

# Grease monkeys: A history of Australia's motor mechanic trade, 1900–1970

Michael P. R. Pearson 

National School of Arts and Humanities, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, New South Wales, Australia

## Correspondence

Michael P. R. Pearson, National School of Arts and Humanities, Australian Catholic University, Strathfield, NSW, Australia.

Email: [michael.pearson@infrastructurevictoria.com.au](mailto:michael.pearson@infrastructurevictoria.com.au)

## Funding information

Australian Government Research Training Program scholarship; ACU Postgraduate Research Student Support Scheme

**KEYWORDS:** Australia, cars, class, engineers, gender, mechanics

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** J23, J62, J71, L62

*This dissertation was completed in 2021 at the National School of Arts and Humanities of the Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Associate Professor Hannah Forsyth and Associate Professor Melissa Bellanta.*

*It was financially supported by an ARC Research Training Program scholarship and travel grants by the ACU Postgraduate Student Support Scheme.*

The arrival of the motor car in Australia at the turn of the twentieth century was a signifier of modernity that eventually transformed Australian landscapes, economy and society. The car has been much studied in Australian social and cultural historiographies (Conlon & Perkins, 2001; Davison, 2004), but these have mainly focused on the machines themselves and the people who own them. Continually overlooked are the new areas of work created by the arrival of the car, such as car repair and maintenance. Unlike cars, which have clearly evolved throughout the twentieth century, motor mechanics are perceived as iconic members of Australia's working class, associated with the timeless imagery: young men in grease-stained overalls holding wrenches. Rather than contributing to a sense of the mechanic's timelessness, however, this thesis historicises the work they performed and how it changed over the twentieth century.

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Asia-Pacific Economic History Review* published by Economic History Society of Australia and New Zealand and John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd.

This thesis explores the emergence of the motor mechanic trade in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century and follows its development through to 1970. By this time, the key developments this thesis explores – the process through which mechanics became emblematic members of the working-class, associated with the particularly masculine “grease monkey” stereotype – was effectively complete. This study builds upon previous work internationally, notably Borg (2007), which documents a history of the mechanic trade in the United States. In doing so, however, it seeks to build upon our understanding of class in a particularly Australian context. The working-class identity that mechanics are heavily associated with today was not inherent in their origins. Rather, its creation was historical process that aligns to theories of class formation presented in the works of Thompson (1968), Connell and Irving (1992).

The dissertation contains seven chapters, organised by three major time periods. Chapters One and Two explore the origins of the trade and its formalisation. This includes transformations in class relations early in the twentieth century as the motor car arrived in Australia. Chapters Three and Four cover the disruptions of the Second World War, both from a military and civilian perspective, and how the war changed the direction of the trade. The final three chapters present the core developments that led to the lowering of the status of mechanics, both from a sociocultural, labour and economic perspective.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE TRADE

This thesis begins by exploring skill as a historical concept, drawing on the work of Ben Maddison, who himself adopts the theories of Antonio Gramsci. Maddison (1995, 2007) suggests the old understanding of ‘artisanal skill’ was characteristically mysterious, unknowable to outsiders but instinctual to – and thus controlled by – craftsmen. Industrialisation undermined this ‘mystery’, removing the control of knowledge from workers, and replacing them with structured institutions. Motor mechanics emerged in the dying days of this artisanal working structures at the end of the nineteenth century (Taksa, 1998). With few barriers to entry into the work of automotive repair, mechanics came from a variety of existing crafts. Others were simply creative, adventurous individuals who stuck their heads underneath a car and figured out how it worked.

Simply defining who was a motor mechanic in the early twentieth century is no easy task. While some mechanics emerged from the metalworking industry, others were small business owners, middle-class engineers and wealthy motorists (Birney, 1984). There were fewer boundaries to participation in the early mechanic trade than one might expect, whether in terms of class, background, regionality, gender or even to some extent race as Aboriginal communities trained their own mechanics (Bolognese, 2017; Clarsen, 2017). A wide variety of people who acquired motor mechanic skills were consequently able to become involved in different kinds of modern engineering work. Beyond identifying these fluid and undefined origins to the motor mechanic trade, this thesis also charts how, why, and when the boundaries around the trade emerged. The diversity of motor mechanics in the early years of automotive repair work also inhibited solidarity and their ability to organise. As a result, the organisational structures that governed the trade were imposed by multiple outside groups.

