Winifred Holtby,
“A Woman In Her Time”

Winifred Holtby, "A Woman In Her Time": Critical Essays

Edited by

Lisa Regan

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PREFACE

Winifred Holtby is generally remembered on the strength of her posthumously published novel, *South Riding* (1936), her close associations with the county of Yorkshire, and her relationship with the writer, Vera Brittain, memorably inscribed in Brittain's *Testament of Friendship* (1940). In her short but remarkably productive life Holtby wrote many short stories, drama, poetry, and six novels. In 1926 she became a director of the pioneering feminist periodical, *Time and Tide*, at the invitation of the proprietor, Lady Margaret Rhondda. The appointment confirmed Rhondda's respect for Holtby's acumen as a professional journalist and placed her at the hub of feminist activity, political ferment, and cultural commentary. In addition, she wrote regularly for *The Manchester Guardian*, *The News Chronicle*, *The New Statesman*, *The New Leader*, *The Radio Times*, *Woman's Journal*, and *The Yorkshire Post* as well as a weekly column in *The Schoolmistress*. Holtby published the first critical study of Virginia Woolf in 1932 and *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (1934), in which she takes up Woolf's mantle as a respected commentator on the changing position of women and continues the work began by the latter in *A Room of One's Own* in 1929.

Like the aviator Amy Johnson, another free spirit whose life was abruptly cut short, Holtby is linked in popular memory with Kingston upon Hull: the place names of the city adding local colour to *The Land of Green Ginger* (1927*)* and other writings. Cottingham, thinly veiled as Marshington in *The Crowded Street* (1924), is close to the University of Hull where Holtby's biographer, Marion Shaw, and other scholars have kept alive the critical interest in her writing. Hull also houses the Winifred Holtby Collection, an indispensible archive for students of Holtby's life and work, much of the original bequest having been donated by Vera Brittain. The Winifred Holtby School Technology College is a permanent civic reminder of the emphasis that Holtby, who graduated with a degree in History from Somerville College, Oxford, attached to the education for girls. But Holtby's attitudes to Yorkshire life were ambivalent, and she found the provincial attitudes that she encountered there potentially stultifying. Like her protagonist, Muriel Hammond, in *The Crowded Street* Holtby left Yorkshire for London, where she shared a flat in Doughty Street, Bloomsbury, with Brittain, enjoying the freedom, stimulation, and

Fig. 0-1: Winifred Holtby, a “radical eccentric” with parasol on a beach, on holiday. Reproduced courtesy of the Winifred Holtby Collection, Hull, L WH/9/9.3/01.

anonymity of urban living and the opportunities to establish a career as an independent, self-supporting woman that the capital city afforded so many young women in the 1920s.

The contributors to this volume are all receptive to Holtby's manifold enthusiasms: her espousal of social-realist fiction, her unashamedly "middlebrow" orientation, and her commitment to social reform. Holtby's desire to reach a wide audience differentiated her from those sections of the literary elite for whom engagement with the "difficult" was the hallmark of artistic integrity and seriousness. Moreover, Holtby's *metier* of journalism, as Catherine Clay explains, enjoyed considerably lower status among intellectuals than literature and literary production, and the maintenance of such hierarchies and distinctions was often important to the modernist writers' projection of self.

The reappraisal of Holtby as a writer of fiction has been helped by recent initiatives to rescue the term "middlebrow" from the pejorative connotations it acquired after the publication of Virginia Woolf's essay, "The Middlebrow," in *The Death of the Moth and other Essays*, in 1942.[1] Scholars including Mary Grover, Nicola Humble, Erica Brown, and many others associated with the AHRC-funded Middlebrow Network, have done much to enable "middlebrow" writers such as Holtby to be read with the seriousness that they have frequently been refused. In addition, the useful new category of Intermodernism, coined by the American scholar Kristin Bluemel in her book, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics*,[2] intimates how we might begin to look at Holtby's achievement differently. Bluemel does not engage with Holtby directly but suggests that a group of writers – George Orwell, Mulk Raj Anand, Stevie Smith, and Inez Holden – who were active in the 1930s and afterwards should be understood as "radical eccentrics." The "radical eccentrics" sought to deal with the contradictions of modern life by appropriating and renegotiating modernity and its meanings in their work while continuing to write in traditional, non-experimental modes. Intermodernism is thus a literary-critical compass which situates writing like Holtby's that appears to be fascinated with the paraphernalia of modernity and its material and cultural artefacts while writing "outside Modernism."

Holtby's relationship with Virginia Woolf, a towering presence within literary Modernism, whom it is likely that she had met on only three occasions, is crucial to the new understanding of Holtby that emerges from this edited collection. This relationship is one which Marion Shaw,

[1] Woolf, "The Middlebrow," in *The Death of the Moth: and Other Essays*, 113-18.
[2] Bluemel, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London*.

