TRADITION, ENVIRONMENT AND THE INDENTURED LABOURER IN EARLY WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Historians have usually concentrated upon the landowners and government officials when undertaking any study of colonial Western Australia. The origins and exploits of people such as Thomas Peel, Sir James Stirling and Eliza Shaw are well documented. Yet little reference has been made to the workers and servants, whose labour was as important to the colony's success as the capital of their employers. In the first decade of settlement Western Australia depended largely upon indentured servants for its work force. Hired in Britain for periods of five to seven years, they were supposed to provide a reliable labour supply for the new colony.

On arrival in Western Australia relations between master and servant usually deteriorated rapidly. The commonly accepted view places the blame on the poor character of the servants. This view has its origins in the correspondence and official documents of the professional-agricultural élite that owned and controlled the colony in the 1830s and 1840s. As early as January 1830 Governor Stirling expressed concern about the behaviour of some of the indentured servants 'whose habits', he claimed, 'were of the loosest description'.[1] Writing from Fremantle beach two months later Eliza Shaw complained that her female servant was 'without exception the idlest, dirty, sauciest slut that ever got into any persons family'.[2] But there have been few attempts, then or since, to understand the position of the servants themselves.

In 1953 F. K. Crowley wrote an article entitled 'Master and Servant in Western Australia, 1829-1851'.[3] The discussion centred on the formulation of master-servant legislation, in response to the need felt by the professional-agricultural class for greater control over their servants. Concentrating mainly upon the development and effects of this legislation, the article did not fully explain the causes of the deterioration in master-servant relations. In the final paragraph Crowley expressed the view that it was the result of what we may call culture-shock:

> In the main . . . the behaviour of masters and servants depended on their own characters, and the influence of a new environment on the age-old traditional relationship between them which had been generated in an intensely aristocratic society.[4]

That personalities played a significant role in the management of indenture contracts is undeniable. What is open to question is the idea that deteriorating relations were the result of a breakdown in Western Australia of 'traditional' patterns of behaviour. This view assumes that the colonial environment somehow destroyed the time-honoured bonds of servitude which had hitherto kept both groups working together harmoniously. Evidence shows very strongly that these 'traditional' relations, if they ever existed, were already breaking down within Britain by the time of settlement. Furthermore, few relations of any kind existed among the emigrants themselves prior to sailing.

What were these 'traditional' relations, or what were they supposed to be? It was the masters who appeared to have had the clearest ideas about them. Writing from Picton in December 1842 the Rev. John Ramsden Wollaston gives us some insight into this attitude:

> It has been the boast of this colony that we have no poor, but I think it is a misfortune (I don't mean paupers) for society will never work unless there is a station for each class according to God's ordinance; not to mention the evil arising from the non-exercise of the reciprocal duties of rich and poor, master and servant.[5]

According to this view a servant was to remain subservient and loyal to his master, and to understand his place in the social framework. Any alteration of this situation would have dire consequences, both social and moral. The master, usually educated, cultured and raised as a member of the British gentry, had no difficulty in seeing himself as naturally superior to his servants. Sobriety and hard work were the main virtues that he admired and expected from his employees. What he wished for was an obedient, industrious lower class that would provide him with an inexpensive and willing work force. The reciprocal duties which Wollaston mentions were related not only to the weight of tradition but to the demands of economics.

Unlike Britain, Western Australia generally had no pool of unemployed pauper labour from which the master could easily obtain replacement servants. As a result the indentured servant was in a much stonger position to demand improvements in his conditions—often at the expense of his master—than he would have been in Britain. Many indentured servants appear to have used this situation to benefit themselves. Their demands for increased wages and rations were a major cause of friction with their masters, who felt it injurious to the prosperity of the colony. The colonial Advocate-General, George Fletcher Moore, expressed these views in November 1830. Government, he felt, was desirous of developing the colony on a thrifty basis and therefore labourers' wages should be kept low. To pay 'from £24 to £36 a year, and diet, to a menial', was financially impossible whilst high ranking officials (like himself), employing several servants, received only £300.[6]

The masters' idea that there was some God-given place for each class was a long established one, but it was also a convenient excuse to deny their servants higher wages and better conditions. Whilst easing their consciences they could save themselves from the already difficult economic situation they faced at the time. To ensure that these reciprocal duties were duly exercised the servant was bound, by his contract of indenture, to be 'dutiful' and to 'faithfully and to the best of his ability execute, do and perform all and whatsoever shall be required of him'.[7] When the servant failed to fulfil these requirements he was branded as idle and insolent and often sent to gaol.

