

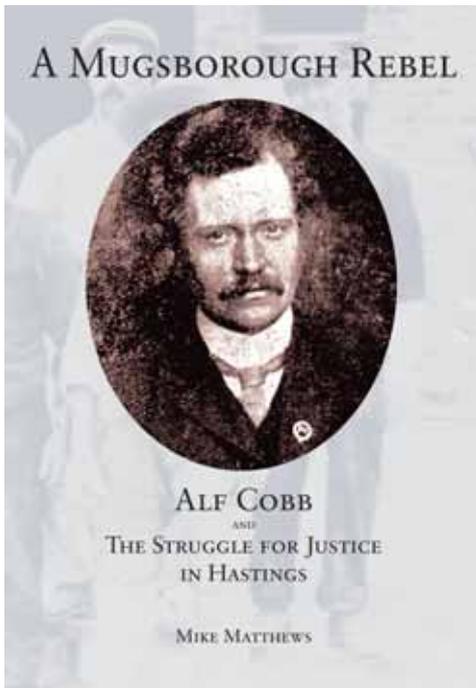


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A Mugsborough Rebel

Alf Cobb and The Struggle for Justice in Hastings



The new 2011 edition of *A Mugsborough Rebel: Alf Cobb* by Mike Matthews is especially welcome, as this year is the centenary of the death of Robert Tressell, author of the famous book *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Tressell's semi-factual novel, set in the run-down seaside resort of Hastings in the early 1900s, had a major influence on many leaders of the British Labour movement throughout much of the 20th century.

While writing his story, Tressell was inspired by Cobb, a draper's traveller from the East End of London who had moved to Hastings in 1900. This was about a year before Tressell also came to live in the town that he was to rename as Mugsborough. Cobb soon became the articulate figurehead of the radical socialist movement in Hastings, as secretary of the local Social Democratic Party. Tressell's

biographer, Fred Ball, said Cobb's "uncompromising, sardonic and fearless style" helped fire Tressell's outspoken prose in his powerful description of the miseries of everyday life in working class Britain.

Mike's book tells how Cobb shook the Hastings establishment out of its lethargy, transforming the borough's politics in the first decade and a half of the 20th century. Cobb set out to unmask the injustice and corruption so prevalent in Mugsborough, a relentless task that gained him massive notoriety, and helped influence Tressell's political perceptions and viewpoint on life in a watering place then undergoing alarming decline.

Cobb's muck-raking exposed widespread "muddle, mismanagement and monstrous scandals" in the town hall. His courageous prosecution of the mayor and Hastings Corporation in 1910 caused fear and loathing of him among the wealthy classes, and generated vindictiveness from councillors "caught with their fingers in the till". Cobb's passionate speeches, often recorded in word-for-word detail in the local newspapers, are quoted extensively by Mike.

A Mugsborough Rebel: Alf Cobb paints a vivid portrait of a fascinating and influential man at a decisive moment in the history of both a typical provincial town and the British socialist movement of the 20th century.

Steve Peak www.hastingschronicle.net

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