Holtby's literary executor, has previously discussed and to which she returns. Shaw's careful scholarship situates both Woolf and Holtby in relation to the Modernist-realist debates of the 1930s. Patsy Stoneman brings a feminist theoretical dimension to these controversies, pointing out that "Realist objectivity," a positive term for its practitioners, is for poststructuralist critics an effect of hierarchical power, which subordinates a potential plurality of voices to a "truth" available only to the narrator. Stoneman also draws upon Donna Haraway's redefinition of objectivity as well as the idea of "situated knowledges" in her discussion of realism in *South Riding*. Exponents of literary realism have usually considered realism to have a privileged relationship to "the truth," however differently "the truth" has been understood in different historical and cultural contexts. The "truth" which Holtby sedulously aspired to represent in her journalism, her novels, and also in her short stories which are considered in detail here by Chris Hopkins, could be stranger than fiction and equally entertaining. Holtby's sense of wonder and amusement at what the twentieth-century in all its ingenuity would throw up next was expressed with irrepressible good humour, the more remarkable because for much of the time that she wrote from 1931 onwards she was in considerable pain. Her mock Socratic dialogue between the Realist and his publisher in the story, "Truth is not Sober," ends with the Realist posing this rhetorical question: "Do You think if Truth were sober he could have invented Beauty Contests and the American Debt question and Manchukuo, and the Dolly Sisters and Radio City, and Hitler and Relativity, and the things that go on every day in basement kitchens?"[3]

Woolf described Holtby in a letter to Hugh Walpole dated 26 October 1932: "She is the daughter of a Yorkshire farmer and learnt to read, I'm told, while minding the pigs—hence her passion for me."[4] The tone in which she writes of Holtby is one of urbane amusement, perhaps of slight condescension. In the use of "hence" one can also detect a note of gentle self-mockery. Nothing in what Woolf says, however, hints at Holtby's perfect Received Pronunciation with its clear cut-glass English vowel sounds or prepares us for the cultured English accent and the air of sophistication that facilitated Holtby's work as a much sought-after speaker on the metropolitan dinner circuits and for the League of Nations Union in South Africa.[5]

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[3] Holtby, "Truth is Not Sober," in *Truth is Not Sober*, 91-92.

[4] *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5, *The Sickle Side of the Moon*, 1932-35, 114.

[5] A digitally enhanced recording of Holtby's voice was played to the Winifred Holtby Colloquium at Anglia Ruskin University in October 2007 courtesy of Gill Fildes.

Winifred was indeed the "daughter of a Yorkshire farmer," David Holtby, but, as Woolf argues in *A Room of One's Own*, writing literature and history requires that we "think back through our mothers if we are women."[6] It was from her mother, the redoubtable, Alice Holtby, the first woman to be elected as an Alderman in Yorkshire, that Holtby acquired her commitment to the ideals of social responsibility and public service. Holtby, said Brittain, "had a stern moral battle to fight every time she resisted the summons of a good cause or ignored an unfortunate fellow creature."[7] The "Prefatory Letter to Alderman Mrs Holtby" in *South Riding* describes local government as the "first-line of defence thrown up by the community against our common enemies—poverty, sickness, ignorance, isolation, mental derangement and social maladjustment."[8] While the preferred language for identifying the ills against which Holtby campaigned all her life has changed, the problems of mental illness and social exclusion remain today. As an "equal rights" feminist Holtby attached great importance to the role of women in working for their eradication. She writes of her schoolmistress protagonist in *South Riding* that "Sarah believed in action. She believed in fighting. She had unlimited confidence in the power of the human intelligence and will to achieve order, happiness, health and wisdom."[9] Much the same can be said of the writer herself.

What Holtby had in common with Woolf was the prescient gendered analysis of militarism that recognised the connection between the cult of masculinity, the upbringing of boys, and the creation of the fascist personality. Both women believed that women must bear some responsibility for acting as looking-glasses "reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."[10] Holtby's writing provides many examples of over-protective mothers or simpering young women solicitously massaging the male ego. The play, *Take Back Your Freedom*, which Lisa Regan discusses here, makes explicit the connection between over indulgent mothers and arrogant, overbearing men.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf recalls her dismay on visiting the British Museum library to discover only books on women written by "men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women."[11] Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilisation* is one of a growing number

[6] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 114.
[7] Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 89.
[8] Holtby, *South Riding*, v-vi.
[9] Ibid., 56-7.
[10] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 53.
[11] Ibid., 41.

of books, as Diana Wallace discusses here, written about women by women between the wars which attempted to address the imbalance.[12] The 1920s had seen a division of opinion between "old" feminists including Winifred Holtby, Vera Brittain, and Lady Margaret Rhondda whose priority was equality with men and "new" feminists such as Eleanor Rathbone and Maude Royden who accentuated women's difference from men and the importance of motherhood. *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, published six years after women had finally secured the vote on the same terms as men in 1928, is dedicated to the veterans of the women's suffrage movement, Ethel Smyth, the composer of the suffragist anthem, "The March of the Women," and Cicely Hamilton, a founder of the Women Writers' Suffrage League. Holtby was prompted to publish her book because she understood that the social and political advances that women had made since the war were fragile and that they could easily be lost by the victory of totalitarianism, just as the rights of women written into the Constitution of the Weimar Republic in 1918 had been eradicated by Hitler's coming to power in 1933.[13] Moreover, women, such as those who had voted for the marriage bar in the Civil Service, could be complicit in the erosion of the very freedoms for which feminists such as herself had fought. In a piece in the *Manchester Guardian* Holtby asks: "Who are the girls who have voted for the marriage bar? Nine out of ten swing daily to their offices in suburban trains and trams and buses, carrying in their suitcases a powder-puff and a love-story or *Home Chat*."[14]

