

**My Place for Teachers
Decade Overview 1920s**

Decade Summary

The end of the First World War brought a period of great optimism and progress for many in Australia. Due to the successful exploits of Australian servicemen during the war and in international politics, 'the digger' was enshrined as an Australian icon and legend. The 1920s saw a higher level of material prosperity for non-Indigenous people than ever before. Many non-Indigenous returned soldiers received advantageous financial loans to build houses, typically Californian bungalows, on suburban blocks of land. New inventions such as radios and automobiles became common acquisitions for the ordinary family and going to the cinema was a popular form of entertainment.

At the same time, Indigenous people were being forcibly removed from their lands onto mission reserves and experienced immense hardship through the application of government 'assimilation' policies. Indigenous soldiers returning from the war were ineligible for any of the programs or benefits that were available to non-Indigenous soldiers. They had no access to medical treatment and were ineligible for the soldier settlement program.

The end of the war also saw Australia enter a period of political unrest and strikes. Unions became more militant in order to protect workers' rights. The conservative alliance, led by ex-ALP renegade and former prime minister Billy Hughes and prime minister Stanley Bruce, was quick to seize on socialist ALP factions and Irish militancy as evidence of 'Bolshevik Communism'.

The 1920s was known as the Jazz era. Women had greater freedom of expression and found work outside of the home. This was reflected in new fashions, short hair, smoking, dancing and improved access to jobs and education. Younger women were sometimes referred to as 'flappers' or 'modern' women.

In October 1929, the world experienced a stock market crash on Wall Street in New York that plunged the world into the Great Depression (1929–34).

1928

February

- Bert Hinkler landed in Darwin after taking about 15 days for the first solo flight from Britain to Australia.

May

- Charles Kingsford Smith flew across the Pacific Ocean from Oakland, California to Brisbane in 10 days.
- Reverend John Flynn started flying doctors and nurses to the outback as a precursor to the first Royal Flying Doctor Service, which would be established in 1942.

June

- The Commonwealth Savings Bank of Australia was established as a separate entity.

August

- Australian Iron and Steel began production with a blast furnace in Port Kembla.

December

- Speedo produced its first swimsuit and Aeroplane Jelly was launched.

History and Politics

National development

In the early 1920s, EJ Brady, a journalist, publicist and author captured public imagination when he published a glossy book called *Australia Unlimited*. He argued that Australia should develop its natural resources and population as quickly as possible. The potential for expansion and growth was evident and Australia was expected to rival the USA in size and power.

In this expansive spirit, the states and federal governments created massive public debt as they embarked on ambitious nation-building projects. The prime minister, Stanley Bruce, supported this optimism and won successive elections with slogans about getting more 'men, money and markets' into the country.

In 1925, the Assisted Migration Scheme between Australia and Britain was established to provide approximately 450,000 migrants over a ten-year period.

Indigenous Australians

In the 1920s, settlers had the mistaken view that Indigenous peoples were 'a dying race'. A government initiative aimed at 'assimilation' was to remove children of mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous descent from their Indigenous families. Indigenous peoples were removed from their traditional lands and forced on to large reserves. Legislation governing all aspects of Indigenous people's lives vested powers in Aboriginal protectors and boards.

In 1925, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA), an all-Aboriginal body, held its first public meeting in Kempsey, New South Wales, to improve conditions for Indigenous people. In 1927, a federal law for child endowment excluded Indigenous people and instead payments went to the Aboriginal Protection Boards of each state and territory.

The 1920s saw a continuation of conflict and violence between Indigenous peoples and colonists in several parts of the country. Relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people since the 1800s had been marked by several cases of planned massacres and incidences of resistance and retaliation resulting in many deaths. Some examples of these are the Myall Creek massacre of 1838, the Coniston massacre of 1926, and several others across the country.

Jim Scullin and the Labor movement

The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1924* (Cth) was passed in July 1924, and the first election in which compulsory voting was used on a national level was in 1925.

In 1927, the Australasian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) was formed.

In 1929, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) led by James Scullin defeated the Bruce–Page coalition government. Scullin became the first Irish-Catholic prime minister. During the First World War years, he had opposed conscription and supported Ireland's nationalist struggle against Britain. Later he helped the ALP to commit to the aim of a complete 'socialisation' of the Australian industry. Throughout the 1920s, he became more moderate, helping to make the ALP more attractive to conservative elements of the Australian population.

