

For Immediate Release

The story of the Great Depression by those who lived through it

"These unhappy times call for the building of plans... that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid." Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 1932

Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man, (published March 2009) is a moving and revealing collection of letters by the forgotten men and women that Roosevelt spoke of, and who suffered through one of the greatest periods of hardship in American history. Through his innovative radio talks, many Americans felt that they knew their President personally and wrote to him and his wife Eleanor in their thousands to confide their troubles or simply to ask for help.

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. The writers 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 this new 25th anniversary edition, Robert McElvaine provides a new foreword that recounts the history of the book and the impact that it has had on the historiography of the Depression, and its continued importance today. McElvaine also sets the stage for the letters, discussing their significance and some of the themes that emerge from them. By preserving their original spelling, syntax, and grammar, he conveys their full flavour.

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