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Disturbing the silence of women metal workers

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ABSTRACT

This reflection explores the challenges encountered at the beginnings of a PhD thesis looking at the history of women in the metal trades in Australia. As workers in a traditionally male-dominated industry, initially excluded from both occupations and union membership, these women have been in many ways silenced in the archival record. Confronting and disturbing that silence has been important in the early stages of this project. In doing so, the author has been guided by longstanding scholarship in women's labour history and more recent explorations in archival studies.

KEYWORDS

Labour history; archival silences; trade-union archives; feminist history

Other than the whir of an air-conditioning system, the University of Melbourne Archives repository is silent. The silence envelopes you when the door closes, and the darkness intensifies it. But sometimes when you walk down an aisle, take a box off the shelf and open it, you realise that the repository is far from silent. The countless activities of countless people are recorded and stored in these boxes and they chatter to anyone who wants to listen.

I'm not the first archivist to encounter this, and the archive as metaphor, phenomenon, subject and more has been occupying the social sciences for decades now. This article will look at my journey from hearing what seemed to be the voices of women working in the metal trades, then losing them, and now how I might draw them out again.

On 6 February, 1968, 180,000 metal workers across Australia went on strike against attempts to undermine over-award payments by absorbing them into award-mandated pay increases.[1] The absorption battle, as it became known, led to large fines for the metal unions and was instrumental in convincing the Victorian rebel unions leaders that more militant action against the anti-strike Penal Powers was necessary. It was the opening salvo in a strike wave without precedent in Australian history.

The metal unions (including the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Boilermakers' and Blacksmiths' Society, the Sheet Metal Working Agricultural Implement & Stove Making Industrial Union and the Vehicle Builders' Employees Federation) were key to this and many other industrial and political developments in the Australian union movement throughout the twentieth century.[2] For several decades the Arbitration Commission used the fitters' rate as the basis to determine all other margins, including those outside the Metals Award. The

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metal unions and their leaders were pivotal to the union response to the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam government, the implementation of the 1983 ALP–ACTU Accord and during the two central periods of agitation for equal pay for women – in the Second World War and following the 1969 Arbitration Commission decision.

While researching the 1969 strikes against the Penal Powers I came across the picture in Figure 1, in the Sheet Metal Workers' journal.[3] It was one of those moments when the silence breaks. Nothing I had read so far had shown more clearly than this picture that there were women workers involved in some of these important disputes. The published histories of the metal unions and the disputes barely mention women workers save for the well-documented campaign for equal pay during the Second World War.[4] In this candid shot we see women workers as central, literally, in this meeting. They sit together as a group, yet they are neither at the back nor front of the audience. There is some interaction with their male co-workers and the picture seems to hint at an ease and camaraderie in their bemusement at having the photograph taken. Reading the image, these women are a natural part of the workforce and the industrial action they are taking. So where are they in the history books? Does this reading of the image represent their experiences accurately? What more can their stories tell us?

Earlier this year I was fortunate to receive a scholarship to undertake a PhD thesis to try to answer these questions. The scholarship is part of an Australian Research Council-funded project based in the La Trobe Department of Archaeology and History titled 'Breaking Down Tradition: Women in Male-dominated Work in Australia & Britain 1840–2000'. The chief investigators, Professor Diane Kirkby and Dr Emma Robertson, seek to understand

Figure 1. 'Mass Meeting of Email Employees [Orange, NSW] Held on 2nd February' *The Sheet Metal Worker*, April 1968, p. 8.

the process whereby industries and jobs are masculinised by looking at the tradition of work cultures and the circulation of ideas between Britain and Australia among workers and unionists. This process draws on legal, social and cultural factors that intersect to exclude women and thus contribute to enduring inequality for women in the workforce. Investigating the cultural and social factors will also reveal a fuller understanding of the experience of working women in the industries chosen, in particular seafaring and railway transportation.

The silence of women in traditional histories, including labour history, has long been exposed by Australian feminist historians.[5] Some of the first practical attempts to redress this silence involved unearthing archival material that documented the experience and activity of women. Daniels, Murnane and Picot's 1977 *Women in Australia: An Annotated Guide to Records* and Bower and Hinding's American *Women's History Sources* published in 1979 are two collaborations between archivists and historians worth noting for the sheer scope and findings of their projects.[6] There is still work to be done restoring women to their place in Australian history. I hope in this project, for instance, to find out more about the 69 women gunsmiths recorded in the 1901 Victorian census, as the only published history of colonial gunsmiths does not mention them or any woman.[7] But more recent scholarship has shown the limitations of simply trying to introduce (or restore) women into an historiographic framework that is itself problematic.