But *Women and a Changing Civilisation* is not where Holtby is seen to be at her most perceptive in writing about sex or sexuality. This is because her concern is with women in the public sphere; her purpose in its writing to challenge those historians of women who "take it for granted that she is primarily concerned, not with geography, but with biology, not with philosophy, but with personal morality and ideal character. Man's problem

[12] See Margaret Lawrence, *We Write as Women* (1937)*;* Ray Strachey, *The Cause* (1928) and *Our Freedom* (1936); Margery Spring Rice, *Working-Class Wives* (1939); The Duchess of Atholl, *Women and Politics* (1931); Margaret Llewelyn Davies, *Life as We Have Known it by Co-operative Working Women* (1931), Mabel Ulrich (ed.), *Man, Proud Man* (1932); Janet Courtney, *The Adventurous Thirties: A Chapter in the Women's Movement* (1933); Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (1921); Irene Clephane, *Ourselves 1900-1930* (1933); Naomi Mitchison, *The Home and a Changing Civilisation* (1934).

[13] Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, 153.

[14] Holtby, "The Wearer and the Shoe," *Manchester Guardian*, 31 January 1930, in *Testament of a Generation*, 64-67 (65).

is his relationship to the universe, woman's they suggest, her relationship to man."[15]

Instead one looks to *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir*, where there is a convergence of minds between Holtby and Woolf about the necessity to break out of the straightjacket of sexual stereotyping and to create new ways of thinking about men and women. Holtby preferred to write of "gender" instead of "sex" because "'sex' has been associated so closely with the amorous and procreative instinct, that its convenience has been destroyed, and its meaning lent an emotional significance which may be quite alien to our purpose."[16] Holtby notes what happened when the "full weight of the Freudian revelation"[17] descended upon the woman writer: "At the very moment when an artist might have climbed out of the traditional limitations of domestic obligation by claiming to be a human being, she was thrust back into them by the authority of the psychologist. A woman, she was told, must enjoy the full cycle of sex-experience, or she would become riddled with complexes like a rotting fruit."[18] Like Woolf, Holtby did not "simplify life by saying that sex is unimportant"; rather she "proclaims its importance, but denies the implications usually derived from its significance."[19] Both women were reticent to describe sexual activity in their fiction. Holtby describes two attempts to consummate relationships sexually – in *South Riding* and in *Anderby Wold* (1923) – both ending unhappily for the men and women concerned.

Taking her cue from *A Room of One's Own* where a glimpse of a man and a woman getting into a taxi together leads Woolf to propose that "[i]t is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly-or man-womanly,"[20] Holtby suggests that "We do not know how much of sensitiveness, intuition, protectiveness, docility and tenderness may not be naturally 'male,' how much curiosity, aggression, audacity and combativeness may not be 'female'."[21] She concludes *Women and a Changing Civilisation* warning where rigid sexual stereotyping can lead: "'We want men who are men and women who are women,' writes Oswald Mosley. He can find them at their quintessence in the slave markets of Abyssinia, or in the winding alleys of a Chinese city."[22] Holtby's novels

[15] Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, 4.
[16] Holtby, *Virginia Woolf*, 178.
[17] Ibid., 30.
[18] Ibid., 29.
[19] Ibid., 180.
[20] Quoted, Holtby, *Virginia Woolf*, 179.
[21] Ibid., 183.
[22] Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, 193.

are full of unconventional heroines who challenge stereotypes, including, for example, Caroline Denton-Smyth in *Poor Caroline* (1931), a character owing something to Holtby's attendance at an "entrancing" lecture by Sylvia Townsend Warner on the subject of the witch as a guilt-free independent woman.[23] In this volume Ashlie K. Sponenberg and Lisa Regan analyse Holtby's anti-romances, and her engagement with debates on psychology, sexuality, and gender roles.

As Gill Fildes reminds us, Holtby was fascinated with the trend-setting powers of modern technology and the growing influence, whether for good or ill, of radio, cinema, and mass communications, writing film reviews for *The Schoolmistress* and for *The Radio Times.* She enjoyed travelling independently, and her traveller's perspective informs her satire, *The Astonishing Island* (1933), whilst the travel agency that scoured the globe to put together extraordinary holidays for ordinary people is ridiculed in *Mandoa, Mandoa* (1933), the phenomenal commercial success of Thomas Cook almost certainly at the back of her mind. *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1933) is set in a fictitious African country, recognisable as Abyssinia, and pillories the African enthusiasm for the latest Western fads and fashions and the "Mandoan need for such amenities of life as soda-water siphons and spring mattresses."[24] Here, as elsewhere, Holtby's humour is conveyed within the scope of the quizzical narrative voice and is directed to a serious purpose.

