

# ***SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION***

## **ONE:**

During The Great Depression in Australia, there were vast divides in the amount of misfortune suffered by different groups, mainly based on whether or not they had a stable, independent income, or method of feeding their families. Indeed, The Great Depression, in many ways, was an exaggeration of the existing system in the 1920s, the rich got richer and the poor were getting poorer. Due to the drop in prices for goods, services and real estate, a rich man could profit quite a bit in material possessions. This is not to say that all middle and lower class groups suffered the same under the wealthy, those that lived in rural areas, for instance, could put food on the table with their own agricultural goods, unlike their urban cousins.

Most farmers and small land - owners in general were, however, at a loss for how to pay off their mortgages. Len Eggleton of Robinvale, Victoria, once stated "About 1930 the banks started to sell up all the farms ... at ridiculous prices ..." This would force many families to, as he put it, "move off with almost nothing." If the farmers migrated to the city to find work, they would lose what limited ability they had to procure their own food, while, if they attempted to stay and tough it out, they would be driven to bankruptcy by the drastic drop in the value of their goods, both locally and exports. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place. Both in and out of urban areas, people had misfortune, however, it was of different types and levels. It is not accurate to say that a farmer struggling to make the next payment to the bank suffered the same as a homeless child living in the slums - it was not uncommon for the family unit to degrade or destabilise during The Great Depression as is demonstrated by the working women of the time.

Looking at the bare statistics of the 1933 census, it would seem like women did not suffer as much as men due to their 14.9% unemployment rate as opposed to the 26.3% of males. However, even if a woman worked and her husband did not, she was still expected to do all the housework and take care of the children as that was "women's work". The work that women did get was generally very low paying, as D. Potts states in his book *In and Out of Work: Personal Accounts of the 1930s* "the first Arbitration Court ... laid down the minimum wage for a man ... No thought of women working" Basically, many women were employed because employers could pay them

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** 012

whatever they wanted. This, on top of being expected to turn the, as M. Cannon describes in her book *The Human Face of The Great Depression*, "staple diet of white bread, tea, refined sugar [which] kept people plump but did little for their health" into something appetizing every day of the week, this put quite a lot of stress on the women of the 1930s.

It was not the same type of pressure as was suffered by the labourers languishing in their uselessness, however. Previous years had been bad - a shop keeper interviewed by Wendy Lowenstein once said "I don't remember the Depression as being any worse than the 1920s. It was always a battle." But they had not been bad enough to erase the stigma attached to being unemployed or accepting charity. The culture of the time was that men worked to support their family, and in the process gained a social group, self-esteem and, basically, something to do with themselves. Completely disregarding the actual loss of income, when a labourer - either skilled or unskilled - lost their job, they also lost their friends, confidence and purpose. They were also viewed with distaste - Drew Cottle believes that unemployment was seen as a "sign of moral weakness" and a "social disease". Despite this, the everyday unemployed were not the most discriminated against group in society.

European immigrants and Aborigines, among the unemployed as well as the employed, were in general, heavily discriminated against. A common complaint at the time as noted by Wendy Lowenstein was "The poms came out here and took our jobs". This may well have had some basis in the truth. In previous years, government sponsored assisted immigration was extremely common peaking at, according to The Commonwealth Year Books, 31,200 assisted in 1926. As such, those that lost their jobs had a convenient scapegoat to put the blame on. Aborigines were just discriminated against in general due to racial prejudice. In terms of feeding their families, many Aborigines had it better than those in the city. Because they lived on reserves, they were able to, as quoted by Wayne Atkinson, "live off the land at such places as Lake Tyres, Cummeragunja, Lake Condah and Framlingham." However, due to the aforementioned discrimination, "the many who ventured to the city for jobs were more disadvantaged than the general community." So while they were in many cases

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** One

able to feed their children better than white men who had to pay rent or a mortgage, they too suffered some misfortune.