When scholars turned away from the notion of archive-as-source towards archive-as-subject, they noticed that the material itself is socially constructed.[8] Throughout their very creation, collection, arrangement and use, archives are soaked with the dominant discourses of the society they record. What the archival sources tell us about women cannot be taken as 'authentic' and 'impartial' because in myriad ways the records and the interventions they receive are shaped by the sexism of our society.[9] Deacon revealed this process at work in her discussion of the role of ideological debate on the collection (and therefore representation) of occupational statistics in the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria.[10] Different methods of classification of women's work led to wildly different participation rates for women – 24–29% in 1871–1901 in NSW, compared with 41–43% in 1871–81 in Victoria. Deacon's scepticism of statistical figures echoes those of American historian Robert Smuts, with whom she concludes her study: 'When the numbers have been evaluated by the normal rules of historical evidence, they can be used as clues, hints, and sometimes even as facts.'[11]

So, if the figures aren't facts, what other sources can be consulted to learn about women in the metal trades? There are very few records either written by or about women in the metal trades prior to the 1930s. There are no sets of papers of women metal workers, no diaries or correspondence, in any major repository in Australia. The metal unions refused to admit women members until the Second World War, so where they do appear in union records it is certainly not in their own voice. Because the unions did not negotiate on behalf of women workers, even the Victorian Wages Board determinations, which cover seemingly every conceivable occupation in the state, only rarely mention women's conditions and wage rates in the metal trades before the mid 1930s. Had the silence descended as I had just begun?

Not necessarily. As Carter points out in his examination of archival silences, 'silence is never absolute' and even the act of repression produces evidence of existence.[12] The fact that women were excluded from many of the jobs in the metal trades meant that when their inexorable entry occurred, a flurry of responses produced an invaluable set of records, most notably at the Sunshine Harvester works in Victoria.[13] Ralph McKay, of the family

who owned the works, began placing women in jobs usually reserved for boys after a 1920 study tour of the US had convinced him that women were efficient workers on light, repetitive tasks. By 1925 the Agricultural Implement Makers' Union was threatening strike action and a Committee of Inquiry was agreed by all parties. The Committee membership included Muriel Heagney as representative of the unions, Dr Kate MacKay, the first female medical factory inspector as the employer's representative, and Dr Ethel Osborne as the chair. The Inquiry heard the concerns of the unions (largely couched around the health and social standing of women workers), the rationale of the owners (that women workers were better placed on these jobs because of their lack of ambition) and, at last, from the women in question. All three of the female Committee members had extensive experience investigating the conditions of women in industry. Their enquiries were detailed and the transcript of proceedings is housed at the Noel Butlin Archive Centre.[14]

Reading the Inquiry transcript and reports is certainly an exercise in reading 'against the grain'.[15] Doing so reveals the complexity involved in attempting to locate the dynamics associated with the experience of women's work. It is not enough simply to describe the differing motivations of the two groups of male protagonists, the unions and the employers. In some senses, their motivations seem obvious, even if they obfuscate them by highlighting more acceptable motivations. But theirs are not the only prejudices and mores at work. The women Committee members and the women workers themselves subscribe to notions of acceptable women's work, even if their view is more expansive than the men's. The women Committee members, like the female factory inspectors' reports, are fixated on the physical effects of the work, and concerned about the possibility of long-term defects of posture and health in ways that are rarely mentioned in reference to men. They, too, are products of broader social conventions which impact on either what they will allow (for the Committee members) or what they will do (for the women workers). Women's history must necessarily consider dominant social attitudes of the time and of both men and women. We cannot allow 'reading against the grain' to turn the actors into tropes. It is important to supplement a linguistic analysis of the documents with an understanding of the broader social forces and dynamics at work.

Indeed, Dever points out in the editorial of a recent special edition of *Australian Feminist Studies* on 'Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research', that the linguistic turn has been tempered by a renewed or new focus on matter, materiality and tools of quantification.[16] An example of this is Goose's *Women's Work in Industrial England*, which collected studies that return to statistical sources, particularly the UK census, to highlight the localised nuances in the experience of women's work.[17] Fahey and Sammartino use a quantitative analysis of the TB Guest wages records as an alternative to published wage rates, which may have been manipulated in their collection by union officials. Comparing wage rates of Guest's and a number of metal firms revealed that the introduction of the minimum wage rates by the Wages Boards led to the hiring of older women and encouraged the feminisation of key manufacturing activities.[18] It appears almost impossible, given the lack of archives *by* or even *about* women metal workers before the 1930s, to begin anywhere other than statistics.

