

Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man

From Brand: The University of North Carolina Press

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Down and Out in the Great Depression is a moving, revealing collection of letters by the forgotten men, women, and children who suffered through one of the greatest periods of hardship in American history. Sifting through some 15,000 letters from government and private sources, Robert McElvaine has culled nearly 200 communications that best show the problems, thoughts, and emotions of ordinary people during this time.

Unlike views of Depression life "from the bottom up" that rely on recollections recorded several decades later, this book captures the daily anguish of people during the thirties. It puts the reader in direct contact with Depression victims, evoking a feeling of what it was like to live through this disaster.

Following Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration, both the number of letters received by the White House and the percentage of them coming from the poor were unprecedented. The average number of daily communications jumped to between 5,000 and 8,000, a trend that continued throughout the Roosevelt administration. The White House staff for answering such letters--most of which were directed to FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt, or Harry Hopkins--quickly grew from one person to fifty.


Mainly because of his radio talks, many felt they knew the president personally and could confide in him. They viewed the Roosevelts as parent figures, offering solace, help, and protection. Roosevelt himself valued the letters, perceiving them as a way to gauge public sentiment. The writers came from a number of different groups--middle-class people, blacks, rural residents, the elderly, and children. Their letters display emotional reactions to the Depression--despair, cynicism, and anger--and attitudes toward relief.

In his extensive introduction, McElvaine sets the stage for the letters, discussing their significance and some of the themes that emerge from them. By preserving their original spelling, syntax, grammar, and capitalization, he conveys their full flavor.

The Depression was far more than an economic collapse. It was the major personal event in the lives of tens of millions of Americans. McElvaine shows that, contrary to popular belief, many sufferers were not passive victims of history. Rather, he says, they were "also actors and, to an extent, playwrights, producers, and directors as well," taking an active role in trying to deal with their plight and solve their problems.

For this twenty-fifth anniversary edition, McElvaine provides a new foreword recounting the history of the book, its impact on the historiography of the Depression, and its continued importance today.

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Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man From Brand: The University of North Carolina Press Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #610832 in Books
- Brand: Brand: The University of North Carolina Press
- Published on: 2008-02-25
- Format: Special Edition
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.93" h x .67" w x 6.09" l, .85 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 280 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

First-rate explanatory essays by the editor.
#151"The New Yorker"

A "New York Times Book Review" Books for Vacation Reading & Notable Book of the Year

First-rate explanatory essays by the editor.
"The New Yorker"

There's nothing more deeply moving than reading the words and thus hearing the voices of the actual survivors of hard times. McElvaine has captured these voices as no one else ever has.
#151Studs Terkel

The book is unique. Nowhere else can we read of despair as recorded by those who were feeling it hardest, unfiltered by memory.
#151"Southern Living"

[This] book is easily the best thing of its sort ever done.
#151David Shannon, Commonwealth Professor of History, University of Virginia

Review

Some of the letters are heartbreaking with their revelations of deprivation, illness, and old age; some provoke a smile, and all are enormously affective.--*Progressive*

An illuminating contribution to the history of a bad time half a century ago.--Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *New York Times Book Review*

McElvaine has done a masterful job.--*Sojourners*

A collection of unforgettable vignettes that offer vivid testimony to the hardships the 'forgotten' men and women endured in the 1930s.--William E. Leuchtenburg, University of North Carolina

These are voices that need to be heard.--*Journal of the Illinois Historical Society*

McElvaine's . . . contribution [is] significant and his conclusions . . . [are] more convincing than those of other scholars who have also tried to recount the Depression 'from the ground up.' . . . There is a poignancy which occasionally pushes past the confines of history and turns into street poetry, art, delirium.--*Los Angeles Herald Examiner*

These are the forgotten men, women and children of the Depression years.--*Newsday*

Soundly conceived and imaginatively edited, *Down and Out in the Great Depression* shows how Americans responded to economic collapse, not in memory, but in their own words at the time—a compelling contribution to our history.--Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

