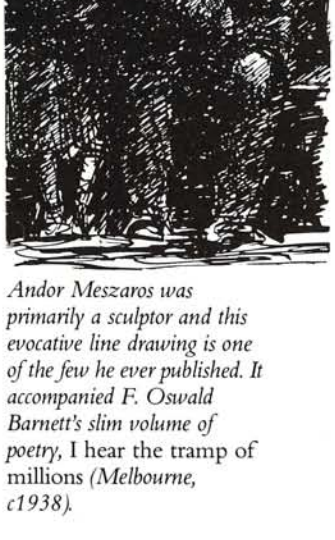
CHAPTER 22

THE UNEMPLOYED

SHEILAH GRAY AND PETER HEMPENSTALL

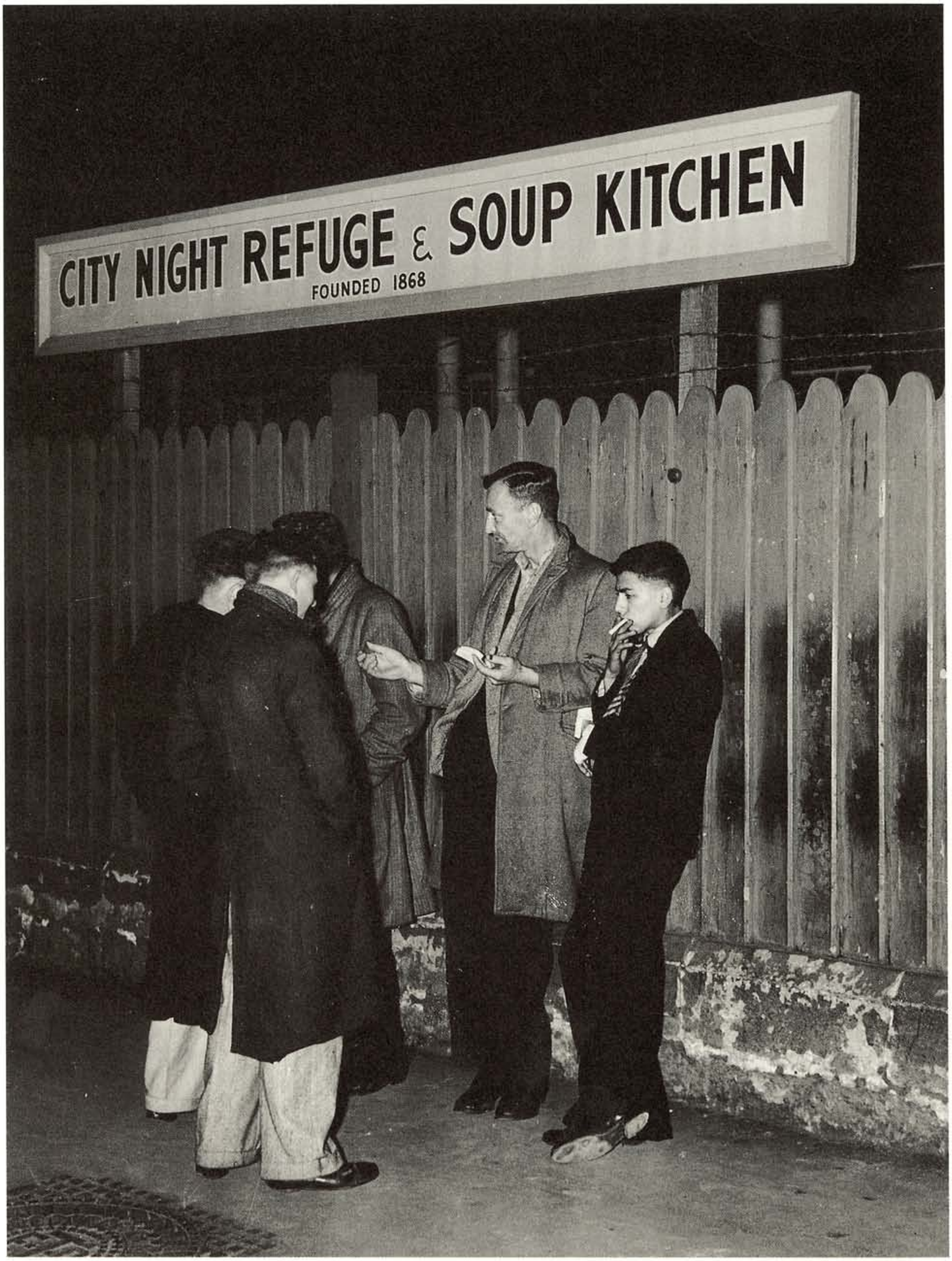
BY 1938 THE SPECTRE of unemployment was stronger than the substance. About About ten men in a hundred were out of work, but five years before there had been thirty in a hundred. The memory of the worst times persisted in fears for the future, lost chances, unbuilt houses and delayed marriages. The memory made some people spend as soon as they had money and others hoard against the return of bad times. It made parents tell sons and daughters to get good jobs and hang on to them.



Andor Meszaros was primarily a sculptor and this evocative line drawing is one of the few he ever published. It accompanied F. Oswald Barnett's slim volume of poetry, I hear the tramp of millions *(Melbourne, c1938).*

On 7 January the Communist party *Workers Weekly* warned of 'a new international crisis ... on the way', and commented on similarities in the plight of Australian workers in 1788 and 1938. People could brush such comments aside as communist propaganda, but warnings came also from sources not committed to the collapse of capitalism. The sober British quarterly *Round table* pointed out that Australia's export prices were again declining and wondered whether the new defence program would 'stem the tide of recession'. In Sydney the *Bulletin* declared that the country was in danger of drifting into a new depression, and in Melbourne an *Age* cartoon depicted community anxiety following a 5 per cent increase in unemployment. Falling export income, failures of small business, strikes, lockouts ... were the bad times coming again? Boilermakers in Perth, Adelaide and Newcastle were warned by their union: 'we must strengthen our organisation as another economic crisis appears to be on the way. It will probably be as severe as 1929. Attacks can be expected on wages and conditions of organisation'.

For some Australians the depression which had started in 1929 still continued. Nobody knew precisely how many were out of work. In the Senate on 23 November the Lyons government admitted to 100 000. The opposition put it at 150 000. Either number might have been correct, and each included men reaching the stage of being 'unemployable'. Such men had been on the 'susso'—state government sustenance or relief work—since late 1933. Unemployment insurance had operated in Queensland since 1923, and the federal government was being urged to introduce an equivalent national scheme. But opponents argued that it


CITY NIGHT REFUGE & SOUP KITCHEN
FOUNDED 1868

would be effective only while the number out of work was manageable, and that crisis unemployment would always require crisis funding. So the plan for national unemployment insurance was stillborn. The unemployed faced a bleak year.

Amid fears of renewed economic difficulties some people were ready to find scapegoats. Many blamed migrants. In April the Lyons government resumed the system of assisted passages for British immigrants and foreshadowed the acceptance of refugees from Nazi Germany. The Labor opposition accepted the need to protect refugees but feared that immigration would increase unemployment. In June Reg Pollard (Labor, Ballarat) claimed that the immigration policy was designed to bring in young farm workers at a time when many of 'our own Australian boys' could not obtain work on farms at 'decent wages'. Even those who got work, he said, were sacked when they turned 21. In August the *Bulletin* reported John Curtin's view that in every state new arrivals had increased the worries of politicians who had to find relief work or sustenance for them, and worse, that migrants had often to be fined for breaches of industrial awards. Opposition to migration, the New South Wales Trades and Labour Council explained, 'was directed not at the newcomers, but at the government and employers who were using the newcomers to their own advantage'. The council did not doubt the need 'to secure sanctuary for the refugees from fascism'.

Women—particularly married women employed in jobs that men might do—also became scapegoats. Some men had noticed that during the depression the official female unemployment rate was lower than the male, and saw this as proof that women had been taking men's jobs. In Melbourne Muriel Heagney, long a proponent of equal pay for women, had argued in her book *Are women taking men's jobs* (1935) that the rates differed only because many industries traditionally dominated by males had been hardest hit by the depression. But the *Bulletin* declared that the proportion of girls going to work each month was increasing while

> The men they have displaced are called intermittent relief workers ... Many of ... [whom] can be found killing time on the beaches ... month after month until they are devoid of ambition and hope'.

According to the *Bulletin* the young working woman imported 'the scraps of clothing she wears', thus 'as a consumer of major Australian industries she is almost a total loss'. Equally reprehensible, while 'the young man reads Australian books ... the young city woman reads United States trash'.