The lifestyles of children during The Great Depression were basically reflections of how much money their parents had. While the rich who, as evidenced by Dame Elizabeth Murdoch, could blatantly say "we (the upper class) didn't really suffer" sent their children to fancy schools in Europe, poor families living in the slums had, as witnessed by one John Smith and published in *The Labor Daily*, 13th August 1930, their children "standing ... in the cold and rain, crying with hunger." While the children of the rich sat at home and ate a roast, the children of the poor ate bread and drippings and, as was the case with 13 year old George Todd, who travelled to Gippsland to become a trapper, tried to make their own way in the world. So while many children grew up to be parents who insisted their children licked the plate clean after every meal, some may have barely known that there was a depression.

While inside socio-economic groups during the depression there was a significant amount of shared suffering, between the groups it was of wildly varying types and levels. A down-on-their luck labourer shared very little with the hardships of an Aborigine hunting for hours everyday. Nor did the mother of six children working to put food on the table, then cooking it every night share much with a young lady going to "finishing school in Switzerland" to avoid the times like Dame Elizabeth Murdoch. Different disadvantages brought different misfortunes and suffering - and an economic downturn as huge as The Great Depression bestows plenty of disadvantage for nearly everyone.

# **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION**

## **TWO:**

The Great Depression was a time of pain but it was not shared equally. On Thursday 24th October 1929, 'Black Thursday', the American Stock Market dramatically collapsed. The impact of the crash was felt around the world, for it brought about 'The Great Depression'. Because of the economic downturn, people's lives changed drastically. The majority of the Australian people lived very well prior to the downfall, so they felt the effects of the depression strongly.

The Aborigines did not share the pain because they suffered worse than a white man. Aborigines who lived on the reserves were forced to live on board rations which were 1/2 of those for an unemployed white man or relief. Aborigines were only eligible for relief if they proved they had a white man's job. Even if an Aboriginal left the reserves, the government had enlisted police assistance in forcing them back to reserves. Wayne Atkinson believes "The Aboriginal people on the reserves fared better during the depression than those who moved to the cities looking for jobs." It was extremely hard for Aborigines to get jobs before the depression and even harder during the depression. By staying on the reserves at least they had the small amount of rations to live on.

The wealthy were hardly affected by the depression but the poor were hit the hardest. The poor would wait hours for the scraps from restaurants and sometimes only receive scraps like a block of cheese to feed and support their family. Many of the wealthy tried to assist the poor as best they could by volunteering their time and money to help. The wealthy made 'The Paddington Relief' and it supported charities, street collections and kept government schools running. Elizabeth Murdoch said "I wouldn't have been dead talking about the depression. We didn't really suffer."

Women were concentrated in occupations which were least affected by the depression, teaching, nursing, domestic, services and light manufacturing. "Although women taught they found it very hard to get their children into schools. Due to this children had little or no education. The 1933 census of population indicates that female unemployed stood at 14.9% nationwide, well below the 26.5% for males.

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** two

There's no doubt that women in some ways were worse off than men. Especially those women who had no family to fall back on, because they then became desperate.

Although poverty had always been widespread in the rural community the farmers were affected as bad if not harder. Having livestock was a huge help to a struggling farmer because it meant they could produce their own food and milk. Farmers struggling to survive had to abandon their blocks or were evicted by the banks.

Unions saw migrants as a threat to Australian workers taking their jobs and working as scabs during strikes. Due to this several riots between immigrants and white Australians took place. The biggest of which was a brawl which took place in Kalgoorlie between British, Australians, Greeks, Italians and Yugoslavs. 30,000 British went back home during the depression.

Due to the Depression a five year unemployment average for 1930-34 was 23.4% with a peak of 30% of the nation being unemployed in 1932. When the Depression reached beyond the working class slums and into the homes of the skilled workers, shopkeepers, small businessmen and the professions, many people found themselves reliant on charity. Most of the poor and unemployed were that way because they were lazy, alcoholics or gambled but now with unemployment came shame and humiliation. Families would sell all their possessions, move in with family members and, in some cases fathers would desert their families before they fronted up to the council to apply for charity. The limited jobs that did arise were viciously fought for. The job vacancies were advertised in the daily newspaper which formed massive queues to search for any job available. This then caused the race to arrive first at the place of employment because the first person was usually hired.

“What took place during the Depression was a massive but mute mobilisation of Australia ... to fight for the survival of the institution which gave them their role in society” (Anne Summers). Australians shared pain but were on different levels because of the different challenges they were facing.

