

Working lives c. 1900: A Photographic Essay

Erik Olssen

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Reviewed by Cybèle Locke

Working Lives envelops the reader visually and textually into the industrial world of work on ‘the Flat’ in Dunedin, circa 1900. Erik Olssen has built a collection of photographs, paintings and cartoons to reveal a time when direct relationships between workers and employers, skill and what was crafted, were valued and primarily local. If you were treated badly at work, you had direct access to your employer and their reputation. If you purchased a pair of shoes that had a fault in the seam, you knew who had made them and the standard of their work mattered. This book invites us to celebrate community, and then to mourn its loss, because deindustrialisation has eradicated such industrial workplace communities over the last thirty years.

Drawing on rich images, Olssen argues that craft skill was the central source of people’s identity and pride. “Printers, bakers and brewers, tailors and tailoresses, smiths, fitters and turners, cabinet-makers and joiners ...believed their craft skill fundamental to civilised life”; and all workers had a part to play in creating “a new and fairer society” (7-8). Mixing was possible because class, nationality and religion were subordinate to (but not absent from) craft, and craft could be taught. Against these frozen images, Olssen describes the ceaseless movement of their subjects: social mobility across occupation, class and living quarters. He pays attention to who produced those images – all men except for painters Ellen Valpy and Doris Lusk – and the images never produced because they were “deemed either uninteresting or unacceptable.” (9) These absences are thought-provoking – housework and the home; draining and waterproofing; electrical current demonstrations or soap-box orators in the Oval; earth privies and night-soil men; racing, gardening and horticulture – and demonstrate the sensibilities and projects of the photographer. In 1900, cameras could not handle dust, movement or dark places and thus technology (and its limits) determines and is a subject of this photographic history.

‘Chapter 1: From the Swamp to ‘the Flat’ maps the colonisation of the land, how the salty swamp, purchased from Kāi Tahu in 1844 as part of the Otago block, was transformed into New Zealand’s first industrial suburbs: “[D]rainage, reclamation and the science of horticulture saw the swamps transformed into productive land for agriculture and horticulture.” (15) In turn, farmlands and Chinese market gardens were displaced by the Main Trunk Railway, industrial buildings and residential housing, accompanied by trams and sewage systems. The people who settled and built this place understood themselves to belong to home places in both Britain and New Zealand, and people from England, Scotland and Ireland (or a mix of these places) dominate these pages. Chinese workers are located in the landscape, but not Kāi Tahu. The flatness of ‘the Flat’, as it was named, and the towering chimney of the Caversham gasworks dominate the early images of this industrialised landscape. The Northern part of the Flat saw a mix of industry and residential places, while St Clair, St Kilda and Kew were exclusively residential; and spaces were gendered. Men dominated the industrial workspaces, unions, lodges, churches, pubs and sports clubs on the Flat, while married women, in charge of household work, established neighbourhood networks; married men are present in these images but married women are not. Single women formed communities on trams commuting into the City to their workplaces: they are present in clothing or biscuit factories, offices or department stores.

‘Chapter 2: Factories, Shops and Offices’ depicts business family history. Each photograph is captioned with ‘thick description’, explaining the background and familial relations of those who founded, expanded and inherited the business; the knowledge systems invested in the work process and how they changed over time; as well as workplace conditions. The relationships between these businesses are explored and mapped, unpacking these complex locales. For example, “Rutherford’s and McCracken’s General Stores faced off across the Main South Road,” in Caversham Village (48-9), and catered to different constituencies: Rutherford was a Presbyterian Scot who sold alcohol, and supported horse racing, the Gun Club and the Liberal Party. Across the road, McCracken also identified as Presbyterian, but he was from Ulster with connections to the Brethren, a teetotaler who disliked the Liberals. The people in these photographs are identified and contextualised, thanks to the assistance of those families whose treasured images are reproduced here. This participation marks the ownership of the Caversham Project by its oral informants. Olssen ends this chapter by depicting these young, immigrant (overwhelmingly Scottish), manufacturing entrepreneurs as invested in making Dunedin an industrial capital where workers were not exploited – they were paid well and free to join unions – and could access libraries and sports teams through their workplaces.

