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Review Essay: Recovering Thirties Fiction

Taylor, E.

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1	Recoveries	1
2		2
3		3
4	With the following presentations by Elinor Taylor and Joseph Pridmore of a	4
5	number of working-class- and left-oriented novels from the 1930s, <i>Key Words</i>	5
6	is inaugurating a new regular feature, aimed at the recovery and re-assessment	6
7	of neglected, marginalised or forgotten figures and texts from radical, socialist	7
8	and labour history. Readers are invited to propose suitable subjects for	8
9	future issues, and to submit, should they wish, their own contributions for	9
10	consideration. Should review copies of nominated books be required, please	10
11	contact the reviews editor with full details of publication at stan.smith@ntu.	11
12	ac.uk, and we shall endeavour to obtain them.	12
13		13
14		14
15	Recovering Thirties Fiction	15
16		16
17	<i>Introduction</i>	17
18		18
19	In 1989 Andy Croft outlined the prevailing myths about the literature of the	19
20	1930s, Auden's 'low dishonest decade'. In the wake of the renunciation by	20
21	so many writers of their youthful commitment to the 'God that failed', ¹ the	21
22	period came to be seen as one characterised by 'a naïve, careless and treacherous	22
23	literature of zealotry'. ² Croft argued against the tendency to reduce 1930s	23
24	writing to the work of a small group of familiar names – Auden, Spender,	24
25	MacNeice, Day Lewis, Orwell and Isherwood – and against over-dependence	25
26	on their subsequent recantations, which had created the image of the 1930s	26
27	as 'politically gutted, imaginatively emptied' (Croft, 169). Croft wondered	27
28	what version of the 1930s might take the public imagination from a different	28
29	selection of texts and authors: instead of A.J. Cronin, Lewis Jones; instead of	29
30	Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson (154).	30
31	A survey of recently reissued novels of the 1930s suggests that the	31
32	political and imaginative possibilities of the decade are being recovered. The	32
33	Library of Wales has republished Lewis Jones's <i>Cwmardy</i> and <i>We Live</i> , and	33
34	Jack Jones's <i>Black Parade</i> . New editions of John Sommerfield's <i>May Day</i> and	34
35	Simon Blumenfeld's <i>Jew Boy</i> have recently reappeared from London Books.	35
35	The list could also include Storm Jameson's <i>In the Second Year</i> (Trent Editions,	35
37		37
38	1 See Arthur Koestler et al., <i>The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism</i> (London: Hamish	38
39	Hamilton, 1950).	39
40	2 Andy Croft, 'Forward to the 1930s: The Literary Politics of Anamnesis', in ed. Christopher	40
41	Shaw and Malcolm Chase, <i>The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia</i> (Manchester: Manchester	41
	University Press, 1989), 151.	

1 2004) and the *New York Review of Books Classics* edition of Sylvia Townsend
 2 Warner's *Summer Will Show* (2009). A long out-of-print novel of the Battle of
 3 Cable Street, Frank Griffin's *October Day*, has also recently been republished
 4 with an introduction by Croft to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary
 5 of that event. Meanwhile the Association for Scottish Literary Studies has
 6 produced a volume of two novels by the Glasgow writer Dot Allan, including
 7 her distinctive 1934 work *Hunger March*.

8 The reappearance of such texts as Sommerfield's and Lewis Jones's is
 9 indicative of the ambiguous presence of the 1930s in the popular imagination.
 10 In one way, their appearance might be a sign of the decline of Communism
 11 as an ideological *bête noire*. The kind of fervent renunciation of Communism
 12 that shaped the 1930s myth in the postwar era has begun to seem remote.
 13 In another way, the recovery of these texts might be seen as an affirmation
 14 of the renewed relevance of that decade. Since 2008 the 1930s has become
 15 the standard reference point for discussing the current economic crisis.³ The
 16 restaging of the Jarrow March in late 2011, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the
 17 original event, suggests the continuing resonance of that decade as a by-word
 18 for crisis.

19 The ambiguities of our present relation to the 1930s can be found in the way
 20 the republished texts are presented. Take, for example, John Sommerfield's *May*
 21 *Day*.⁴ The novelist John King's introduction to the book seems at points to be
 22 offering a kind of apology for Sommerfield's politics, while still asserting that
 23 'Idealistic literature, whether naïve or not, is more important than ever' (16).
 24 King presents Sommerfield as an optimistic and sociable man whose 'belief
 25 in the individual' underpinned his strategy in the novel (12). It is not easy to
 26 concur on this second point. The strategy of the text can just as easily be read
 27 as working very deliberately against the over-valuation of the individual in an
 28 attempt to shift its emphasis on to specifically social relations. Sam Jordison's
 29 *Guardian* review of the republished novel amounted to a denunciation of its
 30 ('spectacularly wrong') political premises, while acknowledging clear parallels
 31 to the present-day. The novel, Jordison suggested, was a failure because it did
 32 not depict problems in an 'individual' enough manner.⁵ It is apparent that the
 33 myth of the 'red decade', in which writers naively aligned themselves with
 34 Communism to the detriment of their art, still persists. The cliché is only
 35 bolstered by the reprinting of Sommerfield's own reappraisal of his text,
 35

37 3 See, for example, Jon Hilsenrath, Serena Ng and Damian Paletta, 'Worst Crisis Since '30s,
 38 With No End Yet In Sight', *Wall Street Journal* (18 September 2008): online edition.

39 4 John Sommerfield, *May Day* (1936; London: London Books, 2010). Introduction by John
 40 King.

41 5 Sam Jordison, 'A Misplaced May Day Dream for the Masses', at guardian.co.uk, 29 April
 2011.

1 written for its republication in 1984, which, while not quite a declaration of
 2 apostasy, expresses the author's rather predictable assessment of it as 'early
 3 '30s Communist romanticism' ('Postscript', Sommerfield, 243).