Male witnesses appearing before a Western Australian royal commission and a New South Wales select committee enquiring into youth employment had no doubt that female labour was replacing male, particularly in manufacturing. The Western Australian commissioners considered putting a quota on the number of women allowed to work in any industry. The falling birth rate was also attributed to female employment, often by people who ignored the impact of the depression on the average age of marriage and the size of families. Thomas Hartrey, president of the Young Nationalists' League in Western Australia, declared it 'utterly soul destroying' for young men to be displaced, while

> from the point of view of society as a whole ... it is a serious menace. To the women it means the thwarting of what is, after all, the natural career and ambition of nine out of ten—a home and children. As a consequence, it often means extra marital incontinence, or as an alternative 'makeshift' marriages, in which children are an economic impossibility.

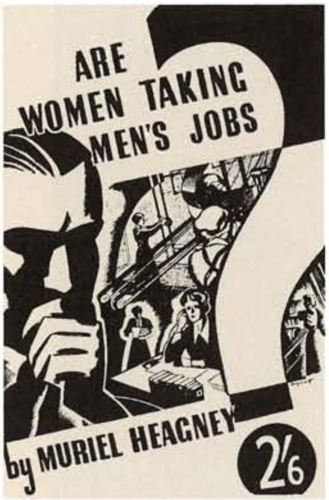
Hartrey wanted women in industry to be replaced by men.

Opposite.

'I'M A HOBO, BUT—I WANT A JOB. *Robert Nocton, 42, ex-Imperial service-man, who has been in Australia for 18 years, told PIX: "I'm a hobo by circumstance, not design. I want a job but I can't find one. There are thousands of men like me in Australia, able and willing to work, looking for jobs. Why should immigrants be brought into the country while there are not enough jobs for the men already here?" This is Nocton's record: Served in France for four years with the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars: fought at Mons; four times wounded: was a stock inspector for 2½ years in the northern districts of N.S.W.: since then fire-man, steeplejack, building demolisher, coastal seaman, gardener, station hand, farm worker, painter, wharf-labourer and now—a Sydney Domain Dosser! Permanent jobs are scarce and Nocton has had to use all his ingenuity to live.'* Pix, *29 Aug 1938.*

Other remedies were proposed. The *Bulletin* published a letter from a South Australian advocating cheaper marriage as a way to take women out of the workforce. Walter Bear, an unskilled man in Brisbane, employed at best intermittently, married in 1938, but he and his wife concealed their marriage. They did not live together, and Walter's wife could not tell her employers of her marriage: 'she'd have got the sack'.

Another option was to channel women wanting work into domestic service, whatever conditions they had to endure. Ivy May McKinnon remembers 'trying to remain in employment under the qualification of the Australian untouchable, the domestic servant'. She had to work well over twelve hours a day, share a bed with two small children, and tolerate listening to a woman tell her daughter that if the girl did not work harder she would 'only be fit for someone's maid'. Individuals and government agencies set out to upgrade domestic employment. It became 'domestic science'. In Western Australia Bessie Rischbieth suggested domestic training centres which would establish housework as a profession, thus opening up a big field of work for educated girls. The New South Wales committee on youth employment thought that Australian girls could be made more 'domestic minded' by the introduction of short domestic science courses at technical colleges with a recognised diploma at the end.



In 1935 Muriel Heagney, trade unionist and feminist, wrote Are women taking men's jobs?. *Based on a survey in Victoria, the book made equal pay a serious national issue but brought no immediate results. Heagney wrote that during the industrial revolution, 'women followed their menfolk into factory and workshop. One by one the manufacture of goods previously produced in the home was transferred to the more economical and efficient sphere of large-scale production. With no productive work left in the home, it was inevitable that women should enter the wider field of industry. Especially this is so in recent times, when mechanical laundries, central heating, and labour-saving devices, besides minimising home labour, have created new "needs" which must be satisfied from wages if the standard of comfort hitherto dependent on unpaid home labour is to be maintained.'* Are women taking men's jobs?, *Melbourne 1935.*

* * *

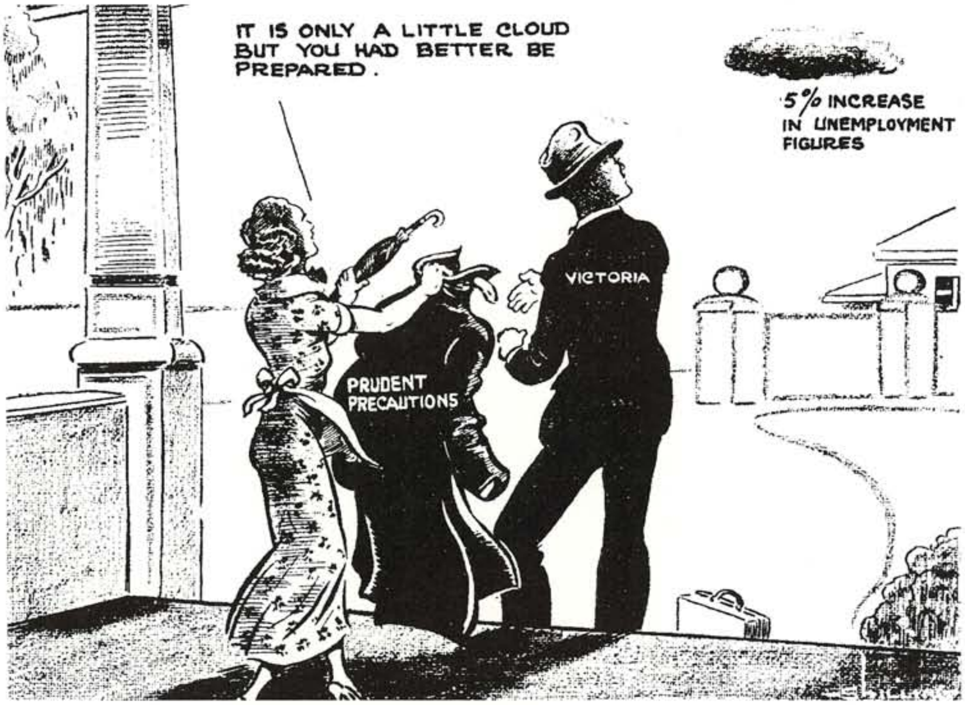
PAY OR NOTICE

Twenty-two-year-old Elsie Walters worked alongside fifteen other girls in the factory of the West Australian Paper Bag Co in West Perth. 'In our pay envelope at this particular firm every week we got a week's notice, so that from the one week to the other you didn't know whether you were going to receive your pay or notice. When you got a weekly notice in your pay envelope, every week, you are very careful what you do or say. Because you didn't know—jobs were still very scarce—and you didn't know whether you would be put off the following week so you were kept in line more or less. So what you thought and what you did, you didn't discuss them.'

E. WALTERS, 1938 COLLECTION

The main source of concern, however, was unemployed youth. Older men were picking up work, but young men who had been fourteen or fifteen in 1930 and had never held a job were, as the Adelaide *Advertiser* put it, 'youths who have lost their chance'. In parliament this theme recurred. 'I know men 26 years of age who have not done a day's work in their life', a Labor member told the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales:

> There are approximately 9000 youths [in the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales] between the ages of 14 and 24 years who have never done a day's work, yet because their fathers are in employment they cannot participate in any relief scheme . . . There are many youths who have never known any other kind of employment [except sustenance work] although it is now eight years since the first onset of the depression.


IT IS ONLY A LITTLE CLOUD BUT YOU HAD BETTER BE PREPARED.
5% INCREASE IN UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURES
VICTORIA
PRUDENT PRECAUTIONS

