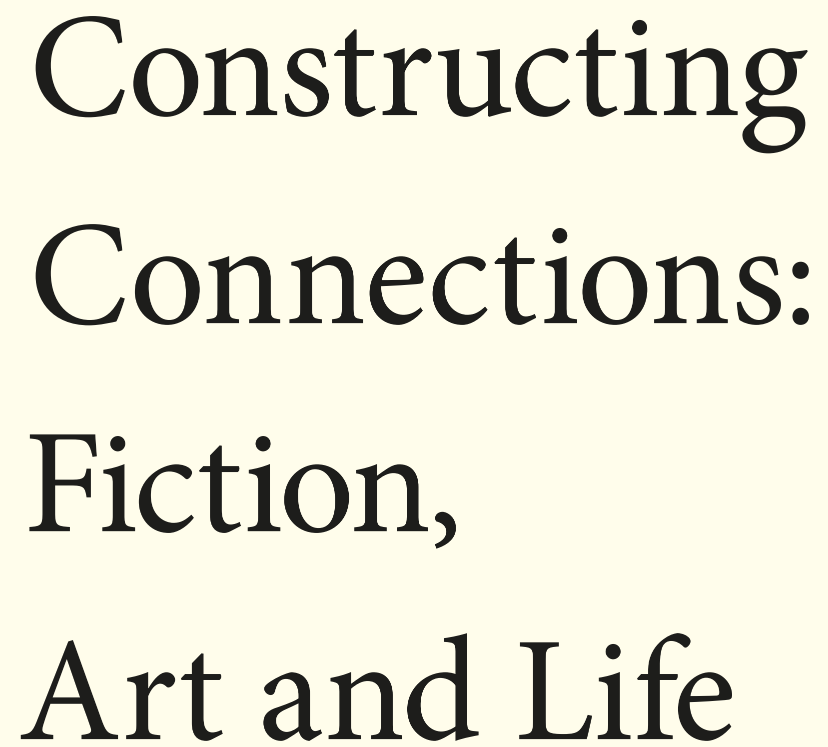
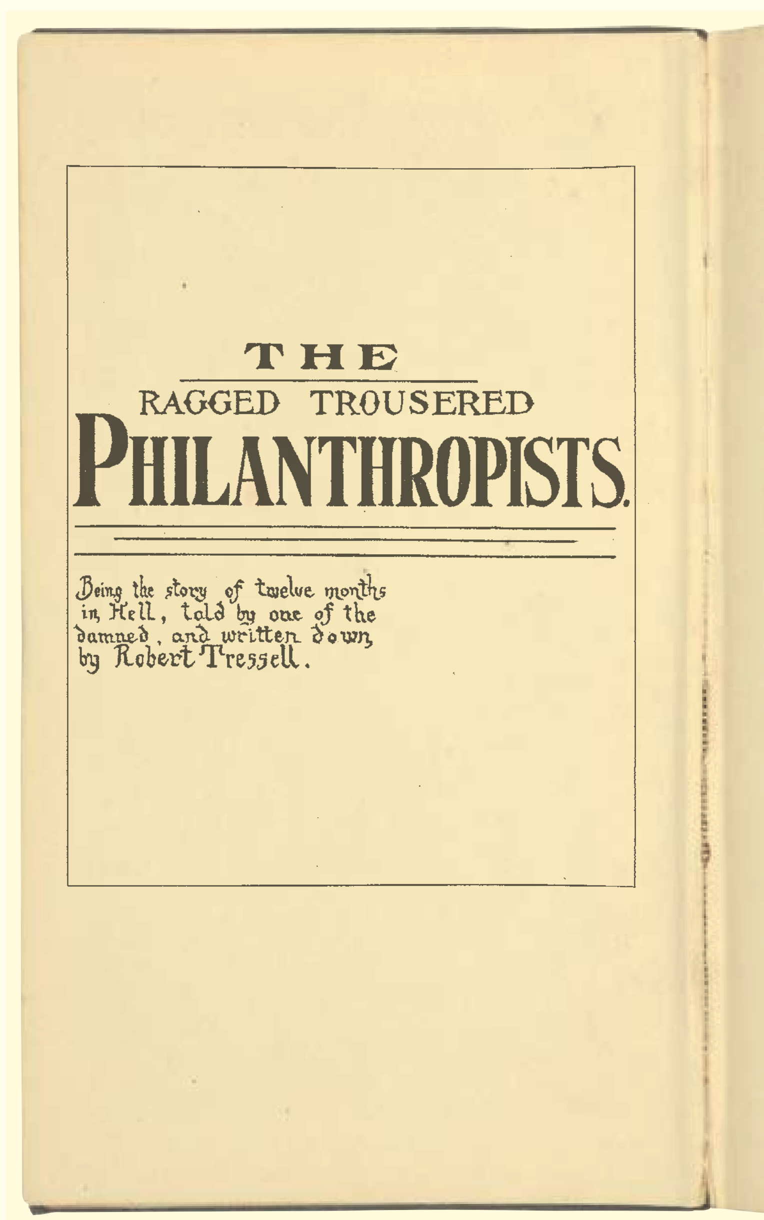


Constructing Connections: Fiction, Art and Life



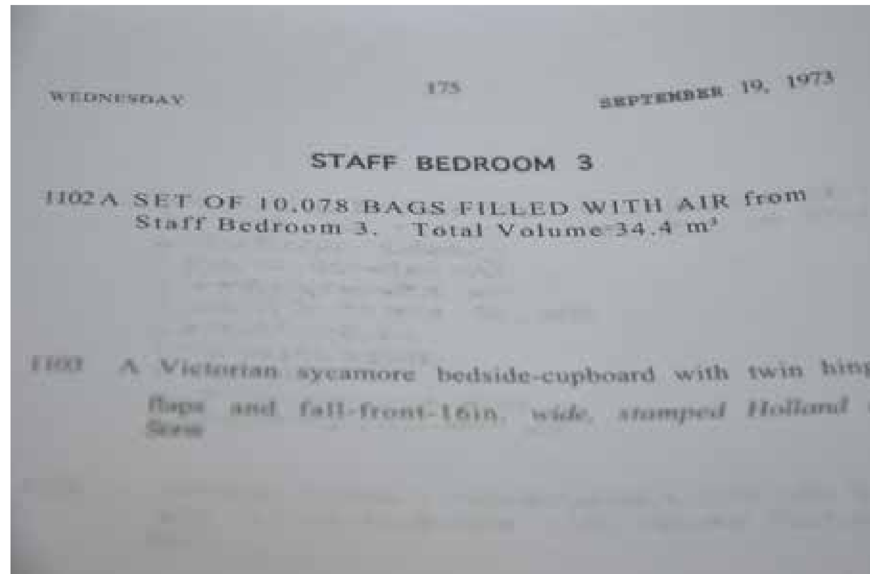
THE
RAGGED TROUSERED
PHILANTHROPISTS.

Being the story of twelve months in Hell, told by one of the damned, and written down by Robert Tressell.

Responding to Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* at Croxteth Hall, Liverpool

ARTISTS:
Neville Gabie
Patricia Mackinnon-Day
Paul Rooney

TEXTS:
Tessa Jackson
Jessica Holtaway
Dr Deaglán Ó Donghaile



WEDNESDAY 175 SEPTEMBER 19, 1973

STAFF BEDROOM 3

1102 A SET OF 10,078 BAGS FILLED WITH AIR from Staff Bedroom 3. Total Volume 34.4 m³

1103 A Victorian sycamore bedside-cupboard with twin hing
flaps and fall-front-16in. wide, stamped *Holland*
Sons

Patricia Mackinnon-Day: *The Air Monopolist* (detail) 2017
1973 auction catalogue (edited)

Neville Gabie: *Experiments in Black and White XXII [Royal Realm]* 2017
installation detail

Robert Tressell describes his characters vividly – you can picture them and hear their voices in your head. Along with Philpot and Harlow, we spend time with Crass, Misery and Slyme. There's even a brief reference made to a Lady Slumrent. The author uses names to illustrate his only novel.

