

David Potts, *The Myth of the Great Depression*,

Scribe, Melbourne, 2006.

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David Potts' book *The Myth of the Great Depression* begins with an interesting notion: it begins by suggesting that within society, certain stories about the Great Depression era are told and retold because they reflect certain societal values, particularly those pertaining to industriousness and material security. This is a historiographic question well worth further examination; however, rather than exploring the origins and ramifications of this specific question, Potts instead sets out to challenge the 'myth' that he proposes has been perpetrated by previous histories of the era. In doing so, he buries the more interesting elements of his work in a re-hash of common mythology about poverty. This is truly a shame because the opportunity existed for a much more challenging and groundbreaking book.

The first problem with any of the conclusions this book draws originates in the methodology, at least as it is presented in this volume. The book relies heavily on interviews conducted largely by Potts' students, and the sample was gathered haphazardly as students reportedly 'chose whomever they liked' (p.5). Potts goes on to state that, 'luckily, all major social groups are represented, and most are covered in roughly the right proportions (matched against the 1933 census and other public records)' (p.5). While no historian would claim to be a practitioner of an exact science, this seems to be a questionable approach to the setting-up of a model. The problem is magnified because this book is not a collection of extracts in the same manner as Wendy Lowenstein's *Weevils in the Flour*, or Studs Terkel's *Hard Times*. *The Myth of the Great Depression* seeks to draw conclusions and make generalisations based on this survey group. Potts and his students may in fact have been lucky enough to 'tick all the boxes' regarding the

experiences of different and varied socioeconomic groups, but the method adopted is far from the ideal process for creating a sample group for research that seeks to ‘reset the lens’ by which we view an entire period.

Beyond any issues with the development of the sample group, there seems to be little engagement in the opening chapter with the process of oral history; how it is conducted; and with the limitations of this type of research, alongside of its possibilities. Some of the students reportedly interviewed family members, neighbours and friends; in other words, people with whom they had a personal relationship beyond that of researcher and subject. Yet, acknowledgment of the ways interviewers may influence the interviewees’ responses occurs not at the beginning but oddly, as late as Chapter Ten. Even then, the focus is upon criticising other historians’ mistrust of positive memories rather than with recognising similar potential problems in the book’s own conclusions, and the effect that pre-existing relationships may have had on the research. As with much of the book there is an exploration that had the potential to contribute to the discourse, yet it is undone by its own singularity of vision.

The fact that Potts did not conduct the interviews himself becomes increasingly problematic when, within the text, he questions the plausibility of certain respondents, and the bias seems to be against those who claim to have been ‘hit hard’. While he accepts that one respondent can ‘plausibly be accepted as one of a significant minority who found things very tough’ (p.34); he dismisses the responses of others whose change of circumstances, by his judgement, did not result in significant economic hardship. He suggests that, ‘More likely the style of questioning and the concept of economic “depression” invites stories of suffering, an unconscious desire to identify with popular images of the times’ (p.36). This almost offhand comment comes at the end of a section and is not further explored nor supported. There appears to be no similar propensity for questioning the psychological motivations of those interviewees who reported the Depression as bearable, despite the fact that there are equally as many

contributing factors in this characterisation. Indeed Potts even quotes a man from 1931 who claimed: 'We do not hold mass meetings, make speeches nor parade our poverty... We each go our own way and realise it is only our own efforts and determination that will see us through' (p.21), without acknowledging that such an emphasis on both pride and privacy might similarly prevent modern respondents from fully disclosing their historical difficulties.

There are other problems that one may consider to be of a scholarly nature, though some fault may lie with the publisher rather than the author. It is unclear whose decision it was not to include the questionnaire used for early interviews, but its absence in the appendix is not a minor omission. Its absence has an impact upon the reading of the material and referring the reader to the author's PhD dissertation is not an adequate alternative. In *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Graeme Davison notes that "Just the facts" is something that detectives say but that no historian can really do, for the "facts" are a response to questions, and one person's questions are never quite the same as another's'.¹ We need to see what David Potts' questions were, so that we can understand the answers. There are similarly problems with the footnoting and the way sources are cited, if at all. The statement, 'Recent studies show that underfeeding by 10-25 percent of preferred intake actually boosts longevity and enhances "mental functioning and the vigour of the disease-fighting immune system"' (p.31), is referenced to no source whatsoever; despite the use of an apparent quotation. While we are all aware of the pressure on authors in non-academic texts to eliminate footnotes, such unsupported claims in defence of the Great Depression diet, and the use of unacknowledged text would not be acceptable in a first-year undergraduate essay. It is no more persuasive or rigorous in the writings of a long-standing academic; scientific claims beyond the realm of the writer's expertise need to be sourced.

