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Edwardian Hegemony in Tressell and Sassoon

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Abstract Ostensibly, all that connects Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928) is that their authors lived in south-east England during the early 1900s and wrote about their experiences. Otherwise, they came from the opposing ends of British society, and their novels were written nearly twenty years apart. That the two works correspond in their portrayals of English society – one as invective, the other as eulogy – is revealing of coeval attitudes, especially of views and behaviour based on social class. Reading other novels and plays of the time shows to what degree concepts of what was socially appropriate held sway over Edwardian fiction.

Keywords Social Class. Conservative Consensus. Ignored Masses. Education. Sport. Pastoral Ideal.

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1 Introduction

Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914, henceforward *RTP*) berates workers, in title and content, for their acceptance of social hierarchy and their own exploitation. Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*[1] (henceforward *MFHM*), published roughly fifteen years later (1928), after events as momentous as the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and British women and working-class men gaining the right to vote (Searle 2004, 831), is an implicit homage to a social order which entailed perpetual subsistence for many and indulgent excess for a few. Edwardian England in Sassoon's version was as placidly conservative as in Tressell's. What is striking in the tales of both the aspiring revolutionary and the wealthy sybarite are the similarities of the depictions, a largely unquestioned hegemonic view of social matters, echoed in a multitude of contemporary works. When *MFHM* was published in 1928, Sassoon was in no danger of being labelled reactionary or a commercial failure (Egremont 2006, 333, 361). The "imbecile system of managing our affairs" (Tressell [1914] 2008, 275) remained natural and unchallenged, as it did in most pre-First World War fiction.

2 The Right Sort

A central concern for Frank Owen, *RTP*'s frustrated insurgent, is that most adults "work like brutes in order to obtain a 'living wage' for themselves and to create luxuries for a small minority of persons who are too lazy to work at all!" (480), a minority that would include George Sherston, *MFHM*'s main character. As shall be seen in this article, in much of the fiction set in this period, to be one of the principal characters meant being within or near the higher reaches of society. E.M. Forster's novels, such as *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *Howards End* and *A Room with a View*, and Henry James's *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl* are dominated by characters who will never have to get their hands dirty to earn money (Kemp 2005). In popular fiction, too, there is a notable bias towards the financially and/or socially blessed, with occasional wage-earners. For example, in the Sherlock Holmes fiction from this decade, which consisted of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and thirteen short stories in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, the main victims are a wealthy baronet, Sir Charles Baskerville (1902, 11); the Earl of Maynooth's son (1905, 4); a lawyer (35-6); the owner of Riding Thorpe Manor (63); Violet

1 This was the first of Sassoon's three-volume memoirs, and the only part that is pre-war (the era that is the topic of this essay) are the first three-quarters of *MFHM*.

Smith (due to inherit a considerable bequest) (115); the Duke of Holdernesse's son (121); a former ship's captain (160); Lady Blackwell, the Earl of Dovercourt's wife (189); a *Mafioso* (225); a lecturer at an eminent university (238); a secretary to a professor (264); a student from Cambridge University (292); Sir Eustace Brackenstall (322); and the British government's Secretary for European Affairs (350). In comparison to the population, the number of what Lloyd George called the 'unemployed'[2] is highly disproportionate, while only one of the other Conan Doyle characters could be described as poor, Violet Smith, and that is a temporary predicament before she will rightfully become an heiress. As most detective fiction usually identifies the victim near the beginning of the story, it is possible to infer that Conan Doyle, and, by extension, many of his contemporaries, believed readers would care more, while their disbelief was suspended, for the fate of a rich, titled or otherwise privileged character, rather than someone as socially humble as themselves.

MFHM is a celebration of an indulged and unproductive lifestyle. The pre-war section of the first volume of Sherston's memoirs (about three-quarters of the book) are an unabashed portrayal of a devotion to pleasure-seeking, while his pride is evident even in the title. The use of 'memoirs' shows a degree of self-importance and implies the world of social privilege to be described. Likewise, the activity by which Sherston is defined is fox hunting. As the most important aspect of a young man's life, it is extravagantly futile. The cost of buying and keeping at least one good horse, fitting it, and dressing yourself appropriately (Newall 1983, 86) was only affordable for a tiny minority, while the purpose of dressing in expensive costumes in order to chase individual foxes over long stretches of countryside could only be recreational. Pursuing foxes with horses and dogs is a very inefficient way of controlling their numbers, so fox hunting did not serve its ostensible purpose and was actually counterproductive. The number of foxes, in fact, increased in the 19th century (Jones 2009, 57) after rules were devised to make the hunt more challenging (62), the countryside had been adapted to preserve fox populations (56), and foxes had even been imported to maintain numbers (Howe 1981, 295). In *MFHM*, that pastime's ineffectiveness leads to complaints from local farmers to Sherston's friend, the hunt master, including one about a fox that was killing a farmer's chickens and that if the hunt did not deal with the problem he would have to use his gun: something, presumably, he is prevented from doing because it would mar their sport (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 195). Hunts cause other inevitable problems on the land they use, such as broken hedges and

2 He described the House of Lords as "five hundred men, ordinary men chosen accidentally from among the unemployed" (Constantine 1992, 37).

gates, and damaged crops (Jones 2009, 60), which make Sherston's claim, that they gave the farmers a "genial interlude" (Sassoon [1928] 2015,195), sound distinctly sanguine.

As a youth Sherston uses his privileges as an opportunity to indulge in his own form of hedonism, as if in emulation of the king, Edward VII, a non-intellectual devotee of feckless pleasure (whose name was given to the decade) (Hunter 2014, 45), who was also a symbol, to his critics, of the contemporary plutocracy – money without responsibility – with a fictional homologue in Toad from Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (Searle 2004, 437). At least Sherston, unlike Toad, is not fickle. He has a single-minded desire to hunt and be oblivious to whatever does not enhance his pleasure, so that in anticipation of the hunting season, autumn is irrelevant, and "Europe was nothing but a name to me" (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 180). His winter with the Packlestone hunt is expressed as a visceral indulgence unhindered by thought, a winter "lived in total immunity from all intellectual effort" (220), a solipsistic lifestyle the older Sherston, as narrator, confesses is "not easy to defend" and may look "rather paltry" (208). In his youth, he is offended by coming across recently built houses while hunting and would like to "clear every modern dwelling" (210) that spoils his view. The desire to make hunting land correspond to a particular notion of natural countryside was shared by Sherston's companions and led to, for example, a greater number of fields (for gallops) and hedges and fences (for jumping) at the cost of wetland and woodland (Howe 1981, 289; Huggins 2008, 374).

The imagined sacrifice of people's homes so that Sherston could experience his idea of a traditional pastoral view is analogous to his frequent disregard of the purpose behind their jaunts across the fields. While hunting for fox-cubs, "for whom, to tell the truth, I felt an unconfessed sympathy", Sherston says, if it happened on the Sussex Downs, "I could half forget why we were there, so pleasant was it to be alive and gazing around me" (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 201). Sherston admits to feeling pity for his prey when he is "alarmed" for a fox's welfare during one of his first hunts (37). His description of coming across a deer that "sweated and shivered in the barn with heaving sides and frightened eyes", supposedly evoked no sympathy (151), though it is strangely invested for someone who claimed not to care. His reason for detachment could be that the animal was to be caught rather than killed (149), but it is possibly a pre-emptive (in terms of the narrative) reaction to a parson calling the hunters "'Brutes'" as they passed (151).

Sherston's objection to the parson – "Silly old buffer!" – stems from the attitude that, whatever feelings someone might have for the animals involved, an unquestioning approval of the pursuit of hunting was required of local residents, exemplified by Mr. Jariott. He is said to have named every fox in his park and mourned whenever one

died, but "would have been horrified" if the hunt could not find a fox (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 217). Jariott's acceptance, even enjoyment, of fox hunting as an attribute for the English countryside could be read as psychological projection on Sherston's part – how Jariott should feel – also, to some extent, an acceptance of a rigid social hierarchy and all that was said to be characteristic of the era (Farr 1970, 380). As far as it affected fox hunting, there was a form of reflected snobbery – farmers preferring to lease land to aristocrats rather than to the petty bourgeoisie (Jones 2009, 62). In Jariott's case, his ability to reconcile apparently incompatible sentiments (his sympathy for the victims and enthusiasm for their persecution) is shared by Sherston. When he witnesses men digging up foxes to destroy them, though aware this is cruel, he gives the action his blessing: "However inhumane its purpose, it was a kindly country scene" (183).