Motorist organisations in particular were a major actor in this space. These clubs were formed almost immediately after the arrival of the car; by 1905, motoring clubs were founded in every mainland Australian state. These clubs were, by definition, elite organisations that allowed then-wealthy car owners to asserted collective power, not unlike trade unions. They

did so in nuanced ways, exploiting their assets to exercise control over the trade through their capital, organisational capacity and authority, aligning to Erik Olin Wright's (1985) class theories. In doing so, motorist organisations were able to establish themselves as the “experts” of the Australian motor industry. They maintained this status by forging connections with employer associations, technical colleges and multiple trade unions to establish credentials for motor mechanics, formalising the trade as its own unique area of work (Broomham, 1996; Neill, 1991; Priestley, 1983; Tuckey, 2008).

Formal technical education brought the motor mechanic trade in line with other trades in adopting an industrial concept of skill. Maddison (1995) has described this changing definition of skill throughout the early twentieth century, resulting in technical education occurring through formalised institutions. These changes took place under the watchful influence of motorist and employer organisations. By the end of the 1920s, motorist organisations expanded their power from being the recognised authorities of knowledge *for* the automotive trades to becoming *regulators of* a recognised body of knowledge. This undercut the artisanal nature of training which until the 1920s had granted mechanics power over their occupation.

Entwined in this process of class formation, however, was also the gendered nature of the work being performed. Women found ways to enter the mechanic trade by exploiting the informal, artisanal structures of education, such as through learning from their fathers (Clarsen, 2017). Even though women likely comprised only a small percentage of motor mechanics in the first three decades of the century, the lack of formal barriers to female participation meant that some of those who began working on cars were able to take advantage of the embryonic stages of the trade. It was the institutions which played an important role in enforcing discrimination against women, reflecting a patriarchal and misogynistic culture. The introduction of certifications had an immediate effect of barring women from becoming mechanics, as courses were ‘deemed strictly for men’ (Smith, 2019).

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND POST-WAR MOBILITIES

These emerging structures, so influential in class formation and the gendering of the trade, were disrupted during the Second World War. The mechanisation of Australia's armed forces created an almost endless need for technically skilled labour for the war effort. This was particularly so for those who worked on combustion engines. Mechanics were enlisted straight out of garages and upskilled to work on various equipment and vehicles of war (Carmichael, 2014). This provided mechanics with opportunities for upskilling in engineering and thus upward social mobility.

These opportunities were gendered, however. When the ongoing demand for maintenance workers at home could not be filled by an increasingly diminished supply of the male workforce, women were called upon to fill the gap left by departing men during the war. Initially, women were celebrated for taking up “untraditional” roles to free up male mechanics to be enlisted into the war effort. Women were trained in their hundreds by motorist organisations, and unions fought to ensure women received equal pay as their male counterparts. This, however, all came under the guise that women were employed temporarily due to wartime conditions. Even before victory had been declared, employers and unions worked together to limit the employment of women mechanics to wartime conditions (Symons, 1997). The motorist organisations, which once lauded the education the women received as exactly the same as male counterparts, withdrew their approval for women's qualifications. This all occurred under the guise of creating positions for an expected large wave of returning servicemen.

But the flood of returning workers did not eventuate, however. Instead, mechanics left the trade in large numbers. Wartime experience provided returning servicemen with an opportunity find jobs that better rewarded them for their newly developed skills. For many, this occurred within other fields of engineering that were desperate for skilled labour to assist with post-war production. This created an acute demand for labour within the motor mechanic trade. Those few men that remained were able to use their scarcity to negotiate higher wages with their employers on an individual basis. These workers used an industrial bargaining tactic to transition between sectors and increase wages as garages competed for prized skills (Smith, 2006).

## THE DESKILLING AND INDUSTRIAL ISOLATION OF MECHANICS

The post-war conditions that benefited workers were short-lived, but their disintegration was not inevitable. Rather, this dissertation argues that it was the result of three key developments. The first was the increasing connection between the trade and sociocultural transformations that occurred within Australian society after the war. Systems of taste and cultures of consumption, according to Bourdieu (1984), are formed through social connections, thus creating a relationship to class. This thesis expands upon this understanding by considering whether these relationships with status and taste transferred from car to auto repairers. Prior to the Second World War, cars were perceived socially as a toy of the working class and remained an aspirational goal for workers. The end of the Second World War and the post-war manufacturing boom made cars increasingly more available to the aspiring class, heralding in an era of mass automobility and subsequently changing Australia's social positioning of the car.