How did the indentured servants view their role in the new colony? Like their masters they had come to Western Australia in the hope of bettering themselves. Some

appear to have had very ambitious notions of what life in Australia would hold for them. Wollaston made reference to this in 1842, when he wrote of their expecting to be made ladies and gentlemen.[8] G. F. Moore, in November 1831, wrote that his servants wished to live like masters and have 'meat and beer three times a day'.[9] Charles Gee, a servant of James Henty, whilst on the voyage out from England wrote a ballad expressing his pleasure at being taken to Australia. Describing the problems of his peers at home he ends with:

> Now when we come to New Holland I hope that soon will be
> All will send home to England, and how happy there wee be
> With plenty of provishons boys and plenty for to do
> So hear is health to Henty and all his joiful crew.[10]

The joy of coming to a country where food and work were abundant was natural for people who had been deprived of such things in Britain. Their idea as to the role they would play in Western Australia would seem less one of providing an inexpensive and subservient work force, than achieving a better and consistent standard of living. It is understandable, therefore, that they should have become disgruntled when faced with the many privations which the pioneering life was to hold. Their loyalty depended very much upon their right relationship with their masters, but to what extent can this relationship be seen as 'traditional'?

In the first place, it was chiefly a marriage of convenience for both parties. The master needed a large number of labourers to enable him to clear the land and cultivate crops. The servant needed the work. Although there were masters who brought with them their trusted family servants, the majority of employees were hired as the masters prepared to sail. There was little opportunity for them to develop the sort of bonds that long term family servants might have achieved with their masters.

About 53% of Western Australia's indentured servants are shown in the 1832 census as having been born in the south of England: namely in London (13.8%) and the Home Counties, especially Kent (10.4%), Middlesex (3.4%) and Surrey; in Sussex (7.0%) and in Hampshire (5.1%); and in the West Country, especially Somerset (4.5%), Devon (3.2%) and Dorset (2.5%). A large number were also born in Lancashire (4.6%), including Liverpool.[11] Exactly where servants were living just before embarkation is not clear. Some of those born near to London, Liverpool and Manchester had no doubt moved into those cities, but as 'many' were apparently recruited from within their parishes,[12] it is likely that most of the total were still living in the county of their birth. As with the servants, a high proportion of the masters came from the south. In a total of 92, between 36% and 47% came from the counties just mentioned, excluding Lancashire.[13] It is not surprising that many servants came from this area if, in fact, masters generally recruited close to home.

The number of servants employed by Western Australia's landowners was quite high. James Henty arrived in the colony in 1830 with 33 persons in his employ.[14] In 1837 William Brockman employed a total of 25 on his property.[15] These men were among the larger employers, but even those with fewer servants would have had to hire persons they had not previously known. The main reason for this was the changing nature of agriculture in the areas from which they originated. In rural England during the 1820s there was a movement away from permanent full-time workers and towards temporary labourers.

Two types of labour existed in rural England during the 1820s. The first were classified as *labourers* and were employed for short periods ranging from a day to a week. The second were household *servants* and were employed throughout the year on a more permanent basis. This latter group, averaging about one servant per farm in

this period, experienced a working relationship very similar to that of Western Australia's indentured servants. Unlike the labourers, these servants lived with their masters and received an annual wage, often solely in the form of food and clothing.[16] Generally below the age of 25, they were employed mainly on large properties by prosperous farmers.[17] A number of colonial masters had belonged to this type of employer. However, about 15% of both masters and servants came from London, which puts them in another category. Moreover in the counties, although a large number of masters and servants came from the same general area (the south) they were differently distributed within it. Four of the most important counties for colonial servants, Kent, Sussex, Dorset and Devon, provided between 25 and 38 times as many servants as masters, while Gloucester and Somerset, with 24 and 50 servants respectively, provided no masters at all. Essex, Suffolk, Surrey and Hampshire were perhaps average with 11 servants per master, while the midland counties, Scotland and Ireland provided an unusually high number of masters. This all tends to suggest that a good number of masters and servants were strangers to one another before emigration.

