Constructing Connections: Fiction, Art and Life

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
Neville Gabie: Experiments in Black and White XXII [Royal Realm]

Patricia Mackinnon-Day: 1973 Auction catalogue (edited)

II

opening the historic house to the public. The figures worker, who is now engaged in maintaining or wealthy. She made ten gilt-edged bone china plates, "bound and fettered with a chain of gold" to the of society’s “Money System”, in which workers are first of four works, is inspired by Owen’s description of the chosen setting for exhibiting the works.

Choosing Croxteth Hall, north of Liverpool, as the site for presenting the finished works, was as much pragmatic as particular. Formally the country house and manor house since 1775 of the Delaunay family or Earl of Sefton, the Hall’s most recent history has several possible touching points to Tressell and his text. Sed to have been re-decorated at about the same time as the book was written, Croxteth Hall perhaps parallels The Gauze, the property or ‘job’ that Tressell’s characters are nurturing, and for the Scottish Owen, has been discussions on labour, the shortage of work and the precarious nature of earning a living. The author himself was a painter of wallpaper and domestic past and present, and a low few years later was buried in a pauper’s grave five miles away, as noted.14

The Hall was the Edwardian home of the final Earl of Sefton and the Countess of Sefton, and as a set of interiors sited in the kitchens and the rooms of the former servants’ quarters. The second room is surrounded by portraits of Gabie’s final work The Air Monopolist, reflecting a further upgrade a rich gent’s residence. In one version the book of the unpleasant task of laying drains, often with the concept of invisibility, and through sound and collaged images, recreate the long history of disrupt our fascination for the stylish and wealthy, continue to obscure and disregard people through lack of acknowledgment. Mackinnon-Day always likes to remunerate herself within where the works, and interaction with people is part of that immersion. Her two other works, The Lyrical and the Hall’s final rooms, listed and labelled as sold lots in to appoint two, and a woman with a rod. The Countess of Sefton, and as a set of interiors reconnecting the areas of housing, the direct interpretation of the idea of ‘’working class literature’ provided a was reminiscent of a ghost (Hunter’s looming face is described by Owen as an ‘apparition’ in one passage), with Gabie’s selection of ghost in history being disrupted and the apparition of being. By removing something of the difficulties of representing history, he wanted to work with material like music, lyrics that would have been performed at the time of Tressell’s book, such as The Ghost of Benjamin Binns and The Countess of Sefton, and as a set of interiors reconnecting the areas of housing, the direct interpretation of the idea of ‘’working class literature’ provided a

the worker’s lost soul and his vengeful control of a by Tressell, they have taken a text that still resonates in materiality and what materials signify - in all three works he both manipulates and connects them to associations, past and present. Robert Tressell describes his characters vividly – you can picture them and hear their voices in your head. Along with Philippa and seleccion. Current cast will spend time with Clare, Minney and Hymie. There’s even a brief reference made to a Lady Slumreyn, the portrait painter and his sister, with the act of being as livelihood the painting of the individual. By doing so he the portrait painter and his sister, with the act of being as livelihood the painting of the individual. By doing so he

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 layover chair being taken from the Dressing Room up a narrow stair and through the Hall’s archives to the former servant’s quarters. The second shows a dissected heart found in the Satchmoasis of All being carried ceremonially through a grand corridor and up the main staircase of the Hall. Two similar pieces of footage capture 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. 

visibility

Tessa Jackson

Independent curator and writer

The four minutes video uses found drain-inspection footage laid over still and moving images of girls with black hair, athleticism and a certain naivety. There is even foreboding of gentility and their games shooting exploit. The work’s presentation in the bathroom captures the frightening idea of the worker’s lost soul and their anguished control of a gentleman, in the most private of spaces. All three artists, despite not in the project but across their work, in present and interact with places that are owed to do with art and more to do with contemporary society. Here, they shaped, by a very different thinking, connect past and present and the political and cultural contexts, contextualising Tressell’s Philanthropists with Croxteth Hall and now seek to continue to obscure and disregard people through lack of acknowledgment. Mackinnon-Day always likes to remunerate herself within where the works, and interaction with people is part of that immersion. Her two other works, The Lyrical and the Hall’s final rooms, listed and labelled as sold lots in...
Labour and Life

Jessica Holtaway

Historic records of Croxteth Hall evoke beautiful images of generations of families, along with their most treasured homes and dogs. “Who lived at Croxteth in 1840?” 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 oral research with me, which included a number of interviews with retired members of staff. These first-hand accounts provide deep descriptions of the daily labours that went into maintaining the building and the lifestyle of the Molyneux family. Here are some extracts from the interviews.

