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SWAGGERS AND SOCIETY

A NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The aims of this study are two-fold. First, to reach an understanding of the swagger, his lifestyle, and his outlook on life. And second, to investigate the relationships between the swagger and various groups in New Zealand society, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The North Otago region was chosen as a base for the study because it has traditionally been regarded as one of the main swagger areas in New Zealand. The main town of Oamaru had a population of 4000 to 6000 in the 1890's, and was neither wholly urban or rural. As the service centre for the North Otago hinterland and a road, rail and sea centre, Oamaru had large numbers of itinerants, passing through the town. In the rural hinterland mixed cropping predominated, and this required large numbers of seasonal workers, which were drawn from outside the region.

In Chapter One it is argued that rural itinerant workers were integrated into a rural structure that was both labour intensive and seasonal. Chapter Two discusses the characteristics which separate the swagger from other rural itinerants, which I have called, the "swag-carriers". In Chapter Three the conflict between the swagger and a developing bureaucracy, and middle class ideology in the late nineteenth century, is analysed. In Chapters Four and Five, the attitudes
of rural and towns people towards the swagger are investigated. A model based on the value system of "reputation" and "respectability," is used in Chapter Six to explain the ambivalence of attitudes towards the swagger, and to investigate an important aspect of the swagger psychology - his self esteem and his individuality.
In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century New Zealand was becoming more modern. Indicators of this change were the maturing age structure and sex ratio of the population; the growth of towns and cities; larger scale production utilizing more advanced technology; the increasing specialization of work; the expanding role of government; and the development of an efficient bureaucracy.

Though rural New Zealand was generally following this trend it remained largely pre-modern and seasonal during this period. It was characterised by a lack of specialization in employment and by a labour intensive economy. Development work, for example, construction of roads, railways and irrigation systems, clearing of bush, ploughing of new land and building of fences absorbed much casual labour. Much of this work was seasonal, restricted by wet and cold winters.

Grain harvesting on the east coast of the South Island, and shearing on the large sheep runs throughout the South Island and parts of the North Island provided thousands of seasonal jobs in spring, summer and autumn. This seasonal work supported a large number of itinerant rural labourers who had a wide
range of skills, and could move easily between shearing shed, bush clearing, fencing line and threshing machine. The seasonal grain harvest also attracted large numbers of settled labourers from small towns in the grain growing areas, and from wider afield. They were attracted by the income that could be earned by working long hours over a couple of months. Seasonal and casual work in rural areas also supported some settled rural labourers without permanent employment, and absorbed at peak times the unemployed from the towns.

Employers of large amounts of seasonal labour, that is, sheep stations, and mixed crop and wheat estates, supported those who depended on this employment, when work was not available. Food and shelter provided by employers enabled unemployed labourers to survive through winter, and to move constantly in search of work. Thus the sheep runs and estates always had a pool of casually employed itinerant labourers on which they could rely. This informal system of relief for the unemployed had a humanitarian aspect, as well as ensuring the availability of labour when it was needed. The humanitarian aspect was reflected in the idea of rural hospitality towards travellers and to the hungry and shelterless.

The Puketoi Diaries illustrate the use made of seasonal and casual labour in the yearly operations of a sheep run. They also illustrate the labour intensive nature of nineteenth century farming; the turnover of "permanent" workers; and the itinerant work seeking process. Itinerant self employed men, including a hawker and a blacksmith, called regularly at
the station. Reference to the 1862 gold rush to Central Otago indicate how sheep runs and farms provided stopping places for travellers in the early New Zealand. However in this case the hospitality had a commercial aspect.

"23 August 1862 - about forty diggers passed on and about 150 stayed all night. Selling flour, tea, etc"

On Puketoi a large number of intensive activities kept the permanent labourers busy throughout the year and to carry out other tasks extra labour was engaged. These activities included ploughing, planting and harvesting potatoes, making hay, threshing oats and cutting chaff, sowing pasture, carrots and turnips, clearing land of stones, as well as looking after flocks of sheep. Shearing was a seasonal activity that required greater resources of skill and labour than were normally available on the station, and these were employed for short periods. In 1864, 12,180 sheep were shorn over a period of thirty-six days, from 23 November to 28 December. Twenty five days were worked - the other eleven were either Sundays or the sheep were too wet to shear. The diary illustrates the labour intensive and time consuming nature of rural work. In May 1866 it took sixteen days and "all hands", to dig the potatoes. Haymaking employed three or four men, and on some days "all hands", for a period from mid January to mid February in 1868. Cutting, stacking and threshing oats and barley continued until mid April. In 1867 ploughing took seventeen days; carting soil by dray,
twenty three days; carting and spreading manure, -
eighteen days; carting stones by horse drawn dray, -
sixteen days; planting potatoes, - five days and threshing
grain - fifteen days. This work was generally carried out
by permanent employees. Casual labour was employed to build
fences, dig ditches, collect firewood, build huts, mark
lambs and shear sheep. The turnover of employees meant that
itinerant work seekers were constantly being employed on a
longer term basis.

Unfortunately the diaries do not indicate the numbers of
shearers and rouseabouts employed at shearing time. In 1864
an average of 550 sheep were shorn each day. A blade shearer
could shear up to 100 a day, but the average was likely to
be less than this. Thus it was possible that Puketoi employed
between five and ten shearers for a period up to a month.
At a later period, Benmore Station employed fifty five men,
including thirty shearers, to shear 90,000 sheep, and the
season probably lasted a month.

Mixed cropping and grain growing in Canterbury and North Otago
employed large numbers of seasonal labourers. For example,
in a "small" undertaking at Kakanui in the 1880's, two men
leased a 200 acre paddock, planting 190 acres of potatoes
and ten acres of barley. At harvest time, forty men were
employed, some from Oamaru, and paid 6d a bag to dig potatoes.
The 1880's and 1890's were the hey days of the wheat estates.
In Asburton County alone, 92,000 acres were harvested in the
peak year of 1892. But by the end of the century, the wheat
era was over. The development of the horsedrawn mechanical reaper and binder in the 1870's reduced the labour content of grain harvests, but large amounts of seasonal labour were still required to stack and thresh the grain.

"Longbeach Estate" had 4,000 acres in wheat and 7000 acres in crop altogether in 1889. At harvest time, sixty drays and waggons were involved in stacking, while thirty five reapers and binders cut the crop. Three hundred men and as many horses were employed. The station normally employed a hundred permanent hands. Gould and Cameron's "Springfield Estate" also employed an extra 100 to 200 men at harvest time. Rather than relying on itinerant labourers calling at the estates looking for harvest work, employers went into the towns. In Ashburton, Baring Square was the place where harvest hands assembled in January and February to await employment for the three month season. In Oamaru the boarding houses held the pool of harvest labourers for employers to engage.

It is difficult for the modern person to imagine the numbers of men and horses employed in farming activities in the late nineteenth century, before the advent of the tractor, bulldozer and motorized reaper and thresher. On Greenfield St Station near Lawrence over a hundred horses were used in ploughing. "Longbeach Station" in 1896 used seventy reapers and binders, seventy drays, and 1,000 horses. Rural workers formed a large part of the New Zealand workforce. The 1891 Census reveals that there were 13716 men listed as
farm servants and agricultural labourers. There were 6427 men listed under the broad category of pastoral workers - labourers, stock riders, shepherds, shearsers etc. In Otago the respective figures were 3359 and 1286. Taking the number listed as "Run-holders, Grazier, Sheep and Cattle Farmer" as 229, there were, on average, five employees on each farm and station in Otago. However, many sheep and cattle farms would have been small and worked by the owner. On the larger runs, the number of employees would have been much larger than five although not as large as on the lowland estates. Sheep and cattle raising was less labour intensive than cropping.

In the 1891 Census there are 6427 males listed as sheep and cattle farm and station employees. This broad category is broken down into thirty four job categories, including station accountant, musterer, labourer and wood cutter. The number listed under this wide range of pastoral activities encompassing most jobs, is only 4488. This leaves 1,941 unaccounted for. It would be tempting to suggest that these 1,941 were unemployed itinerant rural labourers, listed as engaged in pastoral pursuits though unemployed at the time of the Census. But it is more likely that these men listed no specific job on their Census forms. It is also likely that many itinerant labourers would list himself under the general category of "pastoral labourer", of which there were 1608, or almost 30% of the pastoral occupations listed specifically. And many of those listed specifically were likely to be itinerant, or at least employed only for short periods. These
include shearers of which there were 105, wool classers and pressers (20) and drovers (110). Thus from the Census alone it is not possible to discover the number of relatively permanent, as opposed to itinerant, rural workers in the pastoral sector. We can only say that approximately one third were listed under no specific occupations and that those listed specifically included both relatively permanent, and itinerant workers.

Angus has linked the numbers listed in the Census but only 1000 in the directories, which perhaps suggests that 4000 agricultural and pastoral labourers were not resident in rural areas. The directories however are not accurate and tend to discriminate against the lower socio-economic group, and the less permanent in the community. Using other evidence for example the number employed during harvests, and the number of tramps visiting estates and runs, as well as the disparity between census and directory listings, Angus estimates that the number of itinerant rural labourers in Otago alone may have been as high as 3000, that is 15% of the adult male population of rural Otago in 1886. This figure may be inflated by the inclusion of harvest workers. Many were not itinerant rural labourers, but labourers from towns and cities, and settled in rural areas. Lacking year round steady employment they took advantage of the work offered in the late summer on the wheat estates, to supplement their incomes.

Other evidence suggests that there were thousands of rural itinerants in the late nineteenth century. The Journal of the
Department of Labour stated that there were "many thousand" itinerants in the early 1890's; the worst years being 1894-5. By the latter 1890's the numbers had declined. But during the depression the "floating labour population" was augmented by "settlers and others who had previously been settled".19

Records of the number of itinerants calling at stations for work or food also indicate the extent of the phenomenon. A Hawkes Bay station supplied 900 meals in six months in 1894, and a McKenzie country station provided for 600 swaggers a year.20 In 1892 four hundred "tramps" sought jobs at Morven Hills Station in Otago.21 Other sources confirm that the number of wanderers was large.

"In the 1880's there were thousands of swaggers tramping around the country looking for work. There was no charitable aid and no unemployment fund. The conditions under which these men existed were a disgrace to the community. At one time there were hundreds of men camped on the Ashburton riverbed" 22

Another account of the numbers on the road illustrates that the itinerants were not loners.

"We made our way towards Waipawa, where my mate was sure there would be a gathering ... Over a hundred men were camped in the willows" 23

Unemployment was a common experience in both rural and urban areas, and especially prevalent among the unskilled. Employment was often only short term, and men were unemployed while
looking for new work. In both rural and urban areas much work was seasonal, and winter unemployment was a widespread problem. But summer work in rural areas absorbed even the skilled workers who lacked employment in the towns. Campbell estimated that one in 5 of the adult male population was only employed on a casual basis. The inability to earn steadily throughout the year made it difficult to build up savings as an insurance against future unemployment. Lack of work could rapidly lead to poverty.

Unemployment was common but generally restricted to local areas and to the winter months. During this period the more settled and well known members of the community could apply for charitable aid, for relief work, or could run up grocery bills in anticipation of future earnings. But for many others who had few resources, and could not fall back on family, or charitable aid organizations for assistance, the only solution to the problem of finding work in the towns was for the male to wrap up a few belongings in a blanket, and go searching for work. The unemployed tramped rural areas looking for work. Some were walking to new towns in the hope of finding more permanent employment, and picked up casual work to keep themselves going. If all attempts to find work failed, the itinerant could at least rely on informal aid for food and shelter.

The depression of the late nineteenth century caused massive unemployment and poverty. Though many urban workers began
agitating for work and relief to enable them to stay in the cities and towns, large numbers were forced to search for work in rural areas, depending for their food and shelter on landowners, churches and fellow rural workers. In the downturn of the rural economy many permanent rural workers lost their jobs and subsequently joined the ranks of the wandering unemployed.

"When times were bad and the stations and farms could not sell at a price above bankruptcy, working men were turned out to wander and hunger".

The rural itinerant group also included workers who were firmly within the casual and seasonal labour market. Shearers, rabbiters, some harvest hands, fence-s and some rural labourers were included in this group. They moved constantly looking for work when unemployed, and stayed only as long as work was available, but rejecting permanent employment. Some itinerants on the other hand were searching for permanent employment. In the days before the telephone, mass communications and labour bureaux, the search was largely a hit and miss affair. The itinerant called in at farms and stations hoping for permanent employment, but generally accepted less permanent work as a temporary substitute. Some itinerants had little intention of finding work, if they could help it, living largely on informal aid, though usually doing some labour in return for food and shelter.

The groups above are similar to some of those described by
an English University Professor who spent his holidays interviewing two thousand "tramps" in England. Of the two thousand, 623 were willing to work, but couldn't get any; 445 gave no valid reasons; 301 thought that they should not have to work and if some people were foolish enough to do so, they would live on those; 407 were on their way to get work at distant towns, and had letters promising them employment; and 194 were waiting on relatives to die, and to leave them their money. 31

Angus uses a wide definition of the itinerant labourer to encompass the wide range of activities that they engaged in. But despite the diversity the itinerant had one common characteristic and this was their relationship with settled communities

"(they) form a mobile group outside, but intersecting with the rural communities, rural industry centres and pastoral economy, at various times of the year." 32

For example, some miners were also rabbiters and harvest hands at different times of the year, and formed a floating population which moved around within a local district. 33

Some settled rural labourers also engaged in casual and seasonal work. The working year of one such worker in North Otago included potato digging, and planting, cocksfoot seed harvesting, gorse cutting, turnip thinning and regular annual
employment on threshing mills operating in the areas. Work depended on the weather and the season, and when it was available long hours were worked. The settled labourer could build up closer contacts within the local areas, and could probably expect to work more steadily during the year than the itinerant. And he could perhaps hope to accumulate some savings. The fact that he was settled and often had a family and some land for subsistence farming tended to indicate that the settled labourer had achieved some security.

Going to "the track" was seen as a last resort by many, especially by the urban and small town unemployed. But for others it was the means whereby they could accumulate some savings and eventually settle down in a farm or small business. Lady Barker met an itinerant worker who spent several days digging a well on their property. He had £300 in a bank and intended to buy a farm.

