space. As well, they responded to Eveleigh as a conceived space, one that was geometrically arranged and manipulated by the activities of engineers, managers and politicians who impinged on the work performed by employees.[22] By separating the multiple layers of this landscape, I hope to consider how power was exercised by the state, bureaucratic authority, and also through industrial and political mobilisation.

Citizenship provides a particularly useful avenue for considering Eveleigh as a landscape of power because it focuses attention on the efforts made by its employees to participate in the public realm, not simply in the pursuit of private interests but also a broader notion of 'the public good'.[23] In what way did these employees try to and to some extent succeed in shaping the democratic process? A survey of various biographical registers has identified sixteen members of the NSW state and national parliaments whose early work experiences were associated with Eveleigh. Of these, three became Labor Premiers of NSW.[24] What part did Eveleigh's culture play in their rise to political office? And how did Eveleigh workers use their associations with Labor politicians to promote their industrial and political interests? These are questions that I hope to address over the next few years.

Work, itself, presents an important aspect of Eveleigh's lived space. But because this topic is so broad, it had to be narrowed down to manageable proportions. Given that its industrial relations and labour process dimensions have been ably investigated by Greg Patmore and Mark Hearn, I decided to concentrate on the relationship between work organisation, technological change and rank-and-file mobilisation.[25] In this regard I have begun to investigate how Eveleigh's employees interacted with their unions, the Labor Council, the Labor Party and Labor governments, not only as part of their effort to improve pay and conditions, but also to deal with a variety of government policies up to and including the early 1930s. From the 1930s a wealth of information has been found on Eveleigh's activists in publications like the *Railroad* (produced by the Australian Railways Union), the *Magnet* (produced by the Central Council of Railway Shop Committees) and the *Eveleigh News* (produced by the Eveleigh shop committees from 1954). These sources are being examined for information on the evolution of the Eveleigh-shop committees, the nexus between the laborist strategies and communist beliefs and affiliations of their officials, their role in the employment of industrial nurses, the provision of English classes for migrants and their efforts to promote the citizenship rights of Indigenous Australians. In addition, these journals provide a useful tool for identifying spatial processes because they include poems and reports that deal with workers' perceptions and experiences of the site and also outline how the site was used to fulfill social needs and to pursue their political interests. During interviews with those who produced the *Eveleigh News*, I have asked for explanations about various articles and reports and, as in all interviews, I have invited comments about photographs, maps and plans of the workshops. In this context, the interviewees consistently draw attention to the way that physical and social spaces intersected at Eveleigh, particularly when they refer to parts of the site that were traditionally used as rallying points for industrial grievances and also for addresses by Labor politicians, such as Jack Lang, Jim Scullin and H.V. Evatt, among others.[26] Such continuing use of outdoor meeting places, like one known as 'Red Square', are currently being considered by reference to the work of Henri Lefebvre, Ira Katznelson and Doreen Massey, among others.[27]

Technological change presents another dimension of work being explored because of its impact on occupational identity, public policy, management strategy, industrial relations, workplace culture, and gender. Understandably, the significance of technological change to the Eveleigh workshops has been well-documented, given that railways were central to the spread of technology. However, studies of railway technology have often been shaped by what Brown has described as the 'highly romantic symbolic burden' attached to the steam locomotive. As a result, the interest of many railway historians has been limited to the technical capacity and changing form of railway 'hardware' or the part played by the engineers who introduced innovations.[28] This tendency to equate technology with tools, machines and great men obscures its social and cultural nature. As Headrick argues, because technology encounters both support and resistance when it is transferred from one society to another, it inevitably becomes politicized.[29] In the case of the NSW railways, political factors were reinforced by continued public ownership and administration, which left the door open to lobbying tactics particularly in relation to the replacement of imports with local manufacturing during the early years of the 20th century. For this very reason, citizenship provides a useful concept for considering the way Eveleigh workers mobilised to influence the technological choices that were made by governments and managers.

However, technology not only affected Eveleigh's political culture, but also the way work was performed, its masculine identity, and the sex segregation of its employees.[30] To explore these aspects of technology, the project focuses on two specific cases. One relates to the employment of women on 'process work' in this craft dominated workplace. The other centres on the substitution of diesel for steam locomotion during the 1950s and 1960s, a change that led to increased imports and also to industrial relations conflict as the new technology required the retraining of workers and a smaller workforce.