4 Hywel Francis's foreword to the Library of Wales volume of Lewis Jones's
 5 two novels *Cwmardy* and *We Live* expresses a comparable set of anxieties.⁶
 6 Francis almost seems to want to detach Jones from his role in the Communist
 7 Party. Jones, Francis writes, was 'a maverick in the best sense of the word', and
 8 certainly not a party 'apparatchik' (x). It might be nearer the mark to say that
 9 Jones was both these things. It is disingenuous to overlook the fact that he was
 10 a major organisational force in the Party. That Francis wants to paint Jones as
 11 a rambunctious and mischievous character is to reprise the assumption that
 12 there was a clear distinction between those Communists who were puppets
 13 of the Party and those who, for well-meaning but mistaken reasons, aligned
 14 themselves with it. Francis's reasons for characterising Jones like this are,
 15 of course, not difficult to grasp, nor should they be dismissed. It may well
 16 be necessary to bring the author to life this way at a time when ideological
 17 commitment is viewed with great suspicion. Jones, like Sommerfield, is
 18 presented as the antithesis of the ideologue: he is remembered for his 'love
 19 of the people and compassion' (xi). These reservations about presentation are
 20 minor, and outweighed by the value of the novels themselves in helping to
 21 recover, albeit in a mediated way, another view of the 1930s: of possibility as
 22 well as failure. I shall discuss at greater length below two writers whose work
 23 provides the opportunity for a rather different vision of the era.
 24

25 **Frank Griffin: *October Day***⁷

26
 27 The recent republication of Frank Griffin's 1939 novel of the Battle of Cable
 28 Street, *October Day*, is another sign of this more positive attitude to the decade.
 29 Republished by New London Editions to coincide with the seventy-fifth
 30 anniversary of that event, when the British Union of Fascists were prevented
 31 by popular opposition, organised by the Communist Party and others, from
 32 marching through the East End of London, the novel follows a cast of
 33 Londoners brought together, more or less accidentally, by a groundswell of
 34 popular outrage at the BUF's intentions. Griffin uses a comparable technical
 35 strategy to that of Sommerfield: a group of characters whose narratives criss-
 36 cross the political action taking shape in the city. The bus conductor Bert, 'a
 37 picture of progressive youth' (59), forms a relationship with the homeless and
 38 unhappy Elsie, recently released from prison; the unemployed and harassed
 39

40 6 Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy; & We Live* (1937; 1939. Cardigan: Parthian: Library of Wales, 2006).
 41 Foreword by Hywel Francis.

41 7 Frank Griffin, *October Day* (1939; Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2011).

1 Joe Slesser escapes the irritations of his impoverished domestic situation to 1
 2 go to the march, where he strikes up a friendship with a Communist couple, 2
 3 Claire and Calvin. Meanwhile a policeman, Harold Thurgood, who has been 3
 4 conducting an affair with the dissipated widow Lady Stroud, who is also Elsie's 4
 5 former employer, is on duty at the march. Griffin was a Communist Party 5
 6 member, and the text has its didactic moments. Claire and Calvin function 6
 7 mainly to provide a political commentary for the benefit of the other 7
 8 characters, often in a long-winded and rather unrealistic manner. This is odd, 8
 9 since elsewhere in the text Griffin demonstrates an excellent ear for dialogue. 9
 10 Perhaps deliberately, however, Calvin's sermonising tendencies can also appear 10
 11 comic. The manic intensity with which he accosts the hapless and initially 11
 12 apolitical Joe does seem humorously overblown: "Of course it's right!" Calvin 12
 13 exclaimed, and turned again to Slesser, seizing him by the lapels of his coat' 13
 14 (95). 14

15 *October Day's* vision of political action is a vision of a community in 15
 16 carnival mode, of a 'mighty and glorious festival' (125). Occasionally it 16
 17 becomes cartoonish, as when "But just wait till there's t'revolution," declares 17
 18 an old woman, "Then there'll be sights, there won't 'arf!" before throwing a 18
 19 rock at Lady Stroud's car, "The thin-gutted, staring cow!" (110). Apparently 19
 20 anticipating these objections, the 'Author's Note' assures the reader that the 20
 21 scenes contained are based on the facts as recorded by the cameramen of the 21
 22 newspaper, 'to which any doubting reader is referred' (13). There are moments 22
 23 where the propagandist line seems a too strong, as, for example, when Lady 23
 24 Stroud declares that "What we need in England is a strong man at the top, 24
 25 someone like Hitler, to keep these people in order" (175). It is a commonplace 25
 26 that such views were held in such circles, but the dialogue nonetheless feels 26
 27 forced. 27

28 Griffin's Joe emerges as a human being: contrary, often naïve, drily humorous 28
 29 in spite of his circumstances. His eventual politicisation, which amounts to 29
 30 nothing more radical than a decision to join a union, comes as a consequence 30
 31 of discovering that both fascism and the state are, in the novel, indiscriminate 31
 32 in the targets of their violence. He is more indignant than furious: 'He hadn't 32
 33 caused the rotten trouble. He was neither a Red nor a Black. He hadn't charged 33
 34 at the van and tried to bash up the fascists, but they'd tried to get him for it just 34
 35 the same as if he had' (78). He ends up in a fight with a group of Fascists who 35
 35 mistake him for a Jew, in spite of his indignant protestations to the contrary 35
 37 (165). 37

38 However, this is above all a novel of human relationships forged, intensified 38
 39 and transformed by the experience of collective action, and demonstrates that, 39
 40 in spite of contemporary scepticism, explorations of political development 40
 41 need not negate the credible depiction of individual lives and struggles. At 41