Artists Neville Gabie, Patricia Mackinnon-Day and Paul Rooney, in their recent collaboration, decided to respond to Tressell's 1914 novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, not from a point of illustration but rather to reflect on the book's central premise of the "fundamental need to replace the entire capitalist system with a new and more radical society" (Tony Benn, 2012), and how its message remains relevant today. The classic text triggered, for each of them, responses and imaginings that in some ways bare little relation to each other. Instead the well-known volume of 'working class literature' provided a resonant context and a spur to make new work.

Choosing Croxteth Hall, north of Liverpool, as the site for presenting the finished works, was as much pragmatic as particular. Formerly the country estate and ancestral home since 1575 of the Molyneau family or Earls of Sefton, the Hall's more recent history has several possible touching points to Tressell and his text. Said to have been re-decorated at about the same time as the book was written, Croxteth Hall perhaps parallels The Cave, the property or 'job' that Tressell's characters are renovating, and the setting for his hero Frank Owen's discussions on labour, the shortage of work and the precarious nature of earning a living. The author was himself a journeyman painter and decorator and just a few years later was buried in a pauper's grave five miles away, at a site now known as Walton Park Cemetery.

The Hall was the Edwardian home of the final Earl and the Countess of Sefton, and as a set of interiors it reaffirms the status of life above and below stairs. For the artists, it offered both specific and conceptual possibilities. For Mackinnon-Day the Hall gave rise to her process and forms the narrative for her works, for Gabie it offered a context for actions that were triggered by associative ideas and for Rooney it provided a notional framing and an evocative setting. Yet all three responded – with a process of making visible – to what had become obscured, both in terms of the book and their chosen setting for exhibiting the works.

Patricia Mackinnon-Day's *Chain of Gold*, the first of four works, is inspired by Owen's description of society's "Money System", in which workers are "bound and fettered with a chain of gold" to the wealthy. She made ten gilt-edged bone china plates, juxtaposing a photographic portrait of an aristocrat from the Hall's past with that of a contemporary worker, who is now engaged in maintaining or opening the historic house to the public. The figures

Visibility

Tessa Jackson
Independent curator and writer

in pose mirror each other, and the commemorative plates are intended to place current day workers on an equal status with previous owners. Current staff, some over many decades, have maintained not just the fabric of the house and estate but its history, and visitors undoubtedly benefit from their loyalty to, and sense of ownership of, Croxteth Hall. Yet curiously the staff, employed by Liverpool City Council, seem to have become, to some extent, servants. With the building's future now under discussion and likely to become an up-market hotel, their future remains uncertain. Similar to the relationship of Tressell's workmen and their employers, the Hall's current employees have provided a lot of time and hard work for their masters but remain little better off. Mackinnon-Day seems to conclude that they appear to take on the role of current day 'Philanthropists'.

The Air Monopolist, also by MacKinnon-Day and installed on the grand staircase, is connected to Owen's explanation that poverty is in part caused by "Private Monopoly". Angered by the workers' acceptance of the wealthy owning the world's resources, he proposes:

"If it were possible to construct huge gasometers and to draw together and compress within them the whole of the atmosphere, it would have been done long ago, and we should have been compelled to work for them in order to get money to buy air to breathe."

The artwork consists of bags of air, collected from the Hall's rooms, listed and labelled as sold lots in an auction. This is a direct reference to the auction held in 1973, when no heir could be found, and the executors of the late Earl of Sefton put up for sale the contents of the house. The amount of air the artist sold, in a re-staging of the auction, enables the visitor to consider the difference in living conditions between aristocrat and servant. The Hall's archives hold an original copy of the auction book and its list of contents help to bring to life the style in which occupants across the classes lived.

Neville Gabie's three works form part of an on-going exploration entitled *Experiments in Black and White*. A short video entitled *XXI (Status Quo)*, installed on a monitor in the 'Breakfast Room', disrupted the quiet referential air of the formal rooms. Heard in other rooms of the Hall before it was seen, the piece shows a man holding a large pile of plates, who after minutes of trying precariously to bear their weight, drops them. The inevitable crash is intended as a metaphor for the failure to sustain an impossible economic system. *XXII (Royal Realm)*, a video of just over an hour and presented on a monitor between imposing columns on the staircase, follows a man dressed in a dark suit painting himself as well as the backdrop behind, with white paint. This work, surrounded by portraits of the aristocracy – Lord and Lady Seftons and their relatives and friends over the centuries, appears almost humorous but jolts the visitor into realising who is absent. The title is taken from one of the grander paintings at Croxteth Hall but mimics more generally the portrait painter and his sitter, with the action of literally painting out the individual. By doing so he alludes to the anonymity and lack of acknowledgement of those who worked to sustain the life-style of the named faces that surround the piece.

Gabie's final work *Experiments in Black and White XXIV*, two accompanying short videos shown in Lady Sefton's Dressing Room, trace two further actions. We see a tapestry chair being taken from the Dressing Room up a narrow stair and through the Hall's attic rooms of the former servants' quarters. The second shows a discarded chair found in the backstreets of Anfield being carried ceremoniously through a grand corridor and up the main staircase of the Hall. Two very different pieces of furniture occupy contrasting areas of the house, disrupting the idea of who would usually occupy which space, and emphasising the stark realities of different classes. Gabie is interested in materiality and what materials signify – in all three works he both manipulates and connects them to associations, past and present.

Paul Rooney is an artist and a musician, more recently focusing on sound work. His work for the project was triggered by a feeling he had when reading Tressell's book – of Mr Hunter the foreman who is forever lurking. For him this fleeting image was reminiscent of a ghost (Hunter's looming face is described by Owen as an 'apparition' in one passage), with Rooney's sense of ghosts in history being disruptive and the opposite of benign. Expressing something of the difficulties of representing history, he started to work with material like music hall lyrics that would have been performed at the time of Tressell's book, such as *The Ghost of Benjamin Binns*, and *My Father's Grave*, after which his single work is titled. This latter song also picks up on the brief mention in the book of the unpleasant task of laying new drains to replace old leaking ones. Siting the work in what is known at the Hall as the 'Gentleman's Bathroom', his video has a soundtrack that reworks the Edwardian variety song about a worker's grave being moved so that new drains can be laid to upgrade a rich gent's residence. In one version the song goes on to say:

"Now father in his life was not a quitter,
I don't suppose he'll be a quitter now.
And in his winding sheet, he'll haunt that toilet seat
And only let them go when he'll allow.
Oh won't there be some bleedin' consternation;
And won't them city toffs begin to rave!
It's more than they deserve:
They had the bloody nerve
To muck about a British workman's grave."

The four minute video uses images of found drain-inspection footage laid over still and moving images of gents with bowler hats, umbrellas and a certain swagger. There is even footage of gentlemen and their game shooting exploits. The work's presentation in the bathroom captures the frightening idea of the worker's lost soul and his vengeful control of a gentleman, in the most private of spaces.

