

Poems and Verse of Winifred Holtby

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Edited by

Antony Webb

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book is dedicated to my wife Jacqueline who was responsible for the correction of the text of the poems which were taken direct from Winifred Holtby's private papers.

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FOREWORD

DAME SHIRLEY WILLIAMS

Winifred Holtby, a woman whose radiant and generous personality inspired friendship in many of the people who met her, was not known primarily as a poet. We are all in Mr. Webb's debt for painstakingly compiling this collection of her poems. Her novels bore witness to her gift for prose, lightened by humour, empathy for her fellow human beings and a remarkable capacity for description. By the time of her early death at the age of thirty seven, she was just reaching her full potential. Her final book, *South Riding*, showed just how rich that potential was.

Her poetry reflected the pattern of her life, the experiences that dominated each particular stage. Her childhood, spent in the rolling wolds of the East Riding of Yorkshire, fertile countryside once ravaged and pillaged by the Vikings, was shaped by the seasons and the vagaries of nature. Her father, a substantial farmer, taught her about agriculture as she accompanied him on his tours of his land. For much of her childhood, farming suffered a serious depression, reflected long after in her descriptions of the poverty of smallholders in *South Riding*.

Her early poems, several of them written as a schoolgirl, are touching but not remarkable. The exception is *Question and Answer*, written when she was about thirteen. She asks in it why she should suffer and struggle. The date of writing must have been around the time she caught scarlet fever at her boarding school, a serious illness that left a long legacy of ill health including renal failure.

The poem that captures the immemorial quality of traditional agriculture, the sowing, the reaping and the harvest, is *Harvest at Anlaby*. The poem reads like a lullaby, the repetition reminiscent of familiar music. The same theme of a golden harvest is repeated in a poem written four years later, when the First World War was already a year old, *The Harvest Fields of Fair Lorraine*. But now the horrors of war mutilate the harvest: "And midst the gold are crimson stains, the blood of slaughtered men".

The War was not as devastating for Winifred as it was for her beloved friend Vera Brittain. Yet she shared the grief of my mother's bereavements, as her poem *The Frozen Earth* shows. The greatest of them was the death of Edward, Vera's only brother, in Italy shortly before the war ended:

“And you are not there, not there, not there,
Your laughing face and your windblown hair
Leave not even a ghost in the garden”

Winifred's love and empathy were surprisingly matched by a sharp and perceptive wit. Two of the poems of her twenties exemplify this rare combination, the ingenuous *Warning*, a poem about my father's learned and scholarly local priest, Father de Zulueta, and the sensitive and moving *The Foolish Clocks*. Her poetic gifts grow and mature with her journey to South Africa in 1926, a country she found both enchanting and painful, the beauty of its scenery challenged by the bigotry and sourness of its system of apartheid. Memories of earlier experiences also demanded a deeper poetic expression in these years. One of the finest is the haunting *Trains in France*; another, *The Symphony Concert*, harks back to the loss of Edward, who yearned to be a violinist. Then there are the poems such as *The Robber* and *Beauty: The Way of the World*, recalling her youthful love for a young Yorkshireman, Harry Pearson, a love that crackled and sputtered like coals in a dying fire for the rest of her life.

Some of these poems are clearly influenced by other contemporary poets. *The Dead Man*, written in Oxford when Winifred was a student at the University there, could have been written by A.E Housman. Many years later, *House on Fire*, written in 1932, comparing the short life of a house on fire with joy with one built on grief and sorrow, reminded me of Edna St Vincent Millay, my father's favourite poet, which he may well have discussed with Winifred:

“On the solid rocks the houses of my neighbours stand
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand”

The last poems in this collection, *The Ghost of Elinor Wylie* and *Valley of Shadows* provide us with intimations of what we have lost. Elinor Wylie, an American poet, suffered from a similar illness to Winifred's. The three poems dedicated to her bear witness to the suffering Winifred also endured as a result of Bright's disease, the successor to scarlet fever. In *Valley of Shadows*, the young poet is beginning to come to terms with the prospect of her early death and the wild hope of being reunited in the after-life with

Vera, and perhaps with Harry Pearson too.

