

bedtime

A good read of can help your political development, even if it sits on the shelf in the fiction category. In the first of a series on novels that pack a punch **David Grove** revisits the Ragged Trousered Philanthopists .

I don't think much of this bloody tea. These homely words are the first ones spoken in Robert Tressell's novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthopists* as the group of house

inters at the centre of the story settle down to eat dinner in the kitchen. This is our greatest proletarian novel. By this I don't just mean that it's about working people (there are plenty of such novels). I mean that it presents the social, economic and political setting from the viewpoint of a class conscious worker.

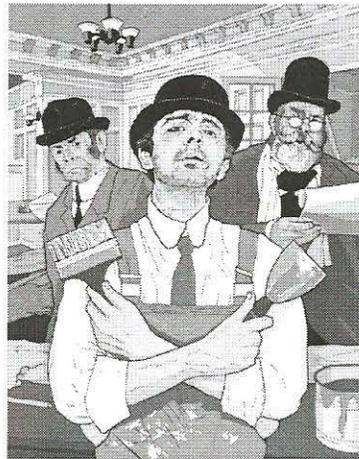
If you haven't read it, get this book from your local library. If you have a copy, lend it to somebody who's asking questions about the nature of contemporary society. True, it was written a century ago. Many of the things it describes have changed enormously. But the essence of capitalist exploitation remains unchanged. And nobody depicted it in fiction more tellingly than Tressell, himself a building worker.

The story of how the book came to be is itself a fascinating revelation: Robert Noonan (the author's real name) completing it as he was dying from tuberculosis; the vast manuscript in a box under his servant daughter's bed; she showing it to her middle class employer when she overheard conversations about books; the first publisher cutting out two-thirds of the text and blunting

its militant optimism; the disappearance of the manuscript and its discovery through the devoted efforts of Fred Ball; its publication in full after the second world war.

Tressell's novel has deeply influenced four generations of readers; many have said it was what converted them to socialism. Some remember best the lectures on capitalism given in the kitchen (with primitive visual aids) by Tressell's hero Frank Owen. His presentation of Marxist economics is somewhat eccentric. It is Tressell's account of the work and play of his characters that truly captures the nature of exploitation and alienation. His anger enlivens every page: anger at the system, but also anger with his fellow workers who don't believe there's any other option "for the likes of us". That's why, with true working class irony, he calls them philanthopists; they unwittingly support the luxury and leisure of their bosses. Tressell's honesty chimes with every militant worker who struggles against both the ruling class and against the capitalist ideas in his workmates' minds.

Though set in the small and politically conservative town of Mugsborough (Hastings) the book is a microcosm of British capitalist society. The contractors, factory owners and shopkeepers who exploit the workers directly also run



the town council, the churches and chapels, the schools and charities; it is the capitalist state in miniature. The bosses (Sweater and the rest) are caricatured in the great English satirical tradition of Dickens and Fielding.

The novel has political weaknesses that reflect both the backwardness of a place like Hastings and the sectarianism of the Social Democratic Federation, of which Tressell was a member. There are only two brief references to trade unions. The way to make socialists is through propaganda rather than daily struggle. There is no understanding of imperialism and how it sets the context of working class politics.

But these weaknesses don't detract from the strength of the novel as a great work of literature. It is driven, as Raymond Williams has written, by "the persistent humour and vitality of the workers as a class". Tressell's workers are real, rounded characters, especially the socialist hero, Frank Owen, and Joe Philpot, probably the most credible (and lovable) working man in English fiction. I'm sure that RTP can go on making socialists for many years yet.