Sherston's commitment to the cause of fox hunting and his corresponding moral contortions sprang from a deeper source. He was an aspiring member of the established upper-class and occasionally revealed that he felt his failure to fully belong to it. With the purportedly prestigious Packlestone Hunt he thought he was an imposter but still imagined himself enjoying the aristocratic tradition of a summer season in London, before coming to his senses (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 222). To realise his ambition of joining the "superior" Packlestone crowd leaves him £300 in debt the following summer. However, he does not even consider earning money to repay what he owes. Instead, he sells a horse, borrows more money and resigns himself to "an uneventful summer, restless and inwardly dissatisfied" (223). Presumably because of his social ambitions or feelings of entitlement, working for money is unthinkable and so unthought.

3 The Social Divide

In Raymond Williams's opinion, the tradition of upper-class concerns in novels from the 1830s was still dominant in the early 1900s, to the point that "any other kind of material had, so to say, to be inserted, apologised for, transmuted in some way" (Williams 1983, 240-1). One of Tressell's achievements is his being so unapologetic for his focus on working-class life, while his affluent characters, with one exception, break entirely from the sympathetic tradition. For the main character, Frank Owen, the idle rich are symptomatic of a national malaise, exemplary of the injustice of the contemporary political and economic system. In the initial explanation of Owen's beliefs, he is said to view the majority in Britain as having barely enough to survive and there are others who are even worse off, but, in the same society, "he saw that the people who had an abundance of the things that are made by work, were the people who did Nothing" (10).

In statistical terms, between 1895 and 1914 ninety-two per-cent of the nation's wealth was owned by ten per-cent of the adult population, and one-third of the national income went to one-thirtieth of adults (Searle 2004, 83). Of working families, eighteen per-cent did not have enough money for their basic needs, and among labourers about half were in poverty (Gazeley 2011, p. 52). Hence the *RTP*'s call for revolution. One of Owen's work colleagues and his political comrade, Barrington, a rich Socialist eager to experience working-class life, envisages a Co-operative Commonwealth or Socialist Republic, a just society that would reward work and penalise indolence. Those that did not work would not be dressed

> in silk and satin and broadcloth and fine linen: we would not embellish them, as you do, with jewels of gold and jewels of silver and with precious stones,

nor would they "fare sumptuously". Instead, not working would mean having neither food nor possessions (Tressell [1914] 2015, 515-16).

If the prospect of such a revolution taking place in Britain may look fanciful now, the increasing power of the trade unions and the nascent Labour Party contributed to bourgeois fears that workers might not tolerate their exploitation (Neetens 1987, 215). Alongside their quotidian ordeals, the working class were still largely excluded from the political system. There was virtually no access to a position with any influence for a man without funds. Even becoming a local councillor was a rare achievement and, as MPs received no salary, the few working-class MPs had to be financed by their unions (Searle 2004, 229-30). However, if discontent existed, it did not feature much in the mainstream fiction of the time. To take an example, the stories by the Socialist H.G. Wells, who was more a Fabian than a revolutionary (Ó Donghaile 2018, 6-7), often centre around the lower-middle class (Wild 2017, 43), and the relative ease with which the main characters can improve their situations – the clerk becoming rich in *Tono-Bungay*, the shop-worker realising his dream in *The History of Mr. Polly* (Kemp 2005)– suggests that, in England, escaping your rut only takes imagination.

In the fiction about the working class, however, hopes for improvement were actively discouraged. John Galsworthy's play *Strife*, about an arduous strike at a tin-plate factory, portrays a dialectic of plenty for the management against hunger for the workers, but the resolution is the union agreeing to a weak offer. The two camps are half-hearted opponents and the strike only endures because of the intransigence of the opposing leaders – the company chairman and David Roberts, the agitator in the workers' committee. That they both fail to achieve their ambitions reads as a prediction that in Britain similar disputes and, by extension, political change would involve

compromise. Roberts' ardent Socialism inevitably leads to frustrations with his colleagues: "You love their feet on your necks" (Galsworthy [1911] 1958, 36). In *RTP*, Owen and Barrington feel the same irritation but convincing their exploited colleagues tho share their vision appears impossible. The man who will become the local MP embodies the "'wealthy loafer class'" (Tressell [1914] 2015, 286), but he will succeed thanks, in part, to the support of many of the low-paid (573).

Some contemporary reviews of *RTP* disputed Tressell's depiction of acquiescent workers, one claiming they were too servile to be representative (Harker 2003, 80), and another that they were "spineless" and more like the previous generation (82).

Raymond Williams believes the image of the working class as compliant and unable even to express discontent is a typically middle-class view, whether from reactionaries or writers like George Orwell, who excluded reference to those "who were well-read, articulate, politically conscious or active in some pursuit which is not conventionally assigned to the class" (Williams 1983, 249). The implication is that Orwell, Tressell, and Galsworthy needed their workers to be ignorant and resigned to their fate so that those authors could provide the eloquent middle-class saviour. Although it is impossible to know the attitudes of Tressell's co-workers, trade union membership can give an indication of British workers' political views and motivation. Between 1900 and 1910, the decade when *RTP* was written, membership as a proportion of workers went from around 13% to 15% and steadily rose to a peak of just over 40% by 1920 (TUC). There were also a large number of strikes from 1910 (Searle 2004, 441-2) which, together with the rapid increase in union participation, suggests growing intolerance of working conditions and a desire to take action. Therefore, if Owen's colleagues are meant to be representative of coeval British workers, their placid submission looks misleading.

In contrast, the well-to-do in *RTP* are too engaged in scheming and other forms of corruption to be termed genuinely idle, but in his appearance and his inability to do more than minimal physical exertion, Mr. (sometimes Oyley, sometimes Adam) Sweater is clearly the product of an indulged, slothful life. His face and build are a grotesque contrast to the finery he wears. His "fleshy, coarse-featured" face resembles "the fat of uncooked bacon", while his "large fat feet [were] cased in soft calfskin boots" (Tressell [1914] 2015, 103). His coat has seal-skin trimming and, though his trousers should be very loose, they are only just big enough and his legs "appeared to threaten the trousers with disruption". The reader's first impression of Sweater – "slow, heavy, ponderous footsteps" (103) – is of someone who moves with difficulty, and the struggle involved in getting him onstage during his political campaign implies his unsuitability as a politician and shows his inability to achieve anything independently. Because there are

no steps next to the platform, on which he should climb, Sweater's friends are forced into "hoisting and pushing him up", while distracting the crowd from the spectacle with a song. The "terrible struggle" leaves Sweater breathless (555-6). This is one of the novel's more successfully comical episodes, in which the rally becomes a circus, and Sweater looks risible at a time when he should command respect.

As David Trotter notes, the fat man as a figure of contempt or mockery was a common feature of Edwardian fiction (Trotter 1993, 249-50). Trotter cites writers as diverse as Conrad, Buchan, Wodehouse and Maugham, and shows how such characters could be used to personify moral and physical grotesqueness. In D.H. Lawrence's *The White Peacock*, the appearance of Will Bancroft is repeatedly derided. When he arrives at a party, wearing "Indian snow-shoes", he purses "his childish lips, and [rubs] his fat chin"; when he compares himself to a swallow, the narrator observes "his corpulence"; and he is ironically vain, with a "cream and lavend'er waistcoat", a ring that is "gorgeous with diamonds", and a mirror with which "he [surveys] himself with great satisfaction" (Lawrence 1911, 166-8). As with corpulence in *RTP*, Bancroft's excess (in body and adornment) is a sign of his wealth, a logical concept at the start of the 1900s, when being overweight would have been virtually impossible without ample funds. Even in the ultra-conservative *MFHM*, the "short, thick-set, round-legged" Sir Jocelyn Porteus-Porteous's appearance is said to reflect his privileged social status, but Sherston's understanding is naturally more sympathetic: "how could any man look otherwise than comfortable and well satisfied when he had inherited such an amply endowed existence?" (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 215).