This brings us to the second reason why the reality of English master-servant relations cannot be called 'traditional' in this period. Whatever the environment may have been in the colony (and Crowley apparently means moral environment), it was not radically different in the mother country. During the 1820s the proportion of live-in servants was decreasing throughout England, and, as has been mentioned, the trend was towards the employment of labourers on a casual basis. The reasons for this trend are said to have been the increasing commercialisation of agriculture and the rising rural population.[18] Farmers could acquire as much labour as they wished without the expense of providing food and lodging for their employees. Rising food prices could place a heavy burden upon the farmer forced to feed several indoor servants, but by paying labourers in cash these costs could be thrown onto the worker. This disappearance of household servants was explained by the Rector of Whatfield, Suffolk, in 1834:

> Labourers now seldom live under their employers' roofs for these reasons: the number of unemployed labourers is such, that a Farmer is always sure of hands when he wants them. It is cheaper to hire day labourers . . . than to maintain Servants in the House, especially as they are always sent home on a rainy day.[19]

The result of this trend was an increase in rural poverty. Steady work became hard to get and working men found it difficult to keep their wages equal to the cost of living. By the end of the decade the labourers in the south of England, in particular, as E. P. Thompson says, 'had been reduced to total dependence on the masters as a class'.[20] It was from this area and this type of temporary labourers that Swan River drew the majority of her servants.

It is certainly true that the colonial servants suffered new and peculiar hardships. In Western Australia the system of labour was superficially similar to that of the live-in servants. The main difference was the length of time his or her contract covered. In the first instance the English servant would be hired only for a year, at hiring fairs or 'mops'.[21] The Swan River servant was hired from the parish for anything up to seven years and placed under a fairly severe discipline on arrival in the colony. By law he had to be registered with the Colonial Secretary and he could not work for another employer without the consent of his master. He was not permitted to own land whilst under indenture and he was forbidden to leave the colony without the permission of the Colonial Secretary.[22] For people who had known only temporary employment,

with long periods of idleness between, the colony offered something very different. In a very vague sense the colonial system was a reversion to the eighteenth century type of master-servant relationship, but it was far from the experience of most of the indentured servants.

It could be argued that despite the lack of any former close ties between individual masters and servants, 'traditional' ideas of English society were nonetheless deeply instilled in both groups. Age-old moral attitudes might have existed on arrival in Western Australia, only to be broken down by new circumstances. If so, one would expect to find masters and servants in England—where 'traditions' continued within the old environment—living comfortably together during the 1830s. On the contrary: in 1830-31 thousands of rural labourers rioted throughout England over low wages and poor living conditions.

As we have seen, the changing nature of agriculture had turned the majority of England's 2.9 million[23] rural workers into temporary labourers. For these people life during the 1820s and '30s could vary from relative comfort to unbearable poverty. On the whole work was scarce and food meagre and unvaried. The living standards of rural labourers were among the lowest in the country. William Cobbett described the conditions of some of them at Cirencester, Gloucestershire, in 1821:

> The labourers seem miserably poor. Their dwellings are little better than pig-beds, and their looks indicate, that their food is not nearly equal to that of a pig. Their wretched hovels are stuck upon little bits of ground *on the road side,* where the space has been wider than the road demanded. . . . In my whole life I never saw human wretchedness equal to this.[24]

Living costs were high in England at this time, owing mainly to heavy indirect taxation. Following the Napoleonic Wars, Britain had been faced with a massive national debt. In 1793 the debt had stood at £248 million, by 1817 it had reached £839 million,[25] and it remained at £780 million in 1827[26]. The burden of paying this fell disproportionately on the working man. Admittedly the upper classes paid heavily in tax, but with the abolition of income tax in 1816 the price of commodities was raised through customs and excise. In fact some two-thirds of this indirect taxation was drawn from such goods as sugar, tea, beer, soap and candles.[27] In 1834 it was estimated that the total taxes on a labourer's yearly wage of £22.10s. was £11.7s.6d.[28]