The itinerant experience was common to many in colonial New Zealand, the starting point in the attempt to find security and independence

"I remember my father telling me that he got off the boat in Bluff from Australia and just started walking to find some work. He walked through Southland and Otago before finally getting a job harvesting around Methven. He carried everything he had and called in at all the stations and farms looking for work. The cooks generally gave him a meal."
The man in question later worked as a farm contractor, and balloted forty acres of the Ardgowan Estate, close to Oamaru which was broken up in the late 1890's. He also grew wheat on other leased land. Katz' description of the transient Canadian, Wilson Benson, is appropriate in describing this man. He was not a drifter, but a "hardworking man in search of success". Bradfield's father was initially an itinerant work seeker, who began his quest for prosperity as a harvest hand. For newcomers to New Zealand "the track" was the best and only way of exploring the new country, discovering the opportunities that were available and finding a social and occupational niche to fit into. With hard work, perseverance and the gradual accumulation of capital, these opportunities could be consolidated. But itinerancy and a reliance on seasonal work were not conclusive to attaining some security, for unemployment was regular. According to McKee-Wright an itinerant worker finding a job could only expect to "miss a while - the hunger in the air". Helen Wilson described "the track" as "an uneconomic way of finding work".

Technological advances including the shearing machine and the tractor, as well as the move away from grain production in Canterbury and North Otago, reduced the amount of seasonal employment from the turn of the century. There was also an increasing number of small farms, worked by their owners. These partly resulted from the break up of some large landholdings. Apart from their families these farmers did not require extra labour. It thus became more difficult to make
a reasonable living as an itinerant rural labourer. And the supply of informal aid matched the dwindling work opportunities in the twentieth century. The swaggers hut on the big stations and estates disappeared.

Into the 1920's it was still common for unemployed men, and those in search of adventure and opportunity to wander rural areas picking up work, often on a long term basis. And during the depression of the 1930's many unemployed took to the roads, and survived on handouts of food, and informal relief. But at the end of the depression these men returned to the towns, and settled employment.

One of the groups that remained on the track into the twentieth century, gradually dying out in the 1920's and 1930's, was the "swagger". The swagger chose a lifestyle that others regarded as a last resort, a lifestyle that entailed much hardship, especially as one got older. He lacked economic security, material possessions, and close links with a single community. The swagger chose his lifestyle as an end in itself. Other rural itinerants were forced on to the track by poverty, or took it up as a temporary means to an end:— that end being settled security. The attitude of some itinerants, the swaggers, is summed up by Lawson.

"Some take to the track for gain in life, Some take to the track for loss, And some of us take up swag, As Christ took up the cross." 42
They were different from the majority of people who desired to settle down and achieve some economic security.

The next chapter will attempt to analyse the origins of this group, their lifestyles and their psychology.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1 Various contributors, Puketoi Dairies - 1859-1869, held in Hocken Library. A diary of the daily activities on a sheep run in the Maniototo area of Otago. - see Hawker references 1 May 1867, 18 October 1867. - see Blacksmith references 5 to 6 September 1868, 2 October 1868, 4 January 1869.

2 Ibid 7 November 1866 All hands at yards. Marked 3935 lambs, 4680 ewes, engaged 3 extra hands.
9 November Paid off hands engaged during marking lambs.
25 January 1863 Engaged man to go to Gimmerburn and build a hut.
13 November 1866 Engaged 3 shearers to finish fence to Taieri.
13 August 1865 Paid off T. Fisher and G. McDonald
14 August Engaged Mr Binns to make himself generally useful.
30 August Thomas Brown engaged.
17 October Engaged James Girvan to make himself generally useful
28 October 1865 Engaged Andrew Maori to put in potatoes.
8 March 1867 Engaged two hands to dig ground amongst trees.
16 June 1868 Amaturers cutting down spear grass. Engaged tow fencers at rate of £1 per week fenced 17,18 and 19.

3 Ibid, 23 November 1864 - 28 December 1864. 12180 sheep shorn.


7 Ibid, p.84.

8 Ibid, p.85.

9 Ibid.

10 Interview with Mr G. Bradfield, Weston, North Otago, 4 September 1979.

11 Hy Scott, Reminiscences Of A New Chum in Otago in the 1870's Timaru, 1922, p.64.
12 Scotter, *Ashburton*, p.84.
13 *New Zealand Census 1891*, p.259.
14 *Ibid*.
18 *Ibid*.
19 Tregear's report, AJHR, 1895, H-6, p.1, in Peter J. Gibbons *Truning Tramps into Taxpayers. The Department of Labour and The Itinerant Labourer* PhD Massey University, p.77.
23 Lee, *Rolling Stones*, p.32.
26 Interview with Mr Gib Nisbett, Oamaru, 4 September 1979. "Mr Nisbett remembered his parents running up £20 grocer bills during the winter, which were paid off when work was available in the summer.
27 "Helen Wilson Recollections", Taped held by the Hocken Library. Here after referred to as "Helen Wilson Tapes". Helen Wilson remembered hearing wives in town saying that their husbands could not find work, as they told their husbands to roll up their "bluey" (swag), and go searching for work.
30 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
31 North Otago Times, 14 April 1900.
32 Angus, "City and Country", pp.77,78.
33 Ibid, p.71.
34 Interview with Gib Nisbitt. See Appendix for an extended statement.
35 Lady Barker, Station Amusements in New Zealand", London 1873, p.179.
36 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
38 John Parr, "When to Otago First I Came", (1861), in Woodhouse, Farm and Station Verse, p.11.
39 David McKee-Wright, quoted by J.A. Lee in "Swaggers the Folklore of Colonial Days", Taped interview with J.A. Lee, held in the Hoken Library. Hereafter referred to as "Lee Tapes".
40 "Helen Wilson Tape".
CHAPTER TWO

SWAGGER AND SWAG-CARRIER

The literal meaning of swagger - one who carries a swag - defines him in terms of a physical characteristic. The swagger walked and carried his belongings on his back. The term swag, used in this context is derived from criminal slang, the swag being stolen property, usually carried in a sack. The New Zealand swagger's swag consisted of a few belongings rolled up inside a blanket and oil cloth, and sometimes a piece of canvas, (which formed a makeshift tent). The swag, tied with a piece of string at each end and slung over the shoulder was comfortable for walking long distances. As Lee noted, the portmanteau bag, (or suitcase), was not much good on "the track". ¹

The literal definition of the swagger includes all men on the track irrespective of the reasons they are there, the length of time they spend, or intend to spend on the swag, and their attitudes towards their lifestyle. Chapter One has already indicated some of the different reasons why men went on the swag including; economic necessity due to unemployment or poverty; temporarily taking advantage of economic opportunities offered by seasonal and casual employment; a commitment to the lifestyle. In calling all those who carry swags, swaggers, irrespective
of these other factors, the term swagger looses a vital
distinction that is felt in using the term. It is argued
that the term swagger, rather than merely meaning
"carrying a swag", also implies a certain commitment to the
tinerant lifestyle. To illustrate this using a modern
example: we recognise a difference between a hitchhiker who
has spent ten years on the road, and one who is just trying
to get home for the weekend, even though they are both
called hitchhikers. Contemporaries of swaggers in the nine-
teenth century recognised different groups within the broad
classification "swagger", and in part this accounts for the
differing attitudes held about swaggers, even by the same
person.2

A division commonly used to differentiate swag-carriers
was between those who were hardworking and those who were
"spongers" and "bludgers", and hence undesirable. While
useful in political rhetoric in the late nineteenth century,
this differentiation does not separate the "true swagger"
from those who were merely carrying swags: there were
hardworkers and "bludgers" in both groups. It is suggested
that the outlook of the "true swagger" was non-materialist
and pre-modern. These separated the "true swagger" from
other men who were carrying swags.

The swagger lived in a society which was orientated towards
the possession of material objects and comforts and which
regarded work as an obligation. His non-materialist outlook
tended to annoy some groups in that society, notably the
middle classes, in two ways. First, the swagger that worked
often spent his wages in hotels because he felt no need to
save the money to buy a house
or some land. He was criticised for being improvident.
Second, the swagger who only did enough work to satisfy
his needs was attacked as "criminal laziness".

The swagger characteristically did not have a family to
support (though there may have been exceptions to this);
had no mortgages and was not interested in saving for the
future. His needs were very modest; enough food to stay
alive, warm clothes, shelter from bad weather, tobacco
and drink. "Fresh air, food, a good bunk - what else
is there in life". The formal aid structures of the
estates and sheep runs and the tradition of rural hospitality
enabled the swagger to satisfy most of his needs by not
working, at least not for long periods for wages. Meals
and shelter could be paid off, for example, by chopping
wood, digging gardens or drawing water. Cash for "necessities"
such as tobacco and alcohol could be earned by working
for wages, for short periods. "Castoffs" provided clothing
for those unconcerned with their appearance. One swagger
wore second hand frock coats - there was little demand
for them and they were plentiful.

Those who had accepted non-materialism and itinerancy
tended towards a subsistence lifestyle based on small
amounts of casual work and informal aid.

"'What does any man want a job for?', the
Shiner asked, 'if he's got all he wants.
I could do with a plug of tobacco right
now,' he added, 'but what else do I want a
job for". 4
The tendency towards small amounts of work to satisfy modest needs formed a group of swaggers that were variously called "sundowners", "criminally lazy" and "sponging undesirables", in the nineteenth century. They were Lee's "scamps and scaliwags" and are the group that swagger-lore now surrounds.

Some "true swaggers" worked for longer periods. They may have been firmly in the seasonal labour market, harvesting or rousing in shearing gangs at various times of the year. But the wages were usually squandered in pubs, and when the cheque was cut out the swagger moved on in search of work. Wages may also have been saved so that the swagger did not have to search for work immediately. Within the non-materialist lifestyle, work was seen as, as fulfilling needs, rather than as an obligation to society. Many swaggers lived according to the idea that one only needed to do enough work to keep "body and soul" together and many did work as barter for the supply of goods, and services such as food, shelter, clothes, tobacco.

The swagger rejected full-time, permanent wage employment, but was not therefore parasitic on society, as many imbued with the strict work ethic of the nineteenth century charged. The swagger had both a symbiotic and a dependent relationship with the rural society he moved within. The barter system illustrates the symbiotic aspect; for example one swagger was given shelter every winter by a Hokitika police constable, and in return chopped enough wood to last
until the next winter. Swaggers were dependent on large stations and estates for work and relief and the changing nature of farming in the twentieth century decreased the availability casual work and handouts.

A feature of the swagger was the lack of responsibilities and commitments in his lifestyle where he only had to worry about himself. It is paradoxical that he was committed to a life requiring little commitment. The swaggers life was less planned, less structured and less ordered than we are used to today in modern, time orientated industrial societies. Some swaggers could not remain in routine work, or in the same place for more than a couple of days, while others worked for a couple of months. Katz characterizes this unplanned, unstructured psychology as pre-modern. The pre-modern man,

"... lacked the calculating discipline that subservience to time, large work settings and technology have imposed on modern man. He followed opportunity, not a plan; he trusted; he found it difficult and unpleasant to remain routine confining work ... He disliked most of all, dependence."

The New Zealand swagger can be seen as a pre-modern man. He fitted in with early society but as New Zealand changed and became increasingly modern, from the late nineteenth century, the swagger was increasingly out of harmony with society. The modern education system, industrialization, urbanization and the growth of the concept of an orderly society began to change mens behaviour and their relationships
with society. The individual became increasingly socialized into the community and subject to its laws and norms. The swagger of the nineteenth century increasingly stood out as a relic from the past in the twentieth century, as the itinerant lifestyle became less viable and less acceptable. In the succinct words of the poet,

"The spirit of the country has changed;
they drifted, drifted slowly down,
And life grew harder as they saw the growth of settlement and town,
And working here and tramping there they fought the battle to the end,
Until the hair was grey enough, and the strong back began to bend,
And as the evening darkened down, they had to turn their weary feet,
To the last refuge of the poor - dead beat".  

The swagger lifestyle is sometimes characterized as a crusade, of pre-modern individuality and freedom against the restraints and depersonalization of modern society. Lawson, writing from Australian experiences, emphasised the swagger as a frontiers'man whose restlessness could be accommodated within the fluid society of the frontier. But he believed that within settled society this restlessness was repressed and would eventually strike violently against society. "And when the world is crowded / tis signed and sealed by fate / the roving blood will rise / To make the countries desolate". For Lawson the roving swagger contained the seeds of violent rebellion in the future, when society denied them freedom and individuality. John A. Lee also views the swagger as a restless frontiers'
man, the predecessor of the restless in contemporary New Zealand who feel constrained by a society with no frontiers, and who react against it. 11

The New Zealand swagger, although of 'roving blood' did not contain the latent rebelliousness that Lawson sees in the Australian frontiers' man. He was not likely to rise up to disrupt settled society and "make the countries desolate". Although the swagger was widely regarded as a disorderly influence, and potentially radical, the New Zealand swagger was not to be feared by settled people. The reasons for this are discussed in Chapter Four. The swagger did not rebel against the changing society but "drifted slowly down ... to the old mens home". The swagger of the twentieth century evoked sympathy; they were men unable to adapt to the changed world about them.

It was widely believed, and feared for its consequences, that the swagger lacked roots, that he was alienated and unable to identify with any community. This view depends on the assumption that itinerancy precluded the swagger from establishing relationships. Integration into a community could not be measured by length of stay or membership of societies or institutions for the swagger, but this does not mean the swagger lacked community. The swagger was integrated into a loose and informal community, made up of different elements from established communities. These elements included places the swagger
could find work, charity, entertainment and fellowship, as he moved around. Most swaggers moved about within small regions, along paths that became established over time. The Shiner's area was reputed to have been between Timaru and Gore. In the North Island the main path was a triangle taking in Wellington, Palmerston North and Napier, and the main area—the Wairarapa. The key in establishing paths was not in remaining an anonymous loner, but in becoming well known; building in reputations and contacts. Casual work, food and shelter was more likely to be given to familiar faces by people in rural communities that were suspicious of strangers.

The swagger spent much of his time walking alone, but he was not a loner, and he enjoyed the company of others. Travelling with companions was common in Australia but in New Zealand swaggers seemed to have had companions on a temporary basis only. In developed rural areas with many smaller farms it was probably easier to get work or charity by oneself, but in undeveloped areas where there were large distances to cover between homesteads, it may have been more common for men to move in groups, for safety and companionship. The Puketoi Diaries note both single men and groups of two or three, calling at the station. Male friendship or "mateship" was an important part of the swagger's personal relationships. Mateship was developed in the work place, on drinking sprees in the pubs, and through travelling together and enduring the same hardships. Mateship is a theme that McKee Wright
explores in relation to swaggers, but mateship was a widespread and significant part of male social relations in New Zealand.