All three artists choose, not just in this project but across their work, to present in and interact with places that are less to do with art and more to do with contemporary society. Here their works, shaped by very different thinking, connect past and present politics and cultural mores, contextualising Tressell's Philanthropists with Croxteth Hall and how we continue to obscure and disregard people through lack of acknowledgement. Mackinnon-Day always likes to immerse herself within where she works, and interaction with people is part of that immersion. Her two other works, *The Leftovers* sited in the kitchens and *Tracing Shadows* on the windows of a long corridor, both make visible the lives of others – the latter simply notes information she found in census records of those who worked at the Hall. Gabie for some time has been interested to explore the nature of manual labour, its repetitiveness and how it is regarded in current society. Here, by performing in each of his own works, he not only puts himself in the shoes of the invisible but returns their presence with a certain lyricism and dignity. Rooney literally works with the concept of invisibility, and through sound and collaged images, recreates the long history of absurdity and injustice that surrounds English class relationships.

Mackinnon-Day responded directly to Croxteth Hall and its current community. Gabie and Rooney reflected more generally on Tressell's themes, disrupting our fascination for the stylish and wealthy lifestyle still propagated by stories such as Downton Abbey. Yet all three, in their different ways, consider the role and the responsibility of the artist, and what this means in today's society. By responding to Tressell, they have taken a text that still resonates and maintained the discussion on the relationship between labour, livelihood and lifestyle, with a motivation that Frank Owen describes:

"Every man who is not helping to bring about a better state of affairs for the future is helping to perpetuate the present misery, and is therefore the enemy of his own children. There is no such thing as being neutral: we must either help or hinder."

Labour and Life

Jessica Holtaway

"…[A] connotation of heroic deeds requiring great strength and courage and performed in a fighting spirit is manifest in the medieval use of the word: labour, *travail*, *arebeit*. However, the daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes the effort painful is not danger but its relentless repetition."

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

In *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by Robert Tressell, each worker needs to demonstrate a fighting spirit, along with physical and emotional strength, to cope with the constant struggle to care for his or her family. Although labour characterises the human condition – we are all involved in some kind of labour to ensure the necessities of our existence – it constrains freedom. In *The Human Condition (1958)* political theorist Hannah Arendt writes of the cyclical nature of labour – the repetitive processes by which we try to sustain our health and wellbeing. For Arendt, labour differs from work, because work ends when its goal has been met (for example when an object has been created). She understands labour as something that produces impermanent solutions to human necessities. For this reason she considers labour to be the opposite of freedom, and believes that it should not be glamorized through associating it with ideas of heroism.

For many of us now, technology and consumer culture have reduced the amount of labour required to meet our basic needs. For example, I can easily buy a healthy meal that needs no preparation on my part. The physical exertion and repetitive nature of labour is diminished. For me, that is. If however, I trace these daily conveniences a little further – a hand-wrapped tortilla from the supermarket or the toaster in my kitchen – I find that they are still produced through repetitive and exhausting labour processes undertaken in factories both here in the UK and abroad – often in developing countries where the poor labour conditions lead to the same problems depicted in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists.*

Responding to Croxteth Hall and Robert Tressell's 1914 novel, artist Neville Gabie made a series of artworks that address the repetitive and exhausting nature of labour. One piece shows Neville painting a black wall white, and then painting it black again. In the process of painting, he covers himself with paint, so that his identity becomes erased, lost in the background. Shown near the portraits of the family – monuments to individual identities – the individuality of the worker is painted out and he becomes almost invisible.

Historic records of Croxteth Hall evoke beautiful images of generations of families, along with their most loved horses and dogs. "Who lived at Croxteth in 1919?" you might ask. The answer would be "the Molyneux family, the Earls of Sefton". But in reality many, many more individuals lived at the Hall at this time, as servants. Some people spent the best part of their life living there, but records of their experiences are rare, if they exist at all. Last month, Croxteth Hall shared some of their archival research with me, which included a number of interviews with retired members of staff. These first-hand accounts provided clear descriptions of the daily labours that went into sustaining the building and the lifestyle of the Molyneux family. Here are some extracts from the interviews:

In 1981, Alison Oldershaw talked to Mrs. Fallows, a scullery maid at Croxteth Hall from 1918 through to 1973. Mrs Fallows remembers daily life in the kitchens and pastry larder at the Hall. Her day typically started at 5am, when she would sweep the kitchens and light the fire and coal stove:

"It was like a fog when you'd finished [sweeping], open the doors if it was not too cold weather, you'd open all the doors, then you had to let all the dust settle. You had to come in here [pastry kitchen] perhaps you wouldn't sweep there because it wouldn't be so dirty, you'd just sweep down there and here. Next place, the fire was burning all night in there. You used to rake it out. You did not shovel coal like that, we had big cobs, big lumps and put them on and they would last all day. You had to use that fire as well. When all that was done, when the dust was settled, I had to go around and dust all the shelves, not move anything because you hadn't the time. I'd have to put staff dishes up for breakfast, we used to keep them on the sides of the dressers. We used to put them on the top of the stove of put them in a screen in this room here. Then I used to have to get the lift, send it upstairs, pull the lever, by the time I got up there it wasn't there. When I got up there I had to put the dining room china on the lift, by the time I got down, it was half way down. I used to have to run and put the dining room china there ready for when the staff had gone up, and then put the china on the stove to get warm you see. It was like clockwork."

And this was all before 8 in the morning! Frank Games, the plumber at Croxteth Hall, also remembers long days such as these. Frank was born in 1927, and he worked alongside his father, who was a blacksmith's striker and boilerman. Frank recalls his father's typical day at work:

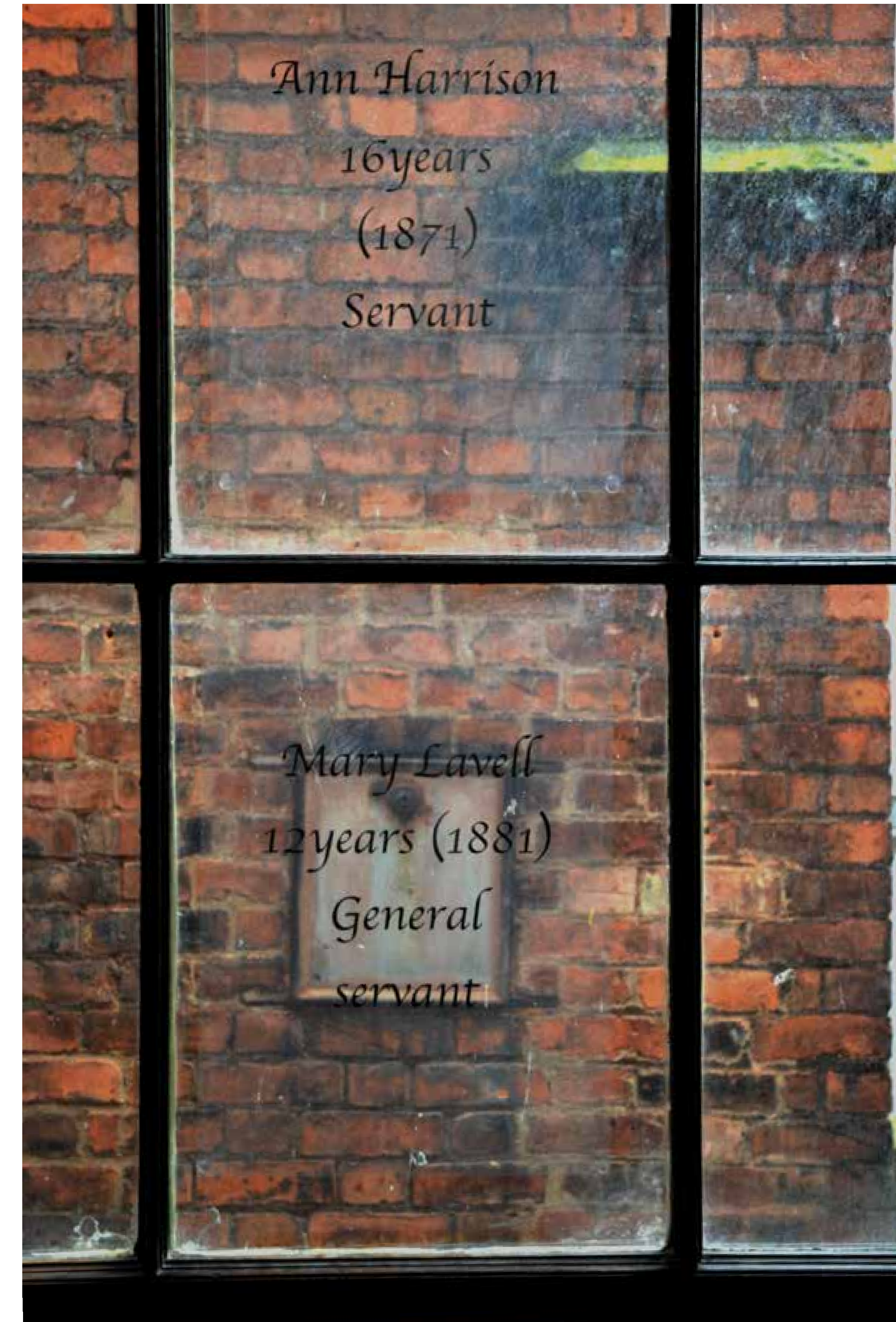
"He used to be here for quarter past five every morning. He used to cycle from Netherton, which is six miles from here. He cycled in all weathers, even when it was snowing. He would walk when he could not cycle and he would still get here for quarter past five. I've seen him leaving home at 3 o'clock in the morning, when there's been a heavy snow storm, to get here, so he would not fail them with their boilers."

