

### **Tailor-made to sweated trade: The clothing trades in Adelaide, 1836-1904**

The clothing trades in the colony of South Australia were subjected to radical change in the second half of the nineteenth century. Methods of production, the organisation of work, its location and the composition of the workforce were transformed. Changes to clothing products, the price of garments and consumer access were part of this upheaval. This paper explores these changes and examines their effects: on men and women clothing workers, their relationships and attempts to improve pay and working conditions.

In the first four decades after white invasion and settlement, most colonists made their own clothes or bought them second hand. The capacity to purchase new clothing was largely restricted to the wealthy or to special occasions. The production of bought clothing was organised along gender lines. The male section of the trade was comprised of tailors. As artisans, tailors were skilled in all aspects of the making of men's clothing by hand and to order. Tailoring skills were acquired in a long apprenticeship, traditionally of 7 years beginning at the age of 11, but shortening through the 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to the regulation of child labour and introduction of public elementary education, to 4 years beginning at 13 or 14. Once an apprenticeship was completed, a man could set himself up as an independent master tailor, or as a journeyman tailor working under a master tailor for wages.<sup>1</sup>

Bootmaking and tailoring were conducted in workmen's homes or in small shops. By 1860, small-scale shop production dominated tailoring.<sup>2</sup> In that year there were 24 tailors' shops in the city of Adelaide alone, when the total non-Aboriginal population of South Australia was just 124,000.<sup>3</sup> The Shops & Factories Commission of 1892 suggests that around 1850 master tailors tended to employ several tailors and apprentices, 1 or 2 in the shop and the rest in their own homes.<sup>4</sup> Tailors were part of a labour 'elite' with wages of 12s to 15s per 10-hour day, 6 day week: compared with a mechanic's wage of 5 to 6s per day, or a labourer's wage of 25s per week.<sup>5</sup> Tailors

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<sup>1</sup> Pike, D. 1967, *Paradise of Dissent: South Australia 1829-1957*, Melbourne University Press, p.181; Galton, F.W. 1896, *Selected Documents Illustrating the History of Trades Unionism in the Tailoring Trade*, Longmans, Green & Co., London, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Pike, op. cit., p. 347; Coghlan T.A. 1969 (1918), *Labour and Industry in Australia: From the First Settlement in 1788 to the Establishment of the Commonwealth in 1901*, Macmillan, Melbourne, vol. III, pp. 102-103.

<sup>3</sup> The Statistical Register of the Province of South Australia for 1860, South Australia, *Parliamentary Papers*, , no. 6 of 1861, pp 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Shops and Factories Commission, together with Minutes of Proceedings, Evidence & Appendices, South Australia, *Parliamentary Papers*, no. 37 of 1892. See for example the evidence of tailors Heinrich Zadow qs. 9884-9989, William McLean qs. 6369-6632 and Thomas Smith qs. 6999-7343.

<sup>5</sup> Coghlan, op. cit., vol. III, pp. 450-451.

protected their relatively superior economic position through controlling and limiting entry to the trade via the indentured apprenticeship system and by maintaining particular skill requirements.<sup>6</sup>

The female section of the trade came under the general occupational classification of 'sempstresses', but was much more diverse than the male section. It included bonnet makers, straw platters, needlewomen, milliners, tailoresses, lacemakers and whalebone covering makers. Apart from lacemakers, 'sempstresses' made items solely for women.<sup>7</sup> Tailoresses made women's cloaks, coats and dress-suits, also by hand and to order. While the Statistical Register of South Australia records tailoring establishments, it does not record any tailoresses' or milliners' shops. Evidence from the Shops & Factories Commission indicates that women clothing workers operated from their own homes, sometimes with 1 or 2 other women or young learners, or in the homes of the colony's wealthier families.<sup>8</sup> The rates of pay of early female clothing workers are also not recorded in the Register. However, we get some idea of female wages if we compare the relationship of male and female rates in other jobs. For example, women domestic servants received one third to one half of the rate for equivalent male domestic servants. This suggests that women tailoresses were paid much less than tailors, but that their rates might compare well with some other forms of female and male labour.<sup>9</sup>

There are no reported moves by women clothing workers to unionise prior to the upheavals in the trade in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The female section had less developed delineations of employer and wage labourer. The diversity of the section and its dispersion in individual homes were also less conducive to industrial organisation.