In 1981, Alison Oldenhoven talked to Mrs. Fullerton, a cook at Croxteth Hall from 1926 through to 1973. Mrs. Fullerton remembers daily life in the kitchens and� puddle harter at the Hall. Her day typically started at 6am, when she would sweep the kitchens and light the fires in coal stoves. “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’d 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’ll sweep down there and here. Next place, the fire was burning all night in there. You used to make it. You did not shovel coal like that, no, big bag, big lump and put them on, and they would last all day. You had to use the 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’ll have to get stuff washed up for breakfast, so we used to keep them on the rakes of the dressers. We used to put them on the top of the shelf of the put in a screen in this room here. Then I used to have to go to the lift, send it upstairs, pull the lever, by the time I got up there it wasn’t there. When I got up at 6am I had to go to the dining room chins on the lift, by the time I got down, it was all way down. I used to have to run and put the dining room chins there ready for when the staff had gone up, and then put the chins on the stov to get warm you see. It was like chaos.” And this was all before the morning! Mrs. Fullerton reflects.

“When it got busy [we] just had to cope. It was hard work. I used to rise up many a time, five o’clock in the morning. You wouldn’t see your bed till eleven at night, sometimes. And after you’d be on all day and then you’d have to cope with the day and the part of the next day, help you see. You had no work to do to your own ideas how you could manage.”

Frank Games, the plumber at Croxteth Hall, also remembers long days such as these. Frank was born in 1927, at the work 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 though it was snowing. He would cycle when he could not cycle and he would still get here for quarter past five. I’ve seen him leaving home at 5 o’clock in the morning, when there’s been a heavy snow storm, to get here, so it 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 load the Earl of Sefton’s carriages. 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 2 o’clock in the morning, and he would still need to be up against the next day in time for work at quarter past five.

Mrs. Unwin, a former cleaner at Croxteth Hall, began working there in 1942. She did not live at the Hall, but she came in daily to assist the live-in staff. Her day started at 5am, when she would sweep the servants’ rooms. Each year she would help with the annual spring clean which involved:

“Breaking all the walls down, washing all the paintwork, cleaning the carpet, no cleaner, you’d have to get on your hands and knees, we used to do it in strips each. A little brush rubber brush and after that, you’d get 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 lifestyle 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 Croxteth: Connections: Fiction, Art and Life aims to engage with the less visible histories of Croxteth and to reflect on contemporary issues around labour and freedom.
Patricia Mackinnon-Day: Chain of Gold 2017
photographic print on gold-edged bone china
workers, and its subtitle, the crises and traumas experienced by Edwardian Marx’s analyses of capitalism, the novel foregrounds ought to be exterminated as well.” “exterminated” four million peasants during the scathing of British colonial policy in Ireland where capitalist economics and imperialist expansion, both contradiction of imperialism’s claim to liberate its firm irony, that “Britons never shall be slaves”. Rule Britannia Bulgarian, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, Polish, Slovak, Czech and Spanish.

The novel’s graphic descriptions of poverty, along with its narrating portraits of working class life, powerfully exploit the novel’s particular situation in the social conditions of the time. The novel is a sympathetic and politically astute in its denunciation of class violence. Amongst working-class English workers who, Tressell, found, were either thoroughly terrorised or dehumanized by the expropriation of society and the state, the novel had traditionally been regarded as a specifically English expression of social disaster and social identity rather than the product of an international, anti-colonial consciousness.

In his introduction to the 1965 edition, Alan Sillitoe describes it as the “first great English novel about the class war” and in 1969 the Nobel Literature Prize laureate, M.F. Fordham, praised it as “one of the greatest realist novels in the English tongue.”

Tressell’s illustrations of the life of the workers, the health and the workers’ struggles with the charlatans of medicine were, according to the prominent Marxist newspaper, the Manchester Guardian, “as extraordinary” four million peasant during the Irish Famine of the 1840s and 1850s (reflected in, immediately, as the “penny dreadful” feature). “This novel”, he argued, that the novel’s logical stop was for such socialistic policies to be adopted by the British government in England, where the ruling class has already conversed with the “half of our country who ought to be entertained as well.”

Thoroughly publicized and influential by Karl Marx’s analyses of capital, the novel traverses the crimes and triumphs of a generation of working-class workers and, in its suite, being the story of Twombly

In the novel’s preface, Tressell explained why he decided to use fiction as a means of conveying the exploration of the proletariat’s bleak and – for middle class readers, at least – unarguable working-life. Upon its publication, it artifices experiences that, as Tressell, noted, were ignored in minimum English fiction, explaining, to its readers here, in Britain, “the works (i.e., capitalized have an easy prey”. Conveying the real, material consequences of life under capitalism, it portrays working-class experience of modernity as a profound encounter with endless cycles of capitalist crisis and stagnation. In doing so the novel [Hillard Raymond Williams’s conceptions of progress] as that which reflects contemporary society’s “structure of feeling.”