Holtby's lecture tour of South Africa in 1926 confirmed her commitment to fighting colour prejudice, her resolve to improving the living standards of the poor, and her support for the African trade unionists whom she knew, such as Clements Kadalie of the black "Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union" (ICU). Thereafter, she redoubled her work for racial equality in Britain where she was regarded as a "kind of unofficial inquiry bureau to whom students from the Gold Coast, Nigeria or Tanganyika came uninvited for help with every type of problem, practical, intellectual and international."[25]

As Gill Frith argues, the significations of contemporary clothing and dress fascinated Holtby not only as the litmus papers of popular (and not so popular) fashion, style, and contemporary taste but, just as tellingly, because they were the "stuff of dreams." Her short story, "Why Herbert Killed his Mother" is a *reductio ad absurdum* in which she satirises the powers of advertisers to sell a seemingly limitless range of consumer products to the baby Herbert's doting parents. Bridling under the indignity

[23] Winifred Holtby to Jean McWilliam, 27 March 1927, *Letters to a Friend*, 451.
[24] Holtby, *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, 134.
[25] White, *Winifred Holtby as I Knew Her*, 115.

of having been clothed and packaged as a marketable commodity, the formerly cosseted infant extracts as an adult the ultimate revenge for misplaced maternal love.[26]

In "Machiavelli in the Sick Room" Holtby advises her reader to "select, if possible, an illness severe enough to heighten the tension of existence" but to avoid the "long, nagging haunting pain, that wakes you up in the darkness night after night."[27] This was not a choice she was able to exercise herself. Her funeral after her untimely death from kidney failure in 1935 was conducted by Dick Sheppard, the charismatic founder of the Peace Pledge Union. Whether or not Holtby would have revised her pacifist sympathies in the light of the traumatic events of the late 1930s remains an unanswered question. Other women writers, who like herself had dedicated themselves to the cause of anti-militarism, parted ways, often with great sadness, as the Second World War appeared to be unstoppable and the inevitable became imminent with the passage of time. Torn between their hatred of war and their hatred of fascism some, including Brittain and Woolf, retained their pacifist convictions while many, equally conscience-stricken, including Storm Jameson and Rose Macaulay, found that they could not.

Holtby is a key figure to the informed understanding of inter-war cultural consciousness and the attitudes of women on the liberal-left of the political spectrum. Women's networks were crucial to the idea of feminist community between the wars, and Holtby's work for *Time and Tide* placed her at the nerve-centre of the key feminist networks of her day. In addition, she gave generously of her time, money, and expertise to numerous groups lobbying for change. Evelyne White lists fifteen such associations, organizations, and pressure groups (both single-sex and mixed) that she supported, but the final tally is far higher.[28]

What emerges from Lisa Regan's edited collection is an overdue and more inclusive representation of Holtby's achievements as a writer and critic, as a modern woman and public intellectual, and useful new insights into how all these aspects of her life and work interlock. As Vera Brittain succinctly puts it, "The critics who hold that Winifred was 'not an artist' because she wrote *Time and Tide* leaders and lectured for the League of Nations Union, should re-read *Virginia Woolf*."[29]

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[26] Holtby, "Why Herbert Killed His Mother," in *Truth is Not Sober*, 67-77.
[27] Holtby, "Machiavelli in the Sick Room," in *Pavements at Anderby*, 96-118 (101).
[28] White, *Winifred Holtby as I Knew Her*, 188.
[29] Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 337.

The volume takes us beyond those aspects of Holtby's life and work that cultural commentators have sometimes regarded as uninteresting or old fashioned (such as her reputation for stylistic unadventurous and her commitment to "old" feminist ideas) by asking us to question the assumptions and hierarchies on which such judgements have been based.

—Mary Joannou
Anglia Ruskin University
Cambridge

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: "A WOMAN IN HER TIME"

LISA REGAN
UNIVERSITY OF HULL

"That's the title! We'll call it 'A Woman In Her Time' & add in a subtitle that it's the story of Winifred Holtby."[1] Such was Victor Gollancz's hearty endorsement of the title Vera Brittain proposed in 1935 for her biography of Holtby. Indeed, it seemed a fitting title to describe the life story of a woman who epitomised the social and political progress of the inter-war years. Born in 1898, Holtby belonged to a generation of newly-enfranchised women, able to benefit from educational and professional opportunities and social freedoms as never before: hers was a life of economic independence and personal autonomy, of professional dedication and political commitment. Graduating in History from Somerville College in 1921 she became one of the first women to be awarded a degree by the University of Oxford.[2] The following year, she took up lecturing for the League of Nations and for the feminist organisation, the Six Point Group, and thereafter rose to prominence as a journalist and noted author, as well as an ardent campaigner for racial equality and peace. Committed to so many causes, she often felt torn between her sense of political responsibility and literary ambitions; as she was to admit, "I still shall

[1] Brittain, *Chronicle of Friendship*, 229. See also Brittain *Testament of Friendship*, 1.