However, in Tressell's critique such bodies are also a manifestation of their financial and political corruption. This analogy was unusual in the fiction of that time, which is surprising as, from a left-wing viewpoint, it would have been a simple and appropriate way to convey an effective image. It was an era when many in Britain were malnourished, as witnessed by hunger marches and other forms of protest (Vernon 2007, 56-9), and so their plight was a crucial feature of working-class fiction. Overweight characters, embodying excess consumption and often dependent on others to perform simple tasks, could be plausible symbols of gross inequality and an unjust system. As with Tressell's image of a man being able to ascend a stage, a step towards gaining political power, only thanks to the help of several other men, it symbolises the commodification of workers that is a central topic in *RTP*. In one of his doomed attempts to stir his colleagues into action, Owen decries a situation in which those with luxurious lives employ people to satisfy their desires and then, when the well-to-do have what they want, stop the workers producing for themselves (Tressell [1914] 2008, 285). As commodities, they are only of interest to those with ample means insofar as and for as long

as they can benefit their social superiors, and so, to those who can afford to pay for their services, they are disposable. Like domestic appliances, the workers are generally treated as of no account when they are not causing trouble, but when there is the possibility of any transgression, they become conspicuous and of sudden interest. For example, when Bert, an exploited teenager, is exhausted from pushing a cart, his boss, Rushton, catches him resting and terrifies him with a reprimand (112). Rushton is later frustrated that he can find nobody committing a sackable offence – for example, as a Christian he cannot punish hymn-singing – and so he has to leave "without having uttered a syllable" (156). However, when it comes to rewarding good behaviour, the patrician class are less motivated. A painter called Crass is persistently hopeful of a tip from Sweater, once putting in inordinate efforts to display a range of tones so that Sweater can choose exactly the one he wants. After building up his expectations, Crass comes to realise he is being ignored and his endeavours will be fruitless (292-4). It is consistent with how Sweater treats the workers in his clothing business. They are mostly girls and women who are hired for three years, supposedly for training, but they have to pay for the first two years and only learn a very specific skill (for example, making a sleeve), ensuring they will not be able to get a well-paid job elsewhere (196-7).

Tressell's targeting of a whole social class, with one redeeming exception (Barrington, the virtuous turncoat), is rare in Edwardian mainstream fiction. 'Saki', for instance, made a literary career out of satirising upper-class life and behaviour but, like Wilde, Wodehouse, and Waugh, he was hardly trying to undermine the social order. Likewise, John Galsworthy approached the topic of class differences without being a firebrand. As previously mentioned, in Galsworthy's play *Strife* most of the management only want "an end to this old-fashioned tug-of-war" (Galsworthy [1911] (1958), 12), while in his novel *The Island Pharisees*, the upper-middle-class Dick Shelton takes a tour of poverty in the manner (from other eras) of Cobbett, Orwell and the eponymous director in the film *Sullivan's Travels*. His shocking experience results in sympathy to no effect, consistent with Galsworthy's other novels (see Hunter 2014, 240) and epitomised by his meeting with a tramp who is in fear of his life: Shelton's solution is to give the vagrant his card (Galsworthy 1904, 303). Likewise, *RTP*'s narrator sees charity as futile, often misguided (Tressell [1914] 2008, 348) as it is run by rich patrons, and ultimately detrimental for those it is supposed to help. Donations

> humiliated, degraded and pauperised those who received them, and the existence of the [charitable] societies prevented the problem from being grappled with in a sane and practical manner. The people lacked the necessaries of life: the necessaries of life are pro-

duced by Work: these people were willing to work, but were prevented from doing so by the idiotic system of society which these 'charitable' people are determined to do their best to perpetuate. (353)

4 Reform or Revolution

A more equable social order was no more likely to occur in early twentieth-century Britain than it was to feature in mainstream literature: changes in employment opportunities and employee protection were slow to appear; and moves to legislate to improve workers' rights and establish the corresponding employers' liability had been defeated in the House of Commons in the 1890s, as many MPs were also employers (Searle 2004, 209-10). A combination of factors, including increased foreign competition, more specialised tasks for workers (as with Sweater's employees, mentioned above), reduced promotion opportunities (437) and high unemployment from the middle of the decade (364) meant that ruthless employers had few restrictions. In Joseph Keating's novels about the hazardous lives of Welsh miners, *Son of Judith* (1900) and *Maurice* (1905), when the work that is available is a constant mortal danger with no chance of meaningful change from above, an anarchist's destruction of the mine (1905, 358) is metonymic for the necessary destruction of the status quo. The situation is barely more tolerable for Carrie, the eponymous *Miss Nobody* in Ethel Carnie's 1913 novel about the struggles of a working-class woman to live a decent life either in the country or Manchester. A witness to the exploitation by factory owners of men, women and children, Carrie realises that the workers' strength is in their number, organises a union, then a strike, and wins a small wage-rise. No British author at this time was more vehement in his condemnation of the disparity in life experiences between the rich and poor than Bart Kennedy. In *Slavery: Pictures from the Depths* (1905), Kennedy illustrates that divide with the example of an impecunious working mother who has to leave her child every day so they can survive. For Kennedy, there is only one way to resolve such inequity: "They would come through the darkness to their kingdom, guided by the glorious torch of revolution" (1905, 361).

Effecting change for the workers in *RTP* is similarly formidable. Although the small number of Sweater's employees who complain are given better wages and rights, Owen's colleagues are shown to have little choice but to submit to punitive and precarious employment conditions. When Jack Linden, an older worker, is caught smoking and instantly sacked, the idea of defending himself is said to be pointless (Tressell [1914] 2008, 41). The ease with which workers can be dismissed is in stark contrast to the ordeal of finding a job, a result of a system, "The Wage Slave Market", which inevitably serves those

in power. The dichotomy is manifest in the behaviour of the company's owner, Rushton, who monitors the men working and, instead of communicating, "just [stands] there like a graven image" (407). Because of his inflated self-importance, he once sacked one of his workers for talking to him in the street (407). As the dominant motive for this draconian treatment is profit, conscientiousness goes unrewarded. When a newly arrived worker breaks a pane of glass, he loses his job despite working unpaid at night to repair it (429). Another worker, Newman, with a family to support, cannot bring himself to do the makeshift job his superiors demand. The supervisor watches for five minutes while he fills all the holes and cracks in a wall and then tells Newman the company has finished with him (161). The combination of the workers' humility and invisibility is also used to hide their employers' flaws. After Rushton helps himself to a customer's barometer, one of the removal men is suspected and sacked (418). The class that was often portrayed as being criminal is the victim of the class that, in this novel, is constantly engaged in criminal activity, and such injustices are partly a consequence of wilful ignorance about those who have least.

Low-paid workers barely register with Sherston in the pre-war section of *MFHM*, in keeping with a narrator who is indifferent, sometimes openly hostile, to whoever is relatively poor. He briefly refers to itinerant hop-pickers after the annual harvest. George Orwell did this work in 1931 and described the Spartan conditions, laborious work, "starvation wages" and "rules which reduce him practically to a slave" (Orwell 1931, 233-5). Sherston, on the other hand, does not mention the hop-pickers' work, only their departure, presumably noticed because it is audible: they sing and play music and are described as "merry" to be returning to their slums in London. As a jarring contrast, the next sentence is about the exclusive shops Sherston visits in the same city to buy clothes for hunting (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 180). His aloofness is also evident on an earlier train journey. Because his aunt has bought first-class tickets, Sherston becomes acutely conscious of his social advantage and wants it to be acknowledged, while developing an aversion to the sight of need. He is "[g]ratified by the obsequious attentions" of a station guard, and while the train goes past an impoverished area of London, he admits,

> I was glad to avert my gaze from the dingy and dilapidated tenements and warehouses which we were passing. Poverty was a thing I hated to look in the face; it was like the thought of illness and bad smells, and I resented the notion of all those squalid slums spreading out into the uninfected green country. (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 70)

