

In 1977, after a five-year campaign, a new gravestone was inaugurated in Walton Park Cemetery, Liverpool. It shows the names of all those interred in the grave and has the following extract from the book - chapter 45, "The Great Oration"

"Through squalid life they laboured in  
sordid grief they died  
Those sons of a mighty mother, those  
props of England's pride.  
They are gone, there is none can undo  
it, nor save our souls from the curse,  
But many a million cometh, and shall  
they be better or worse?  
It is We must answer and hasten  
and open wide the door  
For the rich man's hurrying terror and the slow  
foot hope of the poor."



Tressell's Grave in Walton Park Cemetery

In a preface to his book, Robert Tressell said he wanted to write an interesting and readable story, full of human interest and based upon the happenings of everyday life by building trade workers in a small town in the south of England. Sadly, the author died before its publication and he could hardly have imagined that nearly a century later, his book would still be revered by socialists and trade unionists around the world, that Hastings and Liverpool would have Tressell festivals or that his home city would honour him with a portrait and citation in the Dublin Writers Museum.



Social Democratic Federation Meeting in Hastings

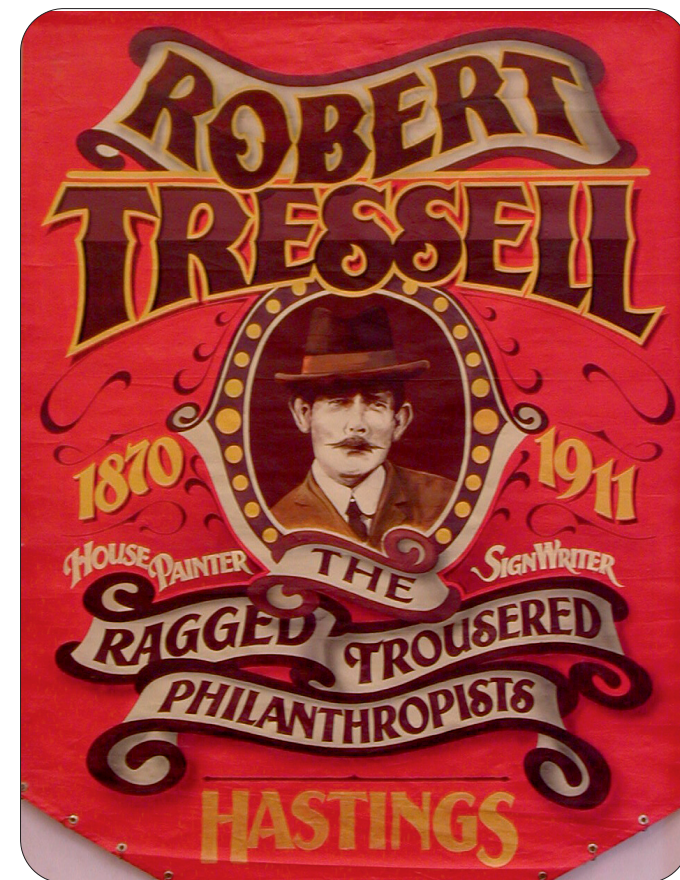
Once read, the book, a mixture of sadness and amusement humanity truth and inspiration, is never forgotten. How many readers have simply said - "it's changed my life!?"

This majestic yet dignified and simple evocation of his times has become timeless. The relative poverty of the 21st century proves that his oblong has yet to be squared. Robert Tressell was truly a painter of words.

Thanks to:- Irish National Painters and Decorators Trade Group (SIPTU)  
Robert Tressell Society, Hastings.  
T.U.C. library collections - University of North London for reproduction of the original title page.  
0171 - 753 - 3184. E-mail [c.coats@unl.ac.uk](mailto:c.coats@unl.ac.uk)  
The late John Nettleton for gravestone picture.  
Dee Daly for Wexford Street picture  
Ion Castro for transcribing, typesetting and supplying the remaining pictures.  
Trevor Hopper for content contribution.

Hastings Museum has a Robert Tressell display and an archive 01424 - 781155.  
e-mail: [museum@hastings.gov.uk](mailto:museum@hastings.gov.uk)  
web: [www.hmag.org.uk/robertTressell](http://www.hmag.org.uk/robertTressell)  
[www.Hastings.gov.uk/museum](http://www.Hastings.gov.uk/museum)

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## Robert Tressell

18th April 1870 to 3rd February 1911

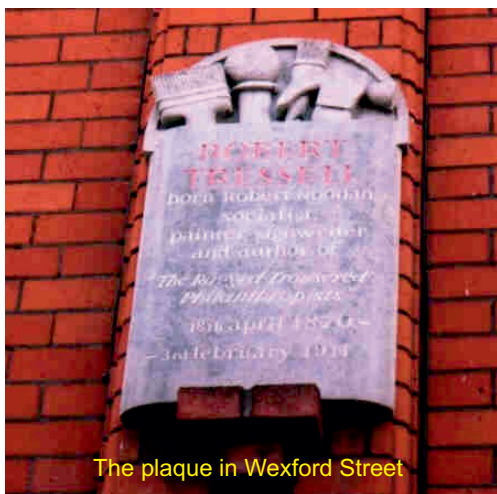
Painter, signwriter, socialist

author of "*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*"



Robert Tressell was born Robert Phillip Noonan at 37 Wexford Street, Dublin on 18th April 1870. At 16 he left home for Liverpool and about four years later, he emigrated to Cape Town in South Africa. On October 15, 1891 he married Elizabeth Hartel. Their daughter Kathleen was born on 17th September the following year.