1 the novel's end, Elsie has moved into Bert's flat, and Joe has made things up 1
 2 with his wife, who he realises is as much a victim of circumstances as he is: 2
 3 'It's this being on the dole, her having to worry about the food and the rent 3
 4 and the kids, that does it' (218). Thurgood's affair with Lady Stroud has turned 4
 5 sour, and, after nearly strangling her to death, he commits suicide. Griffin's 5
 6 novel lacks the experimental reach of Sommerfield's, and works from less 6
 7 theoretically-involved premises. *May Day* begins with an epigraph from Marx, 7
 8 and is overt about its attempt to fashion a narrative method out of dialectical 8
 9 materialism: 'In this whirlpool of matter-in-motion, forces are at work creating history ... 9
 10 Every true story of today is the story of this struggle.'⁸ Griffin, though a Communist, 10
 11 starts and ends with a simpler proposition: 'If you stood together you could 11
 12 win; you were invincible. There were so many of you that no power on earth 12
 13 could resist you, once you stood together.'⁹ Griffin's community, united in 13
 14 anti-fascist action, is likely to be less 'spectacularly wrong' for contemporary 14
 15 readers than Sommerfield's jarring 'Demonstrate for a free Soviet Britain!'¹⁰ It 15
 16 is a fast-paced, funny and human account of an event now disappearing from 16
 17 living memory, supported by Croft's detailed introduction that frames the text 17
 18 with biographical detail and original reviews. 18

20 **Dot Allan: *Makeshift* and *Hunger March***¹¹ 20

21 Questions of authorial politics in the depiction of social upheaval are 21
 22 unavoidably raised when reading the republished edition of two novels about 22
 23 interwar Glasgow life, Dot Allan's *Makeshift* and *Hunger March*, originally 23
 24 published in 1928 and 1934 respectively. Allan was a middle-class woman who 24
 25 made a career as a journalist, novelist, and short story writer at a time when it 25
 26 was still unusual for a woman of her background to do so. The introductory 26
 27 essay by Moira Burgess is enlightening: a thoroughly researched and informative 27
 28 background to a writer who is no longer well known. Biographical information 28
 29 about Allan is scant. Burgess draws attention to her involvement with Scottish 29
 30 PEN, though the details of the duration and extent of her participation 30
 31 are too sparse to support any conclusions about its relevance to the novels 31
 32 presented here, as Burgess acknowledges. However, her comments on Allan's 32
 33 involvement are suggestive. She reports that in 1950, along with several 33
 34 other significant women writers, including Marion Lochhead and Elisabeth 34
 35 Kyle, Allan undertook fundraising work for PEN. Of this activity, Burgess 35
 35 makes the rather odd comment that, 'In the interests of Scottish literature 35
 37 37

38 ⁸ Sommerfield, *May Day*, 26. 38

39 ⁹ Griffin, *October Day*, 162. 39

40 ¹⁰ Sommerfield, *May Day*, 26. 40

41 ¹¹ Dot Allan, *Makeshift and Hunger March* (1928; 1934). Introduction by Moira Burgess 41
 (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2010).

1 one would rather have seen these considerable writers getting on with their 1
 2 writing, as, it appears, all the men were doing' (xi). There is perhaps something 2
 3 of a throwaway tone to this comment, but it does indicate a critical tendency 3
 4 to assume that a writer's best interests are served by a refusal to engage with 4
 5 political activity, and that such engagements can only be to the detriment of 5
 6 the writer's work. The *Glasgow Herald* considered Allan's involvement with the 6
 7 organisation significant enough to describe her as 'a strong supporter' in its 7
 8 obituary,¹² which might suggest a more sustained and principled commitment 8
 9 than Burgess's characterisation allows for. 9

10 The lack of information available would be less problematic if Allan had 10
 11 not written, in *Hunger March*, an intensely, but very elusively, political work. This 11
 12 novel raises considerable problems with the terms in which Allan is presented. 12
 13 Burgess acknowledges the weaknesses of her writing, chiefly its melodramatic 13
 14 tendencies and its faltering attempts to construct credible working-class 14
 15 characters. Both these are genuine problems with her work. Burgess's tone is 15
 16 in one way apologetic, but there is also an excusatory note: 'Perhaps, as a West 16
 17 End lady and a dutiful daughter, she was shackled by the inhibiting influence 17
 18 of the very conventions she depicts, and felt she could not go so far' (xxii). 18
 19 This may well be a reasonable speculation, but it casts a particular light on the 19
 20 novels themselves. The two novels are strikingly different from one another. 20
 21 *Makeshift*, originally published in 1928, concerns an aspiring middle-class poet, 21
 22 Jacqueline Thayer, and her negotiation of the demands of family and romance 22
 23 with her quest for self-expression. It contains some striking phrases, but is 23
 24 overall a quite conventional novel, bound to a rather Victorian plot in which 24
 25 freedom comes from an unexpected inheritance, allowing Jacqueline both to 25
 26 escape the prospect of an unsatisfactory marriage and to pursue artistic self- 26
 27 fulfilment. The naïve Jacqueline finds herself at the mercy of men and, of 27
 28 'the cruel snobbery of the servant class' in her pursuit of escape from a life in 28
 29 which she is always expected to 'make shift' and be content with 'second best' 29
 30 (143). 30

31 Alongside the work of contemporaries such as Sylvia Townsend Warner 31
 32 and Rosamond Lehmann, Allan's *Makeshift* seems conservative. It does little to 32
 33 prepare the reader for the second novel republished here, *Hunger March*. This 33
 34 novel, which originally appeared in 1934, is a deeply strange and unsettling 34
 35 piece of work. At the level of structure, it resembles both Sommerfield's 35
 35 *May Day* and Griffin's *October Day*. It is a narrative of short scenes confined 35
 37 to a single day, featuring a range of characters all linked in some way by the 37
 38 hunger march about to convene in Glasgow's George Square. Like *May Day* 38
 39 and *October Day*, *Hunger March* features no single main protagonist, moving 39
 40 40

41 12 'Obituary: Dot Allan, Novelist and Journalist', *The Glasgow Herald*, 4 December 1964,17. 41

1 instead between several clusters of characters. One group is comprised of a 1
 2 middle-class woman, Mrs MacGregor, her employee, Mrs Humphry, and Mrs 2
 3 Humphrey's unemployed son, Joe. Another cluster involves Arthur Joyce, a 3
 4 businessman grieving for his son, lost in the First World War, and Joyce's two 4
 5 clerks, Charlie Wren and Celia. Another, looser narrative thread brings together 5
 6 Jimmy, a journalist, Adèle Elberstein, a singer in Glasgow for a concert, 6
 7 and Carlo, an Italian hotel worker under Mussolini's regime. A Communist 7
 8 leader, Hamish Nimrod, makes several brief appearances. The narrative, like 8
 9 Sommerfield's, shifts between these characters, sketching out the connections 9
 10 and intersections of their lives. 10