In the Tressell Philosophers, we find an exploration of anti-colonial politics in combination with socialist, revolutionary socialism. Through this radical narrative, Tressell, or Noonan, counteract colonialism and its ascription that it is precisely this fragmentary aesthetic that repeats the direct violence of capitalism and the intensity of the cumulative experience of working class life. Tressell’s social realism is key to how it has conveyed these problems to generation 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, the impoverished, and to people working on zero-hour contracts. Its relevance is undermined in a world in which the monopolization of resources and their concentration in the hands of wealthy and powerful elites interferes with poorer nations. Now that imperialist governments have, since 2003, revived the practice of direct military occupation, it also speaks to the colonized and to those who believe “independence and self-rule” by neoliberal capitalism, like the immigrants and economic refugees whom Tressell depicted in his novel. It speaks to the many people in this country today who are forced, those who died in the Grenfell fire, those who are unregulated and haphazardly dangerous conditions in urban spaces that replicate the displaced 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 role remains as relevant to today as it was to those who encountered it in 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 novel, then, is the final line of this

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Neville Gabie: Experiments in Black and White XXIII (Royal Realm) 2017
video 64 minutes 3 seconds
household paint, buckets and suit
The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists by Robert Tressell was published in 1914, the year World War I 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 those 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 1944. 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 banish 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 hear 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. 3rd October 1916, Helena writes: “Our first batch of invalid 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.
This summer, 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 Noel 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
I imagined ghosts to be. For psychologist Sigmund Freud, the uncanny brings with it a sense of the 'prophetic', which often characterises ghost stories, appearing as things that have been hidden or secret, becomes visible. He believed that the uncanny brings with it the horizon of ever and every day, and that it is a manifestation of the subconscious fears and desires of an individual. It is the uncanny that Freud referred to as 'the return of the repressed'. It is the uncanny that allows us to glimpse things that have been hidden, to see things that have been concealed in archives or in the lowest depths of our subconscious. In this way, the ghost can be seen as a symbol of the subconscious and of the hidden aspects of the self.

Nevertheless, the 'ghost' I chanced upon were not these. They were not threatening or frightening, as I imagined ghosts to be. For psychologist and filmmaker David Lynch, the idea of the 'uncanny' (formellic), which often characterises ghost stories, appears as things that have been hidden or secret, becomes visible. He believed that the uncanny brings with it the horizon of ever and every day, and that it is a manifestation of the subconscious fears and desires of an individual. It is the uncanny that Freud referred to as 'the return of the repressed'. It is the uncanny that allows us to glimpse things that have been hidden, to see things that have been concealed in archives or in the lowest depths of our subconscious. In this way, the ghost can be seen as a symbol of the subconscious and of the hidden aspects of the self.

**Croxteth Hall: A Story of Ghosts**

Jessica Hellyer

"It's long-lasting to remain — to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death. What happens between life and death, can only be 'paranormal'." — It ties in with our current engagement with others within and beyond the complex systems of power that affect our lives today.

This spirit of determination and hope in the face of uncertainty lies 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 Specters of Marx — a text that discusses the politics of communism and imagines political theorist Karl Marx as a ghost who "speaks on speaking". Derrida points out that the first uses of the Marquis de Sade's Commissary of Specters: "(A spectres is haunting Europe — the spectres of communism)." Similarly, Troussel's closing image of the flying ghosts around the primary plinth of the sculpture that mockers bring out of the dust". Troussel asks us to imagine specters as a form of political consciousness: Here we see, 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.

**The novel concludes with an other-worldly vision of communism**. Similarly, Tressell's closing image of workers to fight as individuals in a social system wherein they have lain prone so long, were at last released from their bondage and mourning and arising from the dust of life... This spirit of determination and hope in the face of uncertainty lies on beyond the exhibition, beyond Croxteth Hall, and asks us to imagine and work towards a better future.

**A haunted house**

On first entering the house, the most immediate absence is the company of humans. Their belongings, so called, dusted and unused. The house felt frozen in time, a perfect snapshot of Edwardian life and consumption: the image of a 'man's house' and a glowing figure, lurking in the corners of my imagination.

"My first apparition happened through the pages of Helena's diaries, was introduced to a woman of wealth and status, with her special joy of antiques, hopes and plans. Between her writings at the Brussels International Exhibition of 1958 and her work at Croxteth Hall, the years since the Second World War I enticed into her life. The war saw her turn her house into a hospital for soldiers. It was during the course of her diaries that I was introduced to the world of the strange and the unexpected."

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, who once promptly shut a lioness from her room, and to her entire house and pets, the images of a 'man's house' and a glowing figure, lurked in the corners of my imagination.

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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

Acknowledgements | Colophon
This project was delivered by Tressell Noonan Associates, a Community Interest Company Ltd by Guarantee established by artists Neville Gabie, Patricia MacKinnon-Day, Paul Rooney and Creative Producer Frances Downie. Thanks to Bryan Biggs, Stuart Barbeck, Professor Gerry Smyth, and to Chris Leigh & fantastic staff at Croxteth Hall without whom this project would not have been possible.

Constructing Connections: Fiction, Art and Life is published by Axis Projects Publishing on behalf of Tressell Noonan Associates.

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Design & Publishing: axisgraphicdesign.co.uk
Print: Sharman & Company Ltd

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

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

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