

Response to Reading: Interpreting the Great Depression

Seminar: 15 December 2006. Clark County Heritage Center.
Presenter: Dr. Bill Childs, Ohio State University

The Great Depression of the 1930s was a key event United States history. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was controversial in its day and the Depression and the response of Americans from politicians to artists to ordinary people has been a topic of great interest to historians, as well as the subject of much debate. Dr. Childs will discuss with us the Depression and different interpretations of it.

To get us started, he has given us two readings. Robert McElvaine's book is an important interpretation that reflects a consensus interpretation among historians in the late 20th century. Amity Shlaes presents a new interpretation in her work, perhaps laying the groundwork for a new consensus in the 21st century.

Your task is to read the chapters from each book listed below. Then write a reflection, in one to two double-spaced, typed, pages, on the differences and similarities in the interpretations offered by the authors.

Consider some of these questions: (you don't have to answer all of them)

- How deep are the differences? (are these two different Great Depressions or are they much the same beneath the rhetoric?)
- What seem to be the sources the authors draw on? Are they similar are different and how might that influence their interpretation?
- Are the differences between the authors the result of differing political beliefs or cultural values or other personal beliefs? Do these beliefs color their interpretations in ahistorical ways?

Readings:

Robert S. McElvaine. *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1984, 1993).

Chapter 1: Historical Currents & the Great Depression, p. 3

Chapter 7: "Action, and Action Now": The Hundred Days & Beyond, p. 138

Chapter 8: "Fear Itself": Depression Life, p. 170

Chapter 15: Perspective: The Great Depression & Modern America, p. 323

Amity Shlaes. *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007)/

Introduction, p. 1

Chapter 5: The Experimenter, p. 147

Chapter 8: The Chicken Versus the Eagle, p. 214

Chapter 15: Wilkie's Wager, p. 366