

The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists

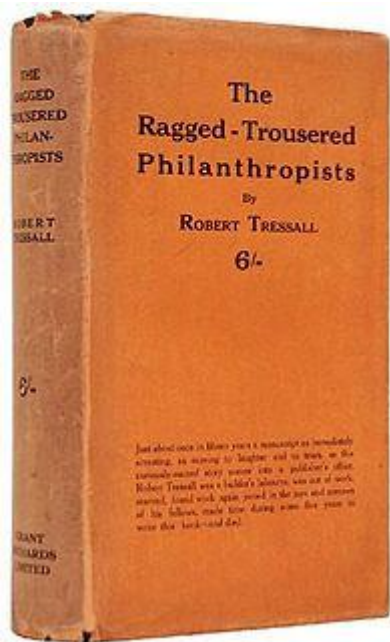
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The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists



1st edition

Author(s)	Robert Tressell <i>a.k.a</i> <i>Noonan, born Croker</i>
Country	Ireland
Language	English
Genre(s)	Novel
Publisher	Grant Richards
Publication date	23 April 1914
Media type	Print (Hardback & Paperback)
ISBN	NA

The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists is a [novel](#) by [Robert Tressell](#) first published in 1914 after his death in 1911. An explicitly political work, it is widely regarded as a classic of working-class literature.

Contents

[\[hide\]](#)

- [1 Background](#)
- [2 Plot introduction](#)
- [3 Major themes](#)
- [4 Adaptations](#)
- [5 See also](#)
- [6 References and notes](#)
- [7 External links](#)

[\[edit\]](#) Background

Robert Tressell was the [nom-de-plume](#) of **Robert Noonan**, a house painter. Although born in [Dublin](#) (and baptised with the surname Croker), Noonan settled in [England](#) after living in [South Africa](#) at the beginning of the twentieth century. He chose the pen name Tressell in reference to the trestle table, an important part of his kit as a painter and decorator. Based on his own experiences of poverty, exploitation, and his terror that he and his daughter Kathleen — whom he was raising alone — would be consigned to the [workhouse](#) if he became ill, Noonan embarked on a detailed and scathing Marxist analysis of the relationship between working-class people and their employers. The "philanthropists" of the title are the workers who, in Noonan 's view, acquiesce in their own exploitation in the interests of their bosses.

The novel is set in the fictional town of [Mugsborough](#), based on the southern English coastal town of [Hastings](#), where Noonan lived, although its geographical location is described in the book and is well away from the actual town of Hastings. The original title page of the book carried the subtitle: "Being the story of twelve months in Hell, told by one of the damned, and written down by Robert Tressell."

He completed *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* in 1910, but the 1,600-page hand-written manuscript was rejected by the three publishing houses to which it was submitted. The rejections severely depressed Noonan, and Kathleen had to save the manuscript from being burnt. She placed it for safekeeping in a metal box underneath her bed.

After Noonan died of [tuberculosis](#), Kathleen was determined to have her father's writing published and showed it to a friend, the writer [Jessie Pope](#). Pope recommended the book to her own publisher, who bought the rights in April 1914 for £25. It was published that year in much abridged form in the United Kingdom and in an even more abridged form (90,000 words, from the original 250,000), in 1918.^[1] It was also published in Canada and the United States in 1914, in the Soviet Union in 1920, and in Germany in 1925. The publisher removed much of the socialist ideology from the first edition; an unabridged edition with Noonan's original ending was not published until 1955.

[\[edit\]](#) Plot introduction

Clearly frustrated at the refusal of his contemporaries to recognise the inequity and iniquity of society, Tressell's cast of hypocritical [Christians](#), exploitative [capitalists](#) and corrupt councillors provide a backdrop for his main target — the workers who think that a better life is "not for the likes of them". Hence the title of the book; Tressell paints the workers as "philanthropists" who throw themselves into back-breaking work for poverty wages in order to generate profit for their masters.