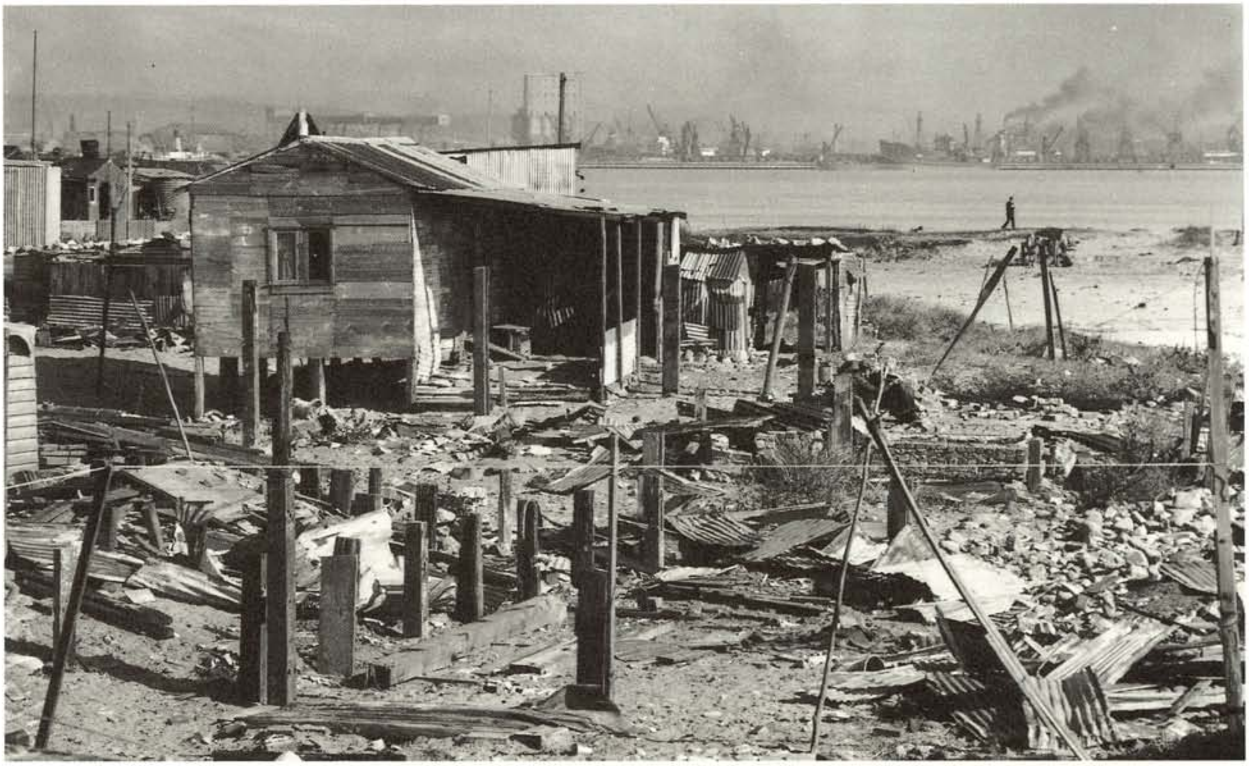
Age, *18 Aug 1938.*

Others in dead-end jobs, such as messengers employed on leaving school, and 'put off' when they reached about twenty, became unemployed adults with six years' work experience and no skills.

The community was concerned about the future of young men unable to find a niche, fearing that they would become discontented, unproductive and unfit to join the married, child-producing ranks of society. People talked darkly about Mosley's fascist 'boys' in England and of the attraction of the 'isms' for the young unemployed. Youths would be readily seduced, they said, by an 'ism', particularly by the worst 'ism' of all, communism.

To help current school-leavers avoid such temptations, state education authorities turned with more or less enthusiasm to vocational guidance, a fruit of the comparatively new science of psychology. In New South Wales the vocational guidance section of the Education department reported an increasing demand by parents for guidance on behalf of their children and by employers for the applicants. The section produced figures to show that guidance worked: of those 'guided' over 93 per cent were successful in the jobs they took up, compared with 66 per cent of those in a group 'not guided'. To show that the examiners were more than capable of working quickly and efficiently, A.H. Martin of Sydney University offered a disarming comparison with totalitarian states: the number of youths examiners dealt with on average in a year were Germany 942, Moscow 769, Leningrad 789 and Sydney 1445. All other states except Tasmania had similar enterprises, but no amount of guidance would help if a youth could not be placed at all.

Each state grappled in its own way with the problem of 'placement'. Victoria had a Boys' Employment Movement run by a voluntary committee which was careful not to send boys to dead-end jobs. In Tasmania the YMCA and the YWCA acted as placement bureaux, in Western Australia the Boys' Employment League, run by volunteers and officials from the Education department, had operated since 1931. The Western Australian royal commission reported that nepotism and social



'Portion of the remains of Nobby's (Newcastle) unemployed camp.' Pix *magazine reported that unemployed camps were still numerous in many parts of Australia, 'revealing how deep and lasting were the wounds of the Depression'. The inhabitants of this camp were evicted by the authorities, but many of them moved to other camps in the district.* Pix, *23 July 1938.*

inequalities too often determined placement, and identified an urgent need both for good statistics on the absorptive capacity of industry and for a linking of vocational guidance and placement schemes. The most industrialised state, New South Wales, had set up the Young Citizens' Movement in 1932, which tried to combine occupational training with recreational and social activities. The central administrative body consisted of voluntary representatives of churches, clubs, commercial and industrial interests, and youth organisations. It worked closely with municipal and shire councils.

All such groups had to assume that work was available, and that redeployment, training and encouragement could bring youth and work together. The New South Wales select committee said bluntly that the assumption was overoptimistic:

> Unemployment is *inevitable* unless we are prepared to abandon the old, unco-ordinated methods which are a legacy of the 19th century individualism and *laissez faire* ... Your Committee believes that unemployment is inherent in the present structure, and that the sooner the State realises this the sooner will a constructive approach be possible.

In fact only farm work had more jobs than men to fill them, probably because farm work had for boys the same disadvantages that domestic service had for girls: a poor future and endless opportunities for being exploited. Nevertheless in every state farm training and forestry schemes attempted to fit urban boys into rural occupations where they were needed. In Tasmania camps for 40 youths each were set up at Mawbanna, Warantinna and Taranna to train bush workers; but each camp was on average only half full. In South Australia farmers were subsidised by the government to employ youths as farm workers, but no record was kept of what happened to them when the subsidy ended. In New South Wales a government agricultural training farm at Scheyville trained selected youths of fifteen to nineteen, who were placed after two months, if possible, with an approved employer through the state labour exchange. The *Sydney Morning Herald* described the scheme glowingly, but the training farm was always short of trainees. City lads, the manager claimed, could adapt to farm work, but they saw it as a dead-end occupation. The *Workers Weekly* agreed, pointing out that Scheyville trainees could never become more than farm hands, for they had 'No hope of ever purchasing a farm from the savings of their meagre wages ... no opportunity of ever marrying or leading a normal home life'. The average rural worker in Australia, the *Weekly* declared, lived a life of extreme poverty and heart-rending toil.

If young men could not be employed, how were they to be kept from being larrikins on the streets? Worse, how could they be saved from falling prey to evil 'isms'? 'We know perfectly well', said a Western Australian medical man,

> that the present position regarding unemployment is so grave that unless something is done to assist the vast army of boys ... we shall hear in time rumblings ... of revolution ... if something is not done soon, these young men will simply have to resort to a brummagem form of Fascism.

Fear of fascism coexisted with admiration for its methods. In New South Wales E.L.S. Hudson spent considerable time planning forestry camps to provide youths of sixteen to eighteen with 'useful work under healthy and character forming conditions'. The youths would be paid, but not sufficient to attract them to stay if permanent work became available outside, and certainly not enough to seduce other youths away from farm work. Hudson excluded adults, keeping the 'as yet unspoiled men from the often bitter and disgruntled men, who have failed in normal employment'. The camp was to be run on the following strict daily routine:

> All youths must rise at 6.30 am.
> Section leaders will call any stragglers.
> Breakfast will be served at 7 am and the doors will be closed at 7.5 am.
> 8 am sections will be allocated their day's work and will move off to their place of work under their section leaders.
> On Monday and Wednesday nights compulsory education classes will be held from 7-9 pm.
> Lights out at 10 pm.
> The camp superintendent will inspect the camp to see that all youths are in bed.

After this camp youths could move on to Wallaroo state forest which employed 1200 young single men. Yet Hudson did not say what would happen to a man when he finished at Wallaroo and was still only equipped for pick and shovel work. Might he too end up 'bitter and disgruntled'?

The long-term unemployed included Harry McKeen, a Queenslander with ten children between fourteen years and seven months. He first came to intermittent relief work in July 1931 and was supported by relief work and rations until June 1938. In November he was selected for full-time work with the Forestry department. After a month he left 'of his own accord' because the work was too hard, and prepared to give up nine of the ten children because of his destitution. Men like him had been on relief so long that they were no longer capable of holding down a physically demanding job.

But it was not too late to reclaim the boys. Police Commissioner W.J. MacKay of New South Wales saw a clear connection between youth unemployment and delinquency. He told of a seventeen-year-old who had left school at fifteen to find work to help his widowed mother, and was found dead in bed with a bullet wound in his forehead and a pea rifle in his hand. Among his belongings were letters from various city offices stating they would consider him if a vacancy arose. MacKay also told of a youth who was employed until he was eighteen and then put off:

> When industry and the production of profits from industry have to depend in such large measure upon the employment of juvenile labour and the dispensing with that juvenile labour when it approaches adult age, [it does not] fulfil the needs of the healthy development of the State.