As a record of the Depression era's forgotten men, women and children—*Down and Out* is worth much more than its purchase price.--*Charlotte Observer*

Robert S. McElvaine has compiled a fascinating, touching and above all illuminating book. . . . This book is a classic. No *New Statesman* reader should be without it.--*New Statesman (London)*

McElvaine makes a unique and significant contribution. . . . The thorough mastery of the subject that he has brought both to the selection and the introductions gives authority to the work far beyond that which a statistical, quantifying study could achieve.--Frank Freidel, University of Washington

Reminiscent of Walker Evans' photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.--*The Mountain Times*

McElvaine is to be commended. . . . *Down and Out in the Great Depression* is a remarkable testament to a time that no longer seems so distant and, at times, strikes awfully close to home.--*Philadelphia Inquirer*

Adds an important new dimension to our knowledge of a vastly important period in American history.--Jonathan Yardley, *Washington Post Book World*

These letters are a moving testimony.--*Times Literary Supplement*

An enormously valuable and revealing document. . . . An experience that pays rich if painful rewards. The most obvious of these is that *Down and Out in the Great Depression* adds an important new dimension to our knowledge of a vastly important period in American history.--*Washington Post Book Review*

This is a good book . . . capturing people's moods well." --*Library Journal*

A powerful collection, offering a rare glimpse of the conditions of the poor during the Depression.--*Mississippi Magazine*

McElvaine . . . successfully draws the reader into the heart and mind of the era-as it affected individuals.--*Clarion-Ledger*

First-rate explanatory essays by the editor.--*The New Yorker*

McElvaine . . . has produced [a] compelling, often poignant glimpse of America's mood during the Great Depression. . . . It makes a fitting memorial to 'the forgotten man.'--*Newsweek*

The book is unique. Nowhere else can we read of despair as recorded by those who were feeling it hardest, unfiltered by memory.--*Southern Living*

Like a well-chosen seasoning . . . it . . . bring(s) out the flavor of history. By rescuing the struggles of individuals from the anonymity of statistics, this volume preserves the Depression as it was experienced-with sorrow, anguish, hatred, faith, and humor.--*The New Republic*

The book makes good reading. . . . Compelling human drama as well as important history.--*Hartford Courant*

The editor provides solid background.--*Publishers Weekly*

Spanning the continent and representing a wide variety of groups, these letters give eloquent voice to the people embodied in government statistics and reports.--*Wisconsin Magazine of History*

Here are 'real people' at rock bottom, in their own words, often heart-breakingly desperate and ungrammatical.--*Spectator*

[I] found *Down and Out* very interesting and informative.--Rosalynn Carter

A stark documentary of a people one short step from despair.--*Center Magazine*

McElvaine . . . recreates the Great Depression with this collection. . . . The result is a much more vivid account than most historical works can provide, with their usual emphasis on statistics and generalizations. . . . The letters make vivid reading.--*Houston Post*

Here is history written by the people who had to live it, in the U.S.A. of the 1930s. . . . A hell of a good book.--Pete Seeger

[This] book is easily the best thing of its sort ever done.--David Shannon, Commonwealth Professor History, University of Virginia

The most readable and entertaining historical work I [have] ever seen.--T.M. English, *Mississippi Magazine*

There's nothing more deeply moving than reading the words and thus hearing the voices of the actual survivors of hard times. McElvaine has captured these voices as no one else ever has.--Studs Terkel

The letters bear a sense of urgency that recollections of the Depression lack, and Robert McElvaine's solid introduction and method of organization deepen their meaning.--*Christian Century*

McElvaine . . . has found and filled a gap. . . . [He] has brought the feelings of these invisible people to

life.--*St. Petersburg Times*

The dispirited reality of the Walton's age is vividly outlined in . . . *Down and Out in the Great Depression*.--*Kansas City Star*

About the Author

Robert S. McElvaine is Elizabeth Chisholm Professor of Arts and Letters and professor of history at Millsaps College.

Users Review

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Ronald Searle:

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Monika Cunniff:

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