About 1894 Robert moved to Johannesburg, where there were better employment opportunities, whilst Elizabeth stayed in Cape Town. In 1897 they were divorced and Robert awarded custody of Kathleen. In Johannesburg Robert was active in the Trades and Labour Council, which represented workers in the building trades. In May the following year he attended the inaugural meeting of the International Independent Labour Party and was elected to its committee.



The plaque in Wexford Street

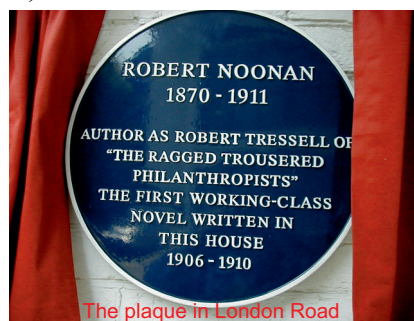
In 1898 he became a member of the Transvaal Centennial Committee, which was involved in discussions to form a local Irish military unit, that would side with the Boers in any

future war against Britain. However, with a young child to care for and indifferent health, he left South Africa before the war started and, in 1901, arrived in Hastings. He and Kathleen and his widowed sister Adelaide with her son Arthur, moved in briefly with another sister, Mary Jane, in Western Road St. Leonards

In Hastings the family lived at various addresses, and Robert worked for at least three different employers - he may have been involved in local trade union activities and organisation. He certainly joined the newly formed Branch of the Social Democratic Federation.

In August 1910, he decided to emigrate to Canada, and, as a first step moved to Liverpool to earn the fare for himself and Kathleen. On 26th November 1910 he was admitted to Royal Liverpool Infirmary and died there from cardiac arrest due to pulmonary tuberculosis on 3rd February 1911. He was subsequently buried with 12 others, in a pauper's grave in Walton Park Cemetery - in the shadow of the wall of Walton prison.

So Robert's sad early death left Kathleen with one legacy - the manuscript of some 250,000 handwritten words stored in a deed box he had made. In 1913, Kathleen, now 21 left Hastings for a post of nursery nurse/ governess in London - taking the deed box with her. By chance, through her next employer and a neighbour, the existence of the manuscript was mentioned to Miss Jessie Pope, a journalist and writer, she read and liked the novel and recommended it to a publisher friend, Grant Richards.



The plaque in London Road

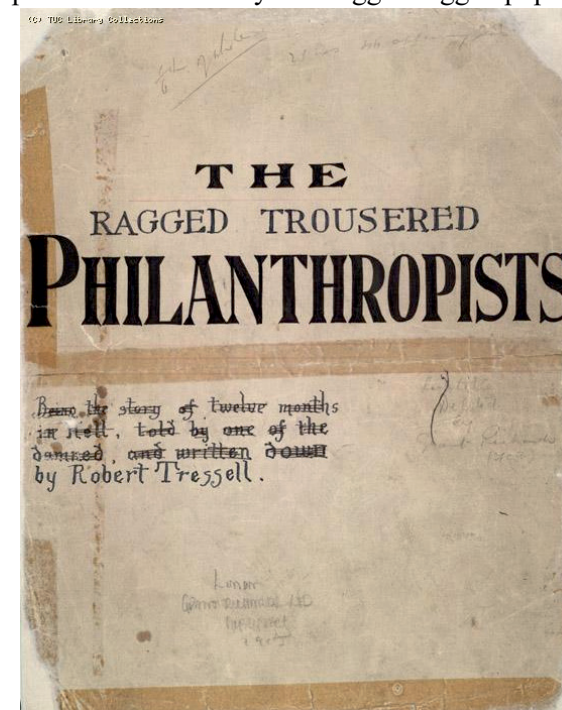
Kathleen sold the complete rights for £25 and received a further £25 after the first edition was published in 1914. In 1945, when Fred Ball was researching for his biography of Tressell "*One of the Damned*", he discovered that Grant Richards still had the original M/S. Together with a few friends, he raised the 60 guineas purchase price. On a Sunday morning, 29th September 1946, a meeting was arranged in a café at London's Elephant and Castle and the vendor and the purchaser exchanged money and manuscript.



A magnificent example of Noonan's Work

The 1700 quarto sheets were in two parcels, Fred later ascertained that the smaller of the two contained the sections not included in Grant Richards abridged 1914 edition. In 1958, the M/S was bought by the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives. The following year, the union presented it to the Trades Union Congress. It is now in the TUC library collections at the University of North London and can be viewed by appointment.

The book is online at <http://www.unionhistory.info/ragged/ragged.php>



On the original title page of "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists", Robert Tressell wrote: -"Being a story of 12 months in Hell told by one of the damned". As Fred Ball says in the preface to his book "Robert Tressell was a man whose 'public life' only began after his death, and in strange ways it has continued ever since". In the years following the publication of the abridged Grant Richards version the book was republished many times. It also became an international success with translations into German, French, Russian, Bulgarian, Czech, Japanese and Swahili. However, it was not until October 1955 that the full M/S was published the first time by Lawrence and Wishart.