The gender regimes that were encouraged in the 1950s had material effects, as cars became definitively 'male', linked with changing masculinities in an age of suburbanism and consumerism. As the skill and status associated with the trades declined, working-class men emphasised the 'masculine' aspects of their work, to the detriment of women, a trend previously observed by Stephen Meyer (1999) and Andrea Waling (2020). Simultaneously, however, the growth of professional work increasingly disconnected men from manual labour (Connell, 2005). The car, and maintenance work that occurred privately by men in their home garage, became associated with a DIY mentality and craft masculinity that became increasingly incorporated into hegemonic masculinity through the 1950s (Davison, 2004; Stein, 2016). However, concurrently, the occupation of motor mechanic became more associated with an emerging youth car culture which disrupted conservative tastes (Davison, 2004). This was a contextual change from the earliest days of the trade, where mechanics were lauded for their mechanical expertise, heralded as "doctors of machinery" (Page, 1963). Instead, this transformation in social status aligned the trade to a youthful working-class with significantly less social standing than their predecessors.

The second explanation for the loss of the immediate post-war benefits was related to a broader deskilling of the trade. This occurred both as a deliberate tactic and an accidental process. Technological change created its own natural deskilling; as cars became safer and more reliable, there was less need for constant maintenance. This process, however, was further facilitated by employers. Understanding that mechanics' strong industrial bargaining position lay in their transferrable skills to engineering, employers ran a long campaign to restrict these opportunities. This occurred through a process similar to that outlined by Harry Braverman (1974),

whereby Taylorist organisational tactics were introduced to limit the works mechanics conducted. This included departmentalisation, specialisation and an increased power of management to control the work conducted. This process was formalised in the trade through restructures to the certification of mechanics. The separation of technical skills from managerial ones formalised a status hierarchy that placed mechanics at the bottom. This flowed through the trade through expansions in tertiary education, which acted as a barrier to social mobility and even worked as an instrument of deskilling. Paradoxically, this process occurred just as the global economy was determinedly upskilling.

The third was class struggle. The most conspicuous feature of this struggle for mechanics was a long-running campaign by motorists and employers to suppress their standing. It was also significant that mechanics' ability to resist the efforts of motorists and employers to exploit them was limited by their lack of collective identity and solidarity. Though many mechanics found individual ways to resist, such as taking on illegal "backyard" work that allow them to expand their skills beyond the increasingly strict boundaries of their trade, Australian motor mechanics remained unorganised and unionised throughout the twentieth century. This was in stark contrast to engineers. Owing to their lack of numbers, engineering in Australia prior to the Second World War was comprised of both middle-class professionals and working-class tradespeople. As a result, engineers did not possess the levels of elite social status akin to their European counterparts (Forsyth & Pearson, 2021). Unlike mechanics, engineers sought to organise to protect and advance their own status to protect their work following the war. The Institution of Engineers Australia brought a work-value case to the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Court in 1957, seeking to gain professional status. They were rewarded with such in 1961 so long as entrance to the profession was based upon certifications, explicitly reducing opportunities to practically trained engineers (Forsyth & Pearson, 2021). This was a new split in Australian engineering. Historically, professional engineering societies had long regarded hands-on trades, such as motor mechanic work, as an important source of experience. They often described practical 'workshop' experience as an essential part of any engineer's education. The 1961 case signified the class status of professional engineers as comfortably middle class, and distinctly separate to those of their trade counterparts (Forsyth, 2023). This decision formally eroded the mechanic-to-engineer pathway that so many returning servicemen from the Second World War had used. Professional, middle-class unions were crucial to obstructing the upskilling and occupational mobility of wage-earners in working-class trades.

## CONCLUSION

Motor mechanics now look classically working class, but this was not always the case. The first motor mechanics did not share a cohesive class identity. Mechanics came from a variety of backgrounds, across social divides of class, race, and gender. What defined them was their skill, which mechanics leveraged to create a new area of work. In contrast, motorists were an extension of the established elite, inherently wealthy and interlinked with capital. While the working class made itself in response to its relations to employers, the tensions that produced a working class of motor repairers was a result of inbuilt conflict between motorists and mechanics. The Second World War disrupted both the formalisation and the gendering of the trade. It provided male mechanics with opportunities for upskilling in engineering and thus upward social mobility.

The post-war conditions that benefited workers were short-lived. Cultural changes combined with economics to associate mechanical repair work with a firmly working-class identity. A deskilling process, both deliberately formed by employers and through natural technological advancements, reduced the leverage mechanics had gained through their skills. Simultaneously, professional engineers were more than willing to cut mechanics off from their areas of work to increase their own prestige. In showing these three factors at work over the period spanning the turn of the twentieth century to the early 1970s, this thesis provides a historical context for the broad denigration of maintenance work that has occurred since then. Whereas the mechanic trade once presented an opportunity for workers to develop skills that provided the possibility of social mobility, it was transformed into a dead-end trade, exploited by employers, for the benefit of the middle class.