Journeymen tailors on the other hand were less isolated in their public places of work and maintained communication with tailors working from home, enabling them to band together and coordinate negotiations with master tailors over wages and conditions. The first recorded combination of tailors in Adelaide was in 1846, when improved economic conditions encouraged them to claim an improvement in hourly rates that had been depressed as a result of a previous downturn in the colonial economy.<sup>10</sup> This combination proved temporary, but a more permanent union, the Adelaide Co-operative Tailors Society, was formed in 1850 by 20 journeymen tailors. Their aims were to protect the skilled nature of the trade, and to protect and improve their wages and conditions, especially hours of work, which could climb to 18 hours per day at the height of seasonal demand. The Society also provided sickness and unemployment benefits. As a friendly

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<sup>6</sup> Child, J. 1971, *Unionism and the Labour Movement*, Macmillan, Melbourne, pp. 22-26.

<sup>7</sup> Pike, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the Shops and Factories Commission, op. cit., evidence of Agnes Milne qs. 4017-4398 and Elizabeth Rogers qs. 2140-2418.

<sup>9</sup> The Statistical Register of the Province of South Australia for 1860, op. cit., pp 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> Coghlan, op. cit., vol. I, p. 456.

society, their organisation gained some legal protection. Trade unions in South Australia were not recognised as lawful bodies capable of holding property and having legal rights until 1876.<sup>11</sup>

The organisation of the clothing trades and the relationships contained within them, began to change with the first large importation of treadle sewing machines in 1875.<sup>12</sup> The sewing machine, much faster than hand sewing, enabled the mechanisation of clothing work and mass production of items. Clothing sizes and styles became standardised, rather than ‘tailor-made’ to individual measurements and taste. It became unnecessary for one tailor or tailoress to follow through all stages of making an article of clothing. Instead, labour was subdivided, with various machinists each sewing only one part of a garment before passing it on to another for further assembly. Cutting and pressing were also separated out for other workers to do. Newcomers ceased to learn a whole trade. Entry requirements, apprenticeships and access to clothing occupations were transformed.

The watering down of skills opened up clothing work to a broader range of workers. Women who had previously only had the option of working in domestic service, flocked to clothing production. Most women were trained from childhood to be competent in the basics of sewing and could learn machining or finishing relatively easily. These new jobs were more attractive than domestic service. T A Coghlan, in his 1918 history of labour and industry across Australia, describes the ‘freedom of the factory’, where long but definite hours were far preferable to subordination by a domestic servant to an employing family in their home for whole days at a time.<sup>13</sup>

A further attraction of the new production methods for workers, especially women, was that treadle machines could be individually purchased and garment pieces taken on contract from city warehouses or factories to be completed at home. This was of real benefit to sick and injured workers and those with caring responsibilities, given that through the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were no state or employer provisions for sickness, workers compensation or dependent care.<sup>14</sup> Concentrations of outworkers developed in the working class hamlets of Bowden, Brompton and Norwood, not far from city factories and warehouses.<sup>15</sup>

Clothing merchants liked home production or ‘outwork’ as it came to be known. It proved highly profitable for them. It transferred costs of machinery, cotton and fuel for light and irons onto the worker. It also enabled expansion when the typically small factories of the time couldn’t keep up with demand. Demand for bought clothing grew significantly as mass produced or ‘ready-made’

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<sup>11</sup> *Register*, 18 September 1850, cited in D. Pike, op. cit., p. 348; Child, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> The Statistical Register of the Province of South Australia for 1875, South Australia, *Parliamentary Papers*, , no. 3 of 1876, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Coghlan, op. cit., vol. II, p. 1075.

<sup>14</sup> The necessity for some women to undertake paid work from home was frequently cited in evidence to the Shops & Factories Commission. William Hendry, manager of G.&R. Wills shirt and clothing factories described the giving out of work to widows and women whose husbands were unemployed, qs. 5135-5138.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, the addresses of witnesses before the Shops & Factories Commission.

articles were cheaper than ‘tailor-made’ and could be bought by many more members of the community.

By the 1890s the traditional male/female divisions and artisan dominance of the clothing trades had crumbled. The sex-based delineation of making articles was gone. Women made men’s shirts, vests and underclothing. The 1892 Shops and Factories Commission and subsequent reports of factory inspectors found that clothing production had become an overwhelmingly female trade. However, while women dominated the new clothing industry in numbers, the highly skilled and better paid occupations of tailoress and needlewoman largely disappeared, to be replaced by less skilled and low paid women machinists making bits of garments such as collars, or assembling shirts. Some, especially girls, were restricted to finishing, which might entail sewing on buttons day after day.<sup>16</sup>

The impact on male tailors was also profound. Tailoring establishments were undercut and lost business to ready-made clothing. Evidence to the Commission by tailor Hienrich Zadow, showed that tailoring shops had been reduced by half. Many tailors had become cutters and pressers; some in factories and others as contractors or sub-contractors giving out pieces to outworkers or employing women direct in small workrooms, where they made shirts or trousers in bulk. Cutters and pressers were at least better paid than machinists and finishers, and retained a training requirement.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of these changes in production methods and work organisation was to force down wages and force up hours across clothing occupations. The physical conditions of work rapidly deteriorated. The clothing trades, together with bootmaking, assumed notoriety, and became known as the ‘sweated trades’.