MacKay began the Police Boys Club movement in 1937 to attract idle youth off the streets. He hoped that the clubs would both reduce juvenile delinquency and enhance the public image of the police. They were set up with the help of Rotary clubs on models which the commissioner had seen in the United States and Britain, and according to their brochure stood 'as sentinels to the child's mind'. Optimistically, the organisers claimed: 'It is ours . . . to say what shall and shall not enter'.

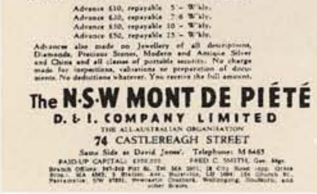
For many Australians unemployment brought chronic undernourishment. In 1934 Ethel Dumbleton of Toronto, on the central coast of New South Wales, married a man doing relief work. He 'never gave me any money', she remembers, 'all the time I was there we lived on bread and pickle'. A baby girl the couple had 'lost weight rapidly when I could not feed her myself, because I never had a decent meal. I had no money to buy the baby other food'. By 1936 a second baby had arrived. 'My husband', Ethel recalls,

> was all the time on some relief work, and I was always terrible hungry, almost as hungry as when I stole a pumpkin from my mother—when I lived at Stoney Creek and lived on pumpkin and nothing else for a week . . . After the birth I had asthma . . . I got so much in debt I didn't know what to do next. Once I went without food for nearly three weeks. Sometimes I would drink the baby's Lactogen when I was mixing it . . . I got light headed going without and I thought I would go mad . . . I made up my mind that I would take my own and my children's lives if I could . . .

She struggled on, and in 1938 was expecting a third child.

Between February 1936 and July 1938 a commonwealth advisory council on nutrition investigated such cases. Eminent professors of medicine sat on the council: Sir Raphael Cilento of the University of Queensland, Harvey Sutton of Sydney University and Sir Stanton Hicks of the University of Adelaide. Their findings were austerely academic and avoided the terms 'malnutrition' and 'undernourishment'. But after surveying how much struggling households spent on food, and what food they bought, they made the trials of the long-term unemployed apparent. One case study at Mount Isa, in Queensland, told of the incidence of rickets, a disease of bone malformation arising from inadequate diet. 'All the cases of rickets in the Mount Isa Mine School', the professors found, 'were among the more recent arrivals many of whose fathers had been unemployed for long periods before commencing work'.

The Mont de Piété company was one of the largest pawnbrokers in Australia. Unemployed men and women often had to pawn possessions. Sydney Sun, *25 Apr 1938.*



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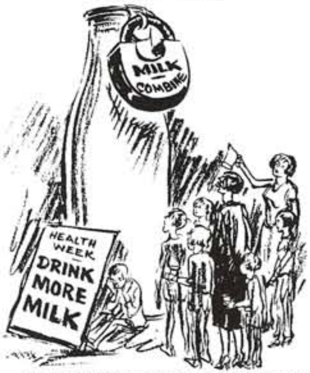
HEALTH WEEK



—But the Workers are still minus Vitamins L.S.D.

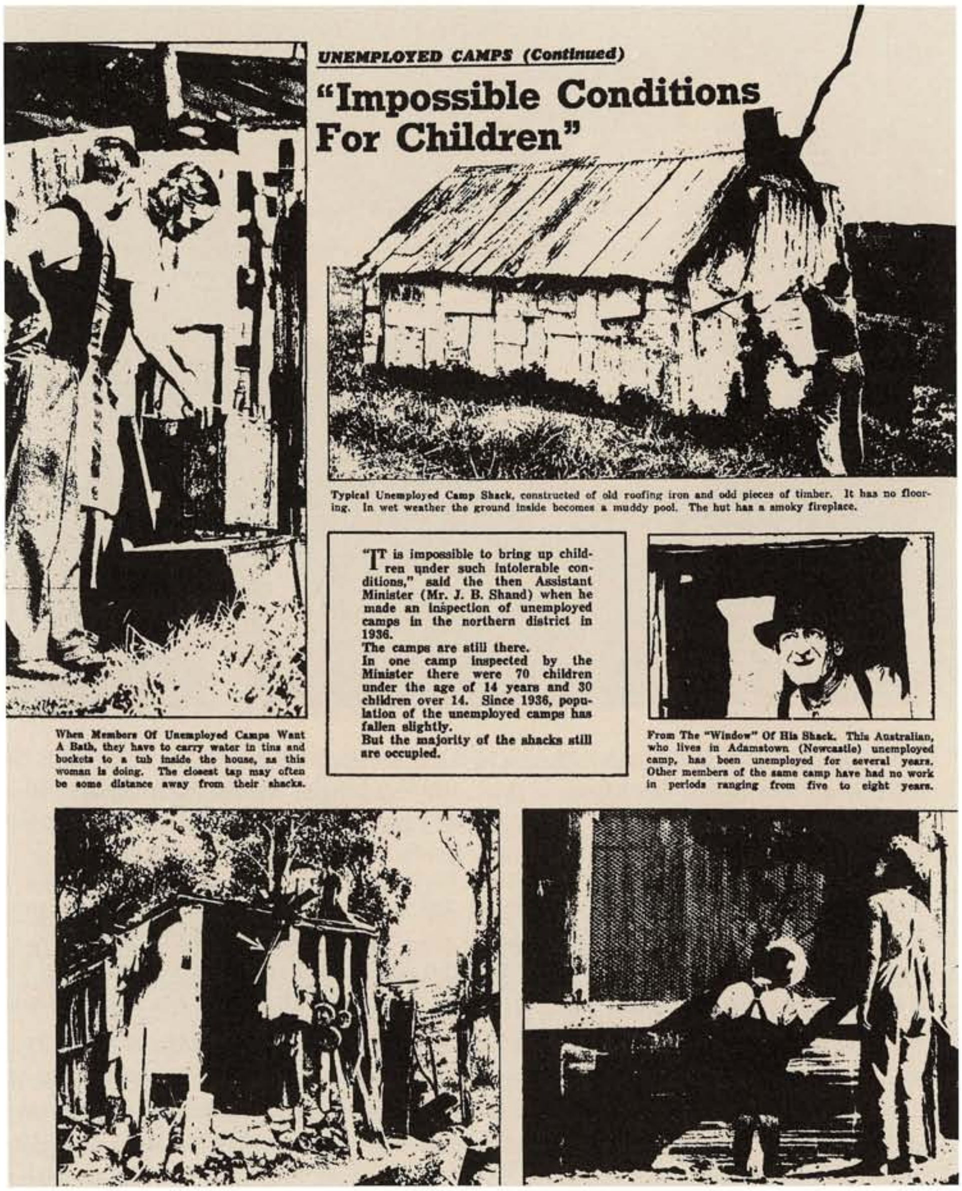
Although federal and state governments tried to promote the virtues of milk and other measures to improve nutrition, the communist Workers weekly *observed that many workers lacked the money (L.S.D. = pounds, shillings and pence) to afford the prices charged by food monopolies.* Workers weekly, *11 Nov 1938.*

* * *

The contribution of unemployment to poor housing was even more obvious. Many slums and shanty towns of kerosene tins, old timber and hessian bags still survived, occupied by transient single men and women, and by the families of unemployed or underemployed breadwinners. In Burnie, Tasmania, Mick Ryder lived on a vacant lot behind a large brick house in which the local grocer was slowly going bankrupt. In better days his wife had used a greenhouse on the lot, built of wooden slats covered with hessian, to keep the winds from damaging her plants. By 1938 the greenhouse had fallen into disrepair and Mick lived there in return for chopping wood. He seemed unlikely ever to get a full-time job; he had 'just a touch of TB' and could not work hard enough to be employed as a labourer. Dubbed 'Mick the hangman', he was becoming a joke around the town.

Family life in poor housing depended on the mental and physical strength of the parents. Vera Deacon's family lived in a riverside shack in the shadow of the Newcastle steelworks. 'Gradually', she remembers,

> our spunky Father began to wear down, growing thin with a harsh cough. Like Mother he was always working. He drove himself and his older children on. Always there was water to be carried, mangrove wood collected from the river, hauled up the hill to be chopped ready for the fire. On and on he pushed himself seeking the elusive 'extra few bob'. Always he was working on the house, whitewashing, mending leaks, improvising, making do to keep the place



UNEMPLOYED CAMPS (Continued)

"Impossible Conditions For Children"

Typical Unemployed Camp Shack, constructed of old roofing iron and odd pieces of timber. It has no flooring. In wet weather the ground inside becomes a muddy pool. The hut has a smoky fireplace.

When Members Of Unemployed Camps Want A Bath, they have to carry water in tins and buckets to a tub inside the house, as this woman is doing. The closest tap may often be some distance away from their shacks.

"IT is impossible to bring up children under such intolerable conditions," said the then Assistant Minister (Mr. J. B. Shand) when he made an inspection of unemployed camps in the northern district in 1936.

