

THE PLIGHT OF THE COLONIAL UNEMPLOYED

First published in The Endeavour December 2003

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We, the unemployed laborers and artizans, citizens of Sydney, beg most respectfully to represent the lamentable and miserable condition to which they are reduced in consequence of the great want of employment present existing, not only in this city, but all over the Colony. Your Petitioners are of opinion that they are adopting a great constitutional privilege in coming to your Honorable House for redress and alleviation in seasons of calamity and deep distress.

Petition of the Unemployed to the Legislative Assembly, 3 May 1860

Unemployment appeared to be a perennial problem in the Colony. The authorities believed that public and private improvements had been delayed owing to the high rates of wages and the difficulty of getting work performed, whether mechanical or otherwise^[1]. A deputation of the unemployed in Sydney attended on the Colonial Secretary in April 1858 following which the names of about 700 individuals were recorded, it being noted that double that number were out of employment.

On 12 October 1858 the Final Report of the Committee for the Relief of the Unemployed in Sydney^[2] reported to the Colonial Secretary that between 6th May and 15th September 1154 men, or about 58 per week, had applied for removal into country districts, or reported themselves out of employment. 592 were single and 562 married, with 1226 children, numbering in all 2,942 souls.

Of 236 cases enquired into, the unemployed were found to be principally mechanics, many of whom, though with large families and in great distress, had deferred their applications until their resources were utterly exhausted, from unwillingness to leave Sydney, and the hope of obtaining employment. Of the 164 married men removed from Sydney, about 100 were accompanied by their wives and families, the wives of the others having consented to their husbands leaving Sydney in search of employment, as many of them had been compelled to maintain their husbands out of their own and their children's earnings. Some applicants for assistance were in a state of utter destitution and were either receiving relief from the Benevolent Asylum, or were sent to the Asylum by the Committee until they could be removed from Sydney.

In the report, the categories of skills of the unemployed run the gamut of trades and callings including masons, quarrymen, blacksmiths, gardeners, bakers, rough carpenters, clerks and storekeepers, butchers, painters, tailors, shoemakers, fencers, wool-sorters, cigar manufacturers, soap and candle makers, vine-dressers, coach trimmers, sailors, musicians, surgeons and schoolmasters and many, many more.

The Committee concluded that the emigration to the Fitz Roy River following the discovery of gold there, had the effect of removing from Sydney much of the surplus labor and would eventually raise the rate of wages and enable labourers and mechanics remaining in Sydney to obtain permanent and remunerative employment. The Committee considered that the operations of the Committee had much alleviated and lessened the pressure on the working classes, which had been severely felt by many, from the long continued want of employment in Sydney.

Notwithstanding the Committee's optimism, two years later the unemployment situation still appeared to be severe and the petition quoted at the head of this article was presented. The petitioners went on to complain: *Your Petitioners are firmly impressed with the conviction that it is in your power to alleviate their distress by opening (for the benefit of the unemployed) some of those great public works for which large sums of money have been voted, particularly the road between Pyrmont and Glebe Island; your viaducts have been swept away, your railway lines require vast repair – the Long Bay Road requires formation – and there are various other public works which would afford us relief upon this lamentable occasion.*

Then on the evening of 11th May 1860 a crowd of 300, described by the Sydney Morning Herald^[3] as *an excited multitude*, demonstrated in Macquarie Street opposite the doors of the Legislative Assembly. That gathering was apparently not the first such demonstration. The crowd was aggrieved by the politicians' summary rejection of a report which detailed the condition of the unemployed and suggested some proposed remedies. The Herald was most critical of the rioters.

As a result of this agitation, however, some attempt was made to deal with the problem and registers of unemployed persons began to be kept. Unfortunately for the family historian, only one volume has survived for the early period – the year 1860 - but it has been indexed.^[4] If you are lucky enough to locate your person, the detail supplied is excellent and includes age, occupation, address, ship of arrival (usually with year), whether married, size of family, how long unemployed and where sent. Just two examples:

- Fredk Schultz, 22, Prussian seaman, Kellys, Harrington St, Catteaux Wattel 1860, unemployed fortnight (another seaman's entry shows the man also at Kelly's Lodging House with the remark *burnt out of Catteaux Wattel*)
- Thomas Shannessy, 40, labourer, Kensington St, Lalla Rookh 1841, family: girl 20 out, boys 16 (sick), 15,5,3; unemployed fortnight; altogether months only odd jobs

In 1866 yet another report on the unemployed was commissioned, A Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly *to inquire into and report upon the Distress at present existing among the Working Classes*, but with wider terms of reference than previous investigations including the taking of evidence on the state of Manufactures and Agriculture in the Colony. The Committee reported that the numbers of unemployed had not been exaggerated and were at least 3,000 men. They found distress to an appalling extent never before experienced in Sydney, that many able-bodied men, with wives and families dependent upon them were unable to find employment or the means of supporting their families and that state of things was not confined to the ordinary or unskilled labourer, but a large number of artisans and mechanics were in the same condition of extreme distress.