Swaggers took part in the activities of established communities as well as meetings organized for other itinerant men. The Shiner regularly competed in the "Irish Jig" competition at the Caledonian meetings at New Year in Oamaru in the early 1900's, and he usually had a lot of friends to console him with drink if he did not win. The interaction of swaggers and itinerant workers, with the settled people in Oamaru is discussed more extensively in Chapter Four. It should be said here, however, that some rural swaggers were loosely associated with small groups within the Oamaru community with whom they shared a similar non-materialist, pre-modern outlook. The swagger was not a rural hermit - he often came into the towns for entertainment and fellowship, and was often only forced back into rural areas by poverty, or the threat of police prosecution for vagrancy.

Swaggers were part of a wider community of less settled men including railway construction labourers, waggon drivers, shearers and other itinerant rural workers. These men occasionally got together at sports meetings, and more often in pubs throughout rural areas. Swag-carriers, both swaggers and itinerant workers, also formed a separate community. They met on the road, in disused huts, at camping grounds and swaggers huts, and around
cooking fires. Swaggers huts sometimes housed forty men, and swaggers camps, much larger numbers of swag-carriers, including swaggers. Lee recalls many tents pitched in a little road near Riversdale, waiting on shearing to begin. The reserve at Waipawa, and the Tyne Street Gardens in Oamaru were both recognised camping and meeting places for swag-carriers, and over a hundred men were seen camped among the willows at Waipawa on one occasion. At meetings of swag-carriers there was storytelling, poem reciting, singing, music, dancing and displays of strength. Some swaggers earned great reputations and became widely known because of their abilities demonstrated at such camps throughout New Zealand. The camps were not organized—they were the result of large numbers of swag-carriers converging on an area in anticipation of seasonal work. But they also resulted from a desire for fellowship and entertainment among men who often spent much of their time alone.

The backgrounds of swaggers, and the factors which led to them taking up the itinerant, non-materialist life style are obscure as many of the swaggers were reticent about revealing their earlier lives. The question, "what type of person was the swagger?", is hard to answer—they left few clues about themselves. To state an obvious characteristic, swaggers were men. All accounts of swaggers fail to mention any women swagger. Many were too old for work but feared institutionalization in the old
men's homes and preferred to suffer the hardships of the track and perhaps die there. Men who had spent many years on the track could not settle down in old age. As well as fit men, there were strange and tragic sights on "the track", men suffering from degenerative illnesses.

"Swaggers ranged from the luckless younger sons of aristocratic parents, to the very dregs of colonial society". Many were well educated but left no record of their experiences and emotions. The swagger therefore has to be interpreted through others. These sources indicate that the swagger embodied both positive and negative aspects. The swagger was attracted to the lifestyle by a desire for freedom and adventure. He had a restlessness, "wanderlust"; rejected long term commitments, security and the comforts of settled society. There was also a sense of failure evident in those taking to the track. Many had come to New Zealand to "seek their fortunes", either on the gold fields, in the developing of the land, or in business opportunities in the towns. The suggestion is that, having not "made it" in a society geared towards success and with a high probability of mobility, swaggers tended to react against, and deny what they had not achieved. Their response was not a militant reaction but a personal rejection of previous goals.

"They came at first from distant lands and strong life beat in every vein, And golden hopes lay on before within the islands of the main ..., There arms were strong, there eyes were bright, and all the world was at their feet, And now they're in the old mens home - dead beat". 23
According to Lee, the New Zealand frontier, gold, and the promise of taming a new land attracted adventures and vagabonds and these men could probably never have settled down. But there were others who hoped to settle and yet became unsettled by the itinerant lifestyle they initially undertook and in some way became addicted to the lifestyle in the same way that modern people with travel experiences find it difficult to put down roots, and become dissatisfied with any settled existence. The gold rushes were a major factor in taking men out of settled environments to which many never returned.

There is a feeling that many swaggers had taken to the road after encountering personal tragedy or misfortune, the inability to cope kept them drifting.

"one swagger I remember - he cursed the whole time about how he had been done out of property". 24

Some who had made the attempt to settle down and had failed seemed to have not had the energy, or psychological makeup to try again, and drifted into the lifestyle requiring little thought for the future, little commitment, "many pioneers failed to adapt, or experienced a drop, in the commodity prices ... and subsequently became wanderers.". 25

There was the man whose wife ran him into debt who left town to and went on the swag, and another who had been a champion axeman until permanently injured, who also took to the track. 26 The gut feeling is that men took to the swag
which they considered an easy way out, because of an inability to cope with responsibilities, economic or personal misfortune.

The swagger's itinerancy and non-materialism came increasingly into conflict with the new society that was developing in New Zealand in the nineteenth century, and there were increasing pressures to conform with the new society. The pull of increasing socialization was strong, but many felt no attraction and remained on the swag until the end of their lives. The next chapter explores the conflict between the swagger and exponents of the new society.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1 "Lee Tapes".

2 For example, Lady Barker, *Station Amusements*, p.179.

3 J.A. Lee, *Shining With the Shiner*, Auckland, 1950, p.179


5 "Lee Tapes".

6 For example, The Shiner could put on a great performance of working ability for a short time. He told Mulcahey when he was working with him one day, that the seagulls were telling him to move on, and soon he left the job. "interview with Mr Bradfield".


8 For example, see W.H. Oliver, *Towards a New History*.

9 David McKee Wright, "In the Old Mans Home" in *Wisks of Tussocks*, Oamaru, 1900, p.45

10 Henry Lawson, "Rover and Rebel", quoted by Lee in "Lee Tapes".

11 "Lee Tapes".

12 Interview with Mr Cooke, Oamaru, 5 September 1979.

13 For example, "Lee Tapes", Lee recalls tramping with the Shiner for a short time.

14 Puketoi Diaries, 25 October 1859, "Man came looking for work". 15 May 1861, "Three diggers called here". 6 October 1861, "Two diggers or sailors came".

15 David McKee Wright, "Old Mates" (1895), and "While the Billy boils" (1895), in, Woodhouse, *Station Verse*, pp.36,36.

16 Author unknown, "Old Tyne Street", manuscript held by North Otago Museum, Oamaru.


18 "Lee Tapes".

19 Lee, *Rolling Stones*, p.32
20 "Lee Tapes". Lee's old uncle used to go "walkabout" from the old man's home.

21 Interview with Mr Bradfield. A senile swagger used to call at his farm regularly.


23 McKee Wright, "In the Old Man's Home", Wisps of Tussock, p.45.

24 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.

25 J.A. Lee, Delinquent Days,

26 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
CHAPTER THREE

ITINERANCY - THE SETTLED VIEW

In the late nineteenth century the itinerant rural worker, and the swagger, came under the scrutiny of several interconnected movements. These were, an increasingly coercive reforming bureaucracy, and a self assured and articulated "middle class" ideology of the "ideal society". The "ideal society" of both these movements was settled, and economically developed; its members lived in orderly communities, and were thrifty, sober and independent. The ideal society lacked social problems, and non-conformist groups. The Liberal period has been described as aggressively egalitarian\(^1\); there was wide acceptance of the need to coerce elements into conforming with the norm - thus producing a "better society" for all.

In 1892 the Department of Labour was established to regulate conditions of employment, and alleviate unemployment. But the Department was, within several years, advocating penal farms to detain itinerants who did not accept employment offered them. And further they were to be compelled to work. This change has several influences.

It was intended by Ballance, that the Department of Labour, would help to identify "malingering" elements, so that they
could be dealt with. He warned that these elements would no longer be able to use the excuse that they did not know where work was available. Ballance's concern about "loafers" was widely felt in New Zealand, and was influenced by a concept of work. Work was the moral obligation of every member of society. Those that did not work were destructive and parasitic.

In the extreme view it was held that unemployment was the fault of the man, who had some personal fault, or weakness. It was not the fault of the labour market or of an unstable economic structure. Unemployment was not only a nuisance but a possible threat. The increasing agitation for work and relief, from unemployed groups fueled the fear that this disaffected group could create disorder. In part the Department of Labour attempt to get urban unemployed into the rural areas, was to prevent them organizing and agitating for government assistance. The unemployed and especially the agitators were also viewed as hypocrites.

"These are the men who are ever looking for work, but in their hearts are praying that they never find it."6

Those holding a less extreme view of unemployment, identified two elements, - the "worthy unemployed", and the "malingeringer". Edward Tregear, first head of the Department of Labour called these groups respectively, the "helpful poor", and the "criminally lazy poor". Tregear had strong views on the
ideal society, and the ideal man. He did not care for the, "endless drifting of human sands / Blown forever through weary lands", but desired an orderly and harmonious society of respectable, law abiding, thrifty, and serious - minded men. And he saw the state as the instrument for introducing stability and order, "the greatest good for the greatest number." 

Tregear at first denied that New Zealand had any problem of those not wanting to work, any criminal or pauper class. But within a year he was distinguishing a group that he thought should be compelled to work, - the "criminal lazy poor". This group included both settled and itinerant elements; "loafer, drunkards, hangers on the wives, spielers". The most visible of these were the rural swaggers. The swagger was seen by Tregear and by much of the community as a "bludger", a man searching for work but hoping not to find it, and an unstable element who would not stay in any one place or at any one job.

The swagger was distinguished from other rural itinerants, those who were genuinely searching for work and looking for the chance to settle down. Tregear hoped to "wean" these "helpful poor" from the "nomadic life", by providing more steady and continuous employment through the year. This would be done by modifying the random search for work, through providing information on work opportunities, and assistance in getting to areas where work was available, for
example, issuing free railway passes. Tregear recognised that casual employment and itinerancy were not conducive to settling down and attempted to provide alternatives; to remedy Lawsons "problem":

"'New Leaf, new land' my motto was,
I did my very best.
Twas want of work that threw me back ..." 13

The department encouraged the search for work in rural areas. It attempted to regulate the "aimless search for work" and to reduce the frustrations involved.14 But rural work was not always popular, especially with married men with families.15 The itinerant search for work could involve long distances and some hardship, and the work offered was short term. Many were unaccustomed to hard manual work, for example clearing bush.

The department was less co-operative towards the itinerants who did not want to work. The development of a coercive attitude towards this group had several sources; Tregear, overseas attitudes and the grass roots attitude of local labour agents. These influences tended to reinforce each other. For example, Tregear's changing attitude towards the "loafer swagger" was reflected in the emphasis of articles included in the Journal. For example, from London a statement that charity sustained professional bludgers and an article on the Australian version of Tregear's "criminally lazy poor."16 It was also reflected in his reports to
parliament and in his correspondence with local labour agents. He called for people to discriminate those who wanted work, from those who only called out for it.\textsuperscript{17}

Tregear influenced the attitudes of the local agents. Initially they had reported the existence of "unemployed", and the occasional loafer. But around mid - 1894 they began regularly reporting the existence of swaggers and loafers.\textsuperscript{18} This in turn persuaded Tregear of the magnitude of the "problem." It thus seems more likely that there was a change in attitudes, than there suddenly appeared, "a class of man on the roads very different from the bona-fide man in search of work".\textsuperscript{19}

The local labour agents not only reinforced Tregear's opinion as to the magnitude of the problem, but also influenced the move towards a coercive solution to the problem. In rural areas and small towns the police constable usually fulfilled many roles, including that of local labour agent. In their main role, they viewed the swagger within the framework of a criminal code as being vagrants. Under the "Idle and Disorderly" provisions of the 1884 Police Offences Act, those without means of support, or the intention of acquiring any, were subject to prosecution.\textsuperscript{20} Police labour agents began suggesting that the Department of Labour have powers separate from those already granted to the police, to deal with those not wanting to work. One agent suggested that, "this class of idlers be compelled to keep of the roads", and that if
they refused work, they be sent to jail, and be compelled to work. Apart from outraging decency in not wanting to work, (a provision already covered by criminal statutes), the itinerant "tramps" were also disorderly elements, annoying settled people and breaking the law, "At every opportunity they thieve". The attitudes of police labour agents, conveyed in Wellington, were a synthesis of their personal experiences with itinerant vagrants and theives, and of Tregear's attitudes.

The climax came in 1896. Tregear advocated that penal farms be established in order to detain the swagger, and compel him to work. But no action was taken on this matter. Increasing prosperity in the late 1890's resulted in a rapid decline in the number of men on the roads. This suggests that many of those regarded as "criminally lazy", were genuinely unemployed. Given the increased availability of suitable work at the end of the depression, a large number returned to more settled existences, and permanent employment. The concern felt about the thousands of unemployed drifting around rural areas was real enough - both within the rural areas, and in government. But the unemployment problem was reduced to a question of personal fault - that the unemployed did not want to work. It was not accepted that most of the wandering unemployed were the victims of economic circumstances, as shown by their return to useful employment when the economy picked up.

The attitude that rural itinerants suffered from some
personal fault or weakness was widespread in New Zealand society, and reinforced the belief that the itinerant lifestyle was an aberrant form. It did not conform to the orderly pattern based on a system of values that are usually ascribed to the "middle-class". These values were espoused as an ideology by the more settled in communities, who had attained some economic prosperity and social status, - in Katz's terminology, the "persistors". The ideology stressed residence and activity in a settled community, independence, and self-reliance. Individual moral responsibility to one's fellow man, to one's family, and community, were important. The ideology taught that the key to "prosperity and social greatness" lay in

"A well-matured, well directed course of action laid down in youth for the guidance of our future lives combined with unwavering purpose of execution".

The aspiration of social mobility was attributed to everyone; the ideal society consisting of independent property owners, and self-employed workers.

It can be readily seen that the itinerant rural worker was not covered by this ideology. His lifestyle and activities annoyed the rural and small town middle-class. But further than this, they were a source of antagonism, and kindled an unease among the middle-class that had the potential to become fear. Itinerants were regarded by settled people as unstable, and disorientated by their mobility. They lacked the restraints of community, family and religion,
and formed a "dangerous class", prone to militancy, and liable to create disorder in society. Angus states that until the mid-1880's, the itinerant rural worker was regarded by the rural middle-class as the unstable, and potentially radical element, in rural society. For example the public works camps were regarded with suspicion and a certain degree of fear.

In rural Australia the squatter was dependent for his survival on the pool of landless, partially employed men. This made him at first uneasy, then fearful, and often savage in his treatment of them. There was a fear that the landless could destroy the squatter, with fire, or personal violence. The squatter also feared that the landless would encroach on his land, (to which he had no legal title), and defend it, with force, against him. There was an antagonism between the landholder and the itinerant worker in rural Australia, that was not present in rural New Zealand.