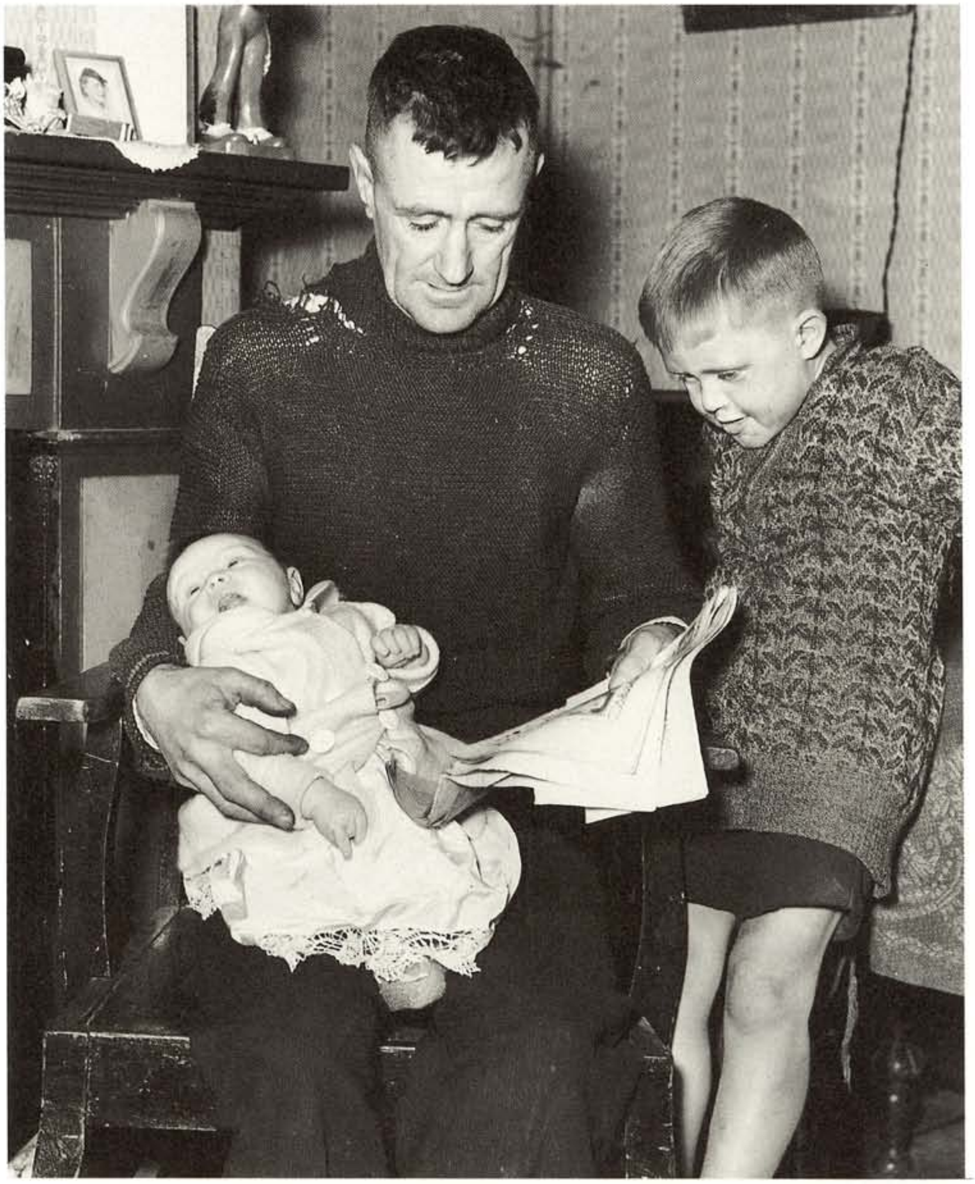
The camps are still there.

In one camp inspected by the Minister there were 70 children under the age of 14 years and 30 children over 14. Since 1936, population of the unemployed camps has fallen slightly.

But the majority of the shacks still are occupied.

From The "Window" Of His Shack. This Australian, who lives in Adamstown (Newcastle) unemployed camp, has been unemployed for several years. Other members of the same camp have had no work in periods ranging from five to eight years.

Pix, *23 July 1938.*



'Alf Wansey, of Young Street, Redfern, with Ronald (5 weeks) and Edward (5 years), two of his seven children. After paying £1 a week rent, the nine live on £3/9/– a week. Father has heart disease, cannot work, cannot get invalid pension.' Pix, *9 July 1938.*

> waterproof. At this time Mother and Dad seemed to argue more; it was all becoming too much for them. I felt they no longer loved each other. How wrong I was. By letting their feelings out, I am certain now that they kept their sanity.

Yet perhaps because of their rural aspect and apparent impermanence, shacks and humpies did not seem as bad as city slums. As the depression had lifted, people in church and humanitarian organisations began looking at the housing endured by unemployed town dwellers. In Melbourne one investigator found a house consisting of three rooms, one a living room, another

> a dining-room, the three daughters, the eldest of whom was nineteen, slept in this room ... the main bedroom [was] 9 by 9 feet, and in which slept the mother and father and the baby. A small back-verandah had been converted into a tiny bedroom, nine feet by seven feet ... [and] five foot six high ... [On a double

> bed] slept four boys, aged 18, 16, 12 and 9 . . . The mother was washing in the back yard . . . her husband was an unskilled labourer, employed by an outer suburban Council. During the depression his services were dispensed with, and then began the descent, until at last the only habitation they could obtain was this rusty, dilapidated, insanitary slum. Having finished her story, she burst into tears . . . 'O sir, could you get us a house?'

F. Oswald Barnett, a Victorian public servant and Methodist concerned at such appalling conditions, wrote a book of verse about them, and Andor Mészáros illustrated it with great sensitivity. One poem was addressed to the victims:

> To you I would apologise,
> That we,
> Who see that horses are well fed and sheltered dry,
> Should think a hovel dark and damp
> Is good enough for you,
> For you so often standing idly by
> Because no man hath hired you,
> You, who have earned so scantily
> You cannot pay to rent a healthy home,
> Nought but a blighted shack
> That bloodless owners call a house,
> As one who did not know your plight,
> Who slept the sleep of long neglect,
> I vow that never shall my voice be dumb,
> Till you are housed as worthy citizens.
>
> To you,
> You women of the slums,
> Condemned to live 'neath leaking roofs,
> In mouldy rooms,
> Who strive to feed your children on the dole,
> And starve yourself,
> To you heroic ones who never moan,
> Though you are crucified upon the cross of poverty,
> To you who smile,
> And share your nearly empty cruse
> With others e'en more desolate,
> I now apologise, and hang my head in shame.

'This Surry Hills Backyard is shared by two families, each with two children. They each pay 5/– rent. "We cannot afford a house anywhere else," says Mrs. A.J. Purcell, trying to cultivate tidy garden.' Pix, *9 July 1938.*

Barnett kept his vow by campaigning skilfully and passionately to make politicians commit themselves to abolishing slums. The Housing Commission of Victoria, set up in 1938 to do that, was his monument.

Some of those who worried about the unemployed feared for the physical fitness of Australians. The nation had to be fit, and the unemployed and their children were not. Australians had become pale and weedy as they lounged on street corners waiting for work, yet European dictators were spending time and money to make their people strong, healthy and fecund. In August the *Age* chided the federal government for its slowness in starting a much discussed national fitness campaign, and in November the National Health and Medical Research Council recommended the establishment of a national council for physical fitness. Immediate action was necessary, it declared, because international events had exposed Australia's unpreparedness. Within two weeks the National Fitness Council had been set up to educate Australians in what the Adelaide *Advertiser* called 'the necessity for bodily fitness as a factor in efficient defence'. The council was widely supported, and several fitness camps were built in rural settings.

Throughout 1938 the federal government juggled what it had decided were alternatives in expenditure: defence and unemployment relief. It tried to keep the latter a state responsibility while cautiously increasing the former. In September the leader of the Labor opposition, John Curtin, moved a vote of no confidence in the government 'because of its lamentable lack of leadership in regard to urgent national problems'. He said: 'any increase of defence expenditure after the Munich Pact as far as Australia is concerned appears to me to be an utterly unjustifiable and hysterical piece of panic propaganda'. Curtin thought that the immediate task was to solve the problem of the 100 000 or more citizens who were unemployed and appallingly housed. Here, with a touch of inconsistency, he brought defence needs into his own argument, discerning in their unfitness for military service a new urgency about changing the living conditions of the unemployed. Another Labor man, Eddie Ward, quoted Professor Harvey Sutton: 'I believe we should be lucky if we raised two thirds of a million men out of an estimated total manpower of 1 500 000'. Ward argued that this poor standard of physical fitness was a result of insufficient and poor food, in turn a consequence of lack of work. Defence and unemployment could also be linked in a moral argument. In November a Labor senator, Donald Cameron of Victoria, pleaded for the unemployed who were 'denied the right to a decent livelihood in the country . . . they are asked to defend'.

