

book @ bedtime

DAVID GROVE highly recommends Simon Blumenfeld's classic novel "Jew Boy" set in London's 1930s Jewish East End

It was the former Challenge Editor James Rodie who introduced me to this remarkable novel, first published in 1934 and reissued in 2011, with support from the BMT union. It did for the East End of London what *Love on the Dole*, which I covered in a previous article, had done for Salford. Both novels are set in working class communities suffering unemployment and poverty during the great depression of the early 1930s. In both the hero is a young man desperately seeking a livelihood, a steady partner and a purpose in life. But there is a big difference. Greenwood's Harry cynically succumbs to the system, whereas Blumenfeld's Alec finally commits himself to struggle for a better world. Surprisingly and perhaps significantly, he is strongly influenced by a black American communist whom he meets on an unemployed demonstration.

In his Introduction to the 2011 edition Ken Vorpote writes "The title was an act of cultural defiance, taking a term of abuse and turning it into a badge of honour." But during the story Alec, though proud of his Jewish cultural heritage, rids himself of religious baggage and of Zionist illusions. He thinks: It was very convenient for the

rich industrialists to centre Jewish interest on Palestine. First class also for the Anglo-Saxon imperialists to have some Jews there, to make Palestine a sort of buffer state in the East, cutting it off from other Mohammedan countries. To pit Jews against Arabs whenever they seemed like making a common front. Divide and conquer! If this were a historical novel about the 1930s I'd have wondered whether a Jew would have thought like that in 1934 – but Blumenfeld did – and wrote it into his book.

The novel has a tremendous variety of scenes and characters, reflecting the rich mixture of races and cultures in London's Whitechapel. This is the background to the battle of Cable Street, to Phil Piratin's election as a Communist MP in 1945, and to progressive Jewish writers like Arnold Wesker and Bernard Kops.

Some of the best bits are in the rather few passages about work in a garment factory. For instance, a new manager introduces the Bedaux system of controlling every detail of the workers' actions. One of them holds up his record card and says: They've made a mistake with mine. They've left no space for mother's maiden name,

or fingerprints. They all walk off the job and Alec makes a political speech. The strike wins a temporary victory but Alec is a marked man, to be sacked when orders tail off.

A striking feature of *Jew Boy* is the prominence given to Olive, the most important – and most engaging – female character. A former servant and prostitute, she gently coaches Alec in the mysteries of sexual

intercourse. They fall deeply in love and she becomes a loyal partner. Though she doesn't share Alec's political or cultural interests, Blumenfeld leaves us with the strong impression that her common sense and worldly experience will provide him with stable support whatever he may do.

Jew Boy (London Books 2011) available at www.london-books.co.uk/