The Victorian Factory Inspectors annual reports seem to be a good place to start in my quest to find where and when women first entered the metal trades (see Figure 2).[19]

From 1886 on, the report contains a table of the number of men and women working in those industries with factories registered under the Factories and Shops Act. Small workshops of fewer than six persons (changed to fewer than four persons after 1895) were not

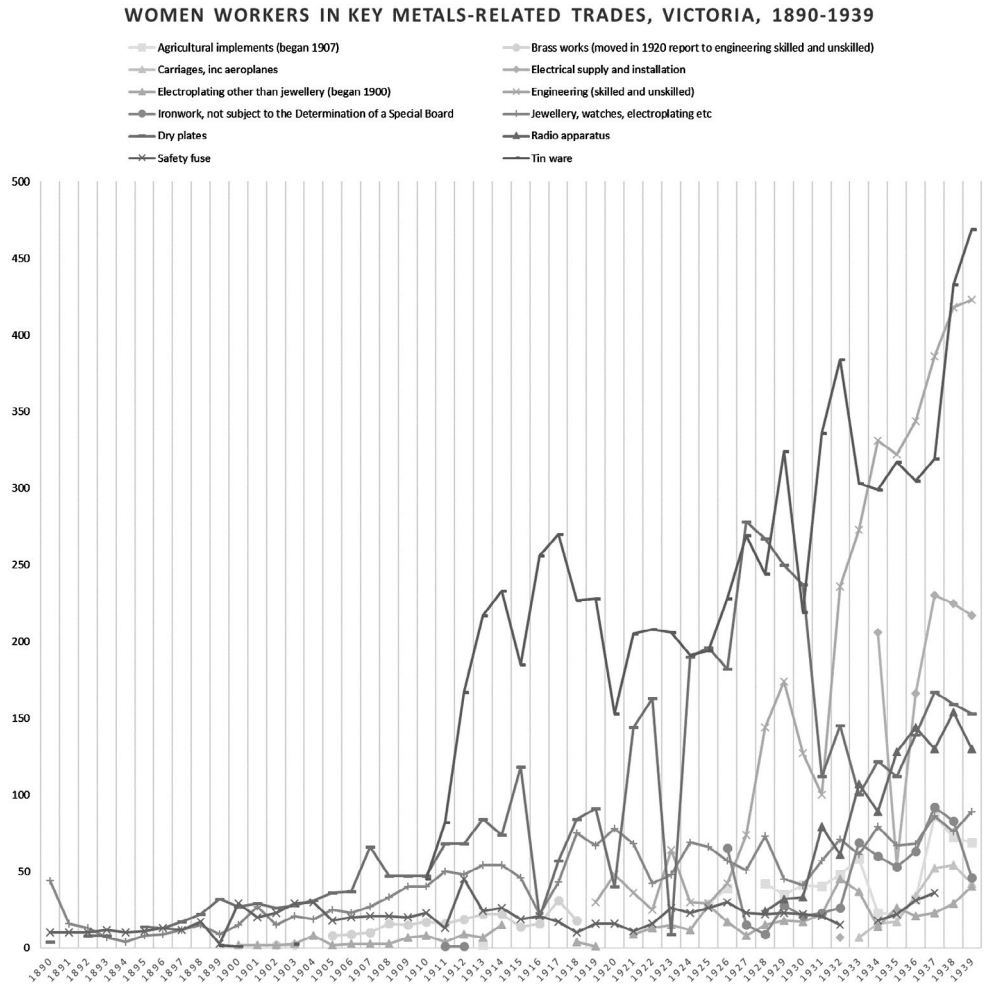

Figure 2. Women workers in key metals-related trades, Victoria, 1890–1939. Source: Reports of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Work-rooms and Shops, 1890–1939.

recorded and it does not include, for many years, regional factories or government works (such as munitions). There is clearly some discrepancy in the reporting, also. The first year that women were counted in the agricultural implements occupation was 1925, when 29 were recorded (aside from 1913 when two were recorded), but we know from the detailed reports of the Committee of Inquiry that women were working in the industry from at least 1922. Still, by looking at the general trends as well as notable anomalies, this should give an indication of where to begin with company and union collections. For instance, there is a noticeable increase in the number of women recorded in the ironwork (not subject to determination) occupation in 1933, carriages including aeroplanes in 1936–37, electrical supply and installation in 1934 and ammunition in 1913. It also appears from an overview of the data that it was a trend for new industries to employ women for a short period before the women workers vanish. A closer investigation of these examples may confirm or deny my suspicion that new industries were more available to women workers until the unions intervened. Following such examples may also lead to moments of commotion (and, therefore,

evidence). For instance, there is an increase in the number of women electroplaters from 1921. In that year, the Wages Board first applied female rates in the electroplaters determination. In that determination, female apprentices received more pay than male apprentices, but by 1931 all women receive significantly less than men of similar experience. By using these statistics, flawed though they are, I hope to be able to concentrate my archival research on periods, industries and companies that are more likely to record evidence of women workers and their working experiences.

Clearly, it will take some work to draw out the voices of women in the metal trades. The union records from the 1930s on contain increasing discussion about issues such as equal pay, including articles written by women workers and activists. Muriel Heagney was appointed the first female organiser of the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1943 and her papers are housed at the State Library of Victoria.[20] With enough research and a delicate understanding of the attitudes and social forces that shape the records I unearth, I hope to disturb that silence.

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