After making sure the boilers were working efficiently, Frank's father would assist with the laundry, collect fresh bread from the village and then iron the Earl of Sefton's newspapers. After this he would move 27 barrel loads of coke into the boiler houses. If there was a party at the Hall, he would sometimes work through until 1 o'clock in the morning, and he would still need to be up again the next day in time for work at quarter past five.

Mrs Unwin, a former cleaner at Croxteth Hall, began working there 1962. She did not live at the Hall, but she came in daily to assist the live-in staff. Her day started at 8am, when she would get the fire ready for Lady Sefton and then clean the servant's rooms. Each year she would help with the annual spring clean which involved:

"Brushing all the walls down, washing all the paintwork, cleaning the carpets. No cleaner, you had to get on your hands and knees, we used to do it in strips each. A little rubber scrubbing brush, and after that; they got a machine to shampoo."

These narrative histories provide detailed insights into the lives of the servants and the workings of country estates over the last century. They also help us understand the physical efforts that went into sustaining the luxuries of aristocratic life. Although technologies have sped-up or eliminated some of these processes, there is still a human cost to luxury living. The exhibition *Constructing Connections: Fiction, Art and Life* asks us to engage with the less visible histories of Croxteth and to reflect on contemporary issues around labour and freedom.



Patricia Mackinnon-Day: *Tracing Shadows* 2017
print on glass

Patricia Mackinnon-Day: *Chain of Gold* 2017
photographic print on gold edged bone china

Against Capitalism and Empire:
Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*

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A unique expression of working-class culture, Robert Tressell's 1914 novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, still occupies a marginal position within the field of literary studies. A tale of painters and decorators who are forced, daily, to compete with one another in an economic race to the bottom, "the painters' bible" as the novel became known, was quickly recognised as an important radical, even insurgent text. Circulated among workers in Belfast, Dublin, Liverpool and Glasgow upon its first publication, it motivated and inspired labour organization in these and other cities in Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales. Focussed on the grinding misery of working-class existence, it presents a troubling picture of the ruthlessness and relentlessness of capitalism. Read and re-read by workers, many of whom were given copies by their trade unions at the beginning of their apprenticeships, it assumed a central position as a foundational text of modern class struggle. With its importance relayed to workers via these channels, rather than through the conventional academic and critical spheres that traditionally confer literary works with status and authority, it became a classic of the socialist literary canon. With millions of copies produced during 117 English-language printings between 1914 and the present, it has also been translated into Chinese, Farsi, Russian, Dutch, Bulgarian, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, Polish, Slovak, Czech and Spanish.

The novel's graphic descriptions of poverty, along with its searing portrayals of working-class families enduring hunger and even starvation, are accompanied by Tressell's repeated criticisms of British imperialism: his narrative of working-class distress opens by subverting James Thomson's 1740 colonialist anthem, *Rule Britannia*, declaring, with firm irony, that "Britons never shall be slaves". Asking the reader to reflect upon the inherent contradiction of imperialism's claim to liberate its subjects, Tressell highlights the repressive fusion of capitalist economics and imperialist expansion, both at home and in the colonies. The novel is particularly scathing of British colonial policy in Ireland where he warns the reader that British policy deliberately "exterminated" four million peasants during the Irish Holocaust of the 1840s and 1850s (referred to, misleadingly, as the "potato famine"). Tressell warns that the next logical step is for such genocidal policies to be implemented in England, where the ruling class has already convinced itself that "half of this country ought to be exterminated as well."

Thoroughly politicized and influenced by Karl Marx's analyses of capitalism, the novel foregrounds the crises and traumas experienced by Edwardian workers, and its subtitle, *Being the Story of Twelve Months in Hell, Told by One of the Damned*, underlines Tressell's concern with the unremitting mobilisation of capital against the interests of the working poor. Its infliction of physical, psychological and economic shocks against workers is integrated into the text and, in turn, this repeatedly disrupts the novel's narrative, exposing the relationship between these pressures and the system that generates them. Its disrupted and disruptive aesthetic captures a desolate, impoverished world that is "falling to pieces and crumbling away" around the working-class characters who inhabit it.

Its significance lies in its uncompromising realism because, unlike earlier 'condition of England' fictions (such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* [1855] and *Mary Barton* [1848], and Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* [1854]), it rejects the formal and long-standing conventions of the nineteenth-century novel. As Gary Day has emphasized, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* does not rely on sentimentalism or romance, as Tressell denied the reassuring closures that characterized bourgeois fiction – conclusions that reflected these authors' affiliation with liberal reformism. Instead, he deployed fiction as a means of confronting the economic violence lying beneath the surface of bourgeois normality.

Composed amid the uncertainty that marked working class experience at the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel is ideologically precise and politically assertive in its descriptions and analyses of class violence. Attempting to educate English workers who, Tressell found, were either thoroughly terrorized or desensitized by the combined violence and authority of capitalism and the state, his novel has traditionally been regarded as a specifically English expression of working-class identity rather than the product of an internationalist, anticolonial consciousness. In his introduction to the 1965 edition, Alan Sillitoe described it as "the first great English novel about the class war" and in 1969 the Marxist critic, Jack Mitchell, praised it as "one of the greatest tradition-breakers in the English novel".

Tressell's illustrations of unstable living conditions, the impact of poverty upon mental health and the workers' ceaseless struggles with the ever-present threat of starvation led its first publisher, Grant Richards (who also published James Joyce's *Dubliners* in the same year), to describe it as a "damnably subversive" work, but one that was "extraordinarily real". Cautiously, Richards issued the novel in a very abridged form and the uncensored version-was not published until it was issued by Lawrence and Wishart, the publishing house of the Communist Party of Great Britain, in 1955. George Orwell, reviewing a new edition of the still-abridged work in 1946 (the novel had by now been reissued thirty-two times since its original publication), praised its realism but also criticized what he regarded as its political naivety. Its relevance, he insisted, lay in the descriptive power of its compelling exploration of the proletariat's bleak and – for middle class readers, at least – unimaginable working conditions. Its importance, he believed, lay in its documentation of the "unhonoured" or forgotten radicals whose efforts finally crystallized in the popular British socialism of the 1940s.