# **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** *three*

## **THREE:**

In the Depression of 1929 many members of society suffered, however, they did not all suffer at the same extent, they did not suffer equally. Some specific groups suffered much more than others, some of the groups that suffered the most included the unemployed or employed working class, outsiders such as Aborigines and other Europeans and working class women. Although many did suffer some did not, an example of this is the wealthy people as they were relatively unaffected as the premiers plan that supported them much greater than it did the working class or Scullin's Labor 'equality of sacrifice.'

The idea that all members of society suffered equally is that similar to Labor 1929 'equality of sacrifice' which was Scullin's phrase to a landslide victory of 1929. When the Australian Economy was already in turmoil, what followed was the Wall Street Crash of 1929 which ensured that Scullin's increase of export and decrease in imports would not be enough to revive the economy, as his plan failed it seemed so did his idea of Equality of Sacrifice. Instead Australian Premiers decided and agreed upon a Premier's Plan (as conservatives rejected Theodore's) which involved cutting wages, increasing taxes, cuts in government spending which would of course result in a raise in the already high unemployment levels. Doing this not only failed 'Equality of Sacrifice' but made the life of the wealthy untouched but the lives of the working class, outsiders and the unemployed much harder.

Life for the working class before the Depression of 1929 was already hard, by the early 1920s they had already become accustomed to higher unemployment and by 1928, even before the collapse of wall street and the Global Depression, starvation was already officially acknowledged in working class areas such as Footscray. Both skilled and unskilled trades were effected greatly by unemployment and when the Depression did hit in 1929 the unemployment levels in working class areas such as Richmond and Footscray reached over 32%. This high rate of unemployment meant that for many, mortgage and rent payments were overdue, food was unavailable and many were forced to beg or try their luck with the already struggling charity organisations. Their competition for jobs and food made people desperate, people were forced to steal and married women were forced into prostitution to help feed their families. For many

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** *Three*

of the unemployed men it was seen as attacks on their pride to ask for charity, this made their life even harder as they felt they received little to no respect if they remained unemployed. Historian John Lach states "The cry for work was more than a cry for bread".

While the unemployed working class suffered due to the depression, the wealthy, as stated by Judy Mackinolty 'could send their children to exclusive private schools, could continue their membership of golf and yacht clubs and enjoy their polo and racing'. Even though the depression is remembered as suffering and hardship there is much evidence that the wealthy did not come across it at all. Some even could benefit from the depression as it showed drops in the prices of food and for those already on fixed incomes could buy much more than they could before. In Judy Mackinolty's novel, when interviewing the elderly working people about their experience of the depression this states the working people certainly suffered, but the rich continued to be rich as before, an ex-domestic servant, they went on to state, "for the rich there was no depression."

In the Depression there was not only the wealthy and the unemployed working class, there was other groups including that of the outsiders. Outsiders were anyone other than white European Australians, like Aborigines and Italians. Both suffered equally, if not worse, than that of the working class unemployed Australians. For the European Outsiders suffering at the end of racial abuse, they were used as scapegoats and were claimed for taking jobs and threatening Australian workers. Unionists saw them as an even greater threat as they took jobs and were seen as scabs during strikes. After an incident with a new market being built in Footscray by other European workers, the council decided to only employ road and building workers of Australian or British decent, which made finding a job increasingly difficult for other European which led to reports of Italians in starvation more than that of the regular working class in Footscray and higher risk of unemployment. Other Europeans in many cases struggled to receive payments from the government. This was also the case for the other Outsider group, the Aborigines. In NSW, the government enlisted police to assist forcing the Aborigines back to the reserves as there they would be ineligible to receive any benefit payments from the government. For those Aborigines

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** *three*

that weren't pushed back into the reserves, to be eligible for any pay out or rations from the government they would first have to prove that they had performed a 'white man's job' and even then Aborigines were entitled to only half the rations of those meagre amounts offered to the white unemployed.