In late October 1929, two days after Scullin was sworn in as prime minister, the Wall Street crash in New York triggered the Great Depression. It took nearly two decades for Australia's economic reconstruction to be completed.

Society and Culture

Film

In June 1920, the film *The Breaking of the Drought*, made by Franklyn Barrett, was released in Australian cinemas. The drought scenes were considered so shocking that the film was banned for export as it was deemed 'harmful to the Commonwealth'.

In June 1927, the film version of Marcus Clarke's novel *For the Term of His Natural Life* premiered. It was one of the most lavish productions of Australia's silent films, and was made by the American Norman Dawn. In the same year, a royal commission was established to inquire into the state of the Australian film industry. It reported that imported US films were squeezing Australian filmmakers out of the box office. At this time, 1,250 picture theatres operated in Australia, employing 20,000 people.

In December 1928, the first 'talkies' were shown and soon began to replace the previous format of silent films.

Art, literature and music

In 1921, the first Archibald Prize for portraiture was introduced after the death of *The Bulletin's* founder, Jules Archibald. The first prize was awarded to William Beckwith McInnes, who would go on to win five of the first six awards.

In the same year, the comic strip *Ginger Meggs* first appeared under the title *Us Fellers* in the *Sydney Sun* newspaper.

On 2 September 1922, Henry Lawson, author of *While the Billy Boils*, died a penniless alcoholic. The prime minister Billy Hughes gave Lawson a state funeral in Sydney. In 1922, *The Stone Axe of Burkamukk* by Mary Grant Bruce was published.

In 1923, DH Lawrence's novel *Kangaroo* was published. Set in Australia, the novel was written while he was living briefly in New South Wales.

In 1926, the first Australian jazz record was made by a new group called 'The Californians'.

In 1927, Dame Nellie performed at the opening of the newly constructed Parliament House in Canberra.

In 1928, Grace Cossington Smith held her first solo exhibition, at Grosvenor Galleries in Sydney.

Consumer choices

In 1921, US products such as Life Savers ('the candy with the hole') and Kellogg's Cornflakes entered the Australian market. At the same time, an act of parliament was passed protecting the term 'Anzac' against commercial uses. By 1927, Anzac Day was declared a statutory holiday in all states.

In 1923, Vegemite was developed by an Australian chemist in order to compete with the British yeast and vegetable extract, Marmite. Vegemite did not take off immediately, having to wait for advertising campaigns in the 1950s to become a national commercial icon.

In 1928, popular enthusiasm for aviation was converted to an advertising campaign for Aeroplane Jelly, which was launched for the Australian market.

Science and Technology

The car revolution

In 1925, the Ford Motor Company in Geelong began assembling cars using imported engines. In 1926, General Motors set up an assembly plant for motor vehicles in Melbourne. By 1927, new annual car registrations reached a peak of 82,500, a figure that would not be matched until after the Second World War.

In 1928, national motor vehicle registrations topped 500,000 in a total population of 5 million people. This rapid expansion of automobile sales brought with it, in 1928, an unwanted record of approximately 1,000 deaths caused by road accidents. This situation sparked the introduction of new road rules and speed limits.

Ecological initiatives to control pests

In 1920, the Commonwealth Prickly Pear Board was formed to investigate biological control of the prickly pear pest, which had infested millions of hectares in New South Wales and Queensland. In 1928, the board introduced a species of moth from Argentina, called *Cactoblastis cactorum*, to eat the prickly pears. Its success gave rise to great optimism (although at times misguided) about introducing new species to bring agricultural pests under control. Prickly pear was largely eliminated as a problem by 1934.

In 1935, the cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) was imported into Queensland from South America in a mistaken attempt to eradicate the cane beetle pest. The cane toads completely ignored the beetles and steadily branched out across the continent. Cane toads soon rivalled rabbits as the most noxious pest ever introduced into Australia.

Radio

On 13 November 1923, radio station 2SB Sydney pioneered the first sealed-set radio broadcasting system when it transmitted a concert from the studios of Sydney Broadcasters Ltd. Under the 'sealed-set system', radio receivers were set to one wavelength and one radio station only. The owner of the radio set would buy a licence from the station, and would then receive direct broadcasts.

In January 1924, the radio station 2FC began operation, broadcasting news, music and race results from a studio on the roof of a department store in Sydney. Later in the same month, 3AR became the first Melbourne radio station. By 1929, about 300,000 listeners had radio licences.