The Colonial Context

Born Robert Croker in Dublin in 1870, Robert Tressell adopted his mother's surname, Noonan. He became a transnational migrant in his teens, leaving Ireland for Liverpool, which he left after serving six months' imprisonment for theft in 1890. Emigrating to South Africa, he learned his trade as a decorator, rising to foreman in Johannesburg. Here he became involved in trade unionism, writing political pamphlets and joining the International Independent Labour Party in 1899. His socialist beliefs were aligned to his anticolonial politics and, as an Irish republican, he served on the Transvaal Executive of the Centennial of 1798 Committee, a front organization of the clandestine and revolutionary Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). This body linked the Boers directly to militant Irish anti-imperialism and Noonan sat on its committee alongside the future president of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, and the chemist and mineral assessor, John MacBride, who would be executed for his part in leading the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. Upon the outbreak of the Boer War, the Transvaal 1798 Committee organized the Irish Transvaal Brigade, which Mac Bride led into battle against the British army.

Noonan left the organisation after hostilities commenced and returned to England, but his literary writing remained framed by this experience of imperialism. Living in Hastings from 1902, he joined the Social Democratic Federation, writing pamphlets and election literature for his local branch, but his daughter, Kathleen, recalled his increasing frustration with the conservatism of English workers. Five years later, in 1907, amid acute unemployment and deprivation in the city, he began writing *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* in response to the Liberal government's application of conservative social policies. The novel was completed in 1910, when his already ailing health quickly deteriorated and, in February 1911, three years before the publication of his novel, Robert Noonan died in Liverpool from tuberculosis while preparing to emigrate, once more, to Canada.

Socialism

Informed by a combination of socialist and anti-colonial ideas, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* conveys the suffering endured by the marginalized working poor of England. Upon its publication, it articulated experiences that, as Orwell noted, were ignored in mainstream English fiction, explaining to its readers how, in Britain, "the wolves (i.e., capitalists) have an easy prey." Conveying the real, material consequences of life under capitalism, it portrays working class experience of modernity as a prolonged encounter with endless cycles of economic crisis and stagnation. In doing so the novel fulfils Raymond Williams' categorization of progressive art as that which reflects contemporary society's "structure of feeling".

In *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, we find an expression of anticolonial politics in combination with militant, revolutionary socialism. Through this radical narrative, Tressell, or Noonan, counters bourgeois 'normality' and its assertion that such suffering, injustices and violence are normal, natural or inevitable phenomena. Rather than drawing on the leisured experiences of the inhabitants of Pimlico or Regent's Park that qualified as Bloomsbury modernism. In his presentation of the chaotic and traumatic experiences of working class life, Tressell concentrates on the resistant consciousness of his protagonist, the alienated decorator and radical socialist, Frank Owen. Refusing to comply with the violence that surrounds him and his fellow workers, Owen will not acquiesce in the dehumanizing structures and practices of power. The novel's structural disjointedness and lack of pattern, therefore, are not aesthetic insufficiencies, but crucial reflections of the chaos of working-class experience. Through these interruptions, Tressell worked the structural violence of capitalism into a disordered but realistic and aesthetically productive fiction. Its directness draws from its repetitiveness, which Grant Allen excised from the original edition, yet it is precisely this fragmentary aesthetic that repeats the author's (and his characters') frustration, anger and despair.

The novel opens with Owen explaining to his fellow-decorators that the denial of pleasure is key to the normalisation of repression:

"What I call poverty is when people are not able to secure for themselves all the benefits of civilization; the necessaries, comforts, pleasures and refinements of life, leisure, books, theatres, pictures, music, holidays, travel, good and beautiful homes, good clothes, good and pleasant food."

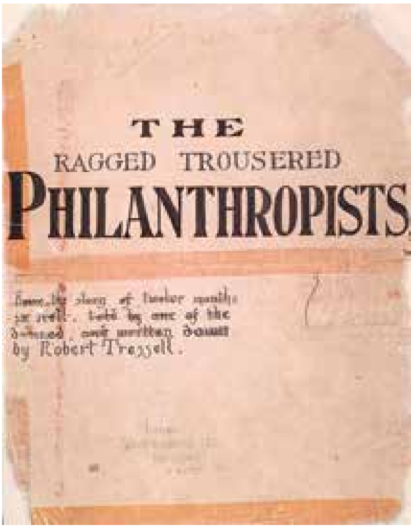
Key to the containment of the proletariat is capitalism's refusal to allow the working class any access to leisure and culture. The prevention of these enjoyments produces the constant tension upon which the novel hinges, ensuring that "the system which produces luxury, refinement and culture for a few… condemns the majority to a lifelong struggle with adversity, and many thousands to hunger and rags". This reality for the majority, Tressell repeats throughout the novel, "has made the world into a hell" and the challenge that he saw facing the left was its responsibility to radicalize the working-class and convince it of the artificiality of capitalism's "fair outward appearance". This problem is directly confronted in his documentation of life in Mugsborough, the fictional town modelled on Hastings, in which the novel is set. Its very revealing name nods to the establishment's duping of the working class, a feat that is achieved with the help of the media, which circulates newspapers entitled, tellingly, The Obscurer and the Daily Chloroform.

A self-reflexive work of political fiction, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* relays the experience of poverty, desperation, deprivation and hunger – realities that these publications deny and conceal. It explains the material consequences of the operation of the capitalist system and its effects upon those who are on the receiving end of the bourgeoisie's "great money trick." Countering the liberal calls for a gradualist version of socialism voiced by Tressell's contemporaries, the Fabian socialists, with a series of grimly descriptive episodes, the novel documented the direct violence of capitalism and the intensity of the misery that it instils in its victims – a form of structural violence from which, as Tressell reveals on many occasions throughout this story, not even children are spared.

In the novel's preface, Tressell explained why he decided to use fiction as a means of conveying the realities of poverty, suffering and class violence in early twentieth-century England:

"I designed to show the conditions relating from poverty and unemployment: to expose the futility of the measures taken to deal with them and to indicate what I believe to be the only real remedy, namely – Socialism. I intended to explain what Socialists understand by the word 'poverty': to define the Socialist theory of the causes of poverty, and to explain how Socialists propose to abolish poverty."

A unique text, a key example of radical, working-class writing and a profoundly important work of insurgent literature, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* still amplifies socialism's revolutionary tendencies today. It successfully popularized socialist doctrine by documenting capitalism's harmful practices, its prolongation of injustice and the violent ways in which it denies human potential. The novel's intensive, class-focussed realism is key to how it has conveyed these problems to generations of readers, and the conditions of working class poverty and desperation that it describes continue to remain strikingly familiar. This novel still speaks to the exploited, to the unemployed and to people working on zero-hour contracts. Its relevance is undiminished in a world in which the monopolization of resources and their concentration in the hands of wealthy and powerful élites intensifies without pause. Now that imperialist governments have, since 2003, revived the practice of direct military occupation, it also speaks to the colonized and to those who have been dispossessed and exiled by neoliberal capitalism, like the immigrants and economic refugees whom Tressell defended in his novel. It speaks to the many people in this country today who are forced, like those who died in the Grenfell fire, to live in unregulated and hazardously dangerous conditions in rented properties that mirror the dilapidated housing in which many of the novel's scenes are set. For these reasons, in our age of austerity, inequality, imperial occupations, seemingly endless economic recession and ongoing economic exploitation, Robert Tressell's tale remains as relevant to readers today as it did to those who encountered it upon its first publication in 1914. As he concluded, people who are organized, even in what may appear to be hopeless situations, can work together in solidarity to establish a new and better world. This, Tressell shows us in the final lines of his novel, can be accomplished by establishing what he described as "the glorious fabric of the Co-operative Commonwealth," where "brotherhood, goodwill and joy" will replace misery, greed and despair – the keynote realities of modern capitalism.