The Committee looked into the timber industry and found that a large portion of the timber used in building in Sydney was imported from America and almost all the furniture used in the country was brought from abroad notwithstanding that the cabinetmakers of Sydney were the equal of those in London. They concluded that local businessmen could be persuaded to invest capital in the trade if a check were placed on the importation of timber and recommended that a 20% duty on imported timber be imposed, estimating that over 500 men, including sawyers, carriers and tradesman would thus find immediate employment. The Committee made similar findings and duty recommendations in relation to the leather industry.

Some 20 years later, parliament was still debating the unemployment problem but this time the discussion appeared to be centred on the uselessness of some of the projects upon which the unemployed were set to work.^[5] Mr Carruthers, MP moved *that the present system of finding employment for the unemployed classes in clearing scrub lands and other unproductive public works is injudicious and that the Government should endeavour, without delay, to initiate works of a permanent and productive character, to absorb the labour now unemployed.*

It was noted that 1,700 men were employed at the National Park (the present Royal National Park) clearing scrub, one of the chief reasons being that the park *is the resort of the people of the city of Sydney, on account of the wealth of the foliage and the abundance of beautiful indigenous flowers to be found there*, but that *The Government, however, by the employment of these men are destroying the wild flowers which have been so much prized.* At Willoughby men were also employed clearing land for no purpose as the scrub just grew back thicker than ever. Spirited debate followed which disclosed that the railway contractors for the third section of the Illawarra Line were losing their men on account of the greater pay offered at the National Park. The debate then ranged over the matter of import duty on

candles, importing of rope from China, and sugar from Germany and France, the tobacco tax and the effects on unemployment. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on this debate in a lengthy article entitled *Public Works and the Unemployed* on 6th July 1887 and opined that it was a pity so much money had been spent in doing work about Sydney which was not required at all – many bridges were urgently required, and yet the Government had taken no action at all. It referred to the *lazy idle classes of the Colony* and reported Mr McElhone, MP's statement that eight out of ten of these men did not want work at all and when they got their wages for a week or a fortnight, they went to the nearest public house and drank it. The article and the debate itself is very enlightening on the attitude of the politicians to the working class.

By this time there was in place a scheme whereby persons seeking work could apply for a free railway pass to travel to the source of the work. For example, there was a rabbit plague in this period and many of the men were able to find work at Hay on eradication of rabbits. The surviving Registers of Free Railway Passes cover the period 1880-1892 and are indexed on a series of nine microfiche containing 23,899 entries^[6]. These records provide a similar type of information to the unemployed registers referred to earlier but in addition note whether the applicant could read or write, his native place, how long in the Colony and in a great number of cases, detail of recent employment.

The following are just a few examples of the type of information some of the records contain but apart from this, the index is particularly useful in narrowing down the period of time required to search unindexed shipping records when the ship name or year of arrival is unknown, because of the requirement that the applicant state *how long in Colony* and the responses recorded are anything from 12 hours to 50 years!

- 13yrs, discharged from infirmary and wants to go to friends in Melbourne
- Past 3 years in R River canecutting &c; formerly 2 years in New England
- Past 20 years navvying in Victoria platelaying 8/- to 12/-
- Working on the Macleay on sawmills and on various coasting boats
- Past 2 years photographing at Boyds £2 per week
- 2 years in New Zealand surveying and station hand and other jobs
- Formerly 4 years in S Australia, sailor
- 2 years in Queensland, 12 months at Cairns, sugarworks
- Past 2 years in Sydney, previous 10 or 11 months in Victoria bookselling & farming
- Past 3 years about Northern islands, New Guinea &c shipwrecked Port Darwin

Conceivably there are ex-convicts listed in these records and, for those researchers with ancestors from countries other than the United Kingdom or who travelled around before arriving in New South Wales, these records are a source worth checking out as there are references to such places as Fiji, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Italy (a very large number), China, America,

New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, India and more.

The one year of 1884 in which an Unemployed Register [see endnote 4] has survived may also be consulted, it containing similar categories of information to that in the 1860 volume.

The information contained in newspapers, records of parliamentary debates and indexes remind us of the hardships and day to day uncertainties our less affluent ancestors must have endured without the cushion of modern day social security benefits and even if you don't find your ancestors in indexes of this kind it is possible to round out information about their lives by researching the issues of the day in newspapers and parliamentary debates, placing your ancestors in the context of their times.

[1] Letter from the Colonial Secretary's Office to the Mayor, Sydney 6th April 1858, Parliamentary Papers NSW Legislative Assembly, Mitchell Library

[2] Parliamentary Papers NSW Legislative Assembly 19th October 1858, Mitchell Library

[3] Tuesday, 15th May 1860

[4] Unemployed Registers 1860 & 1884 Index by Pastkeys

[5] Legislative Assembly Parliamentary Debates 5th July 1887 P2556 Mitchell Library

[6] Free Railway Passes (NSW) Index 1880-1892 by Pastkeys