The rural middle class attributed their aspirations of owning property to other groups, including itinerant workers, and although there were itinerants who aspired to own land, they did not express this in militant, or even political activities. Despite the growth of class consciousness, and conflict in urban Otago in the 1880's and 1890's, there is little evidence in rural Otago of a rising demand for land from itinerants and the propertyless. There was little political agitation or militancy to support their interests.
The lack of militancy can be explained by two factors. First, some rural workers did not aspire to own land, and therefore felt no frustration at not obtaining it. And second, it was believed by those that aspired to own land that the opportunities were still available, and that it was relatively easy to obtain some land. Much of the settled rural working class enjoyed relative prosperity, based on wage labour and subsistence farming on a small plot of land, that was either owned, or leased. Agitation and political activity over land, did not come from itinerants, or the propertyless, in the late nineteenth century. They generally lacked the capital required to farm successfully, or had no aspirations of becoming farmers. Agitation came rather from small property owners, who felt their aspirations of owning more land, and becoming more prosperous, were being frustrated by the large estates.

The middle class were suspicious of itinerant workmen in the public works camps, but this did not apply to the same extent to other rural groups. Itinerancy was accepted as a means of searching for work, and of moving between jobs, in rural New Zealand. The itinerant seasonal and casual worker fulfilled certain rural needs and occupied an important niche in the rural labour market. Many who had become settled in farms, owned small businesses, or were settled rural labourers, had spent some time on "the swag", searching for work. They could thus identify with the hardships and aspirations of itinerant workers. The sight of men walking
the roads, and experience of them calling at farm houses for work, or food, was common in late nineteenth century New Zealand. Thus not all itinerants were regarded as unstable, and potentially radical elements. There was little fear that itinerant workers engaged in farming activities would become politically radical, or threaten the social order. But there was a natural suspicion of unknown itinerants as strangers.

The middle classes recognised, perhaps without articulating them, some of the factors important in promoting radicalism. They did not hold the traditional view that itinerant groups were necessarily unstable and had the potential for radicalism. They held a view based on the aspirations, the perceptions of the opportunities for advancement available, and the tendency to organize, of the various groups in rural society. Tested according to these factors some groups were likely to become radical, others not. For example, some itinerant rural workers had aspirations of owning land, but they believed that the opportunities to do so were open to them, and they had a low propensity to organize in support of their common interests. The chance that this group would become radicalized was small. However, some small landholders with high aspirations, felt their advancement blocked, and organized in support of their interests—this group became radicalized. While some itinerant groups, for example road builders, may not have had many aspirations for increased socio-economic
status, they were able to organize in support of better work and pay conditions. Groups of urban workers forced into railroad construction by unemployment were likely to feel that their opportunities for advancement had been blocked, and that they had in fact fallen down the social ladder. Being in a position to organize, these groups were likely to become especially militant.\(^{34}\)

Most rural workers, both itinerant and settled, had a low tendency to organize in support of commonly perceived interests. The exception to this among agricultural occupations was shearsers. They were itinerant skilled workers, who recognised group interests, and were in a position to organize in support of them. Rural employers vigorously opposed attempts to establish branches of the Australian Shearers Union in Otago in the late 1880's.\(^{35}\) But by the early 1890's shearsers had formed unions, and were striking, in support of better conditions, though with some dramatic failures. In a court ruling twenty eight striking shearsers on Benmore Station forfeited £300 in wages.\(^{36}\) But by the end of the century, shearer pressure, and government legislation, had gained many advances in conditions. The farmer was required to improve the "wretched hovels" that shearsers lived in.\(^{37}\)

Attempts were made to organize settled agricultural workers in North Otago in 1890, but they rejected unionization, deciding that they could get ahead without it.\(^{38}\) But other
groups of itinerant men thrown together for public works construction, or for the seasonal processing of primary products such as rabbits, and sheep, tended to organize, and become radicalized, within these work environments.

The highly mobile nature of itinerants engaged in casual or seasonal employment in rural occupations made it extremely difficult to organize them. Thus, even an unemployed radical union member from the cities could do little to organize and radicalize itinerants while wandering around the countryside. But that same man could organize disruptive and militant protests if he was working within a relief gang with twenty other men. Further more, most rural itinerants and most settled workers did not even consider organizing in support of common interests, or to gain better pay, or conditions. The non-materialist swagger had accepted his low socio-economic position, and therefore did not feel frustrated by his inability to achieve property-owning, or self-employed status. The rural middle-class recognized this, and did not feel threatened by the swagger.

Even those, including rural itinerants, who aspired to social mobility, but found they were not achieving it, did not necessarily become radicalized. Lack of social mobility was often seen as a personal fault, rather than the fault of economic or political structure and many were resigned to their positions. Although one may not have personally made any progress up the "ladder of fortune", the belief
that the ladder was still able to be climbed reduced the impetus to political organization and agitation. The relevant example of this was the widespread belief among rural working class, both itinerant and settled that rural mobility channels were still relatively open. Another reaction to lack of social and economic mobility in one area was to move on to another area, or in some cases, to return "home".

"The months I've been upon the track,
I've looked for work in vain,
With blithesome heart I'd fain go back,
To Scotland dear again." 39

From the mid 1880's, a developing urban, working class faced a narrowing of the opportunities for social mobility, and for the increasing numbers of unemployed, downward mobility.40 They organized into "new unions", and began to criticize the rural and urban elites, and government inactivity. Their ideology, reflected in the Otago Workman, was based on antagonism, class conflict, and the redistribution of wealth, rather than social mobility.41

It seems that Oliver was not correct in his belief that the frustrations of unattainable goals probably occur more frequently on the frontier.42 In this case, frustrations leading to organized militancy occurred as urbanization and industrialization lead to a more structured, non-frontier society. The increasing militancy of the new working class affected the rural middle-class consciousness to a greater
extent than the "unstable and potentially radical", rural itinerants. "The old fear of itinerant rural workers was replaced by a much greater fear of urban radicalism and socialism". There was concern among property holders that these urban movements could radicalise the property-less. But as noted there was little evidence of a rising demand for land. Urban attempts to organize farm labourers were rejected. Attempts to unionize shearers were vigorously opposed by employers, as were later union activities such as strikes.

The 1890 Maritime Strike climaxed a period of increasing tension and indicated two things to the rural and urban middle class. First, that the threat to their positions and to society would come from the urban radicals of the new unions in the future. And secondly, that free rural labour could be used to break strikes, and that many rural labourers were unsympathetic to radicalism.

In the summing up, I would suggest that the coercive attitude of the Department of Labour can be related to the rural middle-class fear of unemployed urban radicals who moved around rural areas during the worst of the depression. Concern over the "unstable and potentially radical itinerant" was thus directed towards certain itinerant groups; unemployed from the towns and cities and some groups of itinerants who worked in large numbers on construction works and in processing and extractive industries. It was recognised
that despite their geographical instability, and sometimes disorderly behaviour, itinerants engaged in agricultural work did not form a "dangerous class", prone to militancy, and liable to create disorder in society.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER THREE


2 Ballance, 18 May 1891, in, Gibbons "Tramps".

3 Campbell, "Unemployment", p.138.

4 Ibid, p.20

5 Gibbons, "Tramps", p.35.

6 N.Z. Herald, 3 September 1880, in, Campbell, "Unemployment", p.44.


8 Gibbons, "Tramps", pp. 27,28,60.

9 Ibid, p.4

10 Ibid, p.79.

11 Ibid, p.87.

12 Ibid, p.97


14 Campbell, "Unemployment", p.135.

15 Ibid, p.121.


17 For example, Tregear's Report, AJHR 1694 H-10, p.4, in, Gibbons, "Tramps", p.85.

18 Gibbons, "Tramps", p.84.

19 Ibid.


21 AJHR 1897 H-6, p.XXI, in, Gibbons, "Tramps", p.86.

22 Ibid.

Campbell "Unemployment", p.52. For example, there was discontent among Central Otago railway construction workers who wanted it acknowledged that they were not paupers on relief works but fulfilling a vital and necessary task. They called for government to let out sufficient contracts to absorb the numbers of unemployed.
CHAPTER FOUR

OAMARU - AND THE IMMORAL ARMY?

This chapter will investigate the relationship between the rural itinerant and various groups in Oamaru. These groups include the Benevolent Society, the Oamaru Borough Council, the Oamaru police, the prohibition movement, middle classes, and a special group of working class.

Attitudes towards social problems such as drunkenness, prostitution, fighting and larrikinism are explored. It is suggested that while the rural worker and especially the itinerant rural worker contributed to some of these problems, they received a disproportionate amount of blame, being perhaps the most visible. In a sense they were used as scapegoats for problems that existed within the town. For example, though the blame was attached to itinerants for supporting prostitution and sly grogging the real concern was to "save" the young men resident in the town.¹ The chapter also explores the community orientation of relief structures in the late nineteenth century, which tended to alienate the rural itinerant, to keep him in rural areas and in bad times, dependent on informal relief in those areas.

The reaction of the Oamaru Borough Council (O.B.C.) towards requests for assistance by the unemployed in the town, illustrates this community orientation, and a developed attitude towards the problem. The Council considered it
had an obligation to the "needy working class", which could be met if suitable work, and finance were available. Unemployment was not dismissed as due to personal failings, and the representations of the unemployed convinced the council of their genuine plight, and sincerity. ² In 1884 for example, £200 was voted by the Council "with a view of affording temporary relief to the unemployed", during the winter, in the form of quarrying, and stone breaking; married men at 6/- a day, single men at 4/-.³ The £200 was increased to £500 for the year.⁴ But relief was to be "confined to those persons living within the borough".⁵ As contributing members of the community the "needy working class" had some claim to its assistance in times of misfortune. The existence of a more formal community based relief structure in Oamaru during several bad years reduced the need for the town unemployed to, "go on the swag" in the search of casual rural work, or the need to take advantage of informal rural relief.⁶ The development of community based relief excluded the rural unemployed who were forced to rely on handouts, and the swaggars hut. However the provision of government relief work enabled them to compete with the urban unemployed for work on road and railway construction.

Another community based relief structure, covering the North Otago region, but based in Oamaru, was the 'North Otago Benevolent Society'. Formed in 1876, its objectives were to, "relieve the necessities of the aged, infirm, disabled and destitute of whatever creed or nation and to afford them
medical relief." Relief was granted, for example, to widows and deserted wives and their children, to disabled men and their families and to physically and mentally ill single persons. Long term relief was granted only to persons resident in the North Otago region for some time, and as many as twenty families had been receiving relief for twelve months or more. Relief was also given on a short term or "casual" basis and in 1888 thirty two persons received casual relief. They were lodged at the home or "otherwise assisted", each receiving relief to the average value of just over 2/-.

It is unlikely that those receiving casual relief were destitute itinerant rural workers, requesting assistance from the Benevolent Society. Although the criteria for granting casual relief, and the backgrounds of those receiving it are not stated, it seems likely that they included poor settled towns people, and destitute travellers. In 1888, four women and sixteen men were granted casual relief. Many married women, and others, for example, "Mary Stirling and child", also received casual relief. Some were granted overnight accommodation in the Benevolent Home, others were given the fare to other towns and cities, for example, Dunedin, Palmerston and Timaru. "Roberts, a casual" was given "a pair of blankets and a suit of clothes". The reasons for travelling are not stated but it seems that many were assisted to reach friends and relatives who intended to support them. Fares may also have been given to poor working men to assist
them in getting to work in other centres, in much the same way as the free railway passes issued by the Department of Labour. Travellers who found themselves stranded in Oamaru, could have been given overnight accommodation, or the fare and a small amount of spending money to allow them to continue their journey. For example, police assisted a young woman with boarding house accommodation for the night and charged this to the Trustees. The Trustees decided that in future the police could refer stranded travellers to the Benevolent Institution for a nights accommodation.

The Trustees of the Benevolent Society were concerned to prevent pauperism - the dependence on charity. Towards this they decided that casuals staying more than one night in the home, work at breaking rocks. This was a common form of relief work in New Zealand and was regarded as "test work". It tended to discourage any reliance on charity by able bodied men. The Benevolent society did not assist the able-bodied unemployed or destitute, either those resident in Oamaru, or the resident or itinerant in the rural areas covered by the Society. To provide relief would have promoted pauperism. Itinerants were not likely to receive any assistance, due to the widespread opinion among the middle class who largely controlled the Benevolent Society, that swaggers and other itinerants did not want to work, an opinion widely articulated in the 1890's by the Department of Labour. The Society was prepared to help the "worthy poor" but not the "worthless poor". And further, the
The itinerant was not a member of any North Otago community, and was therefore generally ineligible for any assistance. The unemployed and destitute were not likely to apply to the Trustees for assistance. Social pressure against accepting charity was strong even amongst the lower socio-economic groups most affected by poverty.

The biggest problem faced by the Society, according to the trustees was that of deserted wives. Apart from marital breakdown it seems that this problem arose through men seeking work, and opportunities for advancement outside Oamaru and North Otago. In many cases these opportunities were sought in Australia. Many of the men sent for their families as soon as they became settled. The provision of charitable aid by the Benevolent Society assisted geographical mobility, by enabling men to search for more secure employment, without their families. Those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale lacked the resources to support their families while they were away, and it is probable that some "deserted" wives were supported by the Society during these periods, knowing that their husbands were going to return. It is not known how many deserting husbands were searching for seasonal work within North Otago, or in other rural areas, or how many may have gone to other cities and towns searching for permanent employment. Although several returned to their wives, there were many who deserted permanently. It was common for husbands to separate from the family in search of work, leaving them with savings, or sending money
back periodically. But it was less common for them to leave the family to the care of the Benevolent Society. This invoked police inquiries on behalf of the Society with a view to prosecuting the deserting husband to pay maintenance. And if the husband had merely left to search for work in North Otago it was likely he would be tracked down by police.

A comprehensive reading of the NOBS Minutes revealed that the term "swagger" was used only once, although there were several mentions of "tramps", who received 4/- each in casual relief. In a letter to the Trustees, the Kurow constable requested that the swagger be "looked after", as he had been hurt at Maloney's Hotel, Sandhurst. The circumstances of the injury are not revealed. This suggests a more sympathetic attitude towards swagger, from at least one rural constable, than was held by some police labour agents. The trustees wanted to see the swagger in Oamaru, before granting relief, but he did not turn up.