Neville Gabie: *Experiments in Black and White XXII (Royal Realm)* 2017
video 64 minutes 3 seconds
household paint, buckets and suit

Peace and War

Jessica Holtaway

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists by Robert Tressell was published in 1914, the year World War 1 broke out. A number of political events had taken place in the years leading up to 1914, but it is the incidents of that summer that are usually associated with the start of the war: the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand on June 28th, Germany's declaration of war on France and its invasion of Belgium on August 3rd. Britain declared war on Germany the following day, August 4th. The war ended on November 11th 1918 but its social impact continued to unfold.

One of the consequences of World War 1 was the decline of the aristocracy in Britain. In October 1919, Country Life magazine commented: "People who formerly lived in very large houses are now getting out of them. As to who goes in is another matter." (October 25th edition, quoted in *The Long Weekend: Life in the English Country House Between the Wars* by Adrian Tinniswood). The Molyneux family stayed in Croxteth Hall until 1972, but there were changes over this time, especially during World War 1, when the Hall was used as a hospital for wounded soldiers and officers.

However, in 1914 few people could predict these changes. In an article in History Today – 'Germany, Britain & the Coming of War in 1914' – Richard Wilkinson (a history teacher at Marlborough College) states: "While these horrors were in the future – only a very few visionaries guessed what war would be like either on land or sea". The brutality of the war, the number of casualties, was unimaginable.

The strangeness and abruptness of the war is apparent in the diaries of Lady Helena Mary Molyneux, Countess of Sefton. Helena Molyneux was married to Osbert Molyneux, the 6th Earl of Sefton, and lived at Croxteth Hall until 1943. In 1914, she was 39 years old and had three children.

Helena's diary accounts (which can be found in Liverpool Central Library) are quite undemonstrative – there are few descriptions of her emotions or feelings, no private confessions – they are records of her daily life at Croxteth: the rats, rabbits and grouse that her sons shot, horse-riding outings, walks, tennis matches and lunch engagements. Reading between the lines there is a sense of contentment and peace, a love for her family and an appreciation for luxuries.

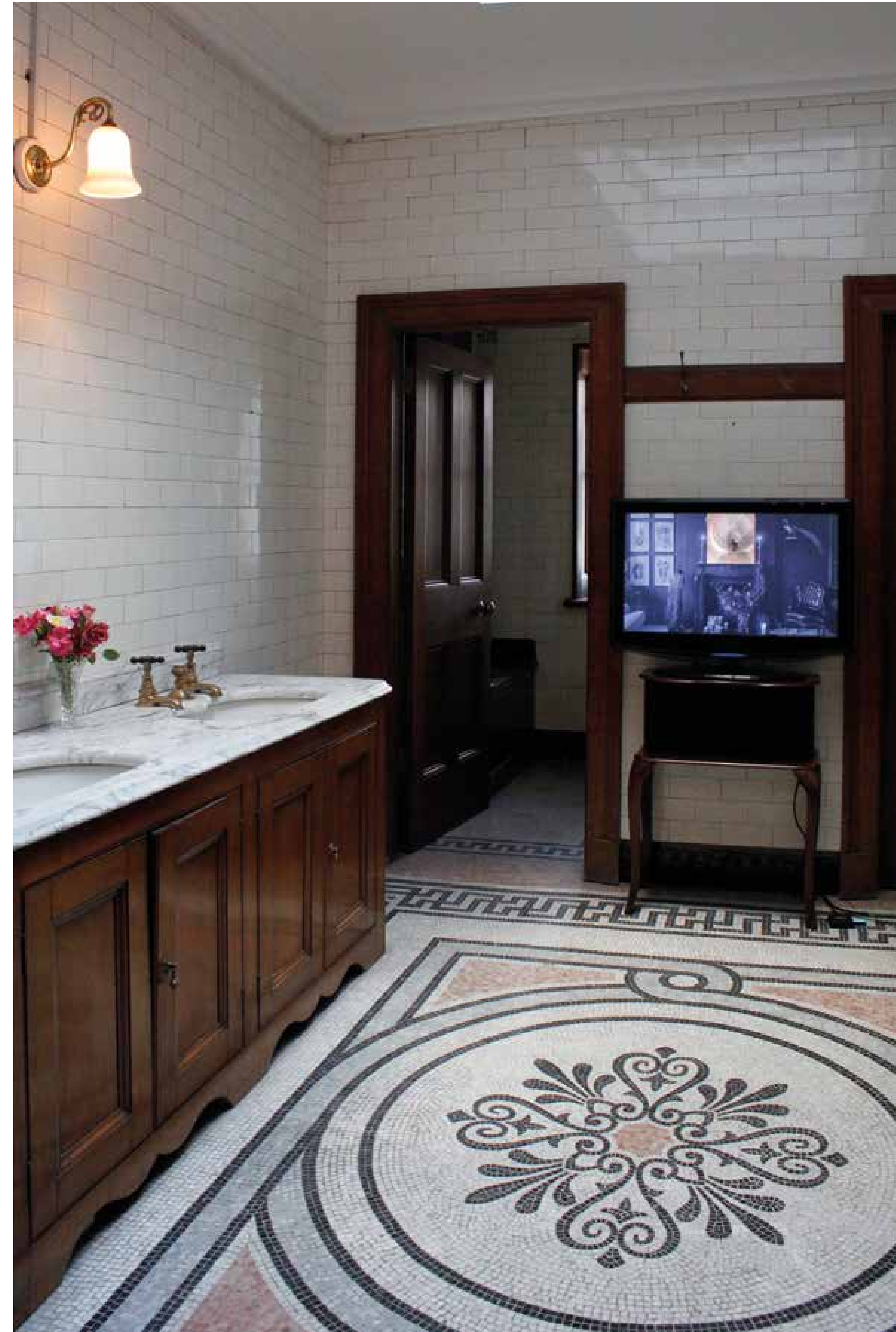
As the diary continues however, there are brief mentions of the war. She carefully records specific events and the deaths of individuals. On August 15th, she writes "our Expeditionary Force all safely landed in France" (her husband's uncle, Henry Hervey Molyneux also kept a diary at this time, and his entry on August 15th reads: "no war news"). Some days later, on August 24th, she writes of the "first news of our troops fighting" and we learn that she has begun to attend 'Ambulance Class'. Nevertheless, between these occasional references to the war, life carries on almost as normal: 3rd October 1914, "Shopped and lunched at the Ritz…"

Two years later, the war had painfully changed the lives of the Molyneux family. Helena's son Cecil was killed in the battle of Jutland in 1916, when he was only 16 years old. Just nine days after learning of their son's death, wounded soldiers began to arrive at Croxteth. On June 9th, 1916, Helena writes: "Our first batch of soldiers patients came in to the hospital – 12 from Alder Hey". Helena's daughter Evelyn died the following year, at the age of 14. Her eldest son, Hugh, became the 7th and last Earl of Sefton.

After the war, Helena dedicated much of her time to charity work. During World War II, she worked as a waitress at the S. Gordon Smith Institute for Seamen. Throughout her life, she was a keen gardener, and even after she moved from Croxteth in 1943, she visited regularly, spending time in the gardens. On August 27th 1947, Helena died in the gardens at Croxteth.