The hero of the book, Frank Owen, is a [socialist](#) who believes that the capitalist system is the real source of the poverty he sees all around him. In vain he tries to convince his fellow workers of his world view, but finds that their education has trained them to distrust their own thoughts and to rely on those of their "betters". Much of the book consists of conversations between Owen and the others, or more often of lectures by Owen in the face of their jeering; this was presumably based on Tressell's own experiences.

[\[edit\]](#) Major themes

The book provides a comprehensive picture of social, political, economic and cultural life in [Britain](#) at a time when [socialism](#) was beginning to gain ground. It was around that time that the [Labour Party](#) was founded and began to win seats in the [House of Commons](#).

The book advocates a socialist society in which work is performed to satisfy the needs of all rather than to generate profit for a few. A key chapter is "The Great Money Trick", in which Owen organises a mock-up of capitalism with his workmates, using slices of bread as raw materials and knives as machinery. Owen 'employs' his workmates cutting up the bread to illustrate that the employer — who does not work — generates personal wealth whilst the workers effectively remain no better off than when they began, endlessly swapping coins back and forth for food and wages. This is Tressell's practical way of illustrating the [Marxist](#) theory of [surplus value](#), which in the capitalist system is generated by labour.

[\[edit\]](#) Adaptations

- The BBC made a TV production in the 60's starring [Edward Fox](#) as Owen and Alan Wade as Bert the barrow boy. They featured on the front cover of the paperback.
- [A stage adaptation](#), written by [Stephen Lowe](#) and directed by [William Gaskill](#), was first performed by [Joint Stock Theatre Company](#) in Plymouth on 14 September 1978. It opened at the [Riverside Studios](#), Hammersmith on 12 October 1978.
- A stage adaptation, written by [Archie Hind](#) and directed by [David Hayman](#), was performed in 1984 by the Scottish agitprop theatre company [7:84](#).
- A stage adaptation, by Tom McLennan, was commissioned by the union, [PCS](#), for "Unions 08". The play is still running and on its third consecutive year of touring. The Tressell society said of the adaptation: "This is the best production of this important work we have ever seen."
- An adaptation was made by Above The Title Productions for BBC radio in 2008, produced by Rebecca Pinfield and Johnny Vegas, and directed by Dirk Maggs. Three 60-minute episodes were broadcast as the Classic Serial on [Radio 4](#). Actors included [Andrew Lincoln](#) (Owen), [Johnny Vegas](#) (Easton), [Timothy Spall](#) (Crass), [Paul Whitehouse](#) (Old Misery), [John Prescott](#) (Policeman), [Bill Bailey](#) (Rushton), [Kevin Eldon](#) (Slyme), and [Tony Haygarth](#) (Philpot). This adaptation was nominated for a [Sony Radio Drama Award](#) in 2009.^[2]

- In May 2009, [BBC Radio 4](#) broadcast a two-part sequel called *Mugsborough 1917*, which featured many of the cast from the previous year's production. The dramatisation was by Andrew Lynch and features the characters of Robert Tressell's novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, picking up the story 10 years on.^[3]
- A stage adaptation, written by [Howard Brenton](#) and directed by [Christopher Morahan](#), opened at the [Liverpool Everyman](#) on 17 June 2010 and subsequently transferred to co-producer the [Minerva Theatre](#) in Chichester as of 15 July 2010.

[\[edit\]](#) See also



[Novels portal](#)

- [Socialism](#)

[\[edit\]](#) References and notes

1. [^] Oxford World's Classics edition, 2005, edited and with an introduction by Peter Miles
2. [^] ["Sony Award winners and nominees 2009"](#) *RadioAwards.org* (Retrieved: 7 September 2009)
3. [^] ["Classic Serial: Mugsborough 1917"](#) *BBC.co.uk* (Retrieved: 7 September 2009)

[\[edit\]](#) External links

- [link to Radio 4 drama producers Above The Title](#)
- [Read the e-text online in HTML format at Literature Junction](#)
- [The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists](#) at [Project Gutenberg](#)
- [The Robert Tressell Centre](#)
- [The Robert Tressell Collection at the Hastings Museum Website \(includes photographs of Robert Tressell\)](#)
- [TUC guide to the novel](#)
- [Audiobook of The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists at LibriVox.org](#)

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