Until the mid 1890s, factories were not subject to any building or safety regulations, apart from a requirement for minimum sanitary facilities. The rush to expand clothing production after 1875 meant that buildings intended for other purposes were hastily filled with sewing machines, iron heating arrangements and cutting and pressing equipment, without regard to the comfort or health and safety of workers. The clothing and shirt factory of G & R Wills for example, built 25 years before for a different function, necessitated cutters, machinists and pressers working on separate floors. This required machinists to lean over a shute and pull up articles in a heavy basket from the basement to the upper storey. Heinrich Zadow maintained that the baskets weighed up to 100 lbs when loaded with moleskin trousers.<sup>18</sup>

Newly built factories and workrooms took advantage of the speed and cheapness of galvanised iron for construction. Even with the occasional lining of matchwood, these structures,

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<sup>16</sup> Report of the Shops and Factories Commission, op. cit., qs. 5063-5070; Inspectors Report for 1896, South Australia, *Parliamentary Papers*, no. 54 of 1897.

<sup>17</sup> Report of the Shops and Factories Commission, op. cit., qs. 6440-7938.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, qs. 7038-39 & 8037.

merely sheds, were fiercely hot in summer (especially with the continual fires required to heat the irons) and cold in winter. Overcrowding and insufficient ventilation were common problems. The Shops & Factories Commission heard that workers had collapsed from insufficient oxygen due to gas lighting in basement workrooms in Hindley Street. Shirtmaker Margaret Buxton complained to the Commission of the cold at her factory. Little could be done to remedy it as the room was so crowded with machines that not even a six-inch hot water pipe could fit around its walls.<sup>19</sup>

The general lowering of wages occurred through several means. Firstly, there was the deskilling of the traditionally better paid occupations of tailor and tailoress already mentioned. Secondly, in an attempt to compete with the influx of less skilled workers engaged in mass production of ready-made clothing, remaining tailoring establishments and women tailoresses and needlewomen tended to drop their prices and reduce the rates of pay of journeymen tailors or young women learners, for example. The lower wage levels thought adequate for women, who formed the vast majority of workers entering the new clothing industry, exacerbated this competitive, undermining process.

Thirdly, wage reductions flowed from the mass entry of workers into the trade and the fierce competition for available work that was generated amongst them in the context of unregulated pay and conditions. This applied particularly to women working at home, who through their desperate need for income and isolation from other workers, were susceptible to pressures to cut piece rates. As isolated workers they were open to employer deceit. An employer could maintain that other workers were doing the same work for less, and that the previous rate or one demanded was too high, without an outworker being able to check and refute the claim. Women confronted with this situation and unable to live without the work were powerless to reject the wage cut that was thus imposed.

The lack of communication between workers and therefore common agreement upon the rate to be demanded, also led to discrepancies in the rates at which women offered to sew items. This in turn permitted a gradual undercutting of wages as the desperate lowest bids were accepted. Tailor Thomas Smith described to the Commission how this process of undercutting operated. He received calls from women wanting to make flannel shirts:

*I have had women offer to make them for 3s (per dozen). One widow competing against another has offered to make them at [amounts] from 3s 6d to 4s 6d. In response to an advertisement I had 40 offers to make them... from 2s 6d to 7s 6d.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., qs. 5914-5924.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., q. 7343.

The persistent lowering of rates and added expenses of outworkers, meant that they barely earned enough to live. In an attempt to secure more income, they worked longer and longer hours. At the same time, single women and girls were subject to further exploitation. Competing employers found it an advantage to take on learners and either pay them nothing for the privilege of 'learning' or a pittance of 2s 6d per week for the first 6 months to one year. After this time, during which the learners worked hard at finishing, buttonholing or tacking, most were dismissed with very little of the trade mastered.<sup>21</sup>

It was these sweated conditions of poor wages, long hours and fraudulent training arrangements that roused the South Australian Trades & Labour Council in 1889 to action. On the motion of a Dr Stirling, Labor member of Parliament and advocate of the vote for women, a committee was set up to confer with the Tailors' Society on how best to unionise women clothing workers.<sup>22</sup>

However, the Tailors Society wanted nothing to do with workers associated with the new industrial occupations. In a vain effort to shore up their exclusive position they voted in 1889 not to admit women operatives. They gave the same response to men stock cutters, who they advised in 1890 to 'form a union amongst themselves'.<sup>23</sup>