It is not incorrect to say many Australians suffered as a result of the depression of 1929. It is, however, incorrect to say that all members of Australian society suffered equally. As for the working class "It is amazing to believe that they survived" Geoffrey Spencely, as well as Outsiders. Whereas the wealthy remained untouched in many cases by the pain and suffering, however, the depression still remains to be, as said by historian Paul Kelly, "the darkest period of the federation story: a time where Australians lost their way, failed to pull together and were betrayed by their leaders."



# ***SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION***

## **FOUR:**

The depression in the 1930s was not a time of shared pain, as the members of society did not suffer equally. Many groups within society in Australia all suffered differently and in different ways. Labor's mantra "Equality of Sacrifice" was not achieved.

Women in the depression were hit hard, as their lives changed dramatically. Australian women were forced to carry the burden of being the domestic worker, raising children, cleaning the house and cooking for their families. They were also often forced to become the major income earner for families as the unemployment rate for men was higher than the women, at 26% compared to female unemployment at 15% in 1932. This was not easy for women as they earned as low as 54% of the equivalent male wage. So they had to work long, hard hours. Many women refused to register for unemployment benefits even if they were eligible. These changes in a woman's role in society was difficult to cope with and vastly different to previous life. Unemployed men also went through changes similar to women, as their roles were changed and employment was hard to find. Business facing financial problems caused huge numbers of unemployment, which meant men could not easily support their families. This changed the social aspect of a man's life which revolved around their work and left many men hurt psychologically. This combined with the stigma of accepting charity meant men were ashamed, embarrassed if they were unemployed. They suffered significantly, while all working and middle class men suffered, the unemployed suffered more than the employed.

Employed people found the depression tough. They were expected to work longer hours for a lower wage, so if they wanted a decent wage to live on they had to work long days. Employed men also lost many benefits that they previously able to claim. Workers were also fired more often and for more reasons than previously as business attempted to keep alive in the economic crisis. A shop keeper during the depression stated in an interview that he could remember "working long, long hours." With worse pay and worse working conditions, many working men faced difficult times, especially when compared with rural workers, especially in Footscray, where starvation was officially recognised in 1928.

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** *four*

People living in rural areas did not suffer equally to people living in cities and urban areas. Unlike the city dwellers, the rural people were easily able to grow vegetable crops, and if they could afford to feed their livestock, breed them and keep them for dairy products. If the livestock were too expensive to feed they were sold or slaughtered to provide food. This, as well as the ability to hunt rabbits helped ease the pain of the poor economy. Some rural workers did suffer greatly however, as many ex-soldiers from World War 1 were given land for fighting in the war. These men were not experienced farmers so many had to either sell their land or just abandon it so they could try to find work elsewhere. Rural workers also had their land debts frozen, which allowed, which allowed them to spend money on food rather than their land debts. Most people suffered whether they lived in urban areas or in rural areas, but not all suffered equally.

The wealthy upper class Australians did not suffer much, if at all during the depression. A wealthy woman in the depression, Elizabeth Murdoch, felt that "we [the wealthy] didn't really suffer." They did not suffer as the people who had the wealth to provide them with what they needed to survive for a few years could live as if the depression did not happen. Some wealthy even managed to profit from the decreased price of goods, as some property was cheap or abandoned, and clothes were cheaper. Compared with the poor or the working class, the wealthy were living like royalty.

The poor had especially difficult times. With little to no wealth and many being unemployed it was hard to buy food and keep paying for a house. This caused many, especially in the cities, to move away and live in tents or small buildings in shantytowns. The poor living in the shantytowns often meant that they would be grouped together to form a close community. If there was food to be found, it would be shared among them so they would live together through poor nutrition and health. The Sydney Morning Herald on the 10th of June, 1931 determined that they lived in a "complete self government with an absence of bickering .. bound together by common misfortune." The poor who remained in cities had to live through the shame of receiving charity, or the poverty if they refused. R Willis believes "you fell into a habit of slouching, of putting your hands into your pockets...ashamed of your secret." Men who could not provide for themselves or their families felt shameful and worthless. The

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION** *four*

poor suffered much more than most other groups of people, as, according to Judy Mackinolty, "the depression was not uniform in its impact on people."

The Great Depression was a time of economic collapse and hardship, but certainly not a time of shared pain of equal suffering. Australians suffered differently all over the country.