Unemployment, nutrition, physical fitness and housing were being drawn into the ambit of national defence. Departments, councils, select committees and royal commissions collected, surveyed, assessed and recommended. But although a little amelioration was achieved through youth, farm and forestry schemes and slum clearance, much damage had been done. For too many Australians the years since 1929 had been bitter, dominated by the threat or the reality of being out of work.

OUTLIVING THE DEPRESSION: NORTH ENGADINE IN 1938

ALAN D. GILBERT

From the North Engadine plateau, on a clear day, the city of Sydney could be seen 30 kilometres to the north, its harbour bridge arching like a grey dome in the distance. The plateau was isolated, surrounded by a wilderness. The deep gorge of the Woronora River was a formidable barrier to the west, and in the east the national park had been a buffer to settlement since its declaration in 1879. A bush road running south from Sydney passed a kilometre or so to the east and continued through the tiny settlements of Waterfall and Helensburgh and down the Illawarra escarpment to the industrial areas of the south coast. To the north, this road dropped down to the Georges River at Tom Ugly's Point, eight kilometres beyond Engadine.

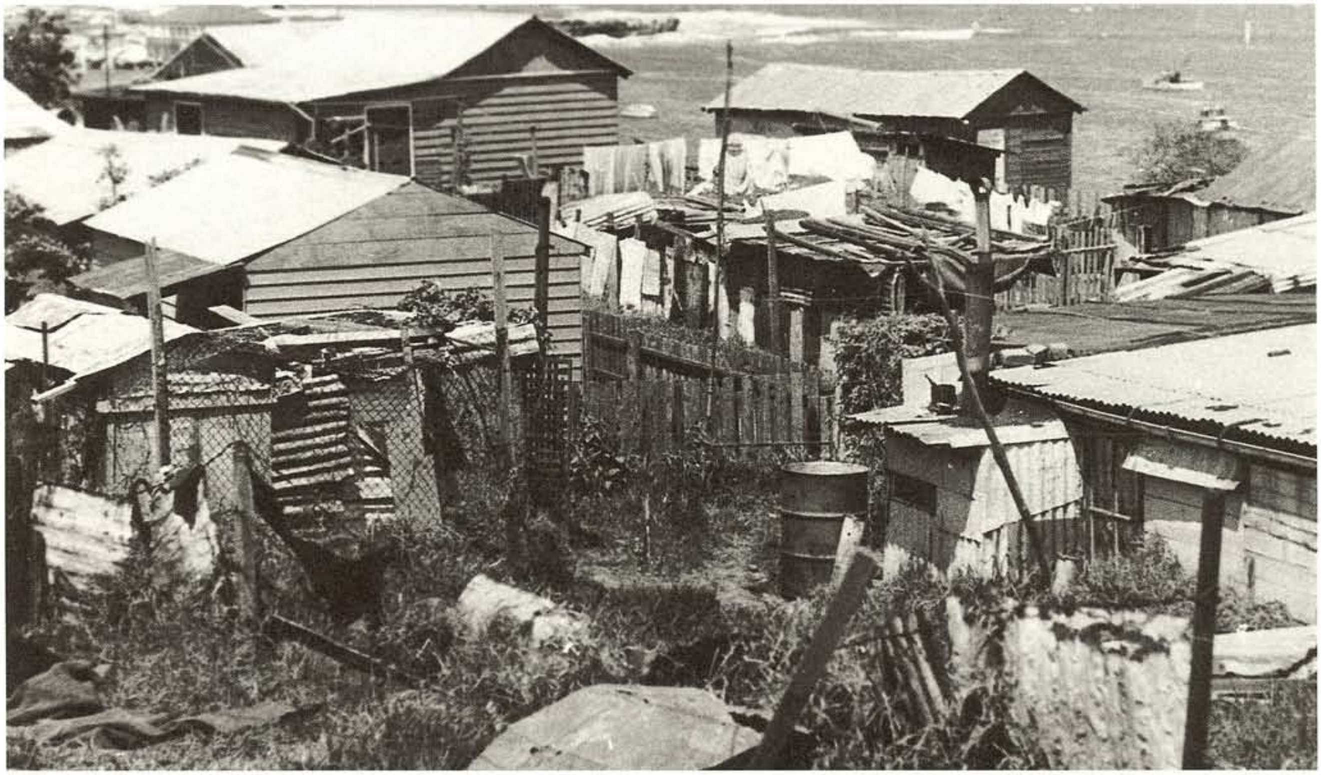
The Georges River had been the most important barrier isolating the plateau from Sydney. In the 1880s the railway had driven a small bridgehead of settlement across the river, but the district had remained an area of mainly rural and resort activities. In the nine years since a bridge had replaced an old car-ferry at Tom Ugly's Point, economic circumstances had delayed hopes that an easy road link would transform Sutherland and Cronulla into suburbs of Sydney. In 1938 the district south of the Georges River still contained many remote, largely inaccessible places within only a few kilometres of Australia's largest city.

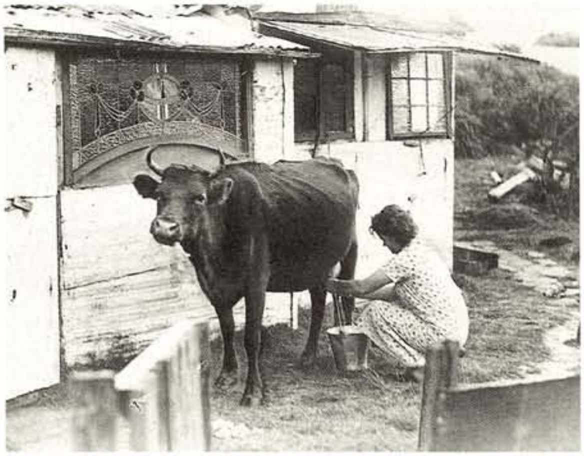
Homeless and unemployed men reading in a shelter in Redfern, Sydney, surrounded by their few possessions. Many such men struggled to maintain respectability in the face of economic disaster: books and shoeshine kits are visible beside billies, water bottles and other evidence of vagrancy.
FAIRFAX PHOTO LIBRARY

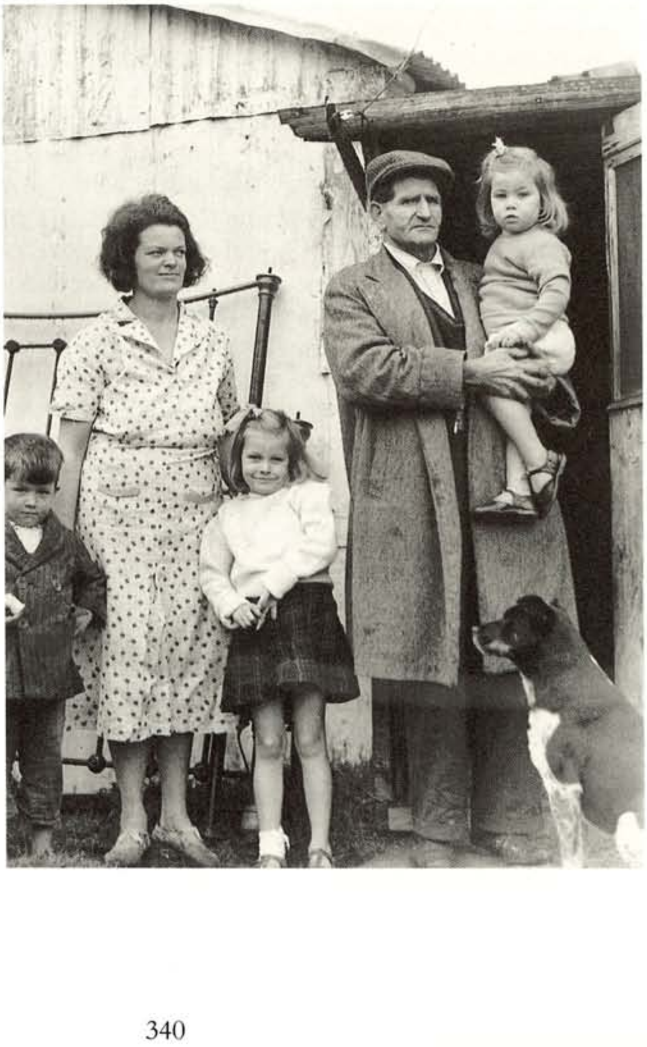
The people who lived at North Engadine were working to reduce their isolation. Just a few years earlier, however, the very remoteness of the place was what had lured them there. They were among the many Australians who had become victims of the Great Depression. Lost jobs had led finally to lost homes and to the indignity of squatting on government land set aside for 'permissive occupancy'. Like permissive occupants elsewhere, they had paid a deposit of £3 8s 8d and a survey fee of £1 10s for remote, unused land, and agreed to pay an annual rental of £1. Though many of them had since found work, at least sporadically, others remained among that 10 per cent of Australian workers still unemployed. All were fearful that depression might yet destroy them. The slow improvement of their economic position had brought no easy resumption of normal life, only an opportunity to begin the difficult task of rebuilding security and respectability.

