

SYNOPSIS

The historiography of Australian racism has principally ‘blamed’ the labour movement for the existence of the White Australia policy and racist responses to the presence of migrant workers. This study argues that the motivations behind *ruling class* agitation for the White Australia policy have never been satisfactorily analysed. To address this omission, the role of the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL) in race relations is examined. As an elite-dominated, cross-class organisation with links to every section of society, it is argued that the RSL was a significant agitator for migrant exclusion and white unity in the interwar period.

The thesis employs case studies, oral history and qualitative assessment of various written sources, such as newspapers, archival records and secondary material, in order to plot the dynamics of racist ideology in two major mining centres in the interwar period. The results suggest that, although labour organisations were influenced by racist ideas and frequently protested against the presence of migrant workers, it was also true that mining employers had a material interest in sowing racial division in the workplaces they controlled.

The study concludes that labour movement responses to migrant labour incorporated a range of different strategies, from demands for racist exclusion to moves towards international solidarity. It also reveals examples of local and migrant workers living, working, playing and striking together in ways that contradict the dominant view of perpetual tension between workers of different nationalities. Lastly, the case studies demonstrate that local employers actively encouraged racial division in the workplace as a bulwark against industrial militancy.