[2] Women were allowed to matriculate and graduate from the University of Oxford for the first time in October 1920. See Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 98. Holtby was one of a number of novelists attending Somerville College, including Vera Brittain, Margaret Kennedy, Rose Macaulay, Hilda Reid, and Dorothy L. Sayers. See Brittain, "The Somerville School of Novelists," *Good Housekeeping*, April 1929, in *Testament of a Generation*, 320-325, and Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists.*

never quite make up my mind whether to be a reformer-sort-of-person or a writer-sort-of-person."[3] *South Riding* is the novel where she best succeeded in balancing those competing demands of the reformer and artist, but it was to be her last: she died at the age of 37 from renal failure brought on by Bright's Disease, never to witness the wider recognition of her accomplishments as a novelist following the posthumous publication of *South Riding* in 1936. Winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize the next year, this well-loved regional tale of local politics in 1930s North Yorkshire was inspired both by Holtby's birthplace and by her mother's position on the East Riding county council as its first female county alderman; thirty years later it encouraged the Royal Society of Literature to establish The Winifred Holtby Prize for best regional novel in 1967. A testament to its enduring popularity, *South Riding* has never fallen out of print and has, moreover, been adapted for cinema, television, and radio.[4] In its depiction of a community's valiant struggle against hardship and deprivation under the shadows of economic depression and war, *South Riding* is not only very much a novel of its era but also the one which perhaps lived up to Holtby's own expectation of the novelists' social and aesthetic task "to make a mirror for their age and a grammar for the human heart."[5]

For all this, and however apt a title "A Woman In Her Time" might have seemed, Brittain's biography was eventually published in 1940 as *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby*. Brittain explained that the alternative title had been suggested by her husband, George E. G. Catlin, because "[h]e realised that the biography, if it was to be more than the slick 'memorial volume' for which so many people had clamoured, must be a study not only of Winifred and her epoch, but of friendship itself. To the extent that this theme required my presence, and no further, I must bring myself in."[6] With this change of title, Brittain succeeded in commemorating Holtby as "the best friend whom life has given me,"[7] and foregrounding their friendship in subsequent receptions of Holtby's life

[3] Winifred Holtby to Lady Rhondda, "Some Letters from Winifred Holtby, arranged by Lady Rhondda," *Time and Tide*, 4 April 1936, 470.
[4] For example, *South Riding* was made into a film in 1938, directed by Victor Saville, and into a series for Yorkshire Television in 1974. The novel was also dramatised, more recently, for BBC Radio 7 in 2007. On the success and legacy of *South Riding*, see Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 257-258.
[5] Holtby, "Basement Windows," *The Schoolmistress*, 6 July 1933, 377.
[6] Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, 180.
[7] Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 4.

and work,[8] a move which, as Marion Shaw reveals, has proved counter-productive: "Paradoxically, in exalting the significance of this noble friendship," Shaw tells us, "Vera, however unwittingly, deprived Winifred of her independent status as a successful woman of action."[9] In her 1999 biography, *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby*, Shaw rectifies this by reading the Holtby-Brittain friendship in the context of other personal and professional relationships. In so doing, *The Clear Stream* presents a more complex and comprehensive vision of Holtby, greatly broadening our understanding of Holtby's contributions to a diverse range of literary, cultural, and political debates between the wars. The contributors to this present volume continue to expand upon this approach, and it is for this reason that this first collection of critical essays on Holtby draws its impetus from the forgotten title of Brittain's biography, "A Woman In Her Time."

"Miss Vera Holtby" and After

In 1934 Holtby wrote to Vera Brittain, "We are so entangled now in people's minds that Lady Steel Maitland, my chairman at Thursday's meeting, introduced me as 'Miss Vera Holtby!' to loud laughter and applause."[10] Holtby and Brittain had first met at Oxford in 1919, drawn together by war experience and their study of history. Striking up what would become a life-long and professionally-enabling friendship, they decided to live together in London from 1921, and this continued, even after Brittain's marriage to Catlin in 1925, until Holtby's death a decade later. As Holtby's 1934 letter indicates, they became a well-known partnership in contemporary literary and political circles, and this friendship has also ensured that they have remained "entangled in people's minds" to this day.

Scholarly interest in Holtby and Brittain has sometimes produced polarised accounts of their partnership: either as an icon of feminist

[8] Holtby's journalist colleague, Evelyne White, also published a biography of Holtby at this time, *Winifred Holtby as I Knew Her* (1938), but this informative account lacked the emotional and engaging rhetoric of Brittain's. Geoffrey Handley-Taylor lists allusions to Holtby and her work prior to 1955, but Brittain and White's are the only book-length studies. Handley-Taylor (ed.), *Winifred Holtby: A Concise and Selected Bibliography*, 43-52.

[9] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 292.

[10] Winifred Holtby to Vera Brittain, 5 November 1934, Winifred Holtby Collection, Hull, L WH/6/6.2/16/04a.