A further burden upon the rural labourer was the method of parish poor relief adopted from 1795 and known as the Speenhamland system. Formerly only the unemployed of a parish were provided for, with out-relief and work on the roads. Under Speenhamland relief payments depended instead upon the labourer's cost of living, and was to be adjusted according to price fluctuations. Where a labourer's wages fell below the minimum level the parish subsidised the balance. Unfortunately, because the labourer's income was now to be supplemented by parish relief, many farmers lowered their wages and subsequently forced the labourer down to the poverty line.[29] 'The distinction between worker and pauper vanished.'[30] No matter how hard he worked the labourer could not raise his income above the subsistence level.

In 1830-32 these problems provoked widespread rioting throughout the English countryside. Originating in Kent and Sussex, the revolt had spread to nearly all counties by the end of 1830. The nature of disturbances varied from area to area, depending on the conditions facing labourers. The three major causes or riots were low wages, unemployment (especially where it seemed to be caused by mechanisation) and the operation of the Poor Law.[31] The main targets were farmers, parsons and parish officers.[32] It was in the counties from which most of Western Australia's indentured

servants came that the bulk of this trouble occurred. A count of all agricultural disturbances between 1 January 1830 and 3 September 1832 has shown that 35.5% occurred in Kent, Sussex and Hampshire, the native counties (as the figures quoted earlier show) of nearly a quarter of all servants. The most common occurrence in Kent was arson, in Sussex it was wage riots and in Hampshire it was machine breaking, or the threat of machine breaking, the owner paying to have his property spared.[33] By the end of 1832 the authorities had quelled the riots, gaoling 664 labourers, executing 19 and transporting 481 to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land.[34]

Thus while indentured servants on the Swan River were causing their masters trouble, their brethren in England—often perhaps their literal brethren—were being more intransigent. As in England, much of the tension in the colony was directly related to low wages and poor conditions. Although better off than they would have been at home, the indentured servants suffered more than any other group of immigrants. This was the cause of much of their grumbling, their refusal to work and their 'insolence'. But it was more the continued unfulfilment of human needs than any response to a new environment or a sudden breakdown in 'traditional' relations.

Birth places of servants (adults and children), taken from the W.A. census of 1832

English Counties		*Scottish counties*	
Berkshire	4	Aberdeen	5
Buckingham	1	Angus	1
Cambridge	1	Ayr	1
Cheshire	3	Dumfries	1
Cornwall	5	Fifeshire	11
Cumberland	1	Inverness	1
Derby	6	Lanark	8
Devon	35	Midlothian	5
Dorset	28		
Durham	4	Perth	1
Essex	11	Renfrew	1
Gloucester	24	Stirling	1
Hampshire	56	Wigtown	1
Hertford	7	Place not given	7
Kent	114	TOTAL	44
Lancashire	51		
Leicester	6		
Lincoln	10	*Irish counties*	
London	152	Cavan	1
Middlesex	37	Cork	11
Norfolk	8	Dublin	8
Northampton	6	Kerry	1
Northumberland	5	Kildare	1
Nottingham	15	Limerick	2
Shropshire	11	Londonderry	2
Somerset	50	Meath	1
Stafford	11	Monaghan	5
Suffolk	23		
Surrey	33	Roscommon	3
Sussex	77	Tipperary	1
Warwick	5	Tyrone	2
Wiltshire	17	Waterford	1
Worcester	3	Westmeath	7
York	19	Wexford	1
Place not given	52	Place not given	9
TOTAL	891	TOTAL	56

Welsh counties	
Brecknock	2
Carmarthen	6
Flint	1
Glamorgan	1
Merioneth	1
Monmouth	1
Montgomery	1
Pembroke	2
Place not given	1
TOTAL	16

Outer islands	
Isle of Wight	1
Guernsey	2
St. Heler	1

Other countries	
Arabia	1
East Indies	4
France	6
India	10
Italy	2
Malta	1
Portugal	2
St. Helena	2
South Africa	3
Sweden	1
United States	1
West Indies	3
TOTAL	36

Born in Western Australia	53

GRAND TOTAL 1100

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