

**My Place for Teachers
Decade Overview 1930s**

Decade Summary

The Great Depression severely affected Australia. The Wall Street stock market in New York had crashed in the previous year. The collapse of international commodity prices, including wheat and wool in the late 1920s, meant that the heavy debts run up by federal, and state and territory governments were almost impossible to pay off at the previously agreed rate.

Some politicians argued that the loan repayments shouldn't be made as the money would be better used creating local jobs. Other politicians said that the most important thing was Australia's financial standing and the debts had to be repaid or else the nation would be declared insolvent.

While the politicians were proving ill-equipped to come to an agreed solution, the Australian people showed themselves to be extraordinarily good at devising their own solutions to the problems of economic crisis and mass unemployment. They became more self-reliant, tilling backyard gardens to grow food, and devising cheap ways of entertaining themselves. Many relied on family or charity support to survive. Due to severe unemployment, there were many families who could no longer pay their rent and were evicted from their homes by the banks and forced to live in camps, which dotted the outskirts of the major cities.

1938

January

- The first national conference of Indigenous Australians was held at the Australian Hall, Sydney, to mark a 'Day of Mourning' and protest during the 150th Australia Day anniversary of colonial settlement. The conference was initiated by William Cooper, founder of the Australian Aborigines League (AAL), and The Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), led by William Ferguson, and Jack Patten. Participants called for Aboriginal land and citizenship rights.

March

- Xavier Herbert won the Commonwealth sesquicentennial (150 years) literary prize for his novel *Capricornia*.
- Daisy Bates (1863-1951), a social worker in Aboriginal communities and an anthropologist, published her book *The Passing of the Aborigines*. Many of Bates's views and stories were sensationalist and incorrect, and many Aboriginal people indicated ambivalence about her and her work.

July

- All exports of iron ore from Australia to Japan were suspended as Japan was seen as militaristic.

December

- The federal government announced that refugees from (Nazi) Germany were to be relocated in Australia.
- A direct radio–telephone link was set up between Canberra and Washington as a sign of closer US–Australian government cooperation.
- Albert Namatjira, an Indigenous artist, held his first exhibition of paintings in Melbourne. All 41 pieces sold within three days of the opening.

History and Politics

Indigenous Australians

In 1931, the federal government declared Arnhem Land an Aboriginal reserve as part of a new policy emphasis to try to segregate traditional Indigenous people and make decisions governing their lives.

The *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936* (WA) gave the minister for Native Affairs the power to take Indigenous people into custody without trial or appeal, and prevented Indigenous people from entering specified towns without a permit.

In the 1930s, Aboriginal people formed protection associations led by inspirational men and women such as William Ferguson, Jack Patten, William Cooper, Douglas Nicholls, Margaret Tucker and Pearl Gibbs to use political action in campaigns to assert self-determination.

The Great Depression

In 1930, the international commodity prices collapsed, triggering a fall in export earnings and increasing overseas debt. The Bank of England insisted the Australian state, territory and federal governments balance their budgets, cut all overseas borrowing and lower all award wages by 10 per cent. Infrastructure projects, which had begun in the 1920s under the previous 'men, money and markets' policy, were stopped immediately.

During 1931, protest marches and demonstrations by the unemployed in all states and territories demanded increased sustenance pay and rent subsidies.

Public expenditure was cut at the same time that private businesses were putting thousands of people out of work. For the majority of people, there was little government assistance, especially at the beginning of the crisis. Private charities were often the only source of support outside of families and neighbourhood communities. Eventually, the states started providing 'sustenance' or 'susso' for the unemployed in the form of ration vouchers, but this was worth only a tiny amount of the basic wage.

In May 1932, the *Loan (Unemployment Relief Works) Act 1932* (Cth) authorised the Australian Government to give financial assistance to the states and territories on condition that employment councils would be established. The government expenditure on relief works for the financial year 1935–36 provided full-time employment for approximately 55,000 from a total of 300,000 jobless. The amount spent on dole payments was twice that spent on the provision of relief work for the unemployed.