Patricia Mackinnon-Day: *The Leftovers* 2017
gelatine, glass

Patricia Mackinnon-Day: *The Air Monopolist* 2017
Gobo projection, screenprint, air, polythene



Paul Rooney: *Father's Grave* 2017
single screen video with six channel sound, 4 mins
installation view

'Olde Tyme' Music Halls

Jessica Holtaway

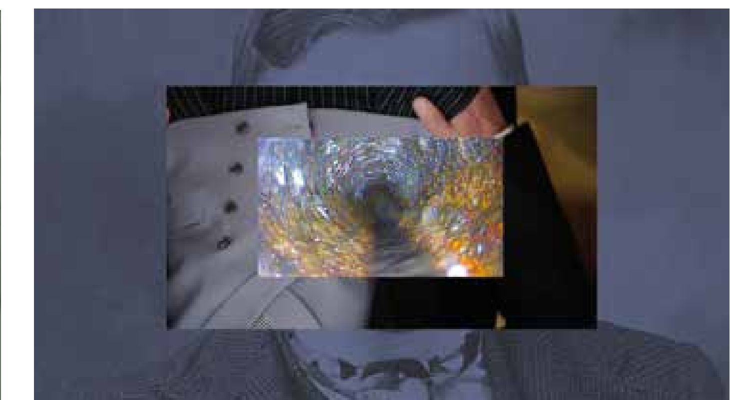
Summer of 2017, artist Paul Rooney developed a piece of work that responded both to a short extract from *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by Robert Tressell (which describes the Raggeds digging trenches for new drains) and an Edwardian music hall song, *They're Moving Father's Grave to Build a Sewer*.

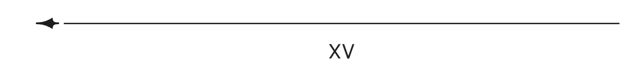
Music halls emerged in the mid 19th century and were popular for over 100 years. They developed from public houses and saloons that featured entertainers. Over time the entertainers became the main attraction and some pubs were demolished and replaced with music hall theatres, where people could eat, drink and smoke whilst watching a large variety of performances. Although saloons and pubs were places for men to meet and talk business, the music halls also attracted women and children, so much so that Charles Dickens once described them as "a virtual nursery". Entertainment included singing, ventriloquism, magic acts and drag acts, amongst many more. When *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* was published, its readers would have likely been familiar with songs such as *I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside* and *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*.

In Liverpool, The Star (now The Liverpool Playhouse) was a popular music hall that opened in 1866. Child actors Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence appeared there in 1912. Robert Tressell was also familiar with music hall culture, and his characters reference a number of different songs – in Chapter 29 'The Pandora' Bert White creates a mini theatre show for children at a birthday party, and the children respond by singing music hall songs such as *Two Lovely Black Eyes*.

As jazz, swing and the big band dance music of the 40s gained popularity, the music halls became less fashionable. But they have had a lasting influence on culture – from contemporary drag acts and burlesque through to variety shows and talent shows, such as Britain's Got Talent. The Beatles' Paul McCartney was the son of music hall performer Jimmy McCartney, and this influenced some of the Beatles' songs, for example *When I'm 64*.

This summer, Paul Rooney installed an HD video work in the 'Gentlemen's Bathroom' at Croxteth Hall: *Father's Grave*. Paul used the lyrics of the anonymous music hall song *They're Moving Father's Grave to Build a Sewer*, but changed its tune. The still images from the video featured in this publication show footage of sewer drain inspections comically juxtaposed with images of opulent Edwardian style interiors.





Neville Gabie: *Experiments in Black and White XXIV* 2017
two screen video 1 minute 56 seconds
domestic furniture, filmed Croxteth Hall, Liverpool

Neville Gabie: *Experiments in Black and White XXI* 2017
video 5 minutes 30 seconds
domestic china, filmed Croxteth Hall Liverpool

Croxteth Hall: A Story of Ghosts

Jessica Holtaway

"If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with* or *about* some ghost (s'entretenir de quelque fantome). So it would be necessary to learn spirits."
Jacques Derrida: *Spectres of Marx*: Exordium: xvii

This is an account of absent people. Though it is not an ordinary ghost story, it is a reflection on the apparitions – the remarkable and unexpected appearances of people and things – encountered at Croxteth Hall over the summer of 2017. Before I visited Croxteth Hall, I was aware of its status as one of the most haunted houses in Liverpool, and as I explored the Hall and its attics, the images of a 'man in a hood' and of a glowing figure, lurked in the corners of my imagination.

Nevertheless, the 'ghosts' I chanced upon were not these. They were not threatening or frightening, as I imagined ghosts to be. For psychologist Sigmund Freud the idea of the 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*), which often characterises ghost stories, appears when something that has been hidden or secret, becomes visible. He believed that the uncanny brings with it horror and even disgust, and that it is a manifestation of the subconscious fears and desires of an individual when they encounter something 'strange'. However, the ghosts I write about here are not 'uncanny' in this sense, although they were encountered through objects and stories concealed in archives or in cordoned off areas of the house. Many of the absent people who brushed through my consciousness were the tired servants of the Hall, wanting to tell their story, to not be forgotten. But in many cases, I had to look for them, to rummage through dusty boxes, seek out century-old diaries and to carefully observe the traces of the Hall's history.

A haunted house

On first entering the house, the most tangible absence was that of the family who lived there until 1972. Their belongings, so called, carefully dusted and cleaned, lay still and unused. The house felt frozen in time, a perfect capsule featuring photographs of children, pets and horses, portraits of the family. On my first visit to the hall, I found myself imagining them as as characters in a period drama, familiar caricatures but lacking authenticity.

Hoping to learn more about these individuals, I visited Liverpool Central Library to read the diaries of Lady Helena Molyneux. Here I encountered my first apparition. Through the pages of Helena's diaries, I was introduced to a woman of wealth and status, with her specific joys and anxieties, hopes and fears. Between lunches at the Ritz and tennis matches, World War I crept into her life. The war was to claim her son, and to turn her home into a hospital for soldiers. It was to change the social structures she had built her life around.

Reading between the lines of her dispassionate accounts of daily life, a figure began to emerge of a complex woman: a woman who loved her pets as if they were people, but who once proudly shot a lion; a woman who dedicated much of her time to charity work, and who put aside her privileges and worked as a waitress during World War II.

Through these diaries, I also began to realise that Croxteth Hall is haunted by the inhuman forces of capital. The fate of the house is still, as it has always been, dictated by the cold, familiar and yet ultimately strange and unpredictable flows of wealth and power. To be 'haunted' not only means to be by a ghost, it refers to showing signs of suffering or severe anxiety. Helena's anxieties surrounding the war and its impact on British society are tied into and contextualised by wider issues of inequality, poverty and suffering, brought about by systems of capitalism. These systems still mould the unfolding history of the building. Throughout the house there are traces of individuals forced by their economic circumstances to do repetitive manual labour. Tiny handprints in the red bricks of the house point to child labour – to a collective apparition that lingers in the very fabric of the building.

Weird representations

In his book *The Weird and the Eerie*, theorist Mark Fisher differentiates between these two concepts. The 'weird' refers to something that "does not belong" and that "brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it", whereas the 'eerie' gives us "access to the forces that govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured" so as to release us from the mundane. In other words, the weird refers to an encounter with the 'outside' and the eerie exposes the 'outside' that has always been within a familiar 'inside'.

This summer, three artists brought the 'weird' into Croxteth Hall. Patricia Mackinnon-Day, Paul Rooney and Neville Gabie each created site-specific works that interrupted the familiar narrative of glamorised wealth in Edwardian England. At the top of the main stairs, amongst the portraits of the absent, Nevillie Gabie's video work of a man painting a wall and obscuring himself in the process, appears uncannily alive even as the artist conceals his identity through painting. *Experiments in Black and White XXII (Royal Realm)* abruptly asks us to think about the role of the worker and the erasure of workers' identities in the historic narratives of houses such as Croxteth Hall.