5 The Lower Orders

Sherston's problem with poverty is his being made aware of it, and it is likely that most readers agreed that they did not want to witness it in fiction. E.M. Forster implied as much in his oft-quoted remark that "[w]e are not concerned with the very poor" (for example, in Hunter 2014, 61). The exclusion of indigent characters featured alongside an implicit desire to defend the social order. For writers like Forster and Henry James, the working class are from another world, servants aside; even middle-class wage-earners are socially incongruous figures in a comparatively elevated milieu. Leonard Bast, the clerk in *Howards End*, is an intruder. There is no prospect of him ascending by marriage, and even the fact that he gets Helen Schlegel pregnant means that, according to the contemporary description, their child is illegitimate. The phrase immediately before he is introduced in the book is about "those who are obliged to pretend they are gentle-folk", and he is said to be "inferior to most rich people […] not as courteous […] nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as loveable" (47). His association with the Schlegels is ended abruptly, when he is attacked and killed by Charles Wilcox, a crime not momentous enough to be considered murder (350). *The Wings of the Dove* also features an outsider. Densher is a journalist in love with Kate Croy, but they are too poor to marry. In James's novel genteel poverty has become a "failure of fortune and of honour" (James 1902, 4), and in *The Wings of the Dove* even financial trouble turns into a relatively comfortable state. Densher, an American, can afford to live in London, and both he and Croy are able to spend some time in Venice. Croy even has the opportunity of marrying a lord (36). She finally marries a newly rich journalist, after a generous endowment by a wealthy heiress has been bequathed to Densher (575).

One alien social group upper-class characters cannot avoid is their domestic staff, and, in *MHFM*, Sherston can only think of his servants in terms of their work. In the initial description of Miriam, an aging maid, there is empathy for what she has endured in her working life, but to Sherston she is nothing more than a drudge. The only details given of the maid's past are related to her previous employer who "exploited [her] willingness to work" for many years. The description of her physiognomy implies that anything notable in her appearance is the result of her duties. Her eyes' expression looked as if she expected "to be rather sharply ordered to lug a heavy scuttle of coals up four flights of steep stairs"; while her hunchback and round shoulders came from a life of bending over a sink. As a result, she was prematurely aged and was so in the habit of serving others that, when told to relax, it only made her want to work more (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 69-70). The implication of her description is that she has no life beyond obliging the Sherstons and cannot even imagine one, a

convenient way for her employers to assuage any remorse they might feel for her servitude, and it is exemplified in the account of how she 'retired'. Looking increasingly ill, she is sent away for two weeks' recuperation, and while there, "she died unobtrusively of heart failure. To the last, therefore, she managed to avoid being a trouble to anyone". Posthumously, Sherston regrets "the occasions when I had shown her too little consideration" (223-4).

As a hippophile with plentiful funds, Sherston hires a groom to take care of his horses, someone who, accordingly, is of great importance to his employer. This is plainly the case with Dixon, Sherston's groom, shown by the number of times he is mentioned (at least 32 in the pre-war section of the novel) and the degree to which Sherston values his knowledge, usually advice about horses, for which Sherston sees him as an oracle. The esteem he has for the groom is evident in his reaction to the latter's exclamation of "Well done", when Sherston wins a horse race: it was "beyond all doubt the quintessence of what my victory meant to me" (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 172). To Sherston, Dixon and horses have a mutual understanding (114), and the groom is able to transfer his knowledge in a manner appropriate for a servant to his master, by "supplementing my ignorance from his own experience [...] to pretend that I knew much more than I really did" (84). This deference is important for Sherston, despite his admiration for Dixon. When teaching the young Sherston to ride, Dixon calls him "sir" for the first time and the boy's "heart warmed toward him as I [...] resolved to do him credit" (10). In his gratitude to Dixon, Sherston never forgets or disavows his groom's subservient status, as when, after the boy's horse has run away, Dixon says nothing, "and this tactful silence more than ever assured me of his infinite superiority to those chattering females in the kitchen" (15). This is very qualified praise – his "infinite superiority" is confirmed because he does not embarrass the child, and he is superior to the other domestic staff but still ineluctably one of them.

As a consequence of Dixon's subservience, in all the references to him the narrator has no story to relate apart from what he does for his employers. In contrast, it is a given that Dixon will be fascinated by the incidents from Sherston's life. Returning from his first hunt as an "independent sportsman", Sherston anticipates Dixon's great pleasure: "I had a big story to tell him" (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 111). Dixon's visits to the pub are occasionally mentioned, but only because of what it is supposed he will say about Sherston. For example, the narrator surmises Dixon will go to the 'Rose and Crown' when his master has won a horse race, to "overawe the gossips with his glory" (174). It is one of many examples in which Sherston often attributes quite extreme forms of vicarious pleasure and pride to Dixon. Having joined the Packlestone, Sherston's joy is purportedly what Dixon feels and for precisely the same reasons: Dixon "was entirely in

his element" and had "intense satisfaction" in his role as the second horseman (looking after Sherston's spare horse) while riding with other grooms. He was "permanently happy that winter", and "more delighted than he knew how to say; and of course, as befitted a 'perfect gentleman's servant', he said almost nothing at all" (223).

If this sounds like delusion, then the alternative would be facing the fact that an older man, who is probably a better rider and who knows more about horses than you, has to base his life around your equestrian pleasures because you both live in a rigidly hierarchical society. In his servant-master relationship, the most satisfaction Dixon can hope for is the care of someone else's horses and reflected glory, so that after Sherston has won a horse race, the following "lofty few minutes [...] were Dixon's reward for all the trouble he had taken" (172-3). When Sherston wants to attend a hunt fourteen miles from home, it is Dixon who has to ride the horse there the night before. According to Sherston's fond speculations it will be a pleasure. He pictures his groom "clattering [sic] importantly" to a pub's customers, boasting about who he is serving – "a very dashing and high-class sportsman" – and using "all the reticence and sobriety of an old family servant" (107). Naturally, the reader never learns what Dixon actually says about his position, work or master.

The unlikely idea that servants were contented with their positions was an occasional theme of Edwardian fiction. Probably the best-known example was J.M. Barrie's play, *The Admirable Crichton* (1902). Crichton is a butler who is very proud of his position and believes his master "has but one fault, he is not sufficiently contemptuous of his inferiors" (Barrie 1902, 5). In Act 2, Crichton is shipwrecked on an island with his master's family and there, where English social strictures have no relevance, Crichton's resourcefulness makes him the *de facto* master. In the last act, the castaways have been rescued and return to London and their previous roles, as Crichton believes they should. Ultimately, it is difficult to know what is admirable about Crichton: his innate deference, his modest capability, or their combination. Barrie gives no clear indication as to whether the play is a satire or a eulogy to traditional mores. This could be seen as a sensible commercial approach by the playwright (not wanting to upset theatre-goers), or his uncertainty about the country's social evolution.

Writers could be less equivocal if the servant was from one of the subject races of the Empire – they were effectively doubly subservient. In G.A. Henty's *With Kitchener in the Soudan* (1905), Gregory, an adventurous polyglot from a 'good' family, decides to assist the British commander and is in turn helped by his servant, Zaki. Gregory is "well satisfied" with Zaki, who works diligently to make Gregory's domestic life comfortable. Zaki's "only regret was that he could not do more for his master, but he was consoled by being told

that the time would soon come when he would be more actively engaged" (Henty 1905, 92).

The workers in *RTP* often display a similar complaisant manner and, in a story about exploitation, such behaviour is pernicious: by gratifying their social and occupational superiors, the workers' obsequiousness appears to be key to why they are destined to remain impoverished. However, it is unlikely that agitation would succeed or that compliance is invariably unwise. Crass, the foreman, epitomises the self-abasing employee. As well as his ingratiating but unsuccessful efforts to get a tip from Sweater (Tressell [1914] 2008, 104-5, 292), he is conspicuous for his "judicious toadying" (43). He takes his bosses' side, mocks Socialists with a makeshift white flag (462), reveals he was behind a colleague being sacked by over-reacting when the sacking is announced (163), and is given instructions on how to report misdemeanours to his employers (408-10). He is a treacherous colleague and no champion of the poor, but, compared to his colleagues, he prospers. Despite being less skilled than most of the workers and doing little work as foreman, he is better paid and has a more secure job (43). While the other workers struggle to feed and clothe themselves, Crass is seen taking a goose home for Christmas, and wearing new and expensive outfits that make his colleagues feel "very mean and shabby" (246). His schemes have their final reward when he is promoted to supervisor (594).

