

As a young Jewish boy growing up in the south side of Glasgow, David Simons was afforded a special experience by his father. Not any of the traditional experiences we might associate with Jewish rites of passage or other customs. No, what Simons remembers most clearly is being taken to see the traditional May Day gathering in Queen's Park and hearing an impassioned speech given by a large black man dressed in an immaculate white suit.

That man was Paul Robeson, and the young boy present in front of him was being introduced – by the father who would die just a few years later when Simons was only 14 – to talk of civil rights and liberal values. Those values now permeate Simons' excellent debut novel, *The Credit Draper*. While it is dedicated to the "lovely" step-father who first gave him the idea for the novel, this story of fathers and sons is full of a sense of social justice that Simons attributes to traditions at large, but which must also, at a more subconscious level, be one that he inherited from his own doctor father.

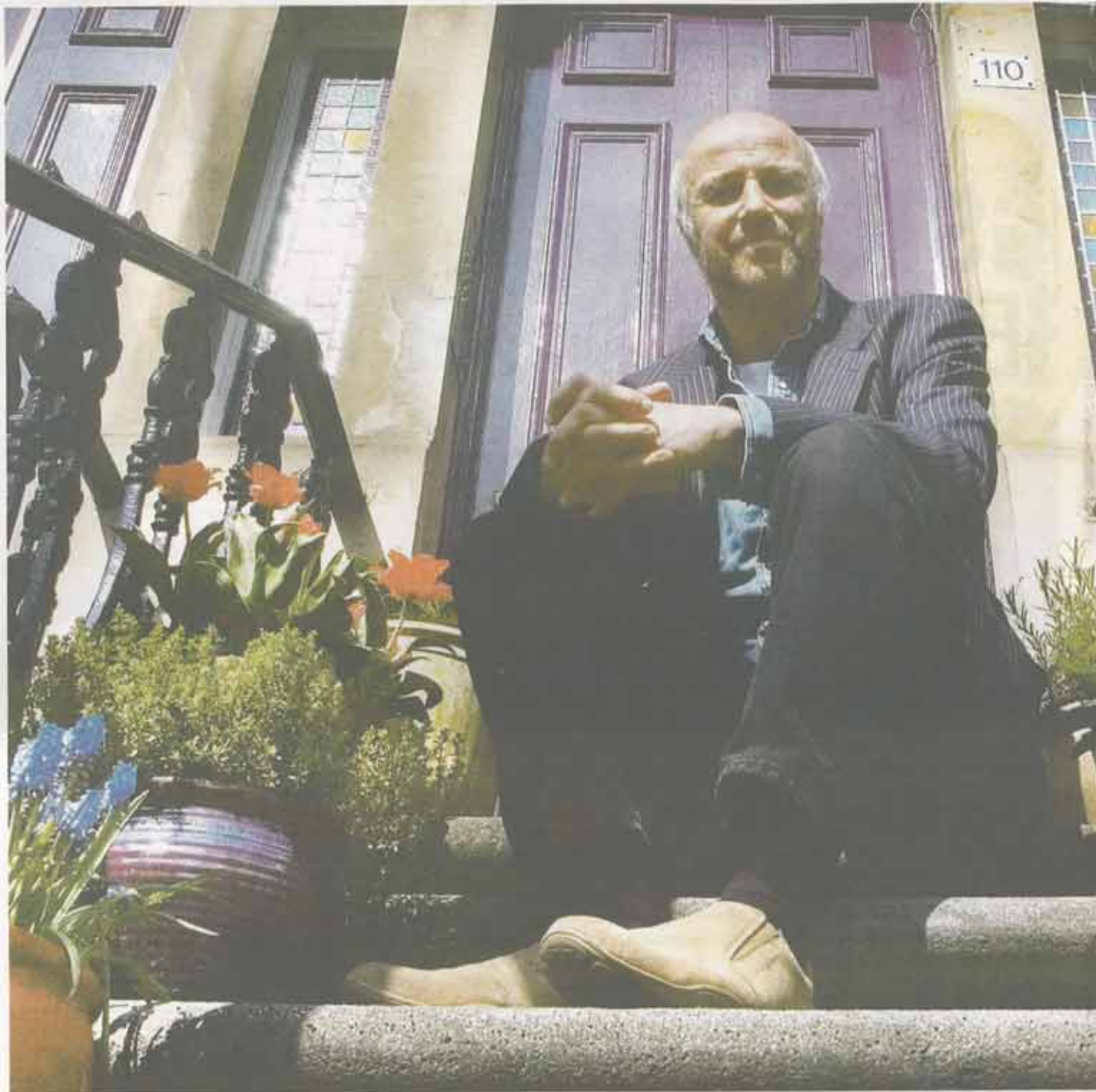
"I think there are a lot of areas where Scots and Jews come together," he says, in his flat which, ironically enough, is directly opposite that park he first visited almost a half-century ago.

"There's a lot of commonality between them: both have a great respect for education and for social justice. The Jews, for instance, were heavily involved politically in Red Clydeside and so on."

It's partly in tribute to that heritage that Simons has written *The Credit Draper*. A tale of immigration, love, family and community set at the beginning of the 20th century in Glasgow and the Highlands, it follows the fortunes of a young Russian Jewish boy called Avram, who is sent by his mother all the way to Scotland by himself at the age of 11.