From the mid 1890's the Oamaru police were able to forward persons for casual relief to the Benevolent Home, but it was unlikely that swaggers would have made themselves known to police by requesting assistance. They could also go direct to the Trustees. For those who could not afford boarding house accommodation, the Tyne Street Gardens, close to Oamaru's business district, provided sleeping places amongst the shrubs, and long grass. In the 1890's, the
gardens were popular with itinerants, swaggers and drunk sailors. The Oamaru police were tolerant of this practice - "sometimes Sergeant O'Grady would roust them out, but they were mostly left undisturbed". Although one writer refers to the gardens nostalgically as the "doss-house of the Knights of the Road", for another it gained an "unsavoury reputation (as the) camping ground for sundowners, and a place of rest for drunk sailors". It was claimed that the old time bobbies did not know when to apply the law of "no visible means of support". But it was more likely that the Oamaru police were tolerant of swaggers, and the destitute, as long as they were not disorderly, or commit crimes. In 1900 the police used the law quite efficiently in charging the Hon. John Burke O'Brian, with having no visible means of support; O'Brian was sentenced to three months imprisonment. Police tolerance towards disorderly conduct, was, according to one source, because many had served on the gold fields, and knew that "exuberance" was often caused by, "coming to town with a large cheque and a desire for congenial company, after a sojourn in the lonely outback". Police may have been more tolerant of disorder on the goldfields, where for example, "Sunday was a day for beer and brawls, not prayer". But in towns there was less tolerance. Police attempted to enforce order but in many cases were restricted by their small numbers, the large size of some disorderly crowds and by the uncooperative attitudes of some groups. In Methven, for example, it was not considered anything out of the way to
"maul" a man in police uniform, when he had interfered to stop a fight. In one incident in Oamaru, a sergeant had to come to the aid of a constable arresting a drunk man for using obscene language, when a crowd began to assist the drunk.

Fighting was an integral part of leisure activities amongst some groups, and usually occurred under the influence of drink. It was a legitimate dispute settling mechanism, and a form of entertainment. But other groups in society regarded this behaviour as a sign of social disorder that illustrated the degeneracy of man. Reports of fights suggest that the less settled working class were most commonly involved in fights. Accounts of various incidents illustrate the prevalence of fighting. In Oamaru, fights, between sailors and police, gained some notoriety. An annual sports meeting held on vacant land in Oamaru attracted "all nationalities and human types", including Chinese, Germans, Russians; shearsers, gold miners, sailors, swaggers and railway construction labourers. The "star items" were the greasy pole walk and the greasy pig chase, and as the proceedings wore on, wordy arguments developed into 'fisticuffs,' and there was a general 'donnybrook' as a "fitting climax to an eventful day". At a meeting of bullock drivers and station hands on New Years Day, 1861, heavy drinking and violent alterations led to terrific fights; other games mentioned were, throwing the hammer, and quoits. Railway construction workers at Windsor brought beer from Oamaru.
which, it was believed, must have been up to standard because when the party got steamed up, nine fights were counted going on at one time on the village green.\textsuperscript{36} Such disorderly behaviour concerned the rural and urban middle classes, but both heavy drinking and displays of physical strength (including fighting), formed an integral part of the "working class culture" in rural and urban areas.\textsuperscript{37} These aspects of the working class culture were not the only activities which came in for criticism. The other side of the story is revealed in a letter to the editor by a "hardworking man who toils his ten hours a day". He criticises the "riotous behaviour" of some individuals holding euchre parties on Saturday nights.\textsuperscript{38}

A large part of New Zealand culture revolved around the hotel as a recreational and social centre, and still does. In the late nineteenth century, only a small proportion of the population in rural areas and small towns were engaged in social organizations and sporting clubs, and "the hotel bars played a larger part in adult male social life than all of them put together."\textsuperscript{39} Excess drinking was widespread, and Oamaru became known for its drinking problem. In the period 1880 to 1920, the convictions in Oamaru for drunkenness were almost three times the national average.\textsuperscript{40} Police were unlikely to take action over cases of drunkenness unless they became disorderly.\textsuperscript{41} Under section nineteen of the "Police Offences Act", (1884), to be found drunk one had to be, "absolutely drunk, in a greater degree of drunkenness than
that of a person in a state of intoxication only". 42

In the 1870's and 1880's Oamaru had quite a reputation for in sobriety, petty crime and disorder. 43 The high degree of drunkeness was due to Oamaru's position as a road, rail and sea centre. The drinking exploits of sailors, and rural workers, both settled and itinerant, are noted in many local reminiscences. As the major town of North Otago, Oamaru attracted both the "landed gentry" and rural workers, for entertainment and excitement. Men from outside the district seeking seasonal harvest work often congregated around Oamaru's boarding houses, waiting for employers to engage them. At the end of the harvest many workers returned to Oamaru, and other towns in Canterbury, with money, and the desire for relaxation and entertainment. Although the biggest influx of seasonal workers was at the end of harvest, rural workers went "on the bash" in Oamaru throughout the year. The harvest drunk phenomenon was widespread in rural and small town South Island. Methven had a reputation for "riotous behaviour" and "rough and tumbles", especially at harvest time.

"After three months of toil, dawn to dark, they returned to town, and kept police busy on their annual collection of 'harvest drunks on the bash' .... knocking down their cheques". 44

The influx of rural workers including seasonal itinerant workers after harvest, was considered by settled Oamaruvians
the major cause of drunkeness in Oamaru. The Oamaru Licensing Committee reported that in 1890, twenty nine persons were convicted of drunkeness between 1 May and 31 October; and eighty seven over the summer harvest period, between 1 November and 30 April.45

"From this it may be fairly inferred that the majority of drunkards do not belong to the district, but come here in the harvest season, earn some money, spend it, then leave". 46

Using Stones Directories, Higgins found that of eighty four convictions for drunkeness in Oamaru in 1896, twenty eight were resident in Oamaru, thirty four were from rural areas close to Oamaru, (for example, Weston, Waimate and Kurow), and twenty four could not be traced.47 The twenty four that could not be traced may have been itinerants with no place of residence, or have been resident in areas further afield than Otago and Canterbury, or have been resident in North Otago or Oamaru, but not listed. The latter would account for some cases; as noted in Chapter One, the directories were not comprehensive! Higgins' results suggest that at least a third of those convicted of drunkenness were from outside Oamaru, but they were settled in rural areas, and not itinerant workers. Another third were resident in Oamaru. Although a large number of those convicted for drunkeness were probably harvest workers, the Licensing Committee analysis that the majority of drunks
Another social problem within Oamaru which attracted wide concern was prostitution. As a recreational centre Oamaru supplied "wine, women and song". Oamaru's position as a road, rail and sea centre and as the largest town servicing a large rural population with a large number of single males, also explains this problem. Prostitution was linked with sly-grogging and both took place in less reputable boarding houses close to the railway station. There are recollections, though unsubstantiated, of thirty five prostitutes living within the vicinity of the railway station.

In the late 1880's there was wide concern about prostitution and "sly-grogging", and police were criticised for their lack of action. The Oamaru Borough Council discussed the need for a by-law against the problems, but it was recognised that existing statute laws were satisfactory. The council requested the police to take extra action within the laws. The police replied that over the past eighteen months they had reduced the number of houses of ill-fame from nine, to two. The police had difficulty prosecuting known "houses", requiring complaints from local residents before action could be taken. In some cases no complaints were made, suggesting that in some areas of Oamaru, notably around the railway station, there was little concern about prostitution and sly-grogging. Other residents however, sought to make,

"the White Stone City ... morally and socially as pure and excellent as the material of which its edifices are constructed". 52
were itinerant seasonal workers does not stand up under Higgins' analysis.

Oamaru had a drinking problem and itinerant harvest workers, lacking the "steadying influence of family and community", were the most visible element in it. But Higgins suggests that the Oamaru prohibition movement received much of its emotional drive from contact with problem drinking at the neighbourhood level within Oamaru. The lower middle-class prohibitionists tended to live in heterogeneous neighbourhood blocks and had close contact with families affected by problem drinking. The prohibition movement was a "capsule statement of a distinct moral and social outlook, and only one of several attempts to propagate middle class values in society"; piety, thriftiness and sobriety. Excessive drinking was seen as the main cause of poverty, family misery, crime and disorder in the town. There was a considerable overlap of membership between the prohibition movement and the Benevolent Society. The Trustees of the society had much contact with poverty and problem drinking in their monthly visits to relief recipients, and it was a Society rule that recipients abstain from alcohol. The prohibitionists reacted against the unstable drinking elements within Oamaru and the disruption to family life that they observed. They also reacted against other elements from outside Oamaru, for example settled rural workers. Itinerant workers lacking family and community restraints were seen as a major source of disorderly behaviour within Oamaru.
Seasonal workers and itinerants passing through Oamaru, sailors and single men in general supported the less morally pure aspects of Oamaru social life. The middle classes were concerned that the itinerant elements supported prostitution and sly gogging within Oamaru, but they were ultimately more concerned about the affects these had on young men resident in Oamaru. They were concerned that the favourite haunts of the young men were the sly gog shops

"kept by effete females who ostensibly act as landladies to young girls whose occupation consists of first decoying boys and youths to the houses then dancing and singing with them until 'all is blue'." 53

One of the more serious social problems of the nineteenth century in New Zealand, and a problem felt in Oamaru, was Larrikinism. Larrikins were gangs of youths and vandals who created disorder and frightened more respectable citizens.

"The Oamaru larrikin is a destructive specimen of humanity - a past master at window smashing and other forms of destruction ... a man was thrown from his horse as a result of boys throwing crackers, ... now they have taken to tearing bills from notice boards". 54

They disrupted Salvation Army meetings. The municipal gardens were constantly vandalized and the Borough Council pressured police to deal with the larrikins. 55
Larrikinism was an indigenous social problem. Rural itinerants did not bring the problem of larrikinism into Oamaru, and could also be the victims of larrikin pranks.

The Oamaru middle classes were also concerned about an indigenous group of working class, who lacked their values and whose behaviour disturbed their sense of respectability and order. This group eked out precarious livings doing casual labouring work or relying on charity. Some were described as "indigent" and "down andouters". Many were street vendors, a job that required little capital, equipment or skill, and allowed one to set one's hours, and be independent. This group have achieved a certain notoriety in reminiscences about old Oamaru, and are generally referred to as "old hands", or "hard cases". Some lived in the immigration cottages controlled by the Benevolent Society and let out at small rents. Others lived in various cottages and ramshackle huts close to Tyne Street, the business area and social centre of Oamaru. The "hard cases" of Oamaru had a low socio-economic status, and their behaviour separated them from the "respectable" working class who subscribed to middle class values, such as thriftiness, and a sense of correct behaviour. It seems that few had family responsibilities and they had a non-materialist outlook. They did enough work to keep body and soul together and had no security against the future. They formed a group into which the swagger fitted easily and was accepted. The "hard cases" like the swagger, had few ties with the community, but they
preferred to stay more settled than the swagger. But some were probably temporarily itinerant as the need arose. This group were close in outlook and lifestyle to the swagger, and it is interesting that the "hard case" was sometimes identified with the swagger. This may have been widespread in the nineteenth century among the Oamaru middle class, who viewed with some concern the unstable group within the town.

Tyne Street and the Tyne Street gardens were full of the "hard cases" - according to nostalgic reminiscences. Trotter Bob sold pigs trotters in Tyne Street and lived in an immigration cottage. There was Harry Parnell, a remittance man who was never known to work, except at light store jobs, and was also an accomplished juggler and mimic. Neal Pickett, a coloured man, sold fish at a stall in Tyne Street. There was Oyster Bob, Tokarahi Jack, Red-nosed Bob, 'Lanky Jack' Murchison, Mother Keegan, Ginger Liz and Mary Mawhinney. Well known swaggers such as the Shiner, the Hon. John Burke O'Brien, and Barney Winters (Whiterats), were often in Tyne Street. The Shiner was identified as both a swagger and an inhabitant of Tyne Street. He was described as "one of the quaintest characters of Tyne Street", and the last of the old timers to disappear from the street. One writer recalled the Shiner and old Ned Rankin, dancing with Mother Meegan and Ginger Liz, with someone playing the accordion.
This chapter has suggested that middle class persistors in Oamaru, for example, the Benevolent Society trustees prohibitionists, and Oamaru Borough councillors, tended to view the itinerant within a community perspective, in two ways. First, the itinerant was not a member of the Oamaru community and thus was not eligible for any of the benefits that the community provided (for example, relief work for the unemployed and some forms of Benevolent aid). Lacking community and family restraints the itinerant was seen as prone to instability, which was manifested in his sometimes disorderly behaviour, drinking exploits and support of prostitution. Thus secondly, the middle classes viewed the itinerant in terms of how they affected social stability in their own community, that is Oamaru. They regarded these activities as not only immoral in themselves, but also having a bad influence on others in the community, for example young men. The rural itinerants were just one group supporting these problems, but they attracted much of the criticism of the "social problem crusaders" because they were a highly visible group prone to excesses, at certain times of the year. More generally, groups from outside Oamaru coming into the town for excitement and "a bash", caused many of the excesses, as well as itinerant workers in our sense, and further, much of the disorderly behaviour was caused by sailors. The police in Oamaru tended to have a tolerant attitude towards drinking and towards those with "no visible means of support". As long as they caused no trouble they were left alone.
There were groups in Oamaru who accepted the "social problems" of excess drinking sly grogging and prostitution. This group would have been called the less respectable working class by other groups. This group were not integrated into the economic, political or social structures of community as were the "persistors" that we have looked out. Their outlook was similar to that of the swagger, and they may have had similar origins. It was amongst this group that the swagger stayed when he stopped his wandering for a time. It may be suggested that this group was the urban equivalent of the rural swagger. While settled rural and urban working class were likely to be forced into rural itinerancy to find work at some stages, it was unlikely that they would become a swagger. They were integrated into a community by family and property, owning, for example, a house or plot of land. But the urban "lumpen-proloiteriat", the "hard cases" of Oamaru, had few ties, and members of this group were the most likely of any to become rural swaggers.

As noted, the police tended to be tolerant of swaggers who camped in the Tyne Street Gardens. There was no discussion of swaggers as a group, or as a social problem, in either the Oamaru Borough Council Minutes, or the Benevolent Society Minutes, for a period of twenty years. From this we could conclude that the swagger group impinged little on the urban middle class consciousness. Itinerants, and others outside the Oamaru community, were the most disorderly at certain times of the year. This "immoral army" of seasonal workers
perhaps caused the most shock to the middle classes. But groups and problems indigenous to Oamaru, for example, larrikins, the settled working class and their drinking habits, and effete females who intoxicated and seduced local young men, affected middle class consciousness to the greatest extent.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR


2. For example see, *Oamaru Borough Council Minutes*, held by Oamaru Borough Council, 20 May 1886, 26 July 1894, and *North Otago Times*, 6 June 1900.