Although Crass's behaviour and beliefs are inimical to Owen's ideas, the latter cannot fault his foreman: "No one can be blamed for doing the best for himself under existing circumstances" (261). If the system favours the selfish, why not act accordingly? However, in the end Owen is not so forgiving of Crass's political beliefs, whose claim that life is Hell contradicts his Conservative support, as someone who thought life infernal would hardly want to preserve the system (144). It is also a strange sentiment for a worker who is relatively successful in improving his lot: he should be content with a system he can use to his advantage. It would be a much more credible lament from one of his struggling colleagues. However, they are said to be happy to live in subjugation, unlike "the savages of New Guinea or the Red Indians" who, according to the narrator, may not enjoy modern innovations but serve nobody and do not work for others. Worse still, the Mugsborough workers believe their own children should expect lives of "grovelling and cringing and toiling and running about like little dogs", while remaining "tame and quiet and content" (473-4). As Julie Cairnie has indicated, Tressell often describes workers as analogous to oppressed races in the British Empire, a comparison that may well have been made about the author, an Irishman (187).

In the narrator's view, the workers' submission is as ill-advised as their political loyalties, a result of "childish minds" beguiled by speeches from overpaid politicians, as when an MP, Sir Graball

D'Encloseland, declares that his constituents should live modestly out of altruistic concern for the less fortunate (Tressell [1914] 2008, 361-2). D'Encloseland (a gauche name, even by Tressell's standards) is a government minister of exemplary greed, hypocrisy, and self-importance. He is applauded by the poor, but reveals that he cannot manage to live on less than £100 a week (361), equivalent to 43 weeks' wages for a skilled tradesman at the time (National Archives). Any occasion might be appropriate to advance his political career, and his daughter's tenth birthday becomes an opportunity for self-promotion dressed up as largesse. In anticipation of a general election, all the local children are given a meal at school and a gilt-edged picture of the Baronet's daughter, who is driven to each school to make a speech. The school-children are delighted, as are the "grown-up children […] going into imbecile ecstasies of admiration of their benevolence and their beautiful clothes" (358-9). The episode is a poignant illustration of the unquestioning deference accorded to aristocracy and the wealthy that bears comparison to contemporary excitement, in some quarters, for the British royal family. To the Socialists, the irksome irony is that what pleases the gullible crowd is what, in fact, should anger them: undeserved riches spent for selfish reasons, to show off a family's unmerited patrician status. When D'Encloseland is later promoted and given a 50% raise in salary, his "ragged-trousered", hungry supporters believe the district can share in his glory and "swagger in their gait as much as their broken boots permitted" (550).

The labourers' ingrained meekness can appear insoluble, as when they tolerate abusive working conditions because their jobs are so precarious (Tressell [1914] 2008, 439). However, *RTP* is more concerned with the character flaws that deprive the workers of self-respect. Not being in the habit of thinking, they have no interest in or, due to their 'rusty and stultified' minds, any ability to understand alternative political ideas (377). Whatever education they have had, "from their very infancy", it has taught them their innate inferiority and, by extension, that education is not for them. Without an interest in alternative viewpoints, they want to "continue to worship and follow those who took advantage of their simplicity" (564). They know it was what their parents had done and believe it should also be their descendants' fate (466). Being resigned both to their destitution and to the dictates of their masters, they support or oppose policies, depending on whether those policies would, in turn, benefit or harm the most affluent. For instance, they are against a halfpenny rise in the local rates that would help malnourished children at the expense of those with most property (356). The reverence the workers show is returned as scorn by their masters, as when a letter is published on the local newspaper suggesting workmen walk in the middle of the road when "better-class visitors" walk on the pavement. Some workers even follow the suggestion (402-3).

Throughout the novel, Owen doggedly exhorts his colleagues to reject their servile status and even harangues the company's owner, Rushton, on behalf of an exploited boy (Tressell [1914] 2008, 588). The protest is a unique event in the book, and implicitly Owen's courage — his job is as insecure as anybody else's – is a result of penury and his approaching nervous collapse (584 and 587). The fact that the owner agrees to Owen's demands suggests that workers should not submit out of fear and, as the successful complaint comes towards the end of the novel, that workers in the future may realise they have the power to improve their working conditions. However, for one particular job, even Owen shows himself eager to satisfy his masters' whims. When Rushton asks Owen to decorate a room for Sweater in a Moorish style, he calls Owen an artist and is pleased to see the worker's embarrassment (117). Rushton banks on Owen taking pride in his work (119) and is vindicated. Owen assiduously studies, plans and designs into the night, and consequently makes a handsome profit for his reviled boss. Owen's motivation is explained as a desire to perform the task he is assigned (120-1), but the people he earnestly works for are his political enemies, and his behaviour is anathema to the Socialism he advocates. Rushton may have exploited a rare opportunity (for a working man) to exercise his artistic talents, in which case the tacit message is that politics are at least temporarily subordinate to creative self-expression.

6 Education and Christianity

In parallel with self-expression, access to education in England in the early twentieth century was severely restricted for the working class. What was on offer, as previously mentioned, is described in *RTP* as, in part, a method to reinforce feelings of inherent inferiority. The novel features the two main scholastic experiences at the time for children from poor families, compulsory elementary schools and Sunday schools (Searle 2004, 50, 535). Most of those attending state schools in Mugsborough, where *RTP* is based, are hungry (Tressell [1914] 2008, 357), surviving on diets of "'skim' milk, bread, margarine, and they con tea"; they have to work a few hours before and after lessons and all day on Saturday (585). As to gaining an insight into what happens while the children are at school, there is little beyond Owen's wife admiring teachers for having a difficult job (76), and the promise of study at schools and colleges being the right of every citizen in a future Socialist state (507), a sign of its undeniable value to these reformers.

However, they are more sceptical when Christianity is involved. Owen is quite vocal about religion, not when it is practised by anybody sincerely following the teachings of Christ, instead what it has

become in contemporary England, "anti-Christs who went about singing hymns, making long prayers and crying Lord, Lord, but never doing the things which He said" (Tressell [1914] 2008, 64). Inevitably, Owen believed that the didactic aim of those hypocrites was that their pupils would "order themselves lowly and reverently towards their betters" (211). Paradoxically, Owen's politically precocious son, Frankie, is persuaded to join a Sunday School (133), which he finds to be an omphalos of corruption. Those who run the school embody the desecration of Christian morality and their names are manifest accusations. The Rev. Belcher, the school's minister, nearly bursts his clothes with his "huge globe of flesh" from gluttony and inactivity, so that he is "afflicted with chronic flatulence, which manifested itself in frequent belchings forth through the mouth of the foul gases generated in the stomach" (169-70). Other attendees have similar lifestyles and builds, such as Mrs. Starvem, who is too fat to be able to kneel (172). In this crowd, Rev. Starr looks incongruous – young, slim, rational, and strangely charming – but he has a mercenary cause: generating money for his fellow Christians (174). On this occasion Starr can announce that enough has been raised from parental contributions and a 'General Fund' for Belcher to go for "'necessary repose'" to the south of France for a month "'with an illuminated address,[3] and a purse of gold'" (175). Belcher invites "the underfed, ill-clad children" to show their gratitude for being English children, by collecting money to repair a chapel (170-1). Tressell's depiction of Christian education is an example of absolute antipathy to the established church, a view distilled in an attack on readings in church: "sayings that the infidel parsons mouthed in the infidel temples to the richly dressed infidel congregations" (358).