By exploring these processes, this dissertation seeks to add context to ongoing debates about the future of maintenance work. Today, the work mechanics do to repair the actual mechanical components of the car is increasingly limited. Instead, an increasing computerisation of cars has transformed the work, making them more technicians than mechanics. Copyright laws, however, have been a new source of deskilling, increasingly allowing manufacturers to deny unauthorised access to the internal workings of their cars. This has come in the forms of digital locks, that prevent access to the computer systems necessary to repair cars, as well as physical barriers, like impenetrable covers placed over the top of engines. The monopoly of maintenance work by manufacturers has set the scene for the ongoing fight over whether citizens even have a right to repair their own belongings, destined to affect what our society and economy looks like in the future (Perzanowski, 2022).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was completed in 2021 in the National School of Arts at the Australian Catholic University. It was supervised by Hannah Forsyth and Melissa Bellanta. Open access publishing facilitated by Australian Catholic University, as part of the Wiley - Australian Catholic University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program scholarship and ACU Postgraduate Research Student Support Scheme.

## ORCID

Michael P. R. Pearson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5078-5270>

## REFERENCES

- Birney, S. (1984) *A nation on wheels*. Sydney: Dreamweaver.
- Bolognese, M. (2017) Nyurulypa: the good tricks. In: Paul, M. & Bolognese, M. (Eds.) *Bush mechanics: from Yuendumu to the world*, 51–57. Adelaide: Wakefield Press.
- Borg, K.L. (2007) *Auto-mechanics: technology and expertise in twentieth-century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and monopoly capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Broomham, R. (1996) *On the road: the NRMA's first seventy-five years*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Carmichael, M. (2014) *With skill and fighting: craftsmen of the Australian Army, 1914–2014*. Brisbane: Brisbane Copyright Publishing Company.

- Clarsen, G. (2017) Bush mechanics: then and now. In: Paul, M. & Bolognese, M. (Eds.) *Bush mechanics: from Yuendumu to the world*, 1–18. Mile End, SA: Wakefield Press.
- Conlon, R. & Perkins, J. (2001) *Wheels and deals: the automotive industry in twentieth-century Australia*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Connell, R.W. (2005) *Masculinities*, 2nd edition. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Connell, R.W. & Irving, T.H. (1992) *Class structure in Australian history*, 2nd edition. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Davison, G. (2004) *Car wars: how the car won our hearts and conquered our cities*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Forsyth, H. (2023) *Virtue capitalists: the rise and fall of the professional class in the Anglophone world, 1870–2008*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Forsyth, H. & Pearson, M.P.R. (2021) Engineers and social engineering: professional/trade unions and social mobility. *Labour History*, 120, 169–195.
- Maddison, B. (1995) *Skill and the commodification of labour in New South Wales, 1840–1915*. Thesis (PhD). Wollongong: University of Wollongong.
- Maddison, B. (2007) “The skilled unskilled Labourer”: the decline of artisanal discourses of skill. *Labour History*, 93, 73–86.
- Meyer, S. (1999) Work, play and power: masculine culture on the automotive shop floor, 1930–1960. *Men and Masculinities*, 2(2), 115–134.
- Neill, N. (1991) *Technically & Further: Sydney technical college 1891–1991*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.
- Page, E. (1963) *Truant surgeon: the inside story of forty years of Australian political life*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Perzanowski, A. (2022) *The right to repair: reclaiming the things we own*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Priestley, S. (1983) *The crown of the road: the story of the RACV*. Melbourne: Macmillan.
- Smith, C. (2006) The double indeterminacy of labour power: labour effect and labour mobility. *Work, Employment and Society*, 20(2), 389–402.
- Smith, L. (2019) *A spanner in the works: the extraordinary story of Alice Anderson and Australia's first all-girl garage*. Sydney: Hachette.
- Stein, J.A. (2016) *Hot metal: material culture and tangible labour*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Symons, B. (1997) *Challenging and maintaining the traditional gender order: labour movement responses to women workers in the metal industry, and to equal pay, during World War II*. Thesis (PhD). Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
- Taksa, L. (1998) “All a matter of timing”: managerial innovation and workplace culture in the New South Wales railways and tramways prior to 1921. *Australian Historical Studies*, 29(110), 1–26.
- Thompson, E.P. (1968) *The making of the English working class*, revised edition. London: Penguin.
- Tuckey, B. (2008) *On solid ground: 90 years of VACC*. Melbourne: Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce.
- Waling, A. (2020) *White masculinity in contemporary Australia: the good ol' Aussie bloke*. London: Routledge.
- Wright, E.O. (1985) *Classes*. London: Verso.