Jack Lang

In 1931, the ALP premier of New South Wales (NSW), Jack Lang, decided to withhold interest payments on British loans, in open defiance of the federal government. He argued that the federal government and other state premiers were wrong to pay foreign loans instead of funding public works, which could provide much-needed employment.

In 1932, prime minister Joseph Lyons paid the interest on the NSW government loans to the British banks, passing a Bill in parliament to later recover the money. Lang refused to repay the money, and tried to prevent the federal government from seizing NSW funds. In May the governor of NSW, Sir Philip Game, sacked Jack Lang as premier, saying Lang's 'defiance of the law' had become intolerable. Although there were fears of civil war breaking out, Lang surprised many by going quietly.

Independence

The British parliament passed the *Statute of Westminster 1931* allowing self-government for all dominions and colonies of the British Empire. Australia refused to ratify the statute, worried about Australian security and the previous promise of a military British presence in the Asia-Pacific

region. The Australian Government was concerned with the increasingly expansion and military aggression of Japan.

Australia eventually signed the Statute of Westminster in 1942 in the midst of the Pacific War with Japan. It became increasingly clear that it was the USA, not Britain, that would be Australia's greatest ally in defending the country from invasion.

Society and Culture

Sport

In 1932, 16-year-old Clare Dennis won three gold medals in swimming for Australia at the Los Angeles Olympic Games.

On 5 April 1932, Phar Lap, winner of the 1930 Melbourne Cup, died in the USA after winning the Agua Caliente Handicap in Mexico. Many Australians at the time believed that the horse had been poisoned.

That summer Douglas Jardine captained the touring English cricket team and won back the Ashes in controversial circumstances. He employed 'bodyline' bowling tactics in an attempt to curb the effect of Don Bradman, Australia's greatest batsman.

In 1934, the first Australian women's cricket match against England took place.

The 1938, Melbourne Cup was won by Catalogue, who was trained by Mrs Allan McDonald. At the time women were not allowed to compete and as such her husband's name was officially recorded as the winning trainer. She also won the Caulfield Cup, and therefore won the Cups Double.

Indigenous peoples' struggles

In 1937, William Cooper, a leader of the Yorta Yorta people of northern Victoria, organised a petition to King George VI, asking for civil rights to be granted to Indigenous people and that there be an Indigenous member of parliament chosen by Indigenous people. The petition was signed by 1,814 people. The Australian Government refused to send the petition to the King.

In 1938, an Aboriginal deputation met the prime minister, Joseph Lyons. They were seeking among other things federal control of Aboriginal people's lives, which at the time lay with the states and territories.

In April 1938, the magazine *The Abo Call* was published by Aboriginal peoples. It advocated equality of treatment and opportunity. The magazine title today would be considered offensive and even at the time was considered by some to be derogatory.

Film

In September 1931, the first full-length Australian-made 'talkie' films were released. In the next year, the film *The Sentimental Bloke* was released in Melbourne by a local production company.

In August 1932, the comedy film *On Our Selection*, based on Steele Rudd's book with the same title, was screened. This was the first film produced by the new Australian studio Cinesound. The opening sequence featured a 'bushland symphony' of bird songs and was the first time the sounds of the Australian bush were heard in a cinema.

In March 1932, the Tasmanian-born actor Errol Flynn (1909–59) starred in the film *In the Wake of the Bounty*, about a mutiny against Captain Bligh. Flynn moved to Hollywood to appear in many lead roles for the Warner Bros. Film Studio.

In 1936, it was estimated that 3.5 million people attended approximately 1,330 picture theatres in Australia every week.

In December 1938, federal parliament passed an act that insisted a greater proportion of Australian films should be screened in Australian cinemas. It was hoped that this effort would increase production in the fledgling Australian film industry. However, by the end of 1939, Cinesound was still the only Australian studio in production.