11 But where Sommerfield announces his intent with the words of Marx and 11
 12 with a meditation on the forces of history, Allan's novel begins with a long, 12
 13 strange 'Proem' that establishes *Hunger March*'s unsettling premise: 13
 14 14

15 The first hunger march took place in Egypt. Joseph's sons, the ten brethren 15
 16 of Joseph, come to seek corn when the famine was in their own land, the 16
 17 land of Canaan, were the first hunger marchers. They marched, not as our 17
 18 ex-servicemen, our neo-pagans, our paid incendiaries, our honest men and 18
 19 our Communist do, brandishing crude weapons, shouting defiance, but 19
 20 in the peaceful manner of a pastoral people whose faith in neighbourly 20
 21 charity is undefiled. (195) 21

22 This image, taken from the Book of *Genesis*, reveals the moralising tendency of 22
 23 the novel as a whole. Hunger marches for Allan seem to have a metaphysical 23
 24 aspect as instances of a perpetual injustice. These opening phrases reveal a 24
 25 troubling belief in an orderly, moral kind of suffering. The 'peaceful manner of 25
 26 a pastoral people' seems to be preferable to the modern hunger march, with its 26
 27 threatening, disorderly tones. This characterisation of modern urban protest 27
 28 continues: 'So, centuries later, modern hunger marches, bearing rude weapons, 28
 29 blaring harsh music, were to encircle our cities' squares, our Government 29
 30 buildings, voicing the prayer of Joseph's brethren: Give Us Bread!' (198). This 30
 31 is written from the point of view of the disturbed spectator. Allan's phrasing 31
 32 suggests that history is something that *happens* to people, apparently without 32
 33 reason or agency: 'Paris awoke to the cry one wet October morning in the 33
 34 early days of the French Revolution' (198). The novel seems to abhor the 34
 35 untidiness and inconvenience the march brings, lamenting that, far from being 35
 37 'a splendid outpouring of humanity knit together by a common cause', the 37
 38 march becomes 'a shuffling mob trailing half-heartedly at the heels of their 38
 39 leaders; a mob wasting its strength in shouts of imprecation, in paroxysms of 39
 40 passion as objectless as they are pitiful to behold' (203). This distaste is coupled 40
 41 with an anti-technological streak running through the text. The generation 41

1 marching now are ‘made outcast, one half, by the machine’ (200). Man still 1
 2 asserts his ‘right to live’ above the din of the machines, but the integrity of this 2
 3 entreaty seems to have been lost and corrupted: ‘His brain, addled by confused 3
 4 justice, by the jargon of diverse politicians, and stupefied by the incessant din 4
 5 of clattering machinery, works only in spurts’ (201). 5
 6 The narrator of the ‘Proem’ declares that there is a moral and spiritual 6
 7 obligation to assist, but this appears as a philanthropic, not a political impulse. 7
 8 Throughout the text the march appears as a kind of memento mori: ‘There but 8
 9 for the grace of God, go I!’ (201). A mixture of presumption and indifference 9
 10 tends to characterise Allan’s treatment of the poor. This is apparent when 10
 11 Arthur Joyce’s clerk, Celia, tries ‘to imagine what it would feel like to be 11
 12 unemployed, to go from day to day weighted by a sense of failure (237). Celia 12
 13 has already decided exactly what unemployment must be like: she assumes it 13
 14 is attended by a debilitating sense of failure. Thus the empathetic effort she 14
 15 is making is superfluous. Mrs Humphrey’s employer, Mrs MacGregor, looks 15
 16 upon the marchers with the kind of baffled pity that is the novel’s dominant 16
 17 reaction. She wonders: ‘had they assembled here of their own free will with 17
 18 the object of displaying, as Eastern beggars do, their sores to the world?’ 18
 19 (370). *Hunger March* is not insensitive to the indignity of unemployment, but 19
 20 its expressions of that apprehension are troubling. The cub reporter Jimmy, 20
 21 whose own class position is far from secure, wonders about the unemployed 21
 22 man drawing his dole: ‘Did it ever occur to him he was an unwelcome guest of 22
 23 the white-collar brigade, that his needs were draining its resources, choking like 23
 24 a heap of filth a strong clear stream?’ (322). It occurs to Jimmy that perhaps 24
 25 the ‘white collar brigade’ has not made such a good job of things, but he too 25
 26 lapses into the anti-technological assumptions made elsewhere. The problem, 26
 27 he thinks, is that the ‘workshops were so cluttered’ and thus there are not 27
 28 enough clear spaces open to the sky’ (323). The novel’s insights into social 28
 29 injustice, to which it is certainly not blind, break down because they continually 29
 30 dissolve into such anti-modern generality. 30
 31 A generalised preference for order over disorder emerges clearly and 31
 32 troublingly in the plotline concerning the Italian hotel employee, Carlo, 32
 33 a refugee from Mussolini’s regime. On hearing of the march, Carlo is so 33
 34 frightened by the prospect of unrest and disorder that he commits suicide. It is 34
 35 ‘a dread of political meddlers, of Fascists, of all who dare authority and dabble 35
 35 in affairs of state’ that disturbs the balance of Carlo’s mind and provokes him 35
 37 to suicide (253). His body is glimpsed by the singer Adèle Elberstein, who 37
 38 interprets it as a sign of the horrors that lurk in the attic rooms of the servant 38
 39 class from which, thanks to her sexual manipulation of men, she has escaped: 39
 40 ‘Top floor, typical top floor’ (318). 40
 41 41