‘Chapter 3: Crafts, Jobs and Professions’ is the heartland of this book, presenting many and varied photographs of people at work. Olssen depicts how people on the Flat believed in the value of work, that all classes should work, and be fairly rewarded with the four eights: “eight hours to work, eight hours to sleep, eight to play and eight shillings a day.” (68-9) Skill hierarchies dominated workplaces, which were mostly run by an artisan or mechanic who had climbed that hierarchy. However, unskilled workers could not climb the craft hierarchy unless they undertook an apprenticeship. Photographs either show or explain technological and material changes, which impacted the work process. Gender is foregrounded in these photographs. Women and men largely occupied different work spaces, had separate entrances and dining facilities. The absence of women demonstrates how successful men were at protecting their workplaces, or elite (better paid) parts of the process, as a male preserve. Olssen spotlights the presence of women in photographs to upset historical claims that only men were rope-makers, or to identify new occupational spaces such as the first female office workers at Hallenstein’s New Zealand Clothing Company. Ethnicity and religion mattered; Chinese workers were shut out of many workplaces and religious preferences had some impact on hiring practices.

‘Chapter 4: A Less Unequal Society?’ and ‘Chapter 5: The Labour Movement and the Labour Party’ depict historical ground that is far more fully canvassed in other Caversham historical works. Olssen draws our attention to dress, working-class access to white-collar work, housing and schools in various images to argue that New Zealand was far less unequal than most other capitalist democracies. Family photographs are utilised to draw attention to various forms of ‘mixing’ on the Flat, across occupation, class, religious denomination and even nationality. Chapter 5 connects trade unions with political mobilisations; dwelling on local ruptures caused by war-time conscription, armed rebellion in Dublin and the organisation of unskilled workers. To his credit, Olssen invites us to engage with both the richness and the limitations of the photographer’s gaze. However, the absences begin to weigh a little. The absence of household work or child-raising; work-place injuries, ill-health and visits from Charitable Aid Board inspectors, give rise to a rather narrow definition of work. To recover these missing histories, *Working Lives* should be perused alongside the other Caversham works: *Building the New World*, *An Accidental Utopia* and *Sites of Gender*. And these histories should stand as multi-layered, thickly described studies of a particular locale, rather than as a keystone to read New Zealand’s national character at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, there was much

variation in the way each main centre and Rotorua were displayed when they were visited by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall in 1901. A. H. McLintock writes: “Dunedin excelled itself with an elaborate series of decorations – with evergreen garlands, coloured drapings, and a line of Venetian masts. There were a number of special arches, including a Government and a City and Suburban arch, and the novel Chinese arch. At night the Octagon was a “scene of great beauty” with illuminated decorations, and fireworks were also a feature of the evening celebrations.”¹ Dunedin was portrayed as a colonial success story that included Chinese but not Kāi Tahu. However, in Rotorua, tangata whenua were dominant: Guides Sophia Hinerangi and Maggie Papakura (Makereti) greeted and guided the royal couple around the geysers at Whakarewarewa. Paul Diamond writes: “After viewing the chief sights and watching Māori children diving for coins in the Puarenga Stream, the royal couple were farewelled with a poi dance... and drove off ‘amid cheers, and of course, the strains of the National anthem.’” Native Minister Sir James Carroll, Apirana Ngata, Maui Pomare and the Reverend Frederick Bennett were all involved in the royal visit to the Rotorua racecourse where thousands of Māori were hosted by Te Arawa to perform the ‘Grand Carnival of the Tribes’.² Dunedin’s display ought not be taken on its own as representative of New Zealand, any more than Rotorua’s. Each locale is embedded in a specific set of relationships, no matter how far-reaching they are.

¹ 'The Duke and Duchess of Cornwall, 1901', from *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A. H. McLintock, originally published in 1966. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 23-Apr-09

URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/1966/royal-visits/page-3>

² Paul Diamond, *Makereti: Taking Māori to the World*, Random House, 2007, 41-2.