Art and Music

In 1937, Margaret Preston (1875–1963) won a silver medal at the Paris International Exhibition and became the first female artist to be commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales to paint a self-portrait. She also published what has been described as a modernist feminist autobiographical essay titled *From Eggs to Electrolux*.

In 1939, James Gleeson (1915–2008) exhibited with the Contemporary Art Society in its inaugural exhibition in Melbourne. His paintings followed the surrealist style and protested against the horrors of war and 'man's inhumanity to man'. His paintings warned of the imminent danger of another war to come.

People in the 1930s listened to the innovative music of Percy Grainger (1882–1961) and the jazz of Billy Hyde (1918–76), and many played and sang around the piano or pianola for entertainment.

Science and Technology

Communications

On 30 April 1930, Australia and Britain were linked by a radio telephone service for the first time. Ramsay MacDonald, Britain's prime minister, made the first phone call to Australia's prime minister, James Scullin. In the same year, a telephone trunk line was established between Adelaide and Perth.

On 1 July 1932, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was established by the federal government to transmit radio programs nationwide. It was funded by broadcasting licence fees rather than advertising.

The ABC established 12 stations across Australia with a combined staff of 256. By the end of 1936 it had permanent symphony orchestras in all six state capitals, which entertained listeners with annual concerts.

Flight

In 1930, Amy Johnson became the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia in 20 days in her Gipsy Moth biplane.

In 1931, the first airmail from England reached Sydney after an Imperial Airways aircraft crashed in Indonesia and the Australian-based Charles Kingsford Smith and G.V. Allan brought the mail to Darwin.

In March 1931, the *Southern Cloud*, carrying two pilots and six passengers, crashed in the Blue Mountains. It wasn't found until 1958. After this disaster radios were installed by Australian airlines.

In September 1932, Maude Rose Bonney became the first woman to fly around Australia.

In April 1933, the body of Australian pilot Bert Hinkler was found in the Italian Alps two months after the plane he was flying had crashed on a flight from England to Australia.

In November 1935, Charles Kingsford Smith and Tommy Pethybridge disappeared while attempting a record-breaking flight from England to Australia. The *Lady Southern Star* crashed off the coast of Burma, and neither the plane nor the bodies of the two men on board were ever found.

Cars

Although purchasing a car was less likely for most people in the 1930s than in previous decades, the manufacture of cars took on a new importance as a source of employment. During the Great Depression, most state governments competed with each other to attract car manufacturers to set up assembly plants in their state or territory to encourage employment growth.

On 19 March 1931, the US car company, General Motors, merged with the South Australian company, Holden, to form General Motors-Holden's (GMH). In August 1935, the Victorian state government gave GMH land at Fishermens Bend in Melbourne to establish a new car assembly plant.

Sydney Harbor Bridge

In 1932, the Sydney Harbor Bridge opened 29 years after construction had commenced. The two sides of Sydney were connected by rail, road and pedestrian thoroughfares. It was a largest single-arch steel bridge in the world and was designed by railway engineer John Bradfield. The arch reaches 134 metres above the harbour, with 49 metres clearance below its deck to enable ships to pass underneath. The £4.2 million construction cost was not paid off until 1988.

Coming at the height of the political and social tensions of the Great Depression, the planned bridge opening by premier Jack Lang was strongly

opposed by members of the New Guard (a right-wing paramilitary organisation) that had declared Lang to be a threat to society. At the official opening ceremony, a New Guard member, Francis De Groot, unexpectedly rode forward on a horse to beat Jack Lang in cutting the ribbon and declaring the bridge open.

The New Guard was formed in Sydney in February 1931 by Eric Campbell, a veteran from the First World War. The aim of the New Guard was to defend the British monarchy and the British Empire and to support conservative governments throughout Australia. They were to suppress disloyal and immoral elements in government, industry and social circles. In addition they were to maintain the full liberty of the individual. At its height, the New Guard had a membership of more than 50,000.