1 Carlo’s violent death, however, resonates ironically. In spite of his terror of 1
 2 unrest, at no point in the novel does the hunger march present any threat to 2
 3 order beyond a temporary disturbance. This ironic undermining of the march’s 3
 4 significance is most clear in the treatment of the unemployed character, Joe, 4
 5 son of the long-suffering Mrs. Humphrey. Joe’s limited experience of the 5
 6 world, occasioned by his inability to find work and consequent complete 6
 7 dependence on his mother, leads him to a naïve commitment to Communism. 7
 8 His inexperience conspires with his reading of Marxist writers to condition 8
 9 a Pavlovian kind of response: ‘any stray orator had only to utter the words 9
 10 “tyrants”, “capitalists”, to touch the little live switch which lit up the boy’s 10
 11 brain’ (246). Joe’s mother thinks he has ‘some dark strain of his blood which 11
 12 rebelled against life as it was. Joe wanted to destroy things, to smash them for 12
 13 all the world like a wee laddie who has no more sense than to break up its toys’ 13
 14 (342). One plotline in the novel follows Joe as he assaults one of Joyce’s clerks, 14
 15 and, believing that he has killed him, flees: ‘He hadn’t struck intentionally 15
 16 at a human being, alive and palpitating like himself. He had only hit out at 16
 17 Capitalism, at cruelty. And they would hang him for that’ (313). Temporarily, 17
 18 he feels surrounded by ‘an air of importance’ (311). But it is no surprise to 18
 19 discover that the clerk recovers fully; in *Hunger March* it seems impossible that 19
 20 Joe could ever do anything of any consequence. His belief that he has struck 20
 21 a blow in the class war is ridiculed as simply the fantasy of a young, workless 21
 22 man. The association of the march with young male impulses is reiterated by 22
 23 Arthur Joyce, the businessman, who sees the procession as ‘boys, boys of all 23
 24 nations, a host of pink-cheeked, confiding youths like [his son] Jerry, ready for 24
 25 the sake of the winged dream conceived by their ardent minds to run their 25
 26 breasts upon a spear’ (332). In Joyce’s eyes, the demonstration is no different 26
 27 from the First World War: an expression of young men’s willingness to die for 27
 28 a cause. 28
 29 Ultimately, what is offered is a decidedly individualist set of solutions. 29
 30 The technocratic order – bringing with it the loud noise and chaos that is 30
 31 so abhorred in the novel – has produced an overcrowded world from which 31
 32 escape must be made. Charlie Wren has an extraordinary vision of the 32
 33 hunger march eventually encircling the whole world: a great protest against 33
 34 ‘a God who had put them into the world and then left them to fend in it for 34
 35 themselves’ and in which each was ‘fighting neither for nation nor for party; he 35
 35 was fighting neither for supremacy nor for riches, but simply to gain a foothold 35
 37 in an overcrowded world’ (409). For Charlie, as for Celia, the only way through 37
 38 this vision of total war is through marriage, the ‘protection of man and woman 38
 39 from that terrible loneliness inseparable from life in an overcrowded realm’, 39
 40 a partial release from the ‘struggle to communicate’ (406). For Jimmy, the 40
 41 resolution is a full spiritual conversion. He decides to follow his father and 41

1 grandfather into the Church, believing, at the novel's close, that 'freedom of
2 the spirit has nothing to do with one's way of living' (421). He believes that
3 'no kind of political adjustment, no state of Communism, or of perfervid
4 Nationalism was going to save the country' (421).
5 *Hunger March* is an extraordinary piece of imaginative work, unsettling not
6 because its grasp of politics is slight, but because it is written with the full
7 force of moral and ideological conviction. The terms in which this republished
8 text is presented, as the work of a middle-class woman, rather inexperienced
9 and inept at dealing with the realities of social injustice, seem inadequate for
10 interpreting the strength of its assertions. The novel's ironic structures serve
11 to deprive its working-class characters of agency to an extent that is difficult
12 to attribute to simple lack of familiarity. A more thorough analysis would
13 pursue the ironic currents of the text, to give a fuller account of its complex
14 configurings of the relation between individuals and the impersonal forces
15 on which the novel is premised. Moreover to construct an account of 1930s
16 writing that is not, in Croft's phrase, 'politically gutted, imaginatively emptied'
17 demands an appraisal of such texts as Allan's alongside the more politically
18 clear-cut work of Sommerfield, Griffin and Jones. Historical distance, and
19 the profound alteration of the political landscape, has meant that the work
20 of these three writers may be read in a less hostile light than they would
21 have encountered in earlier decades. The same distance should enable a re-
22 evaluation of works such as Allan's, which resounds with political messages no
23 less alien and radical.

24 *Elinor Taylor*
25 *Regent's College, London*

26 **Walter Brierley: *Means-Test Man***

27
28
29
30 Raymond Williams's lifelong involvement with working-class life and history
31 pervades all his extensive body of sociocultural studies, novels and literary
32 engagements, while his pioneering of recovery research for neglected and
33 overlooked working-class writing helped shape this field of study as we
34 know it today. *Key Words* is therefore an appropriate forum in which to talk
35 about *Means-Test Man*, Walter Brierley's superior working-class novel of 1935,
35 reprinted in a new edition by Spokesman in 2011.¹ This reappearance might
37 strike a note more ominous than celebratory, however, in the light of that
38 novel's publication history. As with its mid-1930s first edition and the previous
39 Spokesman reprint of 1983, a worsening economic climate has made Brierley's
40 account of the damaging effects of long-term unemployment all too topical.

41 ¹ Walter Brierley, *Means-Test Man* (1935); Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011.

1 The latest edition's back-cover copy is quick to remind us of this, and Andy
2 Croft's introduction to the 1983 version, also reproduced here, has taken on
3 the same relevance now that it had then.
4 Croft's name will be familiar to readers of *Key Words*, and his *Red Letter Days:*
5 *British Fiction in the 1930s* remains the authoritative text on the literary moment
6 to which Brierley belongs.² In his introduction he contends that *Means-Test*
7 *Man* is 'one of the most powerful and original English novels of the 1930s'.³
8 Croft argues that its especial strength comes from Brierley's focus on the
9 implications of joblessness and dependency on state relief entirely within the
10 individual experience of one small family, as they spend a week waiting for the
11 visit of the eponymous government inspector. This approach eschews a much
12 more common tendency in 1930s working-class writing, which was to adopt
13 socialist-inflected themes of mass resistance and collective action. These are
14 all but absent from *Means-Test Man*, a silence that has proved both controversial
15 and provocative for those tackling the novel.
16 Methuen, the original publishers, boasted in 1935 that 'It is almost the duty
17 of every intelligent British man and woman to read this book [...] and to face
18 up to the facts in it'.⁴ Many favourable early reviews agreed: Croft describes
19 in his introduction glowing write-ups from the *Economist* and *TLS*, and adds
20 Oliver Baldwin's remark that 'every MP should read it'.⁵ Croft also notes one
21 dissenting voice, however, that 'was to set the tone for subsequent responses
22 from the Left to the novel' (xiii). It belonged to Ernie Wooley, who wrote in
23 the *Daily Worker*:

24
25 The weakness of the book, recognizable, perhaps, only to those who have
26 experienced long periods of unemployment is that the unemployed worker
27 who sits timidly at home waiting for the investigator is not the rule, but
28 the exception [...] A book which brought out this fighting spirit of the
29 unemployed would have been a much greater use to the working-class'.⁶

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2 Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990).
3 Brierley, *Means-Test Man*, xv.
4 Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain*
(Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 148.
5 Brierley, *Means-Test Man*, xii.
6 *The Daily Worker*, 22 May 1935; cited in Brierley, xiii.

1 galvanising unemployed workers into repeated political action on a nationwide 1
 2 level.⁷ This is not even to mention the General Strike of 1926, the Great Lock- 2
 3 out of 1921, or such earlier events as the transport strikes of 1911–12 which 3
 4 occurred during Brierley’s childhood. In an earlier issue of *Key Words* I wrote, 4
 5 with an unknowing echo of Wooley that has become appropriate here, that by 5
 6 the mid-1930s ‘Collective social protest was the historical norm rather than 6
 7 the exception’.⁸ 7

8 In working-class writing published around the same time as *Means-Test* 8
 9 *Man* this ‘fighting spirit’ is more starkly evident than in Brierley’s novel. Walter 9
 10 Greenwood, Lewis Jones and James Hanley, for example, all wrote novels 10
 11 in the 1930s that feature strikes or collective mass action, and not merely in 11
 12 the spirit of passively reflecting contemporary social conditions of the time. 12
 13 Rather, these social conditions have a decisive bearing on plot and character 13
 14 development. In Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933), for example, the agitator 14
 15 Larry Meath dies as a result of injuries inflicted by police batons during a 15
 16 demonstration.⁹ Hanley’s *The Furies*, published in the same year as *Means-Test* 16
 17 *Man*, contains a mass gathering to protest such institutionalised brutality and 17
 18 also a strike which, according to one of the characters, is in support of coal 18
 19 miners: “‘They want us to support the miners. Poor bastards! They always do 19
 20 it dirty on the miners’”.¹⁰ 20

21 We might reasonably expect *Means-Test Man*’s Jack Cook, who is an 21
 22 unemployed miner, to take more than a passing interest in such matters while 22
 23 they are occurring up and down the country. Instead, though, Brierley shows 23
 24 us a world where it’s next to impossible to imagine anyone in the village of 24
 25 Wingrove (a slightly fictionalised version of Waingroves in Derbyshire, the 25
 26 author’s birthplace) rising up in industrial action or organised protest. The 26
 27 closest Jack ever comes to engaging with such debates is in Chapter Two, 27
 28 ‘Sunday’, for him ‘The worst day of the week, the most trying, the most 28
 29 deadening’,¹¹ and ‘a dangerous day, too, when a moment’s weakness might lead 29
 30 to the very core of domestic accord being poisoned or ripped away’ (66). His 30
 31 interior monologue continues: 31

32
 33 But there was no danger of that from his side, his hate was general, not 33
 34 based on envy of another. He softened as he came down to particulars, 34
 35 his wife, his child, another out-of-work; he did not feel like breaking shop 35

35 7 For a full account, see Peter Kingsford, *The Hunger Marchers in Britain* (London: Lawrence & 35
 37 Wishart, 1982). 37

38 8 See my article ‘Gender and Community in Working-Class Writing’, *Key Words* 5 (2007–8), 38
 39 44. 39

40 9 Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933). 40

41 10 James Hanley, *The Furies* (1935; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 106. 41

41 11 Brierley, *Means-Test Man*, 64. 41

1 windows for their sakes or chivvying Members of Parliament; it was just a 1
 2 sorrow, just a sadness because things were as they were. (66–7) 2
 3 3

4 Jack’s perspective on violent protest is simply to dismiss the concept, in 4
 5 generalising terms, as something that exists outside his experience. Conflicts 5
 6 in the personal and domestic spheres, meanwhile, are far more important and 6
 7 take precedence. This is symptomatic of the novel as a whole. Jane’s attitudes, 7
 8 by contrast, are somewhat more complex. There are four separate instances in 8
 9 the novel’s week-long span where Jane displays accord, albeit of the crudest 9
 10 possible kind, with radical ideologies. These politicised moments are sudden 10
 11 flashes and often occur as a direct response to external stimuli – one, for 11
 12 example, happens when Jane is jolted out of a pleasant reverie by a woman who 12
 13 barges past her in the street, and another when her infant son John comes home 13
 14 crying after being hit by their loutish neighbour Mr. Jinks. For all that these 14
 15 incidents fill her with ire, Jane remains politically ill-informed. She grasps basic 15
 16 notions of inequality, as is revealed by such internal reflections as ‘Thousands 16
 17 of harassed men, women and children were penned in with them, beings with 17
 18 no independence, no freedom, underfed, underclothed, not trusted’ (55), but 18
 19 although we are told ‘behind her hate and anger was a strong activity reaching 19
 20 out towards something definite’ (102), she never arrives at it. In her rage over 20
 21 Jinks’s behaviour, Jane almost immediately conflates the man with a cabinet 21
 22 minister whose picture she remembers seeing in the paper: ‘In that moment 22
 23 she had felt near her enemy somehow ... A suggestion of wildness had swept 23
 24 her’ (102). The connections Jane draws to relate lived experience to a wider 24
 25 external politics are arbitrary, and as with her husband (albeit via a somewhat 25
 26 different route) any attempt to do so inevitably leads her back to her personal 26
 27 and private sufferings: the difficulty of running a household on state benefits, 27
 28 her material deprivations, and the impending humiliation of the Means-Test 28
 29 man’s visit. 29