sisterhood or as a site of repressed lesbian desire.[11] At a time when the discourses of psychology and sexology were becoming increasingly popularised, the partnership had, as Brittain makes clear in *Testament of Friendship*, prompted suspicions of lesbianism amongst their contemporaries. Though Holtby herself is reported to have dismissed such rumours light-heartedly as "Too, *too* Chelsea,"[12] Brittain's defensive reaction has provoked scholarly debate. Seeking to reclaim Holtby for lesbian history, Pam Johnson has, for example, read *Testament of Friendship* as Brittain's cover story, one which removes the taint of lesbian desire by plotting Holtby's life as a thwarted heterosexual romance.[13] In *The Clear Stream*, Shaw moves beyond this impasse, cautioning against "simple" categorisations of both the friendship and Holtby's sexuality. She suggests instead that "[p]erhaps like many women, given an appropriate context and willing partner whom she loved of either sex, she [Holtby] could have been lesbian, heterosexual or both."[14] Literary approaches to the friendship by Jean Kennard and Diana Wallace have similarly opened up more nuanced readings of the partnership by analysing it in terms of professional development. Both focus in particular on aspects of intertextuality and literary dialogue: Kennard highlights the intertextual conversation between Holtby and Brittain's literary output as part of a process of mirroring and self-definition, whilst Wallace, by contrast, identifies "a *competitive* dialogue" of difference and rivalry.[15] Catherine Clay has added a further dimension to the friendship by returning to the Holtby-Brittain correspondence during their period of separation in 1926 (following Brittain's marriage and move to the United States and during Holtby's trip to South Africa). She uncovers a process of renegotiation in the dynamics of the friendship at this time, whereby its elements of work and desire, previously elided by Brittain, are separated out by Holtby, allowing the professional and emotional aspects of the friendship to be equally articulated. In this way, Clay offers new insight on how "the friendship reached some kind of resolution by the end of

[11] For a summary of these debates, see Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*, 119-120 and Clay, *British Women Writers 1914-1945*, 37-40.
[12] Quoted in Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 117.
[13] Johnson, "'The Best Friend Whom Life Has Given Me': Does Winifred Holtby Have a Place in Lesbian History?", 146-157. See also, Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 152, and Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees*, 221.
[14] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 290.
[15] Kennard, *Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, 15-23. Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals*, chapters 5 and 6 (118).

1926,"[16] which enabled Brittain's "semi-detached marriage" to Catlin and led to the establishment of the triangular Brittain-Holtby-Catlin household in London.[17]

Not only has recent Holtby scholarship opened up more complex interpretations of the Holtby-Brittain friendship, but it has also sought to place that friendship in the context of other important relationships in Holtby's life. Shaw's "prismatic approach" in *The Clear Stream* succeeds in "reflecting other stories as well as Vera's and […] placing Vera's story in the context of these other reflections."[18] These include Holtby's relationship with her mother, Alice Holtby, who supported Holtby's education and was responsible for seeing her daughter's first literary endeavours into print as *My Garden and Other Poems* in 1911.[19] Attention is also given to Holtby's enduring friendship with Jean McWilliam, whom she met whilst serving in France as a member of the Women's Army and Auxiliary Corps in 1918. McWilliam, also an Oxford-educated woman, went on to become the head teacher of a girls' school in Pretoria, and it was in the expectation of visiting her that Holtby originally planned her trip to South Africa in 1926. Their friendship is recorded in Holtby's collected letters to McWilliam, published as *Letters to a Friend* in 1937. The childhood friend, Harry Pearson – the man whom Brittain styled as the hero, "Bill," of Holtby's thwarted romance in *Testament of Friendship* – also figures in Shaw's account, as does Vera Brittain's husband, George Catlin. Presenting Holtby as "an index of many of the progressive movements of the inter-war period,"[20] *The Clear Stream* also details her professional relationships with political and literary figures such as Clements Kadalie, the leader of the black Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) in South Africa, as well as Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

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[16] Clay, *British Women Writers 1914-1945*, chapter 2 (48).

[17] This was Brittain's own term for their unconventional domestic "more elastic" arrangement which allowed her to combine marriage and career, and, after 1927, motherhood and career. Catlin would return from America to live with Brittain and Holtby for six months out of each year. See Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 202-211, and Brittain, "Semi-Detached Marriage," *Evening News*, 4 May 1928, in *Testament of a Generation*, 130-132 (131).

[18] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 4; 10.

[19] Holtby often included poems in her correspondence and published them in periodicals such as *Time and Tide*. Her collected poems were published posthumously as *The Frozen Earth* (1935) and have also recently been anthologised alongside other 1930s women poets in Jane Dowson's *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, 62-68.

[20] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 2.

What also emerges in *The Clear Stream* is the emotional and professional significance of Holtby's friendship with Lady Margaret Rhondda, ex-suffragette and founder of the feminist periodical *Time and Tide* in 1920. Catherine Clay has shed further light on this, revealing how Rhondda promoted Holtby as "a quasi co-parent of *Time and Tide*" after Holtby was made a director in 1926, and how their work for the paper and their correspondence evidenced a subtle interplay of professional and sexual identity.[21] Clay also explores other friendships connected with the paper, such as Holtby's friendship with the novelist and travel-writer Stella Benson, who was, as Clay reveals, an important influence on Holtby's third novel, *The Land of Green Ginger* (1927).[22] Clay's study successfully brings *Time and Tide* into focus at the centre of a network of women writers on the fringes of modernism, and extends our knowledge of Holtby's prominent role in what was both a "major platform for women's political journalism" and "a specific forum for women's literary writing."[23]

Holtby's work for *Time and Tide*, as Clay and others have highlighted,[24] placed her within a key milieu for feminist activism and writing. A member of the paper's feminist organisation, the Six Point Group, and also the Open Door Council, Holtby was a committed egalitarian feminist and defended these convictions in 1926 against the so-called "new feminism" headed by Eleanor Rathbone: [25]

> Personally, I am a feminist, and an Old Feminist, because I dislike everything that feminism implies. I desire an end of the whole business, the demands for equality, the suggestions of sex warfare, the very name of feminist. I want to be about the work in which my real interests lie, the study of inter-race relationships, the writing of novels and so forth. But while the inequality exists, while injustice is done and opportunity denied