Christianity was also targeted by Tressell's contemporaries, often singling out a denomination for special opprobrium. Just as Tressell spared Catholicism in *RTP*, apart from a passing mention of priests teaching their followers to accept degradation ([1914] 2008, 570), so Hilaire Belloc favoured the Roman church at the expense of Anglicanism. His cumbersomely titled novel, *Emmanuel Burden, Merchant, of Thames St. in the City of London, Exporter of Hardware* (1904), involves a corrupt scheme to sell wasteland in colonial Africa. Like Tressell, Belloc believed the Church of England to be a mercenary organisation, in this novel part of a racket. When a scheme is launched as a company, the "country clergy" follow the fortunes of the company's shares with great interest (1904, 238). A Rev. Gapworthy is the author of *Political Economy for Schools*, in which he teaches that economic power comes from courageous foresight or, as the narrator terms it, "the 'Christian virtue of Hope'" (180). As a demonstra-

3 A document to show gratitude to someone, usually for work or services provided.

tion that corruption is not only a normal feature of British Anglicanism but actually encouraged, the reader learns in the introduction to Belloc's novel that two of the most conniving characters will be rewarded with eminent positions after the events in the story: one will become Lord Lambeth, presumably a reference to Lambeth Palace, the residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and a Rev. Mauclerc will become Bishop Shoreham (xiv-xv).[4]

For a majority of British children in the early 1900s Christian education meant Sunday schools (80% of 5- to 14-year-olds attended them in 1906; Searle 2004, 535). The schools are the main educational feature of *RTP*, but the only learning experience the children may have is the realisation that adults are imposters and vice can be dressed as virtue. Why so many parents send their children (in the novel) or sent them (in Edwardian Britain) to those schools is a mystery. As previously mentioned, a lot of the children's parents, like Tressell's Owen, had no faith in the Anglican church. From a more cynical viewpoint, Sunday schools were a relatively cheap diversion for the children when any type of schooling may have been welcome, and gave the parents a rare, even unique, opportunity to be together alone. In which case, the educational aspect counted for little, echoed in *RTP*, where most of the men show no interest in their own intellectual development. Having been taught to expect no more from life than hard work and humility, Owen's colleagues, who stand as a synecdoche for the English working class, have no desire to learn new ideas: "Wot the 'ell's the use of the likes of us troublin' our 'eads about politics" (Tressell [1914] 2008, 212). In a sense, it is rational to avoid

4 A more ardent Catholic was the idiosyncratic Frederick Rolfe, a convert who showed devotion to his faith by writing his name as Fr. Rolfe, to suggest that he was a priest. However, in his *Hadrian the Seventh: A Romance* (1904), the tone verges on disrespect for the Church of Rome. An unprepossessing, eccentric, chain-smoking Englishman named Rose unexpectedly becomes Pope Hadrian VII. In his one-year reign he meets Kaiser Wilhelm II and Victor Emanuel III, and has to deal with the Italian monarchy stealing from the Church (Rolfe 1904, 219). Hadrian tries to combat the revolutionary ambitions of the socialist Liblab Fellowship, thwarting them as one who is "fresh and actual and vigorous…[and] should dare to hold up his head, to live and move and have his being, to dispose of millions of money" (287). His struggle culminates when one of the Fellowship's comrades shoots Hadrian who, while dying, forgives his assassin (357-8). The very prolific Joseph Hocking was another who derided a religious organisation for being predominantly mercenary, but he was fiercely anti-Catholic. In his novel, *The Woman of Babylon* (1907), the protagonist, Walter Raymond, has little money but wants his eldest daughter, Lucy, to learn languages. A local Catholic school is the only one he can afford, and, despite their profound apprehension, a Fr. Brandon persuades Raymond to let Lucy attend the school. Raymond is due to inherit a fortune from his father, so the priest, who "rejoiced to sweep wealth into the coffers of his church" (Hocking 1907, 63), determines to convert the family and divert the money. The Jesuits also try to persuade girls who will soon inherit large sums that they have a vocation (for example, 229). When the prospect of money disappears, so does the vocation. One of these girls, Joyce, is able is ultimately able to resist the Catholic coercion because she was brought up a "strong Protestant" (300).

dwelling on or hoping for something you will never have, for example, access to college or university. By calling Owen and Barrington "Professor" (213, 484), their determinedly ignorant audience mocks the futility of their proselytizing lectures, in part through the inadequacy of their students.

Curiously, Sassoon's Sherston has a similar disregard for education, despite his very different experiences. His schooling – private tuition until 12, boarding at a private school as a teenager, and then studying at Cambridge University – was the preserve of the privileged, but for him it was routine and so is of no consequence to him. There is a description of his first tutor, Mr. Star, "a gentle, semi-clerical old person", who attempts to teach Sherston Latin and plays a placid form of cricket with him (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 3). Mr. Star and his methods immediately precede the introduction to Dixon, with his energetic outdoor spirit, love of horses, and livelier style of cricket (4). In competition with the sporting life, abstract notions such as Euclid's theorems or a map of the world cannot engage the boy (33) and will not trouble the reader. His school is first mentioned simply to say that he has left it for his summer holidays (41). His experiences there remain unknown and the scant references to it show his priorities: that Dixon is not buying horses because Sherston is at school (45); and that Sherston uses his school-house scarf for a game of village cricket to show he was selected at school, though the village game is more important (50). Likewise, his time at university is more honoured in the breach: there is no mention of it before he reveals that he lacks "documentary evidence" of his time for the summer after he finished at Cambridge (65). In other words, going to university, leaving it, and everything he did there are of less significance than, for example, going to church hatless (124) or choosing to wear a pink coat next season (175). When his trustee, Mr. Pennett, urges him to return to Cambridge, Sherston is dismissive: it was like "preaching to the winds" (67-8), and by autumn, he is relieved to have escaped the pressure of the Tripos, the final examinations at Cambridge (74).

In brief, for Sherston the university exists in negation. What was an unexceptional experience for a boy of Sherston's background was inconceivable to the vast majority of his fellow nationals at the time, thus his apathetic attitude is symptomatic of the chasm there was in England between social classes. Other novels of the age showed a similar approach. While aspects of education were a recurring feature of Edwardian fiction, overwhelmingly centred around public schools and universities, there was very rarely any narrative interest in teaching or learning. Instead, education was incidental to the main events, the buildings often acting as sites for extra-curricular activities. Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) has frequent references to school, both the state school and the Wesleyan Sunday school attended by Anna's younger sister, Agnes, but with no

concern for the educational activities. There are the associated careers (for example, 15), the school's location, such as where Anna's suitor meets her for a walk (225), and the sight of the children leaving at the end of school (13-14). As shall be seen below, there appears to have been a widespread judgment by writers that the primary function of schools and universities would not interest their readers.

All this is rather perplexing given that access to education had only recently become possible for much of the population. The Education Act of 1870 meant all children from 5 to 13 were supposed to go to school and the effect this had can be seen through the improvements in reading ability. In Britain, male literacy went from 69.3% in 1851 to 97.2% in 1900 and, in the same years, female literacy rose from 54.8% to 96.8% (Ingleby 2020), but only very occasionally did books show enthusiasm for the new-found possibilities. Patrick MacGill, like Tressell, was an Irishman who moved to Britain to earn money doing manual work. As is evident from its title, MacGill's *Children of the Dead End: An Autobiography of a Navvy* (1914) is a novel in which the experiences of the protagonist, Desmond Flynn, are based on those of the author, and it includes views about education that are very similar to the ones expressed by Tressell's narrator. MacGill's novel begins in rural Ireland where teaching, mainly rooted in superstition, by adults who supposedly have superior knowledge, merely reinforces ignorance. As poverty is a constant threat, families need food on credit, and yet the parish priest warns of eternal hell-fire for those who do not pay their debts (MacGill 1904, 3-4). After Flynn's twelve-year-old brother dies, two elderly sisters tell him of quack treatments that would have saved the child, such as "seven drops of blood from a cock that never crowed" (21). Flynn's mental and literary salvation dawns when, working as a navvy in Scotland, he sees two stanzas from Robert Browning's 'Evelyn Hope' and believes it a revelation about the power of literature (136-7), a form of awakening that leads him to read Victor Hugo (138) and Marx's *Capital* (140). The idea that a labourer could undertake autonomous study was a novelty made possible by the publication of cheaper books and the expansion of libraries (Searle 2004, 542-3 and 571-4; Trotter 1993, 64-5), publishers doubtless taking advantage of a more diverse potential readership with the proliferation of state schools. However, the paucity of fiction about the nascent institutions – a rare example being *Chignett Street* (Neuman 1914), a series of short stories of quotidian experiences at a London school – suggests a perceived reluctance to remember by the uplifted working class, or to know about their less fortunate compatriots by the privately educated.