30 One can see how the character of Jane might have been turned to comic 30
 31 effect by an author seeking to trivialise the growing trend towards violent 31
 32 political protest in 1930s Britain. Brierley, however, takes care to never reduce 32
 33 her to a twentieth-century Mrs. Malaprop, generating mere humour by putting 33
 34 her own flawed interpretations onto matters which the reader understands far 34
 35 better. The resultant impression of Jane is far darker and more disturbing. Her 35
 36 incipient socialism grants her only a means of indulging the self-destructive 35
 37 anger and hatred engendered by her circumstances, not a productive outlet for 37
 38 those emotions. Although we may not be able to picture her joining a picket 38
 39 line or participating in a riot, Brierley illustrates plainly that her ‘strong moods’ 39
 40 (101), to use Jane’s own phrase, are a damaging force to her personal happiness 40
 41 and the fragile domestic harmony of the Cook household. 41

1 Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Brierley might be heard to sound a
2 cautionary note about the extreme forms of political activism. Such elements
3 of *Means-Test Man* may have influenced the conclusion of critics such as
4 Wooley and, more recently, Roy Johnson, that the author appeared not radical
5 enough for his radical era, too much of an establishment figure, somehow
6 not quite authentically working-class. Andy Croft cites in his introduction
7 Johnson's assertion that Brierley, 'in every possible way [...] represents the
8 working man as the middle-class would like him to be; but not, fortunately, as
9 he often is' (xiv).¹² In this interpretation, Jack Cook and his creator become
10 a conciliatory voice in a world steadily descending into unrest, crying out for
11 good old-fashioned working-class endurance, constancy and above all, calm, in
12 the face of increasingly uncertain times.

13 Such assessments of *Means-Test Man* not only fail to give due consideration
14 to Brierley's project of articulating the Cook family crisis only in the terms that
15 they themselves understood, but also overlook a fundamental characteristic of
16 the world he depicts. There is simply little potential for unrest in Wingrove, as
17 there is hardly any unemployment. What we see is a pit village that is getting by
18 more or less as well as it has ever done, in which Jack and the handful of other
19 out-of-work characters are very much in a small minority. On each of the five
20 weekday mornings of the novel, Jack listens to a veritable parade of hobnailed-
21 booted workers tramping past his home along the one high street:

22
23 Some were close, just on the other side of the hedge, others were on the
24 far side of the road; men's voices and steps were slow, dragging at times,
25 boys and young men seemed more cheerful, laughs passed among them
26 and happy banter about girls and sport. Salutes, invariably 'Mornin'', were
27 exchanged as the miners going up to the Pirley and Pentland pits met those
28 going down the hill to Tenby, Blackley, and the mines in the little valley
29 below Pinton.¹³

30
31 With five different locales boasting operational pits, all within walking
32 distance, this small corner of Derbyshire seems to be positively booming.
33 As Croft reminds us, Brierley is writing of the Notts-Derby coalfield,
34 where employment figures were comparatively high (xv), while the mass
35 unemployment and consequent organised working-class protest that lies
36 behind Wooley's invocation of a 'fighting spirit' was much more characteristic
37

38
39 12 Croft calls our attention to Johnson's 'The Proletarian Novel', *Literature and History* 2
40 (October 1975), 84–95, and 'Walter Brierley: Proletarian Writing', *Red Letters* 2 (Summer
41 1976), 5–8.

13 Brierley, *Means-Test Man*, 94.

1 of urban centres, particularly Liverpool and Manchester.¹⁴ The nearest city to
2 Wingrove is Derby, ten miles away, which in the 1930s as now was a relatively
3 small and rural county seat with 'little tradition of trade-union militancy or
4 political activity'.¹⁵ Brierley is aware, more than many of his detractors, of the
5 determining influence of local milieu on personal and collective working-class
6 experience.

7 From the beginning to the end of the novel Jack wrestles ceaselessly with
8 feelings of angst, ostracism, restlessness and shame, not so much because he
9 has no job but because most of the other men he knows do. This turmoil
10 is played out to such an extent that some readers may lose patience before
11 the conclusion. But Brierley means us to understand that any frustration or
12 exasperation we may feel is more than shared by his hero. Jack's feelings are
13 drawn wholly from Brierley's personal experience. In an early published piece he
14 wrote of how 'the dependence on the state for money without having honestly
15 earned it has made me creep within myself, losing faith in everything except
16 my own capabilities, closely examining, sometimes even suspecting, friendly
17 gestures' (xv). Much the same is what faces Jack in *Means-Test Man*. He refuses
18 to be seen in the street when the pits let out and colliers returning home might
19 meet him, and takes his Sunday walks in a neighbouring village where nobody
20 knows him by sight. His reason for this is simply that he is receiving Public
21 Assistance, and believes that in Wingrove 'The villagers knew all this and some
22 pitied, some looked the other way, fearing pauperism to be infectious or as
23 a state incompatible with their own' (80). On buying a concessionary ticket
24 for a cricket match, 'Anger, hate, bitterness coursed through him, he burned
25 with some kind of shame' (28), while even accepting a cigarette from a man
26 who happens to be in work prompts a paragraph of agonising. When Jack is
27 queuing in the Labour Exchange waiting to sign on, his thoughts express the
28 extent of the abjection and outcast status he attaches to those in his condition:

29
30 One thing was common to all the different types in the queue without a
31 name – to every member of every type: in some it was stronger than in
32 others, but the consciousness of being below was there – being below the
33 normal level of living in other senses than the economic. This fact was
34 patent when the men were in the Exchange, more so than when they were
35 in the street, for the very presence of the manager or supervisor brought
36

37
38 14 See Harold Hikins (ed.), *Building the Union: Studies on the Growth of the Workers' Movement,*
39 *Merseyside 1756–1967* (Liverpool: Toulouse Press, 1973) and *Strike: The Liverpool Transport*
40 *Workers' Strike 1911* (Liverpool: Toulouse Press, 1980); and Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism*
41 *1900–1914: Myths and Realities* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