4. Ibid, 17 December 1884.

5. Ibid, 17 June 1884.

6. Compared with Helen Wilson's recollections of a wife telling her husband that since he could not find work in the town, he should roll his swag and go looking for work, while she supported the family by taking in washing.

7. *North Otago Benevolent Society Minutes*, (held by the Waitaki Hospital Board), hereafter denoted NOBS, 9 October 1876.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Unidentified newspaper report, Annual meeting of NOBS, 10 January 1889, in *NOBS Minutes*, p.268.

12. *NOBS Minutes*, 1 July 1895.

13. Ibid, 2 March 1885. For example, "David Gray, casual, - trainfare to Ashburton plus 2/-, John Day, casual, - trainfare to Dunedin", plus 5/-.


15. Ibid, 6 March 1882. Note that the society was to pay for the forwarding of a wife and family to her husband in Timaru.

16. Ibid, 4 July 1892. "Twist a casual, and Charles Casey, a casual - one night in the home".

17. Ibid, 5 November 1894, 3 December 1894, 7 January 1895.
18 Ibid, 2 May 1887, 7 May 1888.

19 Unidentified newspaper report of Annual meeting for years ending April 1888, in NOBS Minutes, p.189.

20 NOBS Minutes, 2 August 1897, 4 July 1898, 6 February 1899. Correspondence with a deserting husband, traced to the Kalgoolie gold district, Australia. He claimed he was going to pay back the relief given to his wife as soon as he got a job.

21 Ibid, 7 July 1884, for example, "Mrs Hay, struck off (the relief list), husband returned. Mrs Smith, husband returned, struck of at his request, - secretary to warn police about him".


23 Ibid, 7 September 1885. "Secretary to write to H.W. Robinson, Resident Magestrate, asking that the judgement of the Court be enforced in the case of Henry for maintenance of his wife".

24 Ibid, 7 January 1884.

25 Ibid, April 1890.

26 Anonymous author, "Old Tyne Street", manuscript held by the North Otago Museum, Oamaru.

27 Ibid.

28 Anonymous author, "Again in Retrospect, Early Oamaru, III", manuscript held by North Otago Museum.

29 North Otago Times, 10 May 1900. "Constable McLeod said O'Brien had been knocking around town doing nothing, and making a nuisance of himself ... and begging for pennies on the plea that he was establishing an old mans home".


31 Bathgate, Colonial Experiences, p. 98-100, in, Angus, "City and Country", p.54.

32 Scotter, Ashburton, p.145.

33 North Otago Times, 22 February 1900.
George White, "Early Oamaru - More Memories", in, Beginnings, p.103.

Robert Fulton, Medical Practice in Otago and Southland in the Early Days, Dunedin, 1922, p.213. (Muirhead Collection, Oamaru).


Angus, "City and Country", p.109. "The Otago Workman recorded with amused tolerance, social activities such as drinking sprees", see Otago Workman, 4 April 1891.

North Otago Times, 3 July 1900, Letter to the Editor.

Scotter, Ashburton, p.156.


For example, Scotter, Ashburton, p.157.


Higgins, "Prohibition", p.9. Oamaru was described as the best crime producing area in Otago by a Dunedin newspaper.

Scotter, Ashburton, p.85.

North Otago Times, 6 June 1890. (Report of the Annual meeting of the Oamaru Licensing Committee) in "Oamaru Borough Council Newspaper Cuttings", Book I.

Ibid.


Ibid, pp. 77 80.

Ibid, p.94.

Oamaru Borough Council Minutes, see 5 January 1888, 25 April 1899, and 9 May 1889, for discussion on the problem.

Ibid, 23 May 1889.

Higgins, "Prohibition", p.70.

This came out in a conversation with a prominent retired lawyer from Oamaru. He equated a "rag and bone" man who lived in a small hut below the hospital with swaggers.

For example, various articles in, Beginnings: Early History of North Otago, pp. 97-100, 100-103, 125, 126-131.


"Again in Retrospect", manuscript held by North Otago Museum.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE SWAGGER IN RURAL SOCIETY
IDENTIFICATION AND AMBIVALENCE

In this chapter, a spectrum of attitudes, ranging from hostility, through suspicion, to admiration are discussed in relation to various groups in rural society. These groups include large and small landowners, rural workers, women and children. Various issues relating to the swagger are discussed; including drinking, disorderly behaviour, vandalism, criminal activities and attitudes to work. It is argued that those closest in socio-economic status to the swagger identified most closely with him, but that between them there remained a difference in outlook.

Attitudes in rural areas were partly formed by personal contact; the swagger was regarded as an individual who needed work, food or shelter. Hostility towards the swagger came from those holding a concept of the ideal society, and the related middle class - reformist ideology. The attitude of Tregear, firmly within this ideology, was discussed in Chapter Three. His attitude accords with other colonial elite who held a national, rather than a local perspective. C.W. Richmond (former Judge, and Native Minister in 1894) characterized the swagger as the lowest of the working class; they deserted their families; wasted their money on alcohol; agitated for state assistance when unemployed; and lived on charity of "honest, hard-working" farmers and runholders. Richmond emphasises the
moral degeneracy and instability of the swagger while not recognising structural factors in the economy which reinforced itinerancy, - the seasonality of rural work, and, in the 1880's and 1890's, cyclical unemployment. Edward Gibbon Wakefield regarded the swagger was an outcast, and a menace, that kept class animosity boiling.\(^2\) The swagger was a subgroup of the unemployed, - "those dregs of the labouring population."\(^3\) Neither the itinerant swagger, nor the unemployed fitted into Wakefields's conception of a balanced settled society which included hardworking, independent, working men. But another of the political elite wrote, that in New Zealand, itinerancy was a general feature of rural areas, - "most of the real workingman of the colonies are nomads, ... artisans and general labourers seem to share in the readiness to shift their ground. 4

Station and estate owners, the rural landowning elite, had differing attitudes towards swaggers and itinerants. The Puketoi diaries accepted the itinerancy of men searching for work, and employed significant numbers from "the track", for casual or seasonal work. There is only one reference to swaggers in the diary, and this may indicate the increasing usage of the word to describe itinerant work seekers.\(^5\) There are many mentions in the diaries to men asking for work, staying the night, and leaving in the morning. Lady Barker represents a sympathetic attitude towards the itinerant swagger. He was an honest working man, who had "humility and civility".\(^6\) "Let no one
despise the swagger for they are merely travelling workmen, and would pay for their lodging if it was the custom to do so".7 Lady Barker sensed changes in the attitudes of some land owners towards swagger, which was due to an "increase in civilization, and corresponding social economy".8 She did not agree with the attempts, by "new fangled managers" of runs, to force swaggers to work in return for their meal and shelter, by taking away their swags.

Some station owners were generous to the swaggers. At G. Hunter's place, each man was allowed two free days to do his washing, and have a rest before moving on.9 Hunter gave them clothes, boots, blankets, food and tobacco. Other landowners supported swaggers grudgingly when work was not available, recognising some responsibility to those dependent on them. But others took advantage of itinerant labour.

"My father was once working as a cook on an estate. The owner told him that he need labour and to give each swagger a meal and hold him until he had interviewed them. When the owner had enough men he told my father to send any others away without a meal. But my father used to slip them pieces of mutton, and tea ... swaggers off the road were often taken for a ride by cookies - they'd sometimes only be paid £1 a week." 10

It was generally recognised that most itinerants would accept any work offered. There was however a small group who did not want to work and attracted a lot of publicity and hostility.
The size of this small group became exaggerated and their characteristics were attributed by many to the larger group of itinerants. In the nineteenth century this small group were called "sundowners", a term which had derogatory connotations. They were regarded as bludgers, lacking the common decency to do work in return for food and shelter. Some regarded all itinerants as "sundowners".

"Swaggers those who, snail-like, carry all their worldly possessions on their backs, are men occasionally willing to do a day's work for a night's lodging and a couple of meals. Sundowners, those who have no possessions to carry, walk from station to station during the day and demand supper and shelter (at sundown)."

However, according to Lady Barker, "no true swagger ever appears earlier (than sundown) lest he be requested to move on to the next station". It was the accepted custom not to pay for lodging, though Lady Barker was sure that travelling workmen would pay if it was the custom to do so. They were not bludgers or loafers.

Attitudes towards some swaggers' attitudes to work, ranged from hostility, to amused acceptance. Tregear, and some local labour agents, wanted to imprison swaggers on penal farms, and force them to work. Bradshaw likened this group, (as separate from the "hardworking swagger"), to the "casuals" of the English work house. Both Bradshaw and Richmond were outraged that this group lived off the charity of honest, hardworking people. The ideology of work made it a duty to work, and some were hostile to swaggers who did not fulfil their obligations.
Some who helped the swagger, felt they were being taken, advantage of when some swaggers declined to work. "You would think the farmers would be grateful to have this labour source for emergencies, but not so. They were hostile towards the swagger who was, "looking for work, and praying to God he never found it". The reluctance of itinerants to accept small jobs around the farm and garden amused Helen Wilson, though in the beginning she resented this. "When they'd had a meal, they'd say, "Thanks missus, I'll be back tomorrow to help out". It used to make me smile; they rarely came back". But according to Wilson this was not because they did not want to work, or were loafers, or bludgers, but because they wanted real work and wages, to help support families, not small gardening jobs. There was sympathy for the "strong stalwart men" out of work in bad times even though they did not always accept odd jobs. However it was widely recognised that swaggers would usually do some casual work, for example, digging in the garden, chopping wood, or drawing water from the well, in payment of any aid given them; even the shiner whose work-shy habits were legendary. Pember Reeves treats the reputation of swaggers, that they prayed not to find work, lightly, indicating that not all politicians and bureaucrats were antagonistic to the swagger.

"The swagger ... would take what came, nor shirk nor fret,
Be brander, rouseabout or dagger,
Yet work he never seemed to get,
The disappointed swagger."
... He found a job - Alack a day!
And then indeed fell disappointment,
... He want to work for ever more,
A disappointed swagger. 17

Although most is written about the provision of aid and
the stations and estates, these were not the only sources
of relief for itinerants in rural areas. Small farmers
and settled rural workers also helped the swagger and
unemployed itinerant. Hospitality was a universal expectation
in rural society, "There was a common saying, 'He's so
miserable he wouldn't give a meal to a swagger'. Everybody
gave some food to anyone who called on you, and most
swaggers would do some work if it was offered". 19 Even
settled seasonal workers, who ran into debt every winter,
gave bread and butter to swaggers who called on them. 20

"You could always give them something because
it was easy, and didn't cost much, - a few
slices of bread, butter and mutton, (which was
plentiful, and cheap), and fill their billy
with tea and hot water". 21

In socio-economic terms, settled and itinerant rural
labourers held similar positions, and the positions were
especially close for settled seasonal workers, who
experienced regular unemployment. The latter group were
often away from their homes and families, working or
searching for work. They worked at similar seasonal jobs,
and suffered the same conditions. Farm labourers worked
long hours for poor pay, and were often housed in poor
living quarters. 22 In both New Zealand and Australia living
conditions for itinerant workers were bad, this indicating certain attitudes of employers towards these men. In Australia for example, little was done until the twentieth century to provide accommodation for itinerant workers, and many continued to camp along rivers and irrigation channels when unemployed.\footnote{In the late 1890's, legislation to improve the "wretched hovels" provided for shearers and other itinerants labourers began to have some impact, but conditions for itinerant workmen remained bad.\footnote{They sometimes had to sleep in hen houses and horse stables.}} Food was poorly cooked and sometimes inedible; chops cooked on the top of coal ranges were covered with black soot and cooked cabbage sometimes had duck excrement between the leaves.\footnote{The socio-economic position, type of work undertaken and conditions endured by itinerant and settled rural workers, especially settled seasonal workers, were similar. "Other working men did not look down on the swagger, there were no objections to working with them".\footnote{There was always the possibility of unemployment for settled workers, and most had spent some time "on the swag" looking for work and knew of the hardships involved. They were sympathetic to the men who called on them and gave limited assistance, "the working people were more humane towards their fellow man than the farmers".}} Many small farmers had spent time as itinerant labourers, building up working experience and capital to set themselves up in a farm.\footnote{They also knew of the hardships and were sympathetic towards the itinerant worker.}
Before the introduction of old age pension and more comprehensive charitable aid structures which went beyond individual communities, old men without families to support them were forced to rely on informal relief and light casual work in rural areas. They could survive as long as they could keep walking and when this became impossible the itinerant was either institutionalised in benevolent homes, or was occasionally befriended by a rural family. Settled people were sympathetic to the elderly swagger who often presented a pathetic sight. But old age and its accompanying physical and mental degeneration could be unsettling for some. "Bunny Stewart, a swagger who used to call on us, was a bit senile. But he had been a good worker in his time". Another swagger was taken away to the asylum by police. ³⁰

The swagger was often regarded as an unstable element, lacking family and community restraints and prone to vandalism, theft and anti-social behaviour. Cannon writes that outback hospitality in Australia was partly due to the realization by land owners that they could not stop hungry men from slaughtering and roasting a sheep in a distant paddock and perhaps setting fire to the grass or fences in the process. Fire was greatly feared by rural people in the days when wood was the major construction material, and firefighting facilities non-existent. While it was possible that the camping fires of itinerants could cause damage, this was not a great concern in New Zealand, where millions of acres were burned off intentionally.
In the Australian outback however, fire could destroy livelihoods and endanger life.

