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In the latest instalment of **David Grove's** exploration of novels with a political message he looks at Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*.

L S Lowry painted the people, streets and workplaces of Salford. Ewan MacColl sang about them in *Dirty Old Town*. And Walter Greenwood (1903-1974) set his first novel in the city's Hanky Park, a square mile of two-up two-down terrace houses, "where men and women are born, live, love and die and pay preposterous rents for the privilege of calling the grimy houses 'home'."

Love on the Dole was published in 1933, the second year of Ramsay MacDonald's "National" government, when there were almost three million unemployed (out of a much smaller labour force than today), and the dole (unemployment benefit) had just been cut from 17 shillings to 15 shillings a week (about £30 today) to save the country from going bankrupt. Sound familiar?

So it's not surprising that Greenwood's novel focuses on the physical and moral destruction inflicted by unemployment. Today when one in five 16 to 24 year olds is without a job, and many others in precarious, low-paid work, his insights are still relevant. Though the economic and social context is different from the 1930s, the damage is just as deadly.

The story is embedded in the harsh details of working class life. Harry Hardcastle leaves school at 14 for an apprenticeship in an engineering works. His seven years are up just in time for the Great Depression. "They now were fully qualified engineers. They also were qualified to draw the dole." He has to postpone his wedding. Then the means test is brought in, and his dole is

stopped because he's living at home and his sister is working full-time. He takes part in a march of the unemployed to the Town Hall, brutally crushed by the police.

Perhaps to make sure of getting published, Greenwood often indulges in self-consciously "literary" language, using words that he could only have got from a dictionary or thesaurus. His style contrasts with the simple, direct prose of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. But there is lots of authentic dialogue, especially

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from the four elderly women who form a sort of Greek chorus. Outstanding is Mrs Bull, "the local, uncertificated midwife and layer out of the dead". She is street wise, sympathetic, compassionate – and outspoken: to a friend who thinks of having her fortune told she says *Ah can tell it, lass, an' Ah'm no fortune teller. Tha'll keep on drawin' thy owld age pension and than tha'll dee, Ah'll lay thee out an' parish'll bury y'.*

Greenwood's characters are class-conscious but not politically conscious. They are cynical about the boss class, mystified by the system, grudgingly resigned to appalling living and working conditions, proud of their skills and ashamed of being out of work, solaced by drinking, smoking, gambling, the cinema.

This is stark realism – though hardly socialist realism. Unlike Gorki, Tressell or Steinbeck, Greenwood doesn't show how new forces can arise out of misery and exploitation. Larry, the only socialist in the novel, dies. And Harry's sister, whom Larry was going to marry, instead of taking up his political campaigning, becomes the mistress of a detestable bookie; she uses his influence to get jobs for her father and brother.

But this bleak ending can be forgiven in the circumstances of 1933. *Love on the Dole* remains a proletarian classic.

WALTER GREENWOOD

Walter Greenwood
Love on the Dole

