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HARD TIMES? DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE
AND THE 1930S DEPRESSION
IN NEW ZEALAND

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in History at Massey University

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The 1930s depression is well established in both the historiography and the popular consciousness in New Zealand as a major event with wide-reaching consequences. In this thesis New Zealand demographic data relating to marriages, fertility and mortality are examined for evidence of interruptions that can be attributed to the effects of the economic downturn associated with the 1930s depression. The conclusion reached is that while some interruptions are discernible, they are essentially slight and of short duration. This raises the possibility that the depression did not in fact have a very severe impact in New Zealand. Another possibility is that the relationship between economic circumstances and demographic behaviour may no longer be close, an argument that would seem to be supported by the inconsistency of trends over time, and in other English-speaking countries studied. Data relating to the incomes of five groups are then examined. The evidence is of a wide diversity of financial experience during the depression, with a marked effect on many, particularly the least skilled, the owners of small farms and other small businesses, and those already towards the lower end of the economic scale. In addition, it is shown that the cuts in wage rates and pensions were in general not a major factor in reducing real incomes, which suggests the relative importance in this of unemployment. Statistics relating to unemployment are then analysed. They support the findings regarding income, since the least skilled were the worst affected. It is concluded that while the scale of unemployment in the 1930s was an anomaly in this country, the period of severe unemployment was relatively short compared with that experienced by some other countries. In respect of the groups most likely to suffer unemployment, the depression was an intensification of the normal situation rather than an anomaly. Some possible reasons are suggested for the lack of correlation between demographic and economic trends, and for the prevalence of the belief that the depression was a "community trauma" in this country.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 Interruptions to Demographic Trends</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 Changes to Incomes</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 Underemployment and Unemployment</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

2.1 Index of real income, census years 1926-1951 and 1938  85

2.2 Index of real income, for males of all ages who reported an income and were either self-employed or employers of others, 1935 and 1938  92

2.3 Index of real median income, for those earning £400 or over per annum from selected sources, 1926-1942  97

2.4 Index of real value of civil pensions and benefits, 1926-1936  102

2.5 Index of effective wage rates, selected occupations, 1926-1936  109

2.6 Index of real income for wage and salary earners of all ages in selected occupations or sectors, 1935  113

2.7 Scheme 5: Maximum relief rates refundable to local bodies by Unemployment Board, 1930-1936  118

2.8 Scheme 5: Maximum four-weekly relief rates as a percentage of the average minimum four-weekly wages of a builders' labourer, 1930-1936  119

2.9 Scheme 5: Maximum weekly relief rates payable to a married man with two children as a percentage of average minimum weekly wage rates in selected occupations, 1930 and 1933  121

2.10 Scheme 5: Index of real value of maximum relief rates payable, 1930-1936  123

2.11 Sustenance rates payable in four main centres, 1934-1936  130

3.1 Unemployment rates per 100 males in the work force, by age group, census years 1916-1926  162

3.2 Unemployment rates per 100 males in the population, by age group, 1936  162

3.3 Employers in building trade, 1926 and 1936  170

3.4 Employees in selected occupations in the public administration, professional and clerical sector, 1926 and 1936, and numbers unemployed, 1936  177

3.5 Employees in selected occupations in the commercial and financial sector, 1926 and 1936, and numbers unemployed, 1936  182
LIST OF GRAPHS

1.1 First marriage rate per 1,000 never married persons of all ages, New Zealand, 1921-1966 18
1.2 First marriage rate per 1,000 never married females aged 20, 22, 28 and 30, New Zealand, 1921-1966 21
1.3 First marriage rate per 1,000 never married males aged 22, 24, 28 and 30, New Zealand, 1921-1966 22
1.4 Median age at first marriage, males and females, New Zealand, 1916-1986 25
1.5 Marital fertility rate, New Zealand, census years 1874-1981 34
1.6 Annual total fertility rates, 1912-1983, and completed fertility rates for birth cohorts of women, 1888-1953, New Zealand 35
1.7 Births per 1,000 married women in age groups 14-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, New Zealand, 1921-1966 37
1.8 Median time between marriage and first, second and third marital births, New Zealand, 1916-1986 40
1.9 Median age of mother at first, second and third marital births, New Zealand, 1916-1986 42
1.10 Estimated completed family sizes, New Zealand, marriage cohorts 1913-1936 44
1.11 Percentage distribution of children ever born to birth cohorts of ever married New Zealand women, pre 1876-1937/1941 45
1.12 Total fertility rate per 1,000 unmarried women of all ages (ex-nuptial fertility rate), New Zealand, 1921-1966 49
1.13 Standardised death rates per 1,000 males and females, New Zealand, 1921-1966 57
1.14 Deaths per 1,000 males and females in age groups 50-54, 55-59 and 60-64, New Zealand, 1921-1966 59
1.15 Deaths per 1,000 males and females in age groups 65-69, 70-74 and over 75, New Zealand, 1921-1966 60
1.16 Infant mortality rates (deaths within one year of birth, per 1,000 live births) Australia, Canada, England and Wales, New Zealand and United States, 1921-1961 62
1.17 Deaths per 1,000 males and females aged 1-4, New Zealand, 1921-1966 64
1.18 Maternal mortality rates (deaths from all puerperal causes, per 1,000 live births), Canada, New Zealand and United States, 1921-1961
1.19 Deaths from pulmonary tuberculosis per 100,000 population, Australia, 1923-1961, Canada, 1924-1961, New Zealand, 1916-1961
2.1 Net aggregate farm income, New Zealand, 1922-1950
2.2 Median gross income for those earning £400 or over per annum from selected sources, New Zealand, 1925/6-1941/2
2.3 Widows' pension, old age pension and blind pension as a percentage of the wage of a builders' labourer, New Zealand, 1930-1937
2.4 Index of effective wage rates, selected industries, New Zealand, 1930-1939
3.1 Overtime and short time: average hours recorded per year, for all wage-earning employees in industry, whether or not actually working overtime or short time, New Zealand, 1924-1944
3.2 Overtime and short time: average hours recorded per week per wage-earning employee affected, New Zealand, 1923-1936
3.3 Total population, total numbers in employment and total numbers of males in employment, New Zealand, 1896-1986
3.4 Percentage of the population in employment, and percentage of male work force unemployed, New Zealand, census years 1896-1976, with estimated figures for 1931-1939
3.5 Percentage of work force unemployed, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States, 1896-1986
3.6 Employees in factories, male and female, New Zealand, 1921-1951
3.7 Numbers of shops and shop employees, male and female, New Zealand, 1926-1950
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AJHR</td>
<td>Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Census</td>
<td>Census of New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZOYB</td>
<td>New Zealand Official Yearbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZPDD</td>
<td>New Zealand Parliamentary Debates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>