In other sections, claims are footnoted with references to later chapters. Such an example occurs in the chapter entitled 'Money and Power'. In this section Potts

states, 'Wage earners often won court cases for the restoration of back pay...' (p.12). The source for this claim is noted as being 'Chapter 15', (p.356, note 19), but from where exactly in Chapter Fifteen said reference is drawn, is up to the reader's discretion. This again may be the fault of an editor/publisher rather than the author, but in either case it is confusing and does not reflect a high standard of academic rigour. This citation also illustrates another problem with the book, the inconsistencies in the text. In Chapter One, we are told that the above-mentioned employees often won the court cases; in Chapter Fifteen we learn that in the cases cited, the wage earners won their back pay but *lost their jobs* (p.298): a fairly significant omission. Similarly on one page we are told that 'There is good evidence for the Depression years that malnutrition was widespread and sometimes led to illness and even to death' (p.26), though Potts makes the reasonable argument that these figures need to be considered in comparison with the figures in the 1920s. In doing so he states that for the much of the Depression numbers were similar to those of the previous decade though he notes a spike in 1931. However, three hundred pages later it is stated that: 'Thus it was in the Depression in Australia no-one died of starvation, malnutrition declined' (p.329). There is no mention of the decline occurring after a sharp peak. While the two statements are not in direct contradiction of each other, they certainly lead the reader in different directions.

Even with the numerous problems in methodology and academic rigour there was still a possibility that *The Myth of the Great Depression* could be an interesting contribution to an era that has been largely ignored in Australian historical writing. However, in the concluding chapter the underlying insidiousness of this work is laid bare. It is here that Potts takes the position that the Depression and its associated deprivation (regardless of whether it was experienced by the majority or the minority) created, for the poor, opportunity for self-fulfilment that comes from engaging in an 'evolutionary impulse' to overcome a struggle (p.325). If one is truly seeking to find a myth in our understanding of the Great Depression, Potts raises several worthwhile topics for debate. For

instance, one could reasonably question whether it was the minority or majority who were subject to truly adverse conditions. Equally, there are grounds for arguing that the mythology is rooted in the misconception that poverty in Australia was a phenomenon of the 1930s, as though abject poverty was not experienced in the 1920s or 1940s. However, to suggest that the Great Depression provided the poor with beneficial opportunities is the worst kind of paternalistic rhetoric. To some extent, this argument is glimpsed throughout the book; in, for example, the suggestion that the food in the Great Depression was healthier, as people were more dependent on home-grown vegetables (though there is a failure to explain where those in inner-city slums may have put these gardens). In Chapter Seventeen, this position is magnified with statements such as 'between the wars, the destitute had an unusual freedom to innovate...' and 'few had become accustomed to mass-produced comforts (slum houses often lacked electricity, gas and internal water supply), so there was little difference, say, in hut life compared to inner-city housing, and overheads could be low for those who stayed in town' (pp. 328-329). I do not suggest that Potts necessarily intended to write a piece of ultra-right wing rhetoric; but to frame, even unintentionally, deprivation, hunger, and poverty as the provision of opportunity, is to ignore the realities of the experience of poverty and to create in turn the worst kind of arch-conservative mythology. It is a myth that suggests that those who remain poor do so because they are unwilling to lift themselves out of it; they are unwilling to rise to the challenge. It ignores the many other social and economic factors that contributed (and contribute) to the on-going trap of poverty.

Potts claims to recognise the 'minority story' of the Depression experience and states: 'there is plenty of material here for a truthful and compelling tale of Depression deprivation and anxiety. The better historians, and others in their better moments tell it well' (p.332). Unfortunately, this book is not one of those occasions. One of the greatest responsibilities of historians is to shed light on the complexities of the past. By trying to expose a myth by reframing that deprivation and anxiety as opportunity, Potts instead creates a fairytale happy-ending. As

such, *The Myth of the Great Depression* is best considered itself as myth, as a fanciful over-simplification of a complex process and period.

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¹ Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 2000, p. 6.