The North Engadine community was part of a wider social problem. Squatting settlements, unemployed camps and unauthorised shanties had sprung up on the margins of cities and towns throughout Australia in the early 1930s, housing considerable human misery. On the southern fringe of Sydney alone, at least 110 makeshift dwellings had been erected by homeless unemployed people at La Perouse, about 20 at Long Bay, 147 at Yarra Bay, 60 at Bomborrah Point, 100 at Cook Point in North Brighton, 100 at Frenchman's Bay and 55 at Kogarah. Further south there had been several major communities of squatters in the national park—along the coast, by the Hacking River at Audley, and in a ramshackle complex of corrugated iron, hessian and waste timber in the scrub along the Princes Highway south of Sutherland. There were many shacks and camps in the sandhills and around the shores of Kurnell peninsula, and tucked away in remote reaches of rugged sandstone heathlands further inland. In central Illawarra, the shire council was still trying to control the growth of what it described euphemistically as 'temporary accommodation'. What impressed itself on visitors to the district, the council admitted ruefully, was 'the large number of bag and tin shanties'.

Most of these shanty settlements still survived, although, outside places like the Illawarra, where unemployment remained high, they were smaller and less populous. Assimilating squatters and campers back into conventional housing had become an important priority and, with the economy evidently growing, local authorities felt under pressure to pull down makeshift, unsightly dwellings. But it was not easy to solve problems as varied as the thousands of different people caught up in them. Not everyone had secured permissive occupancy on crown land. Some







Top.

Makeshift accommodation on permissive occupancy site at Happy Valley, near La Perouse, Sydney.

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Above.

Another view of the same 'Happy Valley' home. Strawberry, the cow, ribs testifying to the paucity of the grass among the La Perouse sandhills, supplies the family with milk, 9 July 1938.

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Right.

'Battlers' in Happy Valley, probably in 1938. Home is a rough shanty; the breadwinner's face is haggard and careworn; the woman's unflinching and cheerful. The children look well fed and the girls, especially, neat, clean and well dressed.

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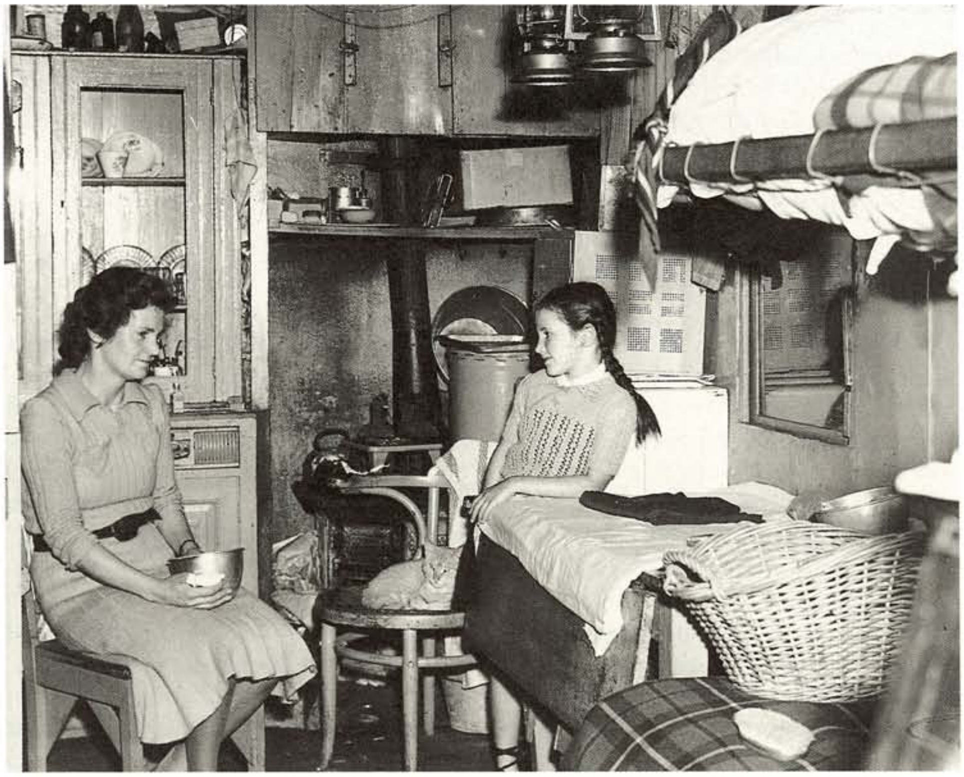

Left.
The cramped interior of a makeshift dwelling, built during the depression. The clean dresses and tidy hair of mother and daughter, and the cared-for appearance of the room, are evidence of an enduring commitment to respectability, and the display of china in the cabinet is a reminder of better times.
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Below.
Depression's aftermath. Children and adults demolish a shanty in Happy Valley in July.
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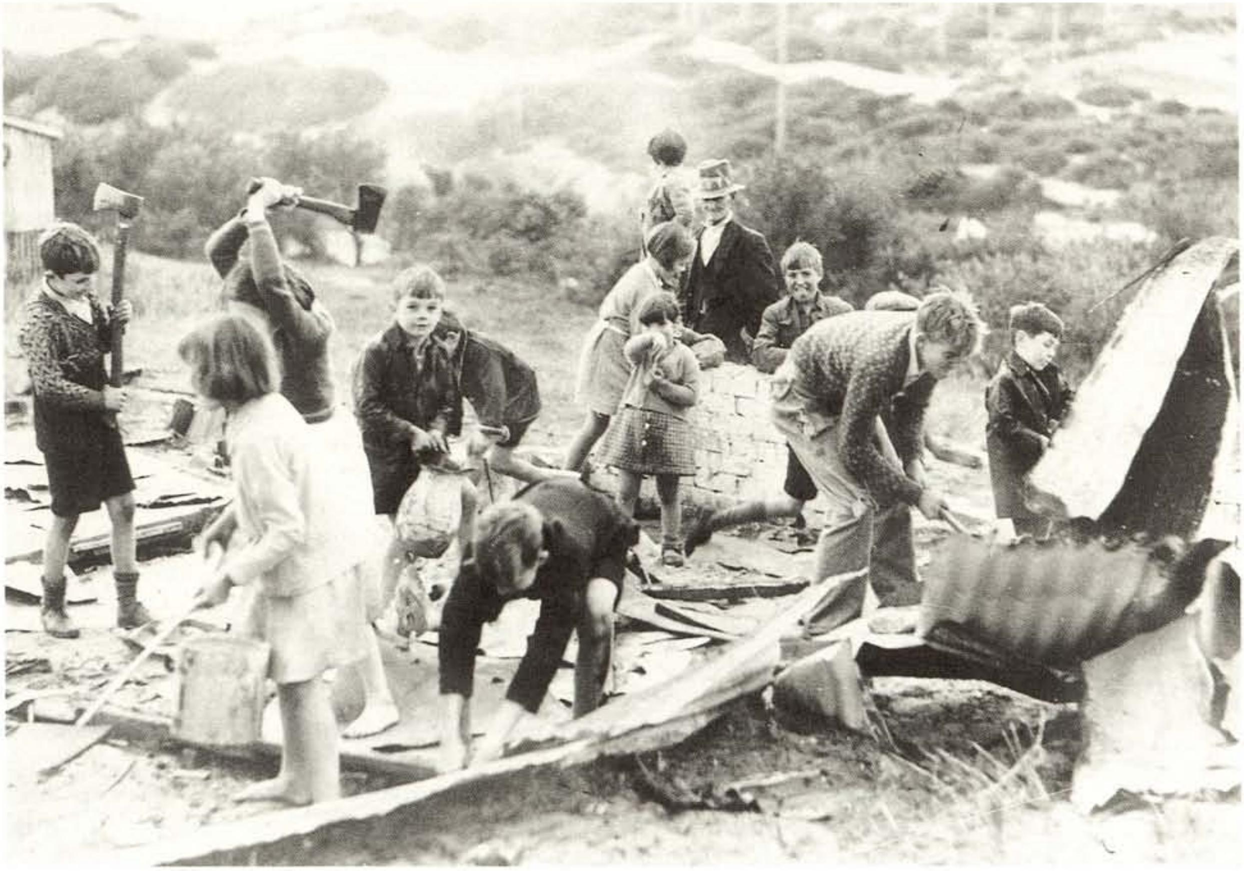


destitute breadwinners had managed to keep their families together by squatting without any authorisation. Others, having left family and friends behind, had sought work—or despaired of finding it—in lonely isolation. Like the people in Kylie Tennant's *Battlers*, some had become transients, 'humping their bluey' from town to town, willing to

> gallop hundreds of miles to snatch at a wage, to wear themselves to death, parch in the heat, and shiver in the cold, only so that they might not be left to the tender mercies of the police and the half-starvation of 'rations' in the outdoor workhouse of the roads.