7 Physical Education

As seen above, judging by the literacy rate the most significant difference made by the act was in the education of girls and women, something evident by the degree to which female characters value the opportunity while resenting the remaining inequality. In *The Story of Ijain* (1903) Florence Dixie describes Ijain's frustrations that her academic opportunities remain restricted in comparison to her twin brother's; whereas the eponymous hero of H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* (1909) is able to overcome her father's objections, and "learn about things and know about things, and not to be protected [...] cooped up in a little corner" (Wells 1909, 30). Instead, she studies biology in London, where the lecture theatre "shone like a star seen through clouds" (168). The contrast with the prolific fiction centred around the school and university life of privileged males could hardly be greater. When Michael, the central character in Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street* (1913), goes to preparatory school, lessons are acknowledged but more as if to show their grand irrelevance. A few sentences about a Latin lesson in which the boys have to copy "1. Cornelia Juliam amat 2. Julia Corneliam amat" [sic] (Mackenzie 1913, 97), show it is a clearly meaningless exercise for children who neither know nor care about Cornelius or Julia. In contrast, the next nine pages deal with making friends, fighting, and rival gangs (98-107), of far greater importance to the boys. Education remains trivial to Michael throughout his school career. When he fails to pass the Oxford and Cambridge Higher Certificate, his only regret is to have "wasted so many hours of fine weather in work" (236). The priorities of Oxford undergraduates are similarly non-academic in Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson, or An Oxford Love Story* (1911), when the beautiful Zuleika visits the university causing ubiquitous delirium among the students, but as their infatuation is not reciprocated, most kill themselves.

It is sport, though, that is the supreme distraction for, at least, fictional public school and university students. Christopher Benson's *The Upton Letters* (1905) are the thoughts of a public-school teacher communicated to a friend, who laments that education has changed for the worse, so that now both masters and boys prefer to concentrate on sports and athletics (Benson 1905, 42-3). The attitude is evident in much of *Sinister Street*, as is the consequent reverence for those who are the most gifted: Michael "was at liberty even to stare at a few great ones whom athletic prowess had endowed already with legendary divinity" (Mackenzie 1913, 142).

Heroic stature was particularly associated with cricketers, and with batsmen rather than bowlers. A knowledge of cricket is a prerequisite for reading P.G. Wodehouse's *Mike: A Public School Story* (1909), in which Mike Jackson, from a cricketing family, goes to Wrykyn school and shines at the sport but fails academically. When his report ar-

rives during the Easter holidays his father is too upset to talk, a situation reminiscent of previous "horrid" reports, but his sister believes he should be absolved for being "the best bat Wrykyn's ever had" (Wodehouse 1909, 32-3). Due to having the wrong priorities (according to his father), Mike has to move from Wrykyn to Sedleigh school and, inevitably, the book ends with a match between the two schools, when Mike plays a decisive innings "in his best vein", which they win (336-7). Mark Lovell, the hero of Beatrice and C.B. Fry's *A Mother's Son* (1907), is admirable in a similar manner, a brilliant cricketer for his public school, Oxford University and England and a champion jockey, a combination that could have been a model for Sassoon's Sherston.

The importance of schoolboy cricket reached extraordinary hyperbolic levels in Horace Vachell's *The Hill: A Romance of Friendship* (1906), a paean to Harrow School. The sporting climax of the novel is Harrow's annual cricket match at Lords against Eton, and the supposed importance of the game, which occupies a chapter (249-77), is manifest in the description of two catches. The first, taken by Scaife, is such a feat that you should "ask of the spirits of the air – not of the writer, how it was done" (Vachell 1906, 266), while the second, by Desmond, makes the worthy crowd forget themselves: "Grey-headed men threw their hats into the air; bishops danced; lovely women shrieked" (274). The hot-blooded language shows the grave import of cricket as well as the supposed eminence of the two schools. The heroic boys who take the catches are similarly significant. In some respects, Scaife is close to the ideal athlete, being extremely strong and more self-confident than his peers. But he is of "low breeding" (238), the son of a businessman, a "great contractor", hence the ambivalence people feel about him, that he had "so many gifts of the gods, yet lacked – a soul" (33). His ancestry — his grandfather was a navvy (34) — explains both his athleticism and his not being of the right sort: Scaife is "almost swarthy" with "coarse hands and feet" (12) and loves "evil for evil's sake" (286). In contrast, Desmond, nicknamed 'Caesar' both because his middle name is Julius and as an implicit recognition of his status, comes from excellent stock. His father is a cabinet minister and a "resplendent, stately personage" (35), and all his relatives attended the feted Harrow (8). His sporting manner is naturally very different from Scaife's "embodied symbol of force" (259). As an opening batsman, Desmond has a cut of "faultless style" (283), and in a run during a football game (the Harrow version and so very consequential in this novel), "that graceful figure…the promise that youth and beauty always offer to a delighted world, became an ineffaceable memory" (88). Desmond's athletic *élan* is an inevitable product of his antecedence and upbringing:

> he had received tender love, absolute trust, the traditions of a great family whose name was part of English history, an exqui-

> site refinement, and, with these, the gratification of all reasonable desires. (95-6)

For Sherston, cricket is another recreational link to his idea of *patria*. Unlike fox hunting, it does not entail social or financial exclusion, though, of course, it was and remains an integral element of a boy's education at the most expensive English schools. As with his experiences on horseback, Sherston's accounts of cricket games are quite solipsistic, but at least two features make it especially appropriate for inclusion in an Edwardian novel. Each game lasts a long time (unless a team plays badly) and is played in the summer, so it becomes an opportunity to appreciate the natural environment, the presumed healthy co-existence of the community, and, once more, the idea of history blending with the present. When players from a nearby village arrive to play against Sherston's village, the church bells provide a prelude to the game, and when Sherston recognises two fearsome bowlers he visualises the country between the two villages: "lovely glimpses of the Weald, and the smell of mown hayfields, and the noise of a shallow river flowing under a bridge" (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 49-50). Sherston knows each player's profession, but for the contest social reserve is not relevant. When an unpopular parson is out for nought, the "hobbledehoy" (teenager) keeping the score makes sure the failure is broadcast for the parson to hear (54). Inclusion, at a parochial level, is shown by the tastes that are catered for: there is a Horticultural Tent, a Beer Tent, and a Tea Tent (57), and there is music. When a brass band playing 'Soldiers of the Queen' is interrupted by a cacophonous steam-organ, the incongruous noise is muted and raucous modernity is put in its place: the "steeds now revolved and undulated noiselessly beneath their gilded canopy" (54-5). Indeed, the early nineteenth century has a living presence in Miss Maskall. She is 87 and it is rumoured that King George IV kissed her (58), and she saw "gentlemen playing cricket in queer whiskers and tall hats" (60).

8 Bucolic Summer

In tandem with his love of cricket, there is Sherston's idealisation of summer, an evocation that has become associated with the Edwardian era, in what David Powell calls "the 'long summer afternoon', the leisurely swansong of an aristocratic society bathed in the afterglow of Victorian splendour" (Powell 1996, vii; see also Fussell [1975] 2000, 23-4). Sherston's feelings about the season combine his strong attachment to the natural world, which flourishes in Kentish summers, with a patriotic nostalgia. On his return from school for the summer holidays, the scene that greets him when he wakes is a

harmonious combination of the wild and the domestic, showing that his house, its residents, the garden, and, by extension, the local natural environment, are where they are and as they should be. A starling's nest is by a window "where the jasmine grew thickest"; the only sounds are from sparrows in ivy; and there are thrushes and blackbirds pecking on the lawn. Because of his strong identification with the Weald, implicitly reinforced by seasonal abundance, the rest of the world is diminished: "How little I knew of the enormous world beyond that valley and those low green hills"; and of the Boer War, he "never could make up [his] mind what it was all about" (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 43-4).