The swagger, and fires, were linked in a sinister manner in a nineteenth century romantic novel, which described the burning down of one of the heroes farmsteads by some "discontented members of the vagrant fraternity." 31 It is implied that New Zealand station owners feared malicious vandalism from itinerants,

"(swaggers) are thorns in the flesh, and crumpled rose leaves in the bed of the squatter, for come what may, they must always be reckoned with, and they seem to require the most patient consideration on account of the power of evil they might become". 32

A phrase which was common in the early twentieth century ran, "'Bryant and May' (match manufacturers) haven't run out of matches yet".33 Although the phrase has a threatening meaning and is believed to have originated out of Australian experiences with fire, in the New Zealand usage it had a lighthearted joking connotation. Cannon writes that the Australian squatter was fearful of the landless itinerant worker, and this could be related to a fear of malicious damage. But vandalism was not generally a New Zealand fear, although it did occur in less dramatic terms. For example, the Shiner is credited with breaking up the wooden floor of a hut he was staying in for firewood.34 Swaggers sheltered in disused homes and sheds, in rural areas with or without the knowledge of the owners. It was thought that an unoccupied house in North Otago had
been accidentally burnt down by a swagger, sheltering for a few days.\textsuperscript{35}

Opinions on the law abiding qualities of itinerants differ. Lady Barker remarks that the rural itinerant had natural honesty as upright workingmen. As a group they maintained a good image, by returning anything that had been stolen, thereby ensuring the continued good will of the settled rural population they depended on for work and relief.\textsuperscript{36} But in contrast to the honest rural swagger, itinerants on the goldfields were likely to cause suspicion, as potential claim jumpers and thieves. At the other extreme, Mrs Wilson describes the swagger habit of calling at stations for food and shelter, "Flat burglary as was ever committed".\textsuperscript{37} Another commentator sympathetic to the hardships and deprivations endured by unemployed itinerants, especially in winter, acknowledged that criminal activities did take place but found it, "remarkable that there were no disturbances and very little housebreaking and theft".\textsuperscript{38}

Swaggers had a reputation for petty theft but it is difficult to know how far the reputation was realistic, or exaggerated, and how far it was a judgement on the swagger by those who linked itinerancy and the lack of family and community constraints, with criminality. Some police labour agents regarded the swagger as the greatest threat to law and order, "they have idle and disorderly habits and at every opportunity they thief".\textsuperscript{39} Two Australian swaggers passed through yesterday, but so far nothing is missing".\textsuperscript{40} Petty theft was not generally regarded as
a serious offence, and could on occasions be a source of amusement. One could joke with the victims of petty theft; it served them right they shouldn't have left the items about, for example, pies cooling on a window-sill. There is a large difference, in most people's eyes, between stealing apples from an orchard and stealing money from a house. The statement that hen houses near the Tyne Street Gardens in Oamaru "yielded many a breakfast" indicates an attitude that this form of petty theft was not serious.41

More serious forms of theft were likely to have been discouraged by the restricted mobility and the visible presence of the itinerant in small communities, making it easy to catch up with and identify probable offenders.

"One of a fine body of men stole a frying pan. Mr C. Bullen arrested the culprit at Ida Valley at the instance of Mr WDM (Puketoi owner) and brought him to Puketoi." 42

Itinerants were not usually regarded as potential criminals but there were occasions when it was known that a man who had committed a crime was moving through a district and this terrified people in "lonely homes" who became especially suspicious and fearful of all strangers.43

Itinerant workers and some settled rural families, lacking permanent employment, were forced to steal sheep and vegetables in order to survive.44 This was especially common during winter. The number of sheep was large, and the small numbers taken may not have been noticed, or may
have been put down to natural causes. As in the Australian experience, there was no way of stopping hungry men slaughtering a sheep in a district paddock. As this all took place at night, nothing could be proved and although it was not an acceptable practice the necessity of this form of theft was acknowledged by rural workers. Men were forced to steal by absolute poverty; a poverty described by Canon Hamilton of several hundred men camping in the Ashburton river bed in the middle of winter suffering from a lack of warmth and food.  

Within the middle class ideology of the settled, orderly society, itinerants were regarded as disorderly elements. What constituted disorderly behaviour differed between rural and urban areas, and within Otago, between differing rural areas, for example, the frontier region of the gold-fields district and the Otago block settlements. Rural areas, and the working class were more tolerant of excessive drinking, boisterious activity and fighting. It may be suggested that the rural middle class had a less developed concept of an ideal society and did not feel that orderly society was threatened by the behaviour of rural workers. Although they may have viewed the drinking exploits of itinerant workers with horror, excessive drinking was by no means confined to this group. Although the harvest phenomenon - and the habit of cutting out the pay cheque gained some notoriety, this may have been exaggerated.
At the other times, unemployed itinerants did not have the money to spend on alcohol and even when itinerants got drunk they rarely interfered with anybody else, usually fighting amongst themselves. Most have harmless when drunk, but some itinerants had reputations for wild behaviour as did some settled workers. These were the exception rather than the rule. Hotel owners welcomed itinerant workers with large cheques and, in continuing to serve alcohol, to those on drinking binges, tacitly encouraged disorderly behaviour. It was widely believed that publicans fleeced many men who handed over pay cheques to be spent at the publicans discretion. Perhaps the "swaggers bottle", containing a sleep-inducing drug, experienced by a traveller at a country pub was to aid in fleecing itinerants with cheques. It could have been used as a sedative to quieten drunk and aggressive men, or to deter a swagger from coming to the pub where they quickly ended up with headaches.

There is little evidence of rural storekeeper attitudes to swaggers; it is probable that storekeepers only dealt with swaggers in business transactions, not as providers of informal relief.

Rural women often had the most contact with itinerants and swaggers, who called at homesteads looking for work or food. Rural men were usually away from the house during the day, and some women, for example, the wives of contractors and seasonal workers, were on their own for periods of weeks. Small farmers often had to search for work away from home to support themselves while bringing the land into production, leaving their wives to look after the farms. In a letter to William Pember Reeves, Tillet shows concern for virtuous
women in the midst of, "a large swagger and mining class living in celibacy ... (who) are a source of danger ... lacking the powerful discipline of the family. But rural women showed little concern for these celibate men, and their husbands did not worry about leaving their wives and families on their own.

Lady Barker was frightened by knocks on the door at night when her husband was away, but did not feel threatened by itinerants. In bad weather she allowed them to sleep inside the house on the kitchen floor, being convinced of their honesty and good intentions. It seems that Lady Barker may have been exceptional in her attitudes compared with other rural elite women; Mrs Wilson was unlikely to have had anything to do with the swagger.

"I never felt afraid of them, even when I was on my own and my husband was away working on a contract. They were polite and respectful, but you never asked them inside and they never expected it. They waited outside. I suppose the best word to describe our feelings towards them was suspicion. You didn't mind giving them something to eat but you were pleased to see them on their way." 53

The reluctance to allow swaggers into one's home helped to preserve its privacy, and was also a comment on the appearance and hygiene standards of some swaggers, "greasy, unkempt individuals". "We fed one swagger out in the shed - didn't let him inside - he could have been lousy." 54 The swagger's hygiene standards were no better or no worse than anyone else. 55
It may have been more common for rural workers to allow swaggers into their homes.

Children displayed a range of emotions towards the swagger, from shyness and fear of strangers to childish curiosity and fascination. The appearance of badly dressed, bearded and sometimes dirty looking swaggers carrying their swags and billies, must have been a strange and threatening sight for children. One of the Bradfield's children was frightened of a senile swagger, Bunny Stewart, who used to call on them regularly, but liked Barney Whiterats, who went around schools showing shadow theatres and white mice. It seems that attitudes to different swaggers were very much a personal thing for children - they were frightened of some swaggers and not of others. To a large extent their reactions were based on parents' attitudes towards the swaggers. Children quickly sensed suspicion and fear, or friendliness exhibited by parents, and reacted accordingly.

Children were generally wary of swaggers, but were also curious of their strangeness and were attracted by the talents of some swaggers.
"And he took out his flute and began to play, and soon around him, but not to close, for his presence was as terrifying as his music, was compelling, came nearly a dozen children" 57

Barney Whiterats was well known in Otago and Southland for his shows to schools and was supported by school authorities and parents. But unsupervised contact between swaggers and children concerned parents, bringing to the fore the underlying fear and suspicion of most settled people towards the swagger.

Men, women, and children felt an unease in the presence of swaggers as strangers. "Most people were a bit suspicious of them to start with, but once you got to know them it was alright."58 In making contact with the swagger, he was no longer an anonymous stranger, but an individual one had talked to. There was both a sympathy and a suspicion for swaggers, "You felt sorry for the, but you didn't want to see them back to soon." 59

Those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale felt most "comfortable" with itinerant workers, including swaggers. They identified with them, having endured the hardship of "the track" before, and sensing the possibility that they could be forced back on to it again. Settled people could also identify with the aspiration of many itinerants to get ahead and sympathise with the unemployed forced to wander
to find work and food.

But settled people could not understand the restlessness of the swagger, his non-materialism and acceptance of poverty and hardship. This gap existed even between the swagger and settled seasonal workers with whom they often worked and endured the same conditions, periodic poverty and hardships. There is a sense of disappointment evident in many attitudes towards swaggers. Their lifestyle satisfied immediate needs, but it was felt they were not living useful lives, or developing any potential they had. Many had skills and talents and had the potential to make something of themselves, but even those closest in socio-economic terms to the swagger felt that "they threw their good lives away". 60

They were regarded as failures and alcoholism was often suggested as the major cause of this. The recognised working ability, skills and education of many of the swaggers only made their lifestyle more of an enigma to settled people.

In the perceptive words of the poet,

"As I sit I wonder,
What mystic current bore,
These restless gifted human souls,
To faraway Benmore,
... What turn of fate had robbed them,
Of the chance to show their worth." 61

"There were men of education and ability on the swag ... but they had a 'kink' - they just said 'bugger work' and battled through life". 62

There is a striking ambivalence in attitudes towards
swaggers from all sections of society. Wakefield was hostile to the swagger 'menace', but recognised that they were "manly and generous". They were admired and yet despised. Swaggers had reputations deriving from their personal abilities and characteristics, which settled people acknowledged, but they had low socio-economic status, and their lifestyle rejected most of the norms of late nineteenth century respectability.

It will be argued in the next chapter that 'reputation' and 'respectability' were two different value systems existing in the New Zealand consciousness, and that swaggers held a special position within these systems which helps explain the ambivalent attitudes towards him, and the place of the swagger in New Zealand folk-lore.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1 Gibbons, "Tramps to Taxpayers", p.75.
2 Ibid, p.76.
3 Ibid, p.27.
4 W.P. Reeves, State Experiments I, pp 31-32, in Gibbons "Tramps to Taxpayers", p.45.
5 "Puketoi Diaries", 26 December 1868, "In mens hut - Bennet, McLaren, Seal and another, and four swaggers".
6 Lady Barker, Station Amusements, p.153.
7 Ibid, p.180.
8 Ibid, p.162.
10 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.
11 Mrs Robert Wilson, Land of the Tui, 1894, in Lee, Rollingstones p.22.
12 Lady Barker, Station Amusements, p.160.
14 Bradshaw, New Zealand As It Is, pp. 26-27, in Gibbons "Tramps to Taxpayers".
15 "Helen Wilson Recollections", taped, T992, held by Hocken Library.
16 Ibid.
17 Interview with Mr Main, August 1979, Oamaru.
18 William Pember Reeves, "The Disappointed Swagger", (1889), in Woodhouse, NZ Farm and Station Verse, p.21.
19 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
20 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.
21 Interview with Mrs Bradfield.
23 Cannon, *Life in the County*, p.85
25 Interview with Gib Nisbitt,
26 Ibid.
27 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
28 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.
29 For example, Lady Barker, *Station Amusements*, p.179
   George Bradfield's father worked as a harvest hand before
   setting himself up as a rural contractor, and small farmer.
   Interview with Mr Bradfield.
30 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
31 Mrs Wilson, *Land of the Tui*, in, Lee, *Rollingstones*, p.22
32 Ibid.
33 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
34 Ibid.
35 "Short History of the McCone Family, 1866-1931" - unpublished,
   compiled for McCone Family Reunion, 1979, (Muirhead Collection)
36 Lady Barker, *Station Amusements*, p.163.
38 T.A. Hamilton, *The Years That Are Past*, 1935, in, Lee,
   *Rollingstones*, p.23.
39 Gibbons, "Tramps to Taxpayers", p.86.
40 "Lee Tapes". Hocken Library.
41 "Old Tyne Street", manuscript.
42 Puketoi Diaries, 30 November 1862. Also see, 3 March 1869.
   "D. Davis, shearer, bolted. G. Harwood to Hogburn after
   the delinquent".
43 "McCone Family History".
44 Interview, name withheld.
46 Angus, "City and Country", p.74.
47 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.
48 Interviews with Gib Nisbitt and Mr Bradfield.
49 Scott, *Reminiscences of A New Chum*, Chapter XIX.
50 Interviews with Mr Bradfield and Gib Nisbitt.
51 For example, Helen Wilson.
52 Tillet to Reeves, in, Gibbons, "Tramps to Taxpayers", p.92.
53 Interview with Mrs Bradfield.
54 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.
55 Interviews with Gib Nisbitt, Mr and Mrs Bradfield.
56 Interviews with Mr and Mrs Bradfield and daughter.
58 Interview with Mr Bradfield.
59 Interview with Mrs Bradfield.
60 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.
62 Interview with Gib Nisbitt.
63 Gibbons, "Tramps to Taxpayers", p.76.
CHAPTER SIX

REPUTATION AND RESPECTABILITY
A TALE OF TWO SYSTEMS

In this chapter it is suggested that the contradictory value systems of "reputation" and "respectability" can provide a model within which to view New Zealand society, the swagger's place in that society, and attitudes towards the swagger. The model also helps us understand certain aspects of swagger behaviour.

Status, or standing in a community, derives from criteria which differ between cultures. In some coastal North American Indian cultures, for example, status is measured by the amount of property one can accumulate - and then destroy. Western culture is usually described as "materialistic" and this label applies also to New Zealand. Angus and Gibbons believe that the label can be especially applied to New Zealand in the late nineteenth century. Status in western culture is measured according to the amount of wealth and property that can be accumulated and exhibited. Status also depends on education, occupation, and involvement in organizations, institutions and power structures in the community. In nineteenth century New Zealand a further factor in status was the length of residence in an area and how early one entered that area after colonisation. The term
"settler" denoted high status for it marked one as an early pioneer. Status was linked to the degree of independence and security one had; occupational level and economic security being closely linked. Within this model, higher status was usually accorded the self-employed skilled tradesman, who owned his own house, than the skilled tradesman employed by someone else and only renting his house, although other factors such as educational and involvement in community structures and organizations could modify this.

Thus status was related to degree of economic security, of independence (one's occupation, and from landlords and mortgagers) of wealth (as exhibited in one's possessions) and important in all these, persistence and activity in the community. Within this model, high status accrued to the comfortably off, the settled, and the independent. Upward social mobility conferred status. Occupational mobility necessarily did not, and geographic mobility reduced status; it reduced the community identification and generally inhibited the accumulation of wealth and security.

It is possible to arrange society into gradients of status because we can measure certain aspects of it. These are wealth, property, ownership and broad occupational groupings. Contemporary people recognised broad divisions of status, and the relative status positions of various groups in their community. Thus it is possible for Angus to organise rural society in nineteenth century New Zealand into a status hierarchy and identify the characteristics of each group that
dictate their positions.² The pastoralist, estate owner or large farmer had wealthy property and was an employer. The rural middle class also had independence in terms of owning their own land or business which provided their income. They were self employed and may have even employed small amounts of labour. The settled rural labourer in permanent employment had relative economic and occupational security. But settled labourers in casual and seasonal employment had little security. The settled working class were resident in a community. They often owned some land and engaged in subsistence production.