Gender is another important dimension of work being considered by this project, not only in relation to technology but also women's work, which has been obscured by Eveleigh's close association with men and masculinity. With guidance from research that has investigated women's employment in British railway workshops, I have begun to consider the working conditions, hours and relations with male employees experienced by Eveleigh's female employees.[31] One hundred and twenty-seven, who worked there between 1887 and 1939 as upholstresses, clerks and cleaners have been identified from Government Gazette listings. SRA records have also revealed sixty women who were employed as process workers in the Eveleigh Munitions Annexe between 1942 and 1943, and seven women industrial nurses who were employed after 1947. Information on those who worked in the Chief Mechanical Engineer's Office and laboratory as secretaries, clerks, tracers and cleaners from 1940, the hundreds of migrant women who worked as train cleaners there from the 1960s, the handful who waited on the workers in the Eveleigh canteens, who gained apprenticeships there during the 1970s and 1980s and who ran English language classes for migrant workers is currently being sought. Up till now three women have been interviewed and two more interviews have been organised for the near future.[32]

Yet despite their fairly large numbers, little detailed evidence has been found on any of these women. Strangely, the wealth of information on the conditions and regulations governing women munitions workers held by the Australian Archives,

contains only a few files relating to Eveleigh. Less surprising, perhaps, is the cursory mention of Eveleigh's female munitions workers in contemporary NSW government railway sources.[33] Luckily, those who worked in the Munitions Annexe and the Ambulance Rooms made a strong impression on the male workforce. So it is mainly through the men's memories that I have been able to discover anything about the conditions under which the women worked. With this information I hope to supplement existing histories of women's involvement in Australia's war effort, in which Eveleigh is conspicuously absent.[34]

The men's narratives are also particularly helpful in identifying connections between the spatial dimensions of the sexual division of labour and gender identity. Lake's argument that women's performance of men's work during the war reaffirmed rather than blurred sexual differences, provides a worthwhile starting point not only vis-a-vis the munitions workers but also the industrial nurses who were employed after the war.[35] Of the seven who have been found in the records, only two have been consistently named by male informants, who admit that one of the nurses was nicknamed 'the Beast of Belsen'. Intrigued by this symbolic representation I have begun to consider the relationship between such labeling, the construction of gender identity and industrial nursing, an effort that has been made easier by the files on this particular nurse in the NSW College of Nursing Archives and the sources on the history of industrial nursing generally, in the Mitchell Library and in the library and archives of the NSW Nurses Association.[36] I hope to investigate the way Eveleigh's male employees reacted to these women by referring to the work of Bob Connell, Alistair Thomson, Stephen Garton and Raymond Evans on masculinity.[37]

By focusing on sources of cohesion and conflict, similarity and difference in a concrete setting, this project offers a way of explaining how gendered and political identities were formed and reinforced by the social, economic and spatial processes associated with work and technological change at one of Australia's largest industrial monuments.

Endnotes

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10.　Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: from Detroit to Disney World*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, pp. 11-12.

11.　Felix Driver and Raphael Samuel, 'Editorials: Rethinking the Idea of Place', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 39, Spring 1995, pp. v-vi.

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13.　Driver and Samuel, 'Editorials: Rethinking', p. v.

14.　Taksa, Social and Oral History Report, generally; Lucy Taksa, 'Scientific Management and the General Strike of 1917: Workplace Restructuring in the New South Wales Railways and Tramways', *Historical Studies in Industrial*, no. 4, September 1997, pp. 37-64; Lucy Taksa, 'All a Matter of Timing: Managerial Innovation and Workplace Culture in the New South Wales Railways and Tramways prior to 1921' *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 29, no. 110, 1998, pp. 1-26; Lucy Taksa, 'Political and industrial mobilization, workplace culture and citizenship at the new South Wales Railways and tramways department Workshops, 1880-1932', in Working Papers in Railway Studies, no. 3, *Workshops, identity and labour*, compiled by Professor Colin Divall, Institute of Railway Studies, National Railway Museum, York, United Kingdom, 1998; Lucy Taksa, 'Social Capital, Community and Citizenship at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops in Sydney, 1880-1932', School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour Working Paper Series, University of NSW, no. 121, March 1998.

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32. Joyce Hitchen and Monika Allen were employed to teach English to Eveleigh's migrant employees during the early 1980s, Pat Holdorf worked as a clerk in the Chief Mechanical Engineer's Office between 1942 and 1947, one woman (who wishes to retain her anonymity) worked in the Eveleigh Locomotive workshops canteen, and Maria Kottaras worked as a train cleaner for thirteen years during the 1970s and 1980s.

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