



# 'I even trained DINGOES to round up the SHEEP'

IAN WARDEN LOOKS AT SOME OF THE WORK-SEEKING  
INGENUITY OF THE BATTLING 'TRAIN JUMPERS' OF  
THE DEPRESSION YEARS

pleurisy and double pneumonia, while camped outdoors under the railway bridge at Cowra.

Ryland (1915–1992) was an untutored but vivid writer who during the Depression experienced a great deal that was well worth writing vividly about. The Library not only has his ruggedly typed 'Knockabout Boy', but also his short stories and ballads, written in his bold hand. He had a fine and zany imagination; in one ballad he pretends that:

*The fruit that I picked filled 100 freight  
trains*

*And I've ridden a bunyip without any  
reins ...*

*The opals I've gouged they would dazzle  
the sun*

*And my team of goannas pulled 55 ton ...*

*The things that I did would make willow  
trees weep,*

*I even trained dingoes to round  
up the sheep.*

Ryland was a message boy with a Sydney publicity company when, in 1930, he was sacked and spent 'long months of discouragement', competing for work of any kind against 'such talented opposition as university graduates'. He and the graduates may have looked in vain for work on the construction site of that great Depression-defying, morale-sustaining marvel, the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It employed more than 1500 workers every

LEFT  
Unknown photographer  
Bill Ryland 'knocking about'  
during the Depression  
Courtesy Mary Ryland

BELOW  
Harold Cazneaux (1878–1953)  
*Arch over Dawes Point,  
Sydney Harbour Bridge, Arch  
Incomplete, Girder Being  
Lifted* 1930  
b&w glass negative  
16.3 x 11.9 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3801612  
Courtesy the Cazneaux family

AT THE TIME OF WRITING THERE ARE forecasts of a million Australian unemployed, inviting comparisons with this country's experience of the Great Depression of 1929–1939. There has been the timely republication of David Potts' *The Myth of the Great Depression* (2006); after examining 2000 detailed interviews with Australians who had lived through the Depression, Potts thinks that, given the choice of emphasising either the poor's 'miseries' or their 'stoic achievements', writers and historians have chosen to dwell on the miseries when in fact the Depression brought both terrible miseries and displays of happiness, resilience and gumption.

Bill Ryland was one of those who spent the Depression years being stoical and resourceful while 'jumping the rattler' (secreting himself aboard trains so as to go from place to place looking for work). His unpublished memoir, 'Knockabout Boy—Tales and Songs of a Train Jumper in the 1930s', is one of the National Library of Australia's unsung gems. His story captures the complexities of a poor Australian man's Depression experience. There are recollected delights, as well as recollected miseries, including almost dying, helpless with





ABOVE  
Max Dupain (1911–1992)  
*Depression Days, Belmore  
Park, Sydney, 1938*  
b&w selenium-toned  
photograph; 27.8 x 27.7 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an23221041

BELOW  
Jack O'Hagan (1898–1987)  
*Our Don Bradman:  
A Snappy Fox Trot Song*  
(Melbourne: Allan & Co.,  
c.1930)  
Music Collection  
nla.mus-an6259774  
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year for the eight years before its opening in 1932.

But, work-starved, one day in 1930 (the year in which, on 19 August, the two sections of the bridge's great 'coathanger' arch at last met) and, 'determined not to let my youth rot on the vine', Ryland took to the railways. He was one of many—the national census of 1933 reported a migratory population of 16 700 in Australia, all but 2000 of them males.

There's a train-jumping genre in Australian memoirs of the Depression. Ryland's unpublished memoir is a version of similar experiences remembered in, for example, Frank Huelin's published *Keep Moving* (1973) ('keep moving' was the order the local police used to give train-jumping hoboes they found in their towns) and Harry Pugsley's published *Confessions of a Dole Bludger!* (1984)

The three men's memoirs are rich with illustrations of the special resourcefulness of some of the Depression's work-seeking men. Huelin offered to write the clergyman's next sermon for him for five shillings—it would have to be an hour long the Vicar insisted. He got the job and was paid even though the finished sermon was based on Huelin's heartfelt bitterness about the disparity between the rich and the poor. Huelin also met an

imaginative fellow train jumper who, typically dishevelled and unkempt, was on his way to look for work as 'The Wild Man of Borneo', travelling with a country show. He'd never done any such work before, he admitted, but had been rehearsing his act for two months now and had his hopes up. Gripping the wagon's bars, gnashing his teeth and roaring, he gave Huelin a sneak preview of his act.