Lowest in status were the itinerant rural labourers. They had general labouring skills and uncertain employment opportunities - picking up casual and seasonal work where available. Wages were low, working conditions hard and the itinerant was completely dependent on his employer for food and shelter - when in work and when unemployed.³ Angus states that the poorly paid and landless transient workers barely counted in rural society. They were seen as outside the ranks of the "independent working man" of the "ideal rural community."⁴ Their drinking exploits and tendency to fight were viewed with horror.

Attitudes were antagonistic to some groups of transient rural workers, e.g. public works labourers working in large groups, but the previous chapter showed that within rural areas,
itinerant workers engaged in agricultural occupations, and swaggers as a special group were regarded differently from these labourers, and attitudes were often sympathetic. The rural itinerant was not always considered within the concept of the "ideal rural society", or compared with the "independent working man". He was seen as someone searching for work, perhaps for some security and the chance to settle down and often wanting just a meal and a place to sleep. Attitudes were shaped by personal contact and the contemporary reality of unemployment and the seasonal employment structure rather than by concepts of an ideal society.

The status model provides us with one view of society and what was considered significant in ascribing importance to its members. But there is another model which enables us to view society, and social interaction through another dimension. This is the reputation/respectability model. It is suggested that to view society in terms of socio-economic status excludes certain criteria used in ascribing status to others, and forming attitudes towards them. It is assumed that the aspiration to increasing socio-economic status was universal, but the assumption is not applicable to all groups in society. The swagger was one of these groups and another was the group of Oamaru "hardcases".

Much of New Zealand society aspired to an increasing socio-economic status and to the related quality of "respectability"
But those with low status and no respectability (as defined by the norms of the late nineteenth century) did not live under negative or low standards: they could not be content with an inferior social position, lacking self esteem. Rather there were other values and standards one could live by and aspire to - and these come under the heading of "reputation".

The two value systems are contradictory to each other, and this causes some tension, especially within the individual who sees merit in using aspects of both value systems, and attempts to reconcile them. This leads to an ambivalence, both in one's own lifestyle and in one's attitudes to others. It can also lead to conflict between those firmly within either one, that is, between respectable values and reputation values.

Respectability in nineteenth century New Zealand was related to the amount of visible wealth and property, displayed in housing, furnishings, one's occupation, one's social behaviour (generally characterised by a restrained demeanour), including clothing, speech and manners. Involvement in community organisations and power structures, public worship and education stressed the outward going aspects of respectability. Certain rules of correct behaviour including sexual propriety tended to privatise the lives of respectable persons. Respectability promoted the public displays of virtues and the private hiding of vices. Respectability embodied economic status and certain standards of public and private behaviour, and morality.
Reputation existed not only as an alternative value system but also as a "counter-culture". It was perhaps more related to what we have called the working class culture, but it is not synonymous with it. The reputation system had an egalitarian aspect, differences in status were recognised but reputations were not ordered in a hierarchy. A high reputation in one field had equal status with a high reputation in another field.

Respectable values were devalued as being pretentious, insincere, and irrelevant criteria of human worth or position in society. The public display of wealth, property and of correct behaviour did not ensure status within this other value system. Status rather was accorded to the excellence one could display in a facet of human activity physical or mental. The activities displayed were related to local conditions, this status derived from ones display of excellence in facets of activity deemed useful and important for its needs by the particular society. In a fishing community in which folklore is transmitted through poetry, a good fisherman and a good poet achieve high status. In New Zealand in the nineteenth century, the ability to do manual work, and to display skills in activities of leisure, e.g., sporting, singing, storytelling all accorded status. Thus a good shearer, gorse cutter, singer or drinker could all achieve status independent of their socio-economic status.

The reputation value system was widely acknowledged by those
who held respectable values. Reputation was accepted by some and resented by others who felt their status undermined. The most obvious denial of respectable status was the lack of deference shown to "respectable" persons in the nineteenth century. This egalitarianism was a characteristic of the reputation system which ascribed an equal status based on proven excellence in any field. Thus the competent musterer had as high a status as the competent station owner. When colonists came from Britain to New Zealand they intended to leave behind their past, with most of its accumulated inequalities. The first article of the colonial creed, according to Lady Barker, was "Jack is as good as his master". Respect had to be earned by landowners amongst his workers - it was not accorded merely because he was the boss, as in the "old country".

The itinerant worker and swagger was dependent on the employer for food and shelter, but he was not dependent on any one employer. His ease of mobility enabled him to change employment and he felt little obligation to the owner. It was felt by many that the swagger, rather than showing deference, was living off the large landowners and giving little in return, and landowners often resented having to support swaggers. Some groups in rural society "worshipped the Swagger" who "fetched up" the idea of the "old country laird and lord who expected his tenants to show deference". Although respectable attributes did not confer status within the reputation value system, wealthy and respectable people
could earn reputations and hence status and authority within that system. A graphic demonstration of this in the New Zealand context is the theme of David McKee-Wright's poem "The Bloke That Ran Across A Snag". The poem describes the conflict between a burly shearer who refused to shear some sheep, and the "small narrow chested" owner. The owner did not assert his authority within the respectable value system, that is, in advancing his authority as employer and station owner. He asserted it by boxing with the shearer, and winning. "I own, I'm fairly beat", said the shearer who shored well from then on. The owners authority, established in respectable terms as a landowner and employer, was only validated by asserting the quality of courage, (in taking on the much larger shearer) and demonstrating his boxing ability. The owner established a reputation for himself and earned status among those who rejected respectable values.

A feature of the swagger lifestyle, was his rejection of materialism, which in nineteenth century New Zealand was a basis of respectability. Furthermore the itinerant lifestyle and rejection of community further alienated the swagger. Denied respectability, the swagger earned status within the reputation value system, where personal qualities rather than wealth earned recognition. Most people held a synthesis of values from the two systems, and recognised the swagger as having a low respectability, but high reputational status. They gained recognition from the expression of individuality and the display of ability, despite their low socio-economic
status, and lack of respectability. The reputations of some individuals had a high status so that they overcame antagonism from those firmly within the respectable system.

Reputations were made by eccentricity and developing personal characteristics; men were known according to some ability. "The Highland Chief" - a tough hardworking, hard drinking Scotsman respected for his ability to work as a fencer, shearer or harvester; "Concertina Charly" reputed to have played in Music Halls throughout Britain; "The Hon. John Burke O'Brien" who wore a frock coat and claimed Irish peerage; "The Frenchman"; Barney Whiterats who showed white mice to school children; "The Shiner", infamous for his ability to elicit sympathy, to charm or trick people into giving him food, shelter, clothing or drink; "Crying Harry" who mourned in pubs and was shouted for his performances. For the swagger the development of reputations and eccentricities was related to the need to be recognised. And they succeeded - swagger stories and eccentricities were well known throughout New Zealand in the rural communities and small towns. And it became a talking point to have had some contact with certain swaggers. Eccentricities were the product of non-conformist personalities and a desire for a recognition of individuality and for a status based on reputation. The status acquired amongst fellow swaggers and the reputation amongst settled people from eccentricity compensated for the swaggers low socio-economic status. The development of reputations was due to the need for self
respect, as much as recognition by others.

In some swaggers, eccentricity was developed by incorporating some aspects of respectability into their appearance or behaviour; these were some of the best known, and most easily recognizable swaggers. The aspects of respectability incorporated were clothes, manners and speech. There were swaggers who wore frock coats, top hats, straw boaters and carried umbrellas. Despite their mode of living they were tidy and took pride in their appearance. They were polite, mild mannered and spoke well. Some regularly attended church. These swaggers made respectable people feel more at ease - they could identify with them and did not feel threatened by an unkempt appearance and the suggestion of "wild" behaviour. They were, in appearance and behaviour, men one could "trust".

Some saw in the outwardly respectable behaviour a satire on respectable pretensions, and found amusing that the antithesis of respectability should recieve any sympathy from respectable people. The Shiner it appears was a regular Catholic Church goer, and he always took a front pew so that everyone could see him. His sincerity of worship was doubted by Lee, "He made his religion pay", but he recieved much sympathy and assistance from other church goers as a result of his show of respectable piousness. But

Swaggers ranged from the sons of English aristocrats to
the very dregs of colonial society and included "respectable" elements. For example, Baron de Lacy had held a commission in a cavalry regiment. He quoted Burns and Shakespeare at length, wore a monocle, had a dignified manner and a long striding walk. There were swaggers with degrees from Oxford and other universities, swaggers with titles of nobility, swaggers from highly respectable and wealthy families. Thus for many of the professional swaggers the outward signs of respectability had their origins in their earlier lives.

"I knew him at home, He's the son of a squire, Squire Hunt ....; His father and he had words I believe, Ned picked up his bag, took his gun and French leave, And never was heard from his family since."

They were not satirizing respectability, or merely using respectable pretensions for theatrical effect, but were exhibiting an internal tension between their earlier and later values and lifestyle. There was a wide fascination for these men. It was recognised that they had achieved respectability or had been well on the way to achieving it, but had decided to become a swagger. Their rejection of the respectable, settled, secure lifestyle gave them status amongst those who had rejected the same lifestyle and values. Among others there was both sympathy for them as "fallen respectables" and a certain hostility towards them for rejecting respectability. The sense of disappointment of wasted opportunities was felt within both value systems.
Within the reputation system there was a sense that some swaggers had wasted their lives by not developing their abilities.\textsuperscript{14} It was felt that many of these men had had the chances to develop their talents further, for example, on the stages or concert halls of Europe but had instead "drifted downward", becoming swaggers.

The swagger has been characterized as a failure - one who was not able to cope with responsibilities, with rejection by peers and family. But the positive aspects of swagger lifestyle were just as important. The swagger suffered hunger and hardship, but he was independent and had no responsibilities or ties. It is possible that despite the hardships life on the track was more personally fulfilling and satisfying,

"Who shall decide the true home of content,  
When he who could seek it in vain at the chase (of foxes),  
Has found it at last in a rabbiter's tent."\textsuperscript{15}

The swagger occupies an important place in the folk-lore of New Zealand. Swaggers, such as the Shiner, the Hon, John Burke O'Brien and the Hon. McKay are recalled in rural Otago today, not through personal contact, but through the folk-lore that has grown around them. In striking up conversations in pubs, one is likely to hear many different
versions of well known stories, for example, about the Shiner digging a well, and the Hon McKay holding up the Palmerston train. In these stories the swagger is portrayed as a likeable vagabond who tricks and makes fun of more respectable people. The well known swaggers had reputations based on the recognition of personal characteristics, and many of their names reflected these characteristics. There was "The Highland Chief", a large burly Scotsman, "Crying Harry" and "The Frenchman". In Lee's terms, the swagger was an "unstandardized" man, whose character was exaggerated by the hardship and isolation of early rural New Zealand.

The swagger's itinerance and his non-materialism expressed his individuality in another sense. He was not subject to the daily routine of settled life and had few of the responsibilities and commitments normally associated with a settled and materialist lifestyle. The swagger had a social existence different from the rest of society, but was not alienated from it. Rather, he had a relationship that was both symbiotic and dependent. The swagger was dependent on settled rural society for casual work, food and shelter, but he also contributed to the character and social life of that society.

New Zealanders have reacted against the more controlled and ordered modern society that was developing in the late nineteenth century. They have created a myth of "rugged individualism" and have in recent decades also been part of the general reaction in western society against materialism. The swagger could be regarded as an early example of an
alternative lifestyle, rejecting materialism and settled behaviour. He fits into the myth of "individualism" as one who established a personal identity and was not bound by the norms of settled society. Lee's *Shining with the Shiner*, Mulgan's *Man Alone* and Barry Crump's "Sam Cash" are part of the literary tradition that have developed as part of the myth. The swagger of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries forms the model for these writings and are the source of the rural and itinerant aspects of the myth of "individualism" in New Zealand.
FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

1 Katz, Hamilton West, Chapter Three "Transiency and Social Mobility", pp.94-173.
2 Angus, "City and Country", pp.58,74,78.
3 Ibid, p.71.
6 Ibid.
7 Daniel Boorstin, The Americans II: The National Experience, USA, p.120.
8 Lady Barker, Station Amusement, pp.214-5.
9 Interview with Gibb Nisbitt.
10 in, Woodhouse ed., Farm and Station Verse, pp.29-32.
11 "Lee Tapes".
12 Lee, Rolling Stones, p.19.
13 Mare S. Randle, "The Rabbiters Tent", 1890, in, Woodhouse ed., Farm and Station Verse, p.48.
14 For example Interview with Gib Nisbitt, "They threw their good lives away".
I left school at thirteen - dug potatoes which was a main crop of North Otago along with wheat and oats, and the main part of the North Otago diet. You were paid 6d a bag, and a good man could dig thirty bags a day (15s/- per day). This lasted through June, July and August.

The next job you could get was turnip thinning - 8 or 9 inches apart - these were for feeding the cattle. The contract price was 12/6 an acre and you could thin about 1½ acres a day.

Then there was the harvest - February, March, and April. Reaping and stacking when the grain was ripe, then working on the threshing mills and chaff cutters. I spent ten or eleven seasons ringing (changing the bags) on a chaff cutter, and about twenty three seasons on the threshing mills - eleven years on Clarkes mill at 9d an hour. One day on Clarkes mill we started at 4 a.m. and finished at midnight - threshed over 500 bags.

There was clover threshing in the middle of winter working daylight to dark, six days a week, working out of stacks.
built usually in wet gullies. We had to winch the traction engine, threshing mill and galley up the hill because of the muddy ground.

When the cocksfoot was ripe you could go along the sides of the roads for a fortnight cutting it, and putting it into sheaves, take it home and on very hot days thresh it on sheets sewed together. With hard work and a good area, you could make £20 but sometimes only got a couple of Pounds. (75 lb bag at 3d a pound = approx £1/bag)

There was gorse cutting - hard and just "bread and butter money" - cutting the gorse during the day and burning at night.

Potato planting - a good man could plant two acres a day at 7/6 an acre.

When I wasn't working, I'd knock around home or dig in the garden. Most people had a cow tethered at the side of the road that kept them in milk and butter. The excess milk usually fed a pig until it was around 180 lb. Then it was made into bacon and ham. One pig would keep a family going for a year.

When I was working I was generally away from home most of the week - would come home on Saturday night and have a hot bath then go back to work again on Sunday night.
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**Articles**