Opposite, Patricia MacKinnon-Day's piece *The Air Monopolist* features an artist-edited copy of an auction book from 1973 – the year that ownership of Croxteth Hall and many of its belongings passed to Liverpool council – along with a projection of text from Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and individual bags of air. Each of the bags of air has been collected from the rooms of Croxteth Hall, and listed as lot numbers in the edited version of the 1973 auction catalogue. The bags of air physically block a large doorway, they seem to hover, shining and transparent – another apparition of the forces of capital over the lives of those who lived and worked at the Hall.

In a nearby bathroom, Paul Rooney's video *Father's Grave* literally brings the 'outside' into the Hall. Video footage of drain inspections is juxtaposed with images of British capitalists and city gents in their bowlers and top hats, or occasionally in their field sports tweeds. *Father's Grave* is inspired by the old music hall song *They're moving Father's grave to build a sewer* – a song about the ghost of a working class man whose grave is moved to make way for a sewer for a 'city chap'. The spirit of the man haunts the 'privy seat', preventing its owner from being able to go to the toilet. *Father's Grave* features the haunting sound of a child singing the core lyric 'you're dead'. Here, the viewer is drawn, trancelike, towards an unknowable underworld – towards that which lies beyond the familiar.

An eerie calm

Unlike the 'weird', which appears suddenly as if from outside, the 'eerie' reveals an outside that has existed serenely within the familiar all along. The attics at Croxteth Hall are 'eerie' – these abandoned spaces evoke the absent presence of the staff, they provide access to the obscured experiences of the staff that lived at the Hall. These empty spaces feel strange, and yet they were fundamental to the daily workings of the house. Perhaps they are strange because they feel so obviously abandoned, in comparison to the main rooms of the house that are polished and preserved. But even these main rooms evoke a sense of the eerie through their stillness. This feeling intensifies with the presence of the contemporary works, in particular Neville Gabie's *Experiments in Black and White XXI (Status Quo)*, in which the artist shakily holds a stack of plates until he is no longer able to bear the weight and they all crash to the ground. The chaotic fragmentation of the china contrasts with the utter stillness and redundancy of the chinaware in the dining room.

Patricia MacKinnon-Day's *Chain of Gold*, a series of china plates featuring portraits of members of the family alongside portraits of the staff and volunteers who currently work at Croxteth Hall, is placed at the foot of the main staircase in the house. Each design seems to re-contextualise the status of the family – no longer the sole focus of Croxteth Hall's history, they sit or stand alongside present day staff. These works become new monuments that elevate the staff from their role as servants of the house, to agents of its history.

Both these pieces reveal an 'outside' that has characterised the house for hundreds of years, something unfamiliar within the house that is fundamental to its history. In different ways they challenge the concept of the 'status quo' by pointing to the unfamiliar at the heart of the familiar – a recurring eeriness at the heart of everyday life that renders any sense of a fixed state of affairs as an illusion.

Paranormal activities

The word 'paranormal' refers to anything that is above, beyond or contrary to what is 'normal'. If we describe something as 'paranormal', we are indicating that the world around us is 'normal' or ordered ('normal' is derived from the Latin 'norma' meaning carpenter's square), but that this 'something' does not conform, it is 'para'. The weird and the eerie make us aware of 'the new'. The shock of the new can bring a combination of pleasure and pain that, as Fisher explains, "has something in common with what Lacan called *jouissance*" – it ties in with our sensual enjoyment of the world. What we perceive to be 'paranormal' can help us disengage from existing attachments, and can be a catalyst for change, for a new way of seeing and experiencing a place or a situation.

When I read though interviews with the staff from Croxteth Hall – particularly the accounts of Mrs. Fallows, a scullery maid who worked at the house between 1918 and 1973 – my admiration for the luxury of Edwardian living began to dissipate. Mrs. Fallow's accounts of the labour that went into maintaining class privilege illuminated patterns of structural inequality, and raised questions around exploitation:

"[When it got busy] [w]e just had to cope. It was hard work. I was up many a time, five o'clock in the morning. You would not see your bed 'til eleven at night, sometimes after. And you'd be on all day and then you'd have to cope with the day and do part of the next day, to help you on, like. You had to work it to your own idea how you could manage." (Mrs. Fallows, in an interview in 1981.)

As I read through interviews with plumbers, cleaners and kitchen staff at Croxteth, I began to be haunted by their accounts of 'normal' life. Away from Croxteth, I became increasingly aware of spectres of inequality. The systems of power, described in their accounts – systems that necessitated low-income workers to fight as individuals in a social system that favoured the rich – no longer seemed historic, they surrounded me wherever they went. But this realisation was not wholly painful – rather I began to sense disorder or 'wrongness' in the world around me, a feeling that brought with a sharper clarity. The artworks at Croxteth Hall had evoked a similar feeling – the incongruity of the artworks in the house generated an awareness of the new and unfamiliar, which re-contextualised the objects and characters of Croxteth Hall's history and provoked questions about what we consider to be 'normal' now.

A lingering spirit

The artists re-introduced visitors to Robert Tressell's socialist novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. The novel, insightful, witty but above all angry, became the spirit at the centre of the project. Presenting a critical lens on capitalism, Tressell calls for a socialist politics and to convince us, he asks us to follow the lives of a group of painters and decorators at the turn of the 20th century. They are 'philanthropists' because their low cost hard labour lines the pockets of the rich, whilst they sacrifice their health, families and stability. Despite their bleak living conditions and the ridicule from their colleagues, the book's socialists have a cautious optimism.

Since the publication of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* in 1914, the British state has founded and developed a number of public services that have helped low-income individuals and families. Nevertheless, as we see increasing privatisation and inequality in the UK today, the book has importance and significance for us now. Gabie, MacKinnon-Day and Rooney have each responded to the main themes of the book – inequality, social divisions, privatisation – in order to generate contemporary perspectives on these issues and to prompt audiences to question the systems that they affirm or reject through their life choices.

The novel concludes with an other-worldly vision of socialism, a phantasm that is 'weird' but hopeful, rather than fearful:

"Mankind, awaking from the long night of bondage and mourning and arising from the dust wherein they had lain prone so long, were at last looking upward to the light that was riving asunder and dissolving the dark clouds which had so long concealed from them the face of heaven."

This spirit of determination and hope in the face of uncertainty lingers on beyond the exhibition, beyond Croxteth Hall, and asks us to imagine and work towards a better future.

This text opened with a passage from philosopher Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* – a text that discusses the spirits of communism and imagines political theorist Karl Marx as a ghost who "goes on speaking". Derrida points out that the first noun of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* is "spectre" ("A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism"). Similarly, Tressell's closing image of the golden light reanimates the spectre of socialism that awakens beings out of "the dust". Tressell asks us to imagine socialism as an other-worldly spirit. Here we can, like Derrida, begin to reflect on the necessity of learning from spirits. And, just as Derrida advocates a politics of responsibility characterised by an acknowledgement of the unknowable, we can begin to question the political ideologies of our time, and regard traces and fragments of history as a fragile inheritance that sustains the possibility of ethical engagement with others within and beyond the complex systems of power that affect our lives today.

A tale of painters and decorators who are forced, daily, to compete with one another in an economic race to the bottom, "the painters' bible" as the novel became known, was quickly recognised as an important radical, even insurgent text. Dr Deaglán Ó Donghaile

Paul Rooney: *Father's Grave* 2017
single screen video with six channel sound, 4 mins
video still

Acknowledgements | Colophon

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