morality of everyday economic activity to distant and abstracted injustice. Animal rights, anti-poverty, and environmental activism are all predicated on such a connection. The relative failure of those movements, compared with the rapid success of abolition, is a depressing testament to a global society that is vastly more interconnected in communication and trade, but seemingly less capable of acting on the ethical aspects of this interdependence.

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While accepted definitions of the word myth are ‘a baseless popular belief’ (Heinemann Dictionary), a ‘fictitious thing’ (Oxford Dictionary), and a ‘delusion’ (Macquarie Thesaurus), David Potts chose to shade this term grey, as used in the title of his book, The Myth of the Great Depression. This work has two clear aims: to ‘explore the myth (usual story)’ of the Great Depression, and tell the ‘positive experiences’ of the Great Depression, which have up to now been denigrated or excluded completely from ‘the myth’ accounts (p. 4). Potts’ overriding aim was ‘to present a balanced history of the Depression as informatively as I can and in tune with the voices of those who lived through it.’ (p. 6).

In order to fulfil his first aim, Potts spent an inordinate amount of time retelling ‘the myth’ version, as written by people he labels ‘left wing Marxist historians and novelists’ (p. 334). While he was comfortable using their work, in order to find fault with it, he chose not to use the bulk of the Great Depression research undertaken by Geoff Spenceley, whose book The Depression Decade: Commentaries and Documents (1981) has been the accepted Victorian Certificate of Education Australian History text for many years. Spenceley also wrote the thought-provoking A Bad Smash: Australia in the Depression of the 1930s (1990), an overview work in the ‘Themes in Australian Economic and Social History’ series. Erik Eklund’s Steel Town: the making and breaking of Port Kembla (2003), and John Shield’s edited volume of All Our Labours: Oral Histories of Working Life in Twentieth Century Sydney (1992), both of which incorporated oral history and an examination of the Great Depression, are other notable works overlooked by Potts.

Potts’ second aim, to tell the ‘positive experiences’ of people who lived through the Great Depression, harks back to this theme flagged by him in a 1990 journal article; in it, he discussed what he termed ‘A Positive Culture of Poverty’.4 He found substantial evidence of this in twelve hundred interviews conducted by himself and his own students over many years (p. vii). He again cited much evidence of ‘happiness’ in The Myth of the Great Depression, it is a key theme running through this work. To my knowledge, no other study of the Great Depression contains sixty-seven page references

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to ‘happiness’ in the index; fifteen references are specifically to the term ‘happiness’, while the other fifty-two cover ‘happiness’ aspects in families, communities, helping others, and self-expression (p. 411).

An insightful example of Potts’ use of ‘happiness’ appeared in chapter eight. He quoted at length one female interviewee’s memories of both the fun and the hard times experienced in her local neighbourhood. Potts used this example to argue that previous historians, like Spenceley, ‘dismiss her positive memories’, choosing to concentrate on her memories of the hard times (p. 174-5). I think Potts made the same error, but in reverse; he chose to highlight the ‘happiness’ spoken about in interviews like this one, and downplayed the negative memories of difficulties experienced.

The twelve hundred interviews are ‘the voices’ which this book wishes to be ‘in tune with’. At first glance, this pool of oral interviews seems to be any social historian’s dream come true. However, I have methodological concerns with both the conducting of these interviews, and Potts’ use of these oral accounts in The Myth of the Great Depression. All the interviews were conducted in the years 1965-69 and 1973-86 (p. vii). The earlier interviews were conducted using ‘a set questionnaire’, while the later ones were ‘open-ended’ conversations (p. 5). With this significant change in methodology, I fear there was scope for distortion in the data collected.

How many different students conducted interviews? How many of the interviews did Potts conduct himself? These methodological points are not addressed anywhere. The footnotes contain twenty-seven citations of ‘Interviews’ with no corresponding numerical reference to any one interview. Are these the citations Potts called his ‘survey mode’ style, which term I interpret as meaning amalgamating information from various interviews and combining them into one quote (p. vii)? This too is unclear.

Fourteen of this book’s seventeen chapters dealt with different aspects of daily life. Potts outlined his general physical format of the book in his introduction (p. 6). Chapter one is a background chapter on economics and politics. People’s material needs are addressed in chapters two to five, which consider food, shelter, warmth, and help (including self-help) respectively. Potts examined ‘attitudes of mind’ in chapters seven, eight and nine. ‘Special experiences’ included life on the track (chapters twelve and thirteen) and camp life (chapter fourteen). Other chapters dealt with issues like relief work (chapter eleven), life on farms (chapter six), work (chapter fifteen) and suicide (chapter sixteen). ‘Memory and whole lives’ (chapter ten) is where Potts’ views of oral history, and the problems associated with it, were discussed. Chapter seventeen is titled ‘Conclusions: history and myth’.

Potts’ discussion of gold fossicking did contain errors. He generalised that ‘much was casual’ and probably not declared as income (p. 101). Potts did not put the Depression gold fossicking system into any context. It was established under the Federal Government’s 1931 Commonwealth Gold Bounty Act. The Victorian Mines Department set up a scheme for gold fossicking, which was administered by local Governments. They issued prospectors with a licence (which enabled them to collect Sustenance), and provided them with picks, shovels and pans. In Victoria, actual gold yields
increased markedly from 26,090 oz. in 1930, to 47,438 oz. in 1931, and 53,856 oz. in 1932.  

David Potts’ work will spark a debate about the effects of the Great Depression on Australians’ everyday lives. He questioned aspects of ‘the myth (usual story)’ such as unemployment, suicide, malnutrition, and eviction rates. He chose to focus on the hard-to-quantify feelings of ‘happiness’ expressed in many of the interviews he used. By questioning these rates and focussing on ‘happiness’, isn’t Potts himself guilty of doing the reverse of what he accused ‘left wing’ historians of doing, that is downplaying the remembered hardships of many, average Australians? Did Potts’ work really stay ‘in tune with the voices of those who lived through it [Depression]’, the many interviewees he had access to? You be the judge.

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In a discussion of the role of historians in telling the stories of the Stolen Generations, Peter Read has distinguished between what he calls ‘central truths’ and ‘smaller truths’. Once established in the historical fabric, the central truths of the Stolen Generations – that Aboriginal children were removed from their families and communities in order to desocialise them as Aboriginal people – were augmented by the many smaller truths – local variations, anomalies and exceptions, moments of bureaucratic compassion, and so on. Rather than undermine the big truth of the Stolen Generations, these smaller truths served to augment it, adding needed complexity, enlarging its scope and adding humanity.  

*Contesting Assimilation*, edited by Tim Rowse, is a collection of seventeen papers originally given at the conference ‘Assimilation – Then and Now’ at the University of Sydney in 2000. It does the work of both establishing the big truth of assimilation of Australian Aboriginal people – that at least from the late 1930s until the 1970s Australian government practice as well as popular settler and state ideologies were directed towards the disappearance of Aboriginality and the absorption of Aboriginal people, biologically and/or culturally, into the settler community – and enlarging this story, telling stories of settler resistance and Aboriginal activists’ use of assimilationist rhetoric, and linking the assimilation of Aboriginal people to other movements in the liberal nation-state to deal with migrants, inhabitants of frontier towns, and others considered outside white bourgeois civility. *Contesting Assimilation* contains a broad analysis of ideas and policy, and is a significant contribution to the study of the ideologies and practices of assimilation.

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