The Trades & Labour Council and women clothing activists were not deterred by this rejection by the Tailors. They called a public meeting on 'the sweating system' in conjunction with concerned church leaders, to be held in the Adelaide Town Hall. This successful meeting, in 1890, resolved that 2 approaches were necessary to improve the conditions of women clothing workers. One was the formation of a Working Women's Trade Union, which was established in the following weeks and quickly grew to 400 members. The second approach involved obtaining the vote for women and returning labour representatives to parliament to secure legislation regulating factory production.<sup>24</sup>

The first Secretary of the Working Women's Trade Union was a Labor parliamentarian John MacPherson (it was not unusual for a paid parliamentarian to assume a union secretary's position, as they had an income and resources to assist workers who could not afford to pay for a full time union official themselves). The honorary President of the union was tailoress Auguste Zadow. The Vice-president was shirtworker Agnes Milne. Both of these women were active campaigners for

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. See for example the evidence of Elizabeth Rogers qs. 2199-2200 & 2341, Agnes Milne q. 4062 and William McLean q. 6476.

<sup>22</sup> State Library of South Australia (SLSA): United Trades & Labor Council of South Australia, Minutes of Council, 18 October, 15 November & 29 November 1889.

<sup>23</sup> SLSA: United Trades & Labor Council of South Australia, Minutes of Council, 29 November 1889; *Advertiser*, 1890, Minutes of the Tailors Society, 24 June.

<sup>24</sup> SLSA: United Trades & Labor Council of South Australia, Minutes of Council, 24 January 1890; Anderson, M. 1920, 'The Women's Movement', in M. Atkinson (ed), *Australia: Economic and Political Studies*, Macmillan, Melbourne, pp. 273-74.

votes for women and were later to become the first and second factory inspectors respectively in South Australia.

With the formation of the Labor Party in 1891 and the inclusion in its platform of support for factory legislation, the Working Womens Trade Union campaigned for a Labor Government. A subsequent group of parliamentary Labor members drafted an Act to regulate the hours and conditions of industrial workers. This met with hostile opposition from employers and their parliamentary representatives.<sup>25</sup> Following stalled debate and further elections, the 1892 Shops & Factories Commission was set up. Its findings and recommendations were divided along pro and anti legislation lines. However, the evidence of poor wages and conditions operating in clothing and bootmaking in particular, could not be ignored. The first Act to regulate factory employment was passed in 1894 by the Kingston Government.

Unfortunately, due to continuing opposition from free-traders, this Act was very limited. It only covered factories where 6 workers or more were employed. A list of such factories was to be kept and they were to be checked for safety and sanitary provisions. The employment of children under 13 was prohibited, as was the employment of youths under 16 unless they had a certificate of fitness. The hours of work of women and youths, but not of men, were limited to 48 per week and not more than 50 hours overtime per year. Monitoring and enforcement would occur through 2 factory inspectors.<sup>26</sup>

The Act contained no provisions to enable the regulation of wages, including piecework rates. Outworkers were not covered, even by the provisions relating to hours. The inspectors soon found that they had no powers of enforcement. Terms such as ‘overcrowding’ or ‘ventilation’ were not defined, and they could not order the cleaning or demolition of premises. Not surprisingly, outwork and sweating, with its characteristics of starvation wages forcing long hours, continued to increase. It spread to aspects of the trades not previously affected, such as dressmaking and millinery. In 1898 inspectors John Bannigan and Agnes Milne found that unregulated workplaces far out numbered those regulated.<sup>27</sup> Unions were affected as well. In 1897, the Tailors Society collapsed. It was followed in 1904 by the Working Womens Trade Union.<sup>28</sup> Neither union, despite the heroic efforts of women such as Agnes Milne, could access, organise and get better outcomes for the dispersed and suffering workers in the trades.

Aided by stronger industrial regulation and the subsequent demise of outwork, these unions would be revived in coming decades. They would join together regardless of sex in the Federated

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<sup>25</sup> See for example: Shops and Factories Commission, op. cit., Appendix I, Petition to the House of Assembly, July 1891.

<sup>26</sup> Factories Act of 1894, South Australia, *Acts of the Parliament*, no. 603.

<sup>27</sup> Reports of the Inspectors of Factories for the years ending 31 December 1896, 1897 & 1898, South Australia, *Parliamentary Papers*, no. 54 of 1897, no. 54 of 1898 & no. 96 of 1899.

<sup>28</sup> SLSA: United Trades & Labor Council, Minutes of Council, 19 March 1897, 21 January 1904.

Clothing Trades Union in 1913.<sup>29</sup> This union would go on to obtain a federal award setting minimum wages and conditions for clothing workers across the country in 1920.

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<sup>29</sup> *Workers Weekly Herald*, 13 May 1913, p. 3.