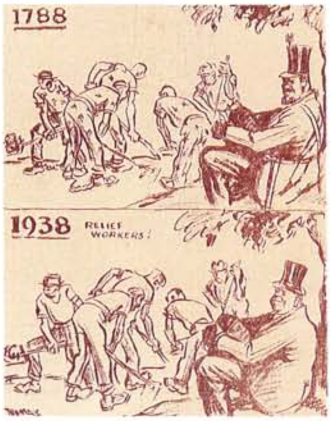
The unpalatable alternative for the destitute was entry into a government unemployment relief camp. Strictly organised, these camps separated their inhabitants, married and single alike, from their families—for they were intended to be harsh enough to encourage people in them to seek employment. Sixty still operated in New South Wales, and their 8000 inmates were reported to be in a 'half-starved condition and not fit to carry on their work'. In an angry outburst, Mark Davison, the member for Cobar, told the legislative assembly that the camps were 'recognized as concentration camps and even referred to as being worse than the concentration camps of Germany'.

Yet an improving Australian economy offered most victims of the depression a chance of gradual rehabilitation. Many rotting shanties already lay happily empty, abandoned by individuals and families who had battled out of disaster. In North Engadine most squatters had managed to secure title to their lots and a permanent settlement was growing up. Flat fibro was replacing corrugated iron. Planned buildings on proper foundations were replacing shacks and camps. The new houses were small and simple, but building regulations were being observed, and council approval—however token and unsupervised—was being sought. These were signs that the North Engadine community was recovering more rapidly than some of its neighbours. The 'Mad Mile' camp along the highway at Sutherland and the Boat Harbour community near Kurnell remained what they had been in 1933. But in North Engadine a shanty settlement was being transformed into a suburb.

Residents wanted jobs, and suburban facilities such as reticulated water, electricity and transport. The Sutherland Shire Council took part in a grant loan scheme, popularly known as the 'Spooner Scheme', under which the New South Wales government made loan finance available to local authorities, and gave pound-for-pound grants towards unemployment relief work which the council provided. Risking bankruptcy, the council was employing 120 to 130 men on unemployment relief, although it had state government support for only 85. At the same time it was urging the government to begin labour-intensive projects in the shire independently of the Spooner Scheme.

The North Engadine people knew how to use such local government initiatives to get jobs. In November the shire council began advocating, 'as a defence measure', spending state money to make a road linking Sutherland and Liverpool, where the army had its Holsworthy Camp. The suggestion came from the Engadine Progress Association, a body dominated throughout 1938 by the concerns of North Engadine residents. 'This road would cross the Woronora pipe line at Engadine and help the defence of the same', the association submitted. Engadine residents may have been unusually defence conscious, but their second argument provides a better clue to their motivation: the road, the association added, would mean 'constructive employment for many local residents'. The shire council was soon busy making arrangements for road building 'to provide work for the unemployed' in North Engadine.

The notice the council took of North Engadine's problems was not simply benevolent. The Engadine Progress Association was an extremely active pressure group. Its members—the unemployed campers and squatters of the depression years now intent on establishing permanent residence in the area—showed themselves skilful and persistent in seeking such conventional suburban amenities as lighting, water reticulation, useable roads properly signposted and gazetted, and even improved recreational facilities. In January the council accepted from the association a list of names for new streets on the northern edge of Engadine, although at the same meeting it refused the association permission to send a delegation to the Premier's department requesting the electrification of Sydney's Illawarra Line from Sutherland to Waterfall, a project which would have both created work in Engadine and enhanced its status by drawing it into the suburban rail network. In February a group calling itself the Engadine Literary Institute and Recreation Club received permission to install an electric light in its new hall, and the association won permission to set up a single street light to illuminate a 'finger post' at the entrance to the 'settlement'. Meanwhile a report from council officers indicated that the very limited, locally generated electricity supplies which required such careful rationing would soon be a thing of the past. Engadine and Heathcote would be linked to the main Sutherland electricity grid 'sometime after Tuesday, 22 June 1938'. Flushed with success, the association began agitating to have the area connected to the shire water supply.

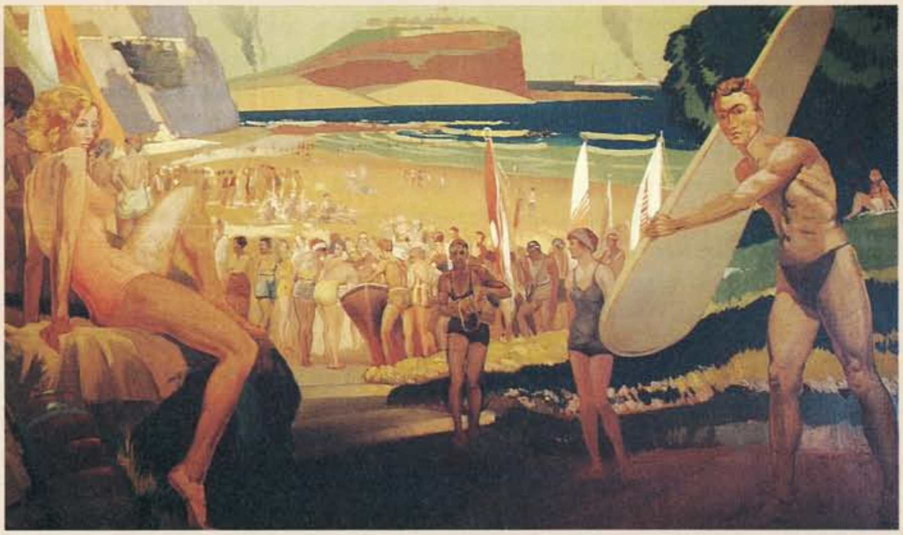


A Workers weekly *view of how far Australian workers had come in 150 years.* Workers weekly, *28 Jan 1938.*

The quest for respectability went on hand-in-hand with the battle against continuing economic hardship. When the association became concerned that any new influx of squatters might hinder the transition of the area to suburban respectability, the council assured it that vacant land at Engadine 'facing the Princes Highway' had been barred to squatters. In May the occupant of 'a bag shack' at Heathcote was told that his accommodation would be condemned in 30 days unless alterations the council specified were made and approved under provisions of the Local Government Act. But making the area respectable imposed severe strains. Legitimate land ownership meant the responsibility of ratepaying, and the council was obliged several times to refuse requests from North Engadine residents to work in lieu of paying rates.

The council did accept self-help in other contexts. When the association pressed for a recreation reserve in the new suburb, land was set aside for the purpose but left undeveloped. The community grew impatient, and members of the association cleared the reserve and erected improvised fencing with second-hand electric light poles. The shire engineer commented: 'this is a recreation reserve in embryo, and when the district is more settled, something more ornate will be necessary'. Similarly, when in May the council accepted the shire engineer's opinion that there was no urgency in improving and extending an important access road, especially because such an extension would require bridging Wollybutt Creek, the community organised a 'working bee' and built its own bridge.

This little bridge over Wollybutt Creek was a development of considerable significance for North Engadine. Without it residents would have remained isolated; with it, they had fairly easy access to the Princes Highway, the southern artery into Sydney. As well, the bridge was a symbol of the reintegration of depression victims into the mainstream of social and economic life. Its very building symbolised the struggles of thousands of Australians to bridge the chasms which the depression had cut into Australian society. Such people got help from local and state authorities, but they had to rely chiefly on their own labour, determination and courage.



Pleasure, *a large mural by Herbert Gallop in the Great Northern Hotel, Newcastle, New South Wales, shows men and women disporting themselves on nearby Nobby's Beach. Oil and tempera on canvas. Photograph by John Freund, 1986.*

V

LEISURE

Entertainment in the lounge of the interstate passenger ship Moonta. *The piano was at the centre of social gatherings large and small, formal and informal.*

ANU ARCHIVES OF BUSINESS AND LABOUR