[21] Clay, *British Women Writers 1914-1945*, chapter 3 (54).
[22] Ibid., 135-143.
[23] Ibid., 15.
[24] Ibid.,10; See also Spender, *Time and Tide Wait for No Man*, 99-104, and Alberti, "The Turn of the Tide: Sexuality and Politics, 1928-1931."
[25] Under the leadership of Eleanor Rathbone, "New Feminism" had realigned the priorities of the National Union of Societies of Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) away from egalitarian calls for equal work for equal pay to more specifically woman-centred policies of birth control, family endowment, and protective legislation. For a detailed discussion of the shifts in the feminist movement between the wars, see Caine, *English Feminism, 1780-1980*, 182-197; Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, 236-243; and Smith, "British Feminism in the 1920s," in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Harold L. Smith, 47-65.

> to the vast majority of women, I shall have to be a feminist, and an Old Feminist, with the motto Equality First. And I shan't be happy until I get it.[26]

Despite casting feminism as a necessary evil here, Holtby wrote numerous articles in support of women's rights to social, political, and economic equality. She also wrote the drama *A New Voter's Guide to Party Programmes* to advise newly-enfranchised women in the run-up to the 1929 General Election,[27] and she evaluated women's progress from ancient times to the inter-war era in *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (1934). Holtby's defence of unmarried women like herself against "The legend of the Frustrated Spinster" is one aspect of her feminism that has particularly attracted scholarly attention.[28] A number of studies looking at debates on the surplus woman have recognised Holtby as a voice of resistance to inter-war discourses of psychology and sexology which promoted damaging stereotypes of the repressed spinster and reductive categories of gender and sexuality.[29] As Holtby's Bloomsbury intellectual in the 1928 drama *Eutychus: or the Future of the Pulpit* observes: "The psycho-analysts have revealed the terrible consequences of sex-repression" whilst "[f]anatics like […] Mr. Anthony Ludovici have gone so far in their veneration of the consequences of sexual intercourse that they have made a new religion of maternity, and condemn all women who will not worship with them."[30]

Yet, as Holtby indicates in the above quotation from her 1926 article, she was not fettered to one political cause alone. The "study of inter-race

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[26] Holtby, "Feminism Divided," *Yorkshire Post*, 26 July 1926, reprinted in *Time and Tide*, 6 August 1926, in *Testament of a Generation*, 47-50 (48).

[27] See Holtby, *A New Voter's Guide to Party Programmes: Political Dialogues*. The feminist here defines feminism for Juvenis (a young voter), stressing that [i]f only you could see all adult men and women as human beings together, the rest would come quite simply" (49).

[28] Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, 125.

[29] On Holtby's defence of the spinster against psycho-sexual stereotypes and in the context of inter-war surplus woman debates, see Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 121-24; Joannou, "*Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows*," chapter 3; Oram, "Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses," 425-7; Nicholson, *Singled Out*, 31-33; 147-148.

[30] Holtby, *Eutychus: or the Future of the* Pulpit, 73. Ludovici was a controversial, proto-fascist philosopher and social critic whose anti-feminist stance is evident in *Woman: A Vindication* (1923) and also *Lysistrata: or Woman's Future and Future Woman* (1924), part of the same "To-day and Tomorrow Series" in which *Eutychus* was published.

relationships" became increasingly important to her following a lecture tour of South Africa for the League of Nations Union in 1926. She went on to write numerous articles persuading the British public to recognise the injustices of the 1926 Colour Bar Bill and other legislation restricting the political and economic rights of black South Africans. "Segregation is a vague and pleasant word," Holtby was to urge in 1930, "but its practical consequences are perfectly definite and utterly unpleasant for the peoples on both sides of the separating barrier. For those on top, it means a fruitless privilege resulting in intellectual stagnation and economic insecurity. For those underneath, it means a form of unacknowledged slavery."[31] Holtby's importance as a campaigner for racial equality in South Africa and at home in Britain was recognised on her death by Maxwell Garnett, secretary to the League of Nations, who declared that "she and a handful of others have raised the new British nation which knows and understands far more about international affairs than many of its rulers have suspected until very recently."[32] Current studies on race and imperialism have also recognised Holtby's achievements in promoting international and cross-cultural understanding. Susan Pedersen has, for instance, argued that Holtby was remarkable not only for her far-sighted ability to question the reformist motives of British imperial policy, but also for her capacity to sympathise with both the men and women of colonised countries.[33] In addition to Holtby's campaigns for racial equality in South Africa, Barbara Bush has also discussed Holtby's fight against racial discrimination back home in Britain, detailing her involvement with racial equality societies and interracial salons.[34]

As Shaw and Bush have documented, Holtby's campaigns to secure financial and administrative support for the ICU, the first black trade union in South Africa, developed her connections with left-wing political activists such as the ICU leader, Clements Kadalie, and the British trade unionist, Arthur Creech Jones. It was in collaboration with Creech Jones that she lobbied the Imperial Committee of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) on behalf of the ICU. Eventually an agent, William Ballinger, was appointed, who went out to work in South Africa with the aim of steering

[31] Holtby, "Progress or Slavery," *New Leader*, 3 October 1930 (Reprinted in the *Nation, New York*, 26 November 1930), in *Testament of a Generation*, 187.
[32] Garnett, "Letters to the Editor," *Time and Tide*, 12 October 1935**,** 1432.
[33] Pedersen, "Metaphors of the Schoolroom: Women Working the Mandates System of the League of Nations," 201-204.
[34] Bush, "Britain's Conscience on Africa," 207-11. See also Bush, "Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century," 75-133.