15 Brierley, *Means-Test Man*, xv.

1 a silence about the rank, there was a kind of fear that a word might bring
2 official eyes on them to their detriment. (168–9)
3
4 For many readers this may chime discordantly with George Orwell's words
5 in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.¹⁶ Writing of how he met unemployed workers on his
6 return from Burma in 1928, Orwell states: 'the thing that horrified and amazed
7 me was to find that many of them were ashamed of being unemployed [...] the
8 attitude towards unemployment in those days [was that] it was a disaster
9 which happened to you as an individual and for which you were to blame'
10 (78–9). However, Orwell charted a decided shift in working-class attitudes
11 over the nine years between that time and the publication of *Wigan Pier*. In an
12 oft-quoted exemplum, he imagines two fictitious coal-miners and asserts that
13 ten years ago, it was the case that 'So long as Bert Jones across the street is still
14 at work, Alf Smith is bound to feel himself dishonoured and a failure. Hence
15 that frightful feeling of impotence and despair which is almost the worst evil
16 of unemployment' (79). This, however, had changed by 1937:
17
18 When people live on the dole for years at a time they grow used to it,
19 and drawing the dole, though it remains unpleasant, ceases to be shameful.
20 Thus the old, independent, workhouse-fearing tradition is undermined, just
21 as the ancient fear of debt is undermined by the hire-purchase system. In
22 the back streets of Wigan and Barnsley I saw every kind of privation, but
23 I probably saw much less *conscious* misery than I should have seen ten years
24 ago. The people have at any rate grasped that unemployment is a thing they
25 cannot help. It is not only Alf Smith who is out of work now; Bert Jones is
26 out of work as well, and both of them have been 'out' for years. It makes
27 a great deal of difference when things are the same for everybody. (80–1)
28
29 There's a danger in setting too much store by the sweeping statements of
30 George Orwell – *Wigan Pier* in particular contains some famously dubious ones
31 – but even if we take his words to reflect a broad reality, Jack Cook becomes an
32 anachronistic figure. Just two years before Orwell's book, so close to the end
33 of the decade of change he identifies, and after three years of unemployment,
34 Jack's feelings remain identical to those of Alf Smith in the first instance.
35 There's no fellow-feeling with the Bert Joneses, and certainly no sense that
35 joblessness in Jack's community is tolerable because everybody's in the same
37 boat. The examples from Brierley's novel above, especially the sequence in the
38 Labour Exchange, illustrate clearly enough that in Wingrove drawing the dole
39 is still both unpleasant and shameful.
40
41 16 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937; London: Secker & Warburg, 1997).

1 The village can appear an anachronism in other ways too. Combined with
2 the frequent sumptuous invocations of the Derbyshire countryside (the author
3 admired Hazlitt, and in 1930 submitted a homage to him as his application
4 for a National Miners' Welfare Scholarship), the cricket matches on the green,
5 Sunday school, Jack's roguish friend Kirton who enjoys poaching, and a
6 long tradition of coal mining that's still by and large healthy, the picture of
7 Wingrove can seem more like a fantasised rural idyll than a realistic portrayal
8 of Britain during the rapid social and technological changes of the mid-1930s
9 (x). It is the threat to that idea of a happy and timeless rural existence, a threat
10 posed in part by rising unemployment and the clinical depersonalisation of
11 state responses, that concerns Brierley the most.
12 All these ideas converge in the looming figure of the Means-Test man
13 himself. What he stands for, rather than what he is, allows Brierley to turn
14 his uneventful visit into a truly dramatic climax, in which the reader suffers
15 as the Cooks do and understands completely their suffering. The Means-Test
16 man, who is relatively young, walks with a 'faint swagger', rides a motorcycle,
17 slicks back his hair and wears a 'thick gold-coloured ring'¹⁷ announces even in
18 his physical appearance a grounding in contemporary mid-1930s fashions and
19 attitudes, all of which look strikingly vulgar in the more genteel and homely
20 Wingrove. His coolly officious manner, businesslike rather than friendly –
21 'callous' is Jane's word (263) – represents a government whose approach to
22 helping those in need has become less and less compassionate. Jack and Jane
23 dread having such a man in their home because decent, respectable working-
24 class people of their generation simply do not throw open their private
25 financial troubles to prying strangers, nor should ever be reduced to going
26 cap-in-hand to those strangers for the money they need to live on. While the
27 Means-Test man is inspecting their Co-op book, the couple looks on in mute
28 outrage at the indignity:
29
30 Jack glanced at Jane. He was tired of standing here and she looked tired too.
31 But he couldn't have sat down, and he was sure Jane couldn't; that would
32 seem as if they felt a certain amount of comfort, which they certainly did
33 not. They were wanting him to get it over with and go quickly. The master
34 and mistress of a household – the two heads of a home – husband and
35 wife in their castle – English. And this man sat here at the table where grace
35 used to be said, where friends used to come and laugh over tea, always on
37 the first Sunday of the year, that nearest John's birthday. And this man sat
38 where those friends had sat, he was like a lord and they stood trembling
39 before him. (262–3)
40
41 17 Brierley, *Means-Test Man*, 257.

1 It's that concept of an old, working-class Englishness, one of unspoken 1
 2 customs, expectations and values, which Brierley fears so deeply for. The 2
 3 castles he speaks of are under siege, by the nation's leaders on the one hand 3
 4 with their Means-Test and their prowling investigators, and on the other, 4
 5 tacitly expressed through Jane and her angry politicised moments, by a new 5
 6 working class that chooses organised and sometimes violent resistance over 6
 7 a stoical bearing-down. *Means-Test Man* is one of the last novels recording 7
 8 the strengths as well as the vulnerabilities of this traditional working-class 8
 9 *mentalité*, increasingly eroded by the bureaucratic and disciplinary regimen of 9
 10 an indifferent state, only fleetingly aware of the impending catastrophe which 10
 11 was to close this low dishonest decade. 11

Joseph Pridmore 12

Heilongjiang International University 13

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