The summer of 1914, before most of the first British volunteers had seen any active duty, marks the end of an era. Sherston plays cricket three or four times a week, when "long days of dry weather and white figures moving to and fro on green grounds […] now seem like an epitome of all that was peaceful in my past" (179). August and September 1914 come to represent an era that cannot return. That summer, therefore, needs to be the one he wishes he had experienced, a plainly romanticised depiction in contrast to what actually happened. When Sherston ceases to be one of the idle rich and volunteers at the start of World War One, he states "a hard fact in history", that "the cloudless weather of that August and September" would be remembered for the "spellbound serenity of its hot blue skies", before that autumn's "catastrophic events" (231), and that from June to mid-September there was no rain (180). The official records from Tunbridge Wells in Kent, instead, show 1914 was a mixed bag of an English summer, of rain, sun, cool and warm temperatures. From August 2nd to September 26th there were 17 days with rain, the average maximum temperature was 70.5°f (21.4°c), and there was just over 50% of the possible daily sunshine (see Met. Office).

Sherston's version of that summer is an expression of how vital the season and country are to him:

> The air was Elysian with early summer […] I was lazily aware that this was the sort of world I wanted. For it was my own countryside, and I loved it with an intimate feeling, though all its associations were crude and incoherent. I cannot think of it now without a sense of heartache, as if it contained something which I have never quite been able to discover. (Sassoon [1928] 2015, 66)

Sherston's desire to forget the inconveniently inclement days exemplifies what Sarah Edwards has shown to be a recurring theme of early twentieth-century British fiction, in which long hot summers represent a golden Arcadia (2017, 15, 18). It is tempting to view the evocations of Edwardian summers as being a retrospective wish by writers in the 1920s to look past "the war's 'pile of debris' toward the sunnier

landscape of a preceding *belle époque*" (Stevenson 2010, 132). However, it is evident that contemporaneous novelists were moved to eulogise the season before the shock of war in Europe. Like Sherston's rendering of the season in 1914, in pre-war fiction the English climate can sound closer to Mediterranean, as with Leslie Moore's *The Peacock Feather*, the story of Peter, a wandering ex-convict and would-be author. When he accepts an invitation from Lady Anne, an admirer of his writing, he walks out into

> a still sunny day, like many of its predecessors that summer. June had taken the earth into a warm, peaceful grasp. There was a restfulness about the atmosphere, a quiet assurance of continued heat and sunshine. (Moore 1914, 106)

Lady Anne is so much in accord with the season and her environment that she could be a product of them:

> The sunshine […] fell across her white dress and on her dark hair, which held the blue-black sheen of a rook's plumage. Her skin was creamy white, and her mouth, modelled like the mouth of a Greek statue, of geranium red (94) [...] she looked entirely in keeping with her surroundings. (131)

Jeffery Farnol's *The Broad Highway* (1911) has another wandering Peter. Peter Vibart refuses to marry a much-admired lady, leaves his family and meets a variety of people on his travels, including the beautiful Charmian Brown, who is summer personified, to very beneficial effect, and reminiscent of Cleopatra (rather than her servant):

> [Peter] beheld Charmian standing with the glory of the sun about her – like the Spirit of Summer herself, broad of hip and shoulder, yet slender, and long of limb, all warmth and life, and long, soft curves from throat to ankle – perfect with vigorous youth from the leaves that crowned her beauty to the foot that showed beneath her gown. (Farnol 1911, 326)

Charmian, in accord with summer, has become endowed with its virtues, analogous to the experiences of James Maradick, the central character in Hugh Walpole's *Maradick at Forty* (1910). Maradick is middle-aged and discontented with his life in London and flees to Cornwall with his wife where, thanks to the location and the season, he finds equanimity:

> The sun was sinking towards the sea and there was perfect silence save for the gentle ripple of the waves. It was so still that a small and gently ruffled sparrow hopped down to the edge of the water

> and looked about it. Toby [a dog] saw him but only lazily flapped an ear. The sparrow watched the dog for a moment apprehensively, then decided that there was no possible danger and resumed its contemplation of the sea […] A great peace was in Maradick's heart. This was the world at its absolute best. When things were like this there were no problems or questions at all; Epsom was an impossible myth and money-making game for fools. (Walpole 1910, 96-7)

The natural harmony is so ubiquitous that it extends to animals and, often a feature of pastoral euphoria, makes work irrelevant, inspiring pleasure in universal indolence. Often in the fiction of the time, even agriculture does not need human intervention. An exception is the description of Suffolk fields at harvest time in Matilda Betham-Edwards's *The Lord of the Harvest*, though it is still not deserving of close interest: "that mechanical swing of twenty arms […] monotony emblematic of these noiseless, unheroic lives" (Betham-Edwards 1899, 10-11).

Despite being an urban, social-realist novel, *RTP* also includes its own episode of rustic pleasure in summer as an escape from working. The excursion, in effect the workers' summer holiday, lasts an afternoon and evening (450) and much of that time is taken up with the journey (Tressell [1914] 2008, 453-4). The trip, for which each worker has had to save for four months (394), is organised so that the coaches travel in terms of company hierarchy, the director in the first 'brake' with supervisors and affluent friends (475). Consequently, there is no escape for workers from those you work with or under, with the attendant antipathies, nobody can forget their social status, and because there are after-dinner speeches, in which Socialism is attacked and defended (459-64), there is political rancour. However, the benefits are unimaginable experiences in their daily lives, and the challenge of the journey is a natural consequence of it being between two completely different worlds. The workers' main motivation is food and drink, and the meals are described in terms of pastoral abundance, in contrast to the workers' subsistence diets. The year before, the dinner included three types of meat, soup, vegetables, sauce and two puddings (390), and when they had finished the landlord indicated that there were enough leftovers for another meal (393). This year they have six types of meat, soup, *entrées*, vegetables, various puddings and a confusing number of knives and forks: "it was almost as good as the kind of dinner that is enjoyed every day by those persons who […] are cunning enough to make others work for them" (455). These outings are also the only time when workers are said to have recreation (apart from drinking and singing in a pub). When the "Semi-drunk" worked for Daubit and Botchit, they visited a pub where you could play football, cricket, and skittles (302); in the year in which the story is set, after dinner they play various games such as cricket and cards (468).

It is significant that such everyday activities should be accorded rarefied status and are apparently only possible in the country, the lack of which Owen believes is symptomatic of poverty, "when people are not able to secure for themselves all the benefits of civilisation […] leisure, books, theatre" (Tressell [1914] 2008, 22). However, the greatest contrast to the quotidian deprivation and exploitation of Mugsborough is a view of that part of rural England in the summer, a scene that is extraordinary in the context of the novel:

> they found themselves journeying along a sunlit, winding road, bordered with hedges of hawthorn, holly and briar, past rich, brown fields of standing corn, shimmering with gleams of gold, past apple orchards where bending boughs were heavily loaded with mellow fruits exhaling fragrant odours, through the cool shades of venerable oaks […] over old, mossy, stone bridges spanning limpid streams that duplicated the blue sky […] on every side ever more fields, some rich with harvest […] Several times they saw merry little companies of rabbits frisking gaily in and out the hedges […] Past thatched wayside cottages whose inhabitants came out to wave their hands in friendly greeting. Past groups of sunburnt, golden-haired children who […] waved their hats and cheered. (452-3)

It is a foreign country or a view of the type of life envisaged after the revolution, but the contrast to urban life is difficult to explain. How is it possible that such abundance, health and philanthropy could exist a few miles from need, sickness and misanthropy, and, if it did, why did nobody move there?

9 Conclusion

Assumptions about subject matter and its treatment, especially regarding social class, were and, to some extent, still are accepted as natural in Edwardian fiction. For example, that, in order to be of interest, a character should be socially privileged; that, in interactions between characters at either end of the social spectrum, those who worked for a living should be innately servile; or that sport should be revered while education could be ignored. These paradigms are so prevalent in the fiction of the time as to almost appear as laws of nature. Their clear existence in *MFHM*, set in the period but written twenty years later, indicates the degree to which atavistic ideas of what it meant to be British permeated its literary culture. That *RTP* mostly exposes their artificiality is a mark of Tressell's revolutionary achievement.

Abbreviations

RTP = Tressell, R. [1914] (2008). *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.
MFHM = Sassoon, S. [1928] (2015). *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man.*

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