Terrified of him being conscripted into the Russian army, his mother has given him an address of another Jewish family, living in the Gorbals, with whom he is to make his new home. When we first meet Avram, he is stepping off the boat, prior to a long, lonely walk all the way from Clydeside. "Three of my own grandparents were immigrants from Poland and Russia," Simons explains. "My stepfather's mother, who was an angel, a beautiful woman, actually did walk all the way from Clydeside to the Gorbals alone, with just an envelope with an address on it, and at that age."

I tell him this seems entirely evocative of an era when hardship, poverty and isolation seemed to be the order of the day for so many people. While Simons's book is about a specific boy, in a specific time and place, and who comes from a specific faith, its values are very much universal ones. Most of us can empathise with feel-



ings of abandonment and the strangeness of the new as a child, although Avram's experience is a shocking one to us now.

"Yes, we are shocked at it now," he continues, "but it's probably still happening, with people seeking asylum. Avram is essentially an asylum seeker, that's what people did then. I think Glasgow has a tradition of accepting immigrant communities, phenomenally so. When I think of what the Jews were – they were Eastern Europeans, they were asylum seekers, economic migrants, coming with their own strange customs, their kosher rules, circumcision, wanting their own schools and synagogues, their own butchers and restaurants – it's just the same in a way as what's happening now (with other

communities), and they came in great numbers. At their height, there were about 15,000 Jews in Glasgow. I think the people of the city have been fantastic in the way they've absorbed immigration."

Simons isn't naive about the problems immigration can trigger, and his book isn't naive about them, either. He admits

that while he himself has never directly encountered any "overt" anti-Semitism, and neither have any of his Jewish friends, he acknowledges, though his involvement with the immigrant community in Govanhill near where he lives, that there are "huge issues with immigration". "There is a tremendous amount of racism but it's under the surface," he says. "On

the surface, people are generally getting along. I'm not saying tension doesn't exist but I think it's the same as it was with the Jews then – it erupts during times of stress. We tend to jump on a racial minority when there's a specific problem."

What inspired Simons's book was the specific experience of the credit draper – a figure who Simons had previously believed worked solely in Glasgow. His own grandfather was a credit draper, selling wares to people in Glasgow and Greenock, areas that were close to where the main warehouses existed. Credit wasn't available – the credit draper was often the only means by which people could buy on credit. So Simons knew of this history. But it was only through talking to his late step-father that he found out about the credit drapers who traversed the Highlands at this time.

"My stepfather's uncle was a credit draper in the Highlands," he says, "and that came as a complete surprise to me. I

David Simons has focused his novel on a young Russian Jewish immigrant finding his way in early 20th-century Scotland

PICTURE: ROBERT PATERSON

had no idea they went out into the Highlands but they'd go for the week then come back to Glasgow on Friday for the Sabbath. I loved the juxtaposition of an Orthodox Jew working in the Highlands, and I'd thought at first there would be lots of conflict between the two, with these Orthodox Jews turning up at these remote crofts and villages. But there wasn't. They were absorbed into the community just as well as they were in the city."

In the novel, young Avram – a budding football star – is prevented from playing an important football match because it takes place on a Saturday. His dreams are sacrificed to his religion, and this too reflects Simons' own attitude to his faith. "I remember asking my stepfather why

he went to the synagogue when he didn't understand Hebrew, when people talked a lot during the service, when he wasn't particularly religious. I always used to ask, about faith, I had a love-hate relationship with it. I couldn't get answers to questions about what people find in their faith. The services would be quite noisy, which surprises a lot of non-Jews to know. The services are long, people talk through them, there's quite a lot of disrespect. So I couldn't understand why he went."

What was his response? "He told me that it was about community. And I couldn't argue with that. I could see the point about community." There are hints in the novel of anti-community feeling, for instance when the First World War breaks out, and the matriarch of the family who has taken Avram in, Madame Kahn, is sent to a camp because she is a German "alien". I ask Simons if he was conscious of writing a novel that had the shadow of the future Holocaust hovering over it, and how that affected him.

"I set the novel when I did because I wanted to avoid the Holocaust," he says. "It would probably have been easier for me to write about it because it's a time that's more directly involved with my immediate

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family. But I deliberately wanted to avoid it because it's such a large issue and you have to be so careful of your facts. And so much has been written about it as well. But when Madame Kahn goes to the camps – and the Jewish Representative Council operated very quickly to get Jews out of them, they didn't stay longer than about three months during the war – it is a forewarning of what's going to happen. Madame Kahn comes back, shocked at what's happened to her, and says it must never happen again. Of course, we know that it will."

For all that foreboding, and the serious issues that Simons' novel raises, it's also a joyous book in many ways, delighting in the fun and ambition of a young boy who grows up, as we all must do, to learn the ways of the world. Avram never knows his own father but the credit draper uncle, who takes him under his wing and shows him how to accept life's limitations, is a touching paternal figure who, for all his orthodox ways, reflects Simons' own belief in liberal values. It's ultimately in this unorthodox father-son bond that those values emerge, and the image of another young boy, standing with his own father in a park listening to a speech, flickers constantly behind it. ■

*The Credit Draper*, by J David Simons, is published by Two Ravens Press, priced £9.99.