

Background to Working Lives Interviews

In order for a country's history to truly reflect its past, the need to chronicle the lives of its 'ordinary' citizens, and not just the notable ones, has long been acknowledged. Eric Hobsbawm wrote that the most widely recognised achievement of radical history "has been to win a place for the history of ordinary people, common men and women". This collection of transcripts of retired people remembering their working lives is intended to add to the growing record of what it was like to be a worker in Australia in the mid-twentieth century.

Most of those interviewed responded to an article I sent to NSW central coast newspapers in 1995, which explained the broad aims of the project and encouraged retired people who were prepared to talk to me about their working lives to contact me. As well, several interviews were the result of word of mouth contact and recommendations from friends and acquaintances. Only one woman responded to the publicity, (though I have managed to rustle up another one). This is probably because when you say "work" in this society, most people assume you mean "paid work", and this has traditionally been the domain of men - especially for those past retiring age. Depending on the type of work involved, it could be argued that it would be arrogant for a male to think he could ask pertinent questions about the subtleties of female culture. I think similar accounts to these of "women's work" are much needed, but perhaps they would be better conducted by women. (Anyway, that's my explanation for the gender imbalance in these collections.)

Each person was interviewed twice - each conversation lasting usually for about two hours. In the first interview, the respondent was asked for a chronological overview of their working history, and questions on my part were kept to a minimum. In the second interview, the conversation was directed to areas for exploration arising out of the content of the first talk we had, so the conversation jumps around more in the latter parts of the transcripts as a result.

The transcripts have been only minimally edited, and as far as possible I have tried to retain the colloquial and informal conversational style in which the memories were delivered. (For a more detailed account of my transcription methods see [Taping, Typing and Trusting: Confessions of a Transcriber](#) (elsewhere in **Top Drawer: Words**). Some of the material might at times appear only marginally relevant, but working life is so bound up with the rest of existence that I felt it safer to leave too much in, rather than omit material that could prove to have a bearing on why a working life took the course that it did. Besides, I am uneasy about assuming the role of censor, since one person's irrelevance is another person's gem of interest, and who am I to make the decision?

When I tell people that I am chronicling the human dimension of peoples' working lives, a common response is for them to ask me if I've read Bert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*. The connection is a perceptive one, because whatever the chord was that Facey's account struck in so many of his readers, I think it echoes through these accounts as well, individually voiced in each working life remembered. In compiling these accounts I have been repeatedly impressed by the spirit, resilience, good humour, stoic acceptance and determination to make the best of things that is so characteristic of so many of the people I have spoken with.

But as well as sharing a certain resonance of authenticity with Facey's book, this is also a collection of *different* working lives, and the range and variety of the experiences that constitute peoples' working lives is quite striking. Equally striking is a *similarity* of experience within all these differences - similarities brought about in the main by large-scale historical developments like the Depression, the major wars and technological change in the workplace. And they are all played out against the backdrop of social class. Much may be conveyed in the *way* things are said, and these highly individualistic accounts of the day-to-day realities of working life a generation or so ago speak volumes between the lines about the social values, mores, habits of mind and assumptions about the world that held sway at the time. (Much of what's between the lines for me has to do with the size of a person's life and the extent to which it is delimited by one's position in the social hierarchy.)

While compiling this lot I came across a quotation attributed to Mark Twain which I can't resist concluding with: "*If work were so great the rich would have hogged it long ago.*"