Kadalie's organisation away from Communism.[35] Holtby's politics were liberal and left-leaning but non-revolutionary: both she and Brittain had joined the Labour Party in 1924, and though Holtby supported the more radical ILP,[36] her socialism is perhaps better understood, as Nattie Golubov has argued, in terms of the English tradition of ethical socialism. Rather than adhering to a strictly Marxist position, Holtby advocated equality, freedom, individual effort, and collective improvement, all characteristic, Golubov suggests, of an ethical socialist outlook which she shared with contemporaries such as Naomi Mitchison, Margaret Storm Jameson, and Rebecca West.[37]

Holtby also shared with these writers her support for the peace movement and her opposition to fascism. In 1934 she contributed an essay against private arms manufacture to Storm Jameson's collection of peace essays, *Challenge to Death*, in which she asserted that traders and arms manufacturers were as much victims of a capitalist system as those who died in combat. "The obligation is upon us," Holtby asserted, "to end the system under which war remains the accepted final stroke of national policy."[38] Yet, as Shaw points out, Holtby, along with other contributors to Storm Jameson's essay collection, tended towards the pacificist position, accepting that some use of final force might ultimately prove necessary in combating fascism.[39] Holtby increasingly wrote against fascism in the 1930s: *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, as well a number of journal articles, were directed at refuting fascist policies of racial division and sex-segregation, and she frequently took issue with the rhetoric of Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists. As she was to observe, "I cannot believe that his [Mosley's] semi-military organization, his stress of national and racial distinctions, and the other things which he permits his followers to say, really make for peace and international confidence."[40] All these concerns inspired the anti-dictatorship play, *Take Back Your Freedom*, begun in 1934 (but not published until 1939, after her death).

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[35] Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance*, 183-90; 234-235. See also Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, chapter 6.

[36] Brittain, *Testament of Experience*, 57. See also, Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 176-177, and Berry, "Introduction to Winifred Holtby's Journalism," in *Testament of a Generation*, 24.

[37] Golubov, "English Ethical Socialism: women writers, political ideas and the public sphere between the wars," 33-59.

[38] Holtby, "Apology for Armourers," in *Challenge to Death*, ed. Jameson, 137.

[39] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 227-232.

[40] Holtby, "Shall I Order a Black Blouse?", *News Chronicle*, 4 May 1934, in *Testament of a Generation*, 171.

Though *Take Back Your Freedom* is perhaps one of the clearest examples of how Holtby's political convictions informed her literary output, such convictions underpin all of her fiction. Holtby recognised the novelist's power to educate and reform; "And the novelists?", she was to ask readers of *The Schoolmistress*, "May we not read them for our instruction?"[41] Holtby's was a middlebrow readership – what she referred to as "that great intermediate class of the 'novel reading public'"[42] – and many of her novels, with their focus on middle-class femininity, domesticity, and their continuity with nineteenth-century realism, invite inclusion under the more specific category defined by Nicola Humble as the "feminine middlebrow."[43] Passing references to other middlebrow novels by fictional characters and the frequent nod to the "feminine middlebrow" reader's appreciation of the Brontës, for example, often signal Holtby's knowledge of her readership.[44] In contrast to Woolf, who was "unlikely ever to command the allegiance of a wide contemporary public" in Holtby's view,[45] Holtby realised that in the popular appeal of novels such as her own lay the power to shape middle-class identity: "[o]n their social and ethical values," she tells us "are constructed the social and ethical values of the great middle-classes."[46] This conviction is what motivates some of the more challenging elements of Holtby's fiction. Not content to simply reinforce her readers' values, Holtby is, on the contrary, always pressing her readers towards a more questioning and critical view of their world. For example, her second novel, *The Crowded Street* (1924), as Humble has discussed, foregrounds and troubles middle-class values about marriage and social-climbing.[47] In fact the novel reveals how damaging these middle-class values can be: adherence to her society's ideals of "sex success" leaves the unmarried Muriel Hammond stifled in

[41] Holtby, "Basement Windows," *The Schoolmistress*, 6 July 1933, 377.
[42] Holtby, "What We Read and Why We Read It," *The Left Review*, 1: 4 (January 1935), 112.
[43] For a full discussion of Holtby's place in the middlebrow, see Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-1939*; Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 234-36, 255-56; and most recently Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*.
[44] For an example of Holtby's references to other middlebrow novelists, see *South Riding*, 393. On Holtby's use of the *Jane Eyre* plot, see Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations*, 87-134, and for a more general discussion of the importance of the Brontës to the "feminine middlebrow," see Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, 176-178.
[45] Holtby, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir*, 201-202.
[46] Holtby, "What We Read and Why We Read It," 112.
[47] Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*, 90-93.