Unemployed workers at the Cenotaph in Wellington before they rioted along Lambton Quay.

[But] the authorities refused them. So they got permission from a private property owner to use a big vacant section somewhere up . . . Cuba Street way, and they were all peaceably having their meeting there when without warning the police rushed them. They came charging through the gates, over the fences and belted hell out of them . . . and of course the crowd scattered. Well, that incensed the people of Wellington and that night they started to flock in the thousands . . .

Several nights later, near the Cenotaph,

> I heard a voice cry out, 'Let's smash the bloody town up' . . . [They] started to advance up Lambton Quay belting windows with oranges or bananas and as they broke the windows, particularly of hardware shops, they'd pick up spanners and iron bars and different gear like big tools . . . And as they went up Lambton Quay you could hear the windows crashing, it was a horrible sound . . . and if you wanted to go against the crowd you just couldn't. They just surged right up behind those rioters, right up through the Quay.

And as they went up Lambton Quay you could hear the windows crashing, it was a horrible sound . . .

King, 2007

Although in every instance the number of people responsible for damage was small compared with the number of onlookers, many New Zealanders feared at this time that the country was on the brink of anarchy. Expressions of contempt and even hate for politicians were widespread: it was said of Gordon Coates, for example – untruthfully – that he was drinking heavily and had told a deputation of unemployed workers to 'eat grass'. The Government passed the Public Safety and Conservation Act which gave the police draconian powers to detain people. But there was no further violence. It was as if the country had looked over an abyss and then decided by common consent to draw back.

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Just how bad, though, did living conditions become over this period? Tony Simpson has described the Depression as 'a grey and ill-defined monster, an unspeakable disaster' that 'cast a long shadow, a blight on everything it touched . . .' After 1933, when the Government required at first single and then married men to go into rural work camps to qualify for relief payment, those workers often found themselves in extraordinarily unpleasant places. One such was Aka Aka, south-east of Waiuku, where the *Auckland Weekly News* reported:

> The floors of the tent are earthen, uncovered by boarding, and on Wednesday many of them were dampened by rain soakage. The surroundings . . . were very muddy. The men bathe in the drains, wash in a horse trough, and if it rains have to don wet clothing the next day, for there is no drying room. Men recently arrived at the camp and unused to navvying may earn only five shillings a week . . . Nearly always they are ankle-deep and knee-deep in water, and often waist-deep.

And, of course, life was difficult for dependants living on reduced incomes. '[Wives] had to make do as best they could,' wrote Erik Olssen, 'improvising clothing out of sugar sacks, trying to feed their families, scrounging and begging. They also had to keep their homes clean and tidy to impress the voluntary inspectors who checked to make sure that families really needed assistance.' While there was help for the poor, again they had to be the *deserving* poor.

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The Depression was not an unmitigated disaster for all New Zealanders, however. There were some who, because of their occupations or private means, scarcely noticed its passage. And there were others who succeeded in making the experience positive, a source of adventure and spiritual or cultural enrichment. On the whole these were single men with minimal responsibilities, but not always. When Fred Miller, a South Island journalist, was laid off by his newspaper, he took his family to Central Otago for three years where he panned for gold (and, for part of that time, housed his wife