

The Workshops. A History of the Midland Government Railway Workshops edited by Patrick Bertola & Bobbie Oliver. Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2006, pp. 300, AUD \$45.00 Paperback, ISBN:1920694838.



Between 1904 and their closure in 1994, the Midland Government Railway Workshops were the largest industrial workshops in Western Australia. Not only were they the hub of the state's railway network – manufacturing and repairing railway engines and rolling stock – but they also produced wartime munitions, built boilers and other plants for defence vessels, and undertook repair work for US submarines based in Fremantle. However, as this book reveals, there was more to the workshops than merely their economic functions; they nurtured and sustained an elaborate and diverse socio-cultural environment that extended beyond the employees to families and local community. Moreover, the workshops were 'a self-contained city', where, as former timekeeper Kevin Mountain recalled, workers could 'get [their] hair cut for two bob ... hire a dance band ... have a bet on the races ... [and] borrow money from moneylenders' (p. 200).

This absorbing collection of twelve essays is arranged in four thematic sections: the first deals with the context of the workshops; the second examines 'the working factory' – its environment and practices – including the experience of women as munitions workers, trade unionism, and the effect of government policies; the third sheds light on cultural and leisure influences and activities; and the final section explores influences and events leading up to and surrounding closure, efforts to preserve the workshops, and Australian attitudes to industrial railway heritage. The book's strengths are the breadth of themes covered and the expertise of the contributors, who have exploited a wide range of documentary, photographic, and oral sources. The chapters vary in length and historical depth, but all are stimulating and meticulously researched. Three merit specific attention. In section two, Bobbie Oliver provides a fascinating and sensitive insight into the apprenticeship system, revealing workshop rivalry, developments in working practices, rites of passage, and pranks ranging from tomfoolery to the downright dangerous. Charlie Fox's penetrating analysis of work organisation illuminates worker-management relations and the way workers were able to influence operations through informal control of output, and trade union strength. And Patrick Bertola's essay is an authoritative examination of the nature and development of occupational health, and more specifically workers' exposure to asbestos, revealing 'systematic deficiencies' and failure to address effectively this and other serious hazards in the workshops (p. 144).

A few quibbles, however, can be made. Some essays could have engaged more with existing historiography and provided greater context; more rigorous editing would have eliminated occasional unnecessary repetitions; and several pages from the bibliography and index are missing (pp. 280-97) – perhaps a fault only in the review copy. These shortcomings aside, the book is an engaging and authoritative case study, which succeeds in synthesising an impressively large amount of material. It is handsomely-produced, lucid, genuinely interesting, and boasts a fine collection of photographs, but more significantly, its insights add considerably to our knowledge of WA's labour and social history.

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