Once, in desperation, the inventive Pugsley did what many desperate unemployed did and answered a boxing spruiker's offer of 'a pound

or two for a round or two'. Pugsley endured three rounds of hell for the £1 a loser earned if he survived three rounds. Ryland, too, wrote of the boxing tents, seeing them spring up 'overnight ... like mushrooms':

*Christ, what a way to earn a quid, but  
a quid to me was more than three weeks'  
dole. Next morning my face looked as if it  
had been hit by a train. My body agreed  
that it had.*

In his sensitive published Depression memoir, *The Broke and the Broken* (1982), Hugh Clarke, a boy in Brisbane at the time, recalled feats of canniness galore. One neighbour went into business as a cleaner of people's rainwater tanks, raking out dead lizards, frogs and mice with a tool made of a kerosene tin cut in half lengthways and fixed to a pole. Clarke's own battling father started a secondhand book business based on the phenomenon of 'families selling up their libraries to buy food'. Hugh and his father hated the ordeal of buying the books: 'The faces of the people with whom my father bargained were all stamped with the brand of hopelessness'.

Amidst all the anxiety, a rare topic for a 'lighter side' of conversation for the Clarkes came in the spirit-sustaining feats of Australia's Don Bradman. The nation's nadir coincided with the godsend of the great batsman's heyday. Popular songs were written about him. Jack O'Hagan's catchy 'foxtrot song', *Our Don Bradman*, came out in 1930, and an enthralled nation listened to vocalist Art Leonard's recording of it on the wireless and then warbled it for themselves.

*For when he goes in to bat  
He knocks ev'ry record flat,  
For there isn't any thing he cannot do,  
Our Don Bradman—Ev'ry Aussie 'dips his lid'  
to you.*

Ryland was never a 'Wild Man of Borneo' and perhaps didn't ever *really* train dingoes to round up sheep, but he did do work as diverse as carrying the hat around for a virtuoso busker and, in return for free rides on cattle trains, acting as a 'prodder', prodding into uprightness any cattle that fell over.

Work was elusive and Ryland wrote a wistful ballad about how the train jumper often went on marathon travels in pursuit of the mirages of rumoured work.

*I tried up Guyra way for digging spuds.  
When I thought I had it made they said 'Put  
away your spade.  
'The crop has gone to rot because of floods.'  
Couldn't get enough hard yakka just to keep me  
in tobacco,  
And I came back down to Sydney stony broke.*

Not quite stony broke and usually with just enough money to give his battling mother some treats, Ryland did sometimes come back to Sydney. But never for very long. There was no work there and, anyway, Ryland, resigned to having to battle wherever he was, preferred to do his battling in the somehow less dispiriting bush. In the cities, the legions of the homeless, often hapless veterans of the Great War, were everywhere in the parks, sometimes living in shanties and even in caves (unemployed mortgagees couldn't keep their homes and the evictions of renters quadrupled).

And, too, the train-jumping life had somehow got into Ryland's blood. In 'Knockabout Boy', he discusses some of his train jumping with gusto and fondness.

*The most thrilling jump I ever made was on the engine of the Melbourne Express. I was in a hurry to get from A to B and as this flyer was the fastest thing on rails I decided to do it the hard way. Just as she was pulling out from Culcairn I emerged from my hiding place behind a water tank and shinned up the ladder behind the tender. With swag and tucker bag still on my shoulders I lay flat on the heap of coal at the rear and away we went at full speed ahead. As we roared on through the night I could watch from my precarious perch as the fireman shovelled coal into the mouth of the blazing furnace and as the driver tended the controls, both blissfully unaware of their appreciative audience.*

Although Ryland writes about these hard times with some nostalgia (he made many good train-jumping mates, lots of them with exotic names, for example, the mate who found him three-quarters dead under the bridge at Cowra was 'the Blue Mountains Parrot'), it's the general wretchedness of his yarn that leaves the enduring impression. He encountered as much callousness as camaraderie in people: he was, on occasion, imprisoned for his train jumping. Ryland went on to fight in the Second World War, but his



train-jumping years had been so dreadful he was sure later that:

*The [railway] track was an ideal training ground for the years of war ... to come. Sleeping out in all weathers, rain, cold and snow, slogging towards a distant siding in heatwaves of over a hundred degrees, scrounging for food and often going without, this was ideal training ...*

But by the time he was able, in 1939, to give up train jumping to become a soldier (Pugsley noticed, bitterly, the 'remarkable transformation' in fickle people who had hitherto considered the unemployed 'some type of disease' but who hailed them as 'national heroes' once they enlisted), Ryland found he was 'very attached to the iron horse'.

*After a long 1600 mile drag from North Queensland [coming south to Sydney] to enlist I strode up to the engine that had brought me safely home, and as it stood there, panting and puffing like some prehistoric beast, I patted its metallic side, and said in a loud voice 'Thanks mate, you're a beauty!'*

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IAN WARDEN is a Canberra-based writer with a background in newspapers



ABOVE  
Unknown photographer  
*Cave Dwellers near Kernell (i.e. Kurnell), New South Wales, 1930s*  
b&w photograph; 7.0 x 11.6 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3706012

BELOW  
Unknown photographer  
*Ryland the soldier during the Second World War*  
Courtesy Mary Ryland