Those who knew Winifred, whether in life or through her books, will treasure this collection, both for the light it throws on her own self, and also for the intimations of the poet she might have become.

INTRODUCTION

Winifred Holtby was born at Rudston, East Yorkshire on the 23rd June 1898 she died on the 29th September 1935. During her short life she wrote several books, *Anderby Wold*, *Land of Green Ginger*, *Poor Caroline*, *Mandoa Mandoa* and her most famous *South Riding*. She was also a prolific writer of letters, poems and verse. She put many of her poems into the letters she wrote to her friends. But at her death the only published work of poetry was a small volume of poems called *My Garden and Other Poems*, that her mother Alice Holtby took from the scraps of paper that she threw into her waste paper basket unknown to Winifred.

After her first book of poems, even though Winifred wrote many others, but no other book was published in her life time. In the year of her death Collins published the *Frozen Earth and other Poems* but only containing 16 of her poems. Collins in the forward to the book admitted that there were many other poems and verse written by Winifred Holtby, but they were scattered amongst her letters and within back issues of newspapers and magazines and it required someone to undertake research in order to bring them together under one volume. It is hoped that this book will act as a definitive work of her poetry.

Winifred Holtby's poems act as markers through out her life, initially whilst still at school apart from *My Garden and Other Poems*, she also wrote, *QMS Scarborough* and the *Harvest Fields of Fair Lorraine*. When she went up to Oxford University she wrote the *Harvest at Anlaby* which pointed towards her first novel *Anderby Wold*. This was a story about the East Riding of Yorkshire, where Winifred grew up. Some very poignant poems were written when she was going through difficult periods in her relationship with Harry Pearson the "Boy friend that isn't a boy friend", caused by his inability to make a commitment to Winifred. Through out her life he would suddenly appear, normally out of work and she would support him financially and materially. Then he would just disappear not telling her where he was, through out her life he took everything and gave her nothing in return. From this relationship she wrote, *The Robber*, *The Dead Man*, *Epilogue to Romance*, *Grudging Ghost* and *Epigram to the End of Love*, all of which show the pain that she went through with this man.

The poem *Trains in France* relates to a time when she was in the WAAC in France in 1918. As a hostel Forewoman she was taking the women who worked for her to their posting in Camiers, spending an uncomfortable night in a goods van, she never forgot the sound of the trains as screamed by.

The very lovely verse of *Epigram to Vera Brittain*, indicated the close friendship that these two women had. The poem *Hills of the Transvaal* represents her time in South Africa, where she spent six months by herself lecturing on behalf of the League of Nations Union to trades union, in their struggle against the colour bar, in order to obtain equality with white workers. She continued this work after her return to England and raised considerable funds to support this cause, sending out William Ballinger as her representative.

Towards the end of her life, when she was suffering from the chronic symptoms of Bright's Disease (Renal Failure). She wrote three moving poems for the *Ghost of Elinor Wylie*. Elinor Wylie an American Poetess who suffered from a disease similar to that of Winifred's. Within these poems she tells of the symptoms and pain that racked her body. Yet she managed to continue in the work that she loved in writing novels and journalism, completing also the manuscript for *South Riding* just two weeks before her death.

One of the last poems in this book *The Valley of the Shadows* recently discovered in Winifred Holtby's Archive at Hull University. This very moving poem was obviously written shortly before her death. In it Winifred is giving thanks to a special person who has helped and supported her throughout her adult life. This person saw her through difficult times, especially when her health was at a low ebb. This was the person who held the bowl whilst she was being violently ill. Although Winifred became an agnostic whilst at Oxford University, in this poem she shows respect for this special person's beliefs. "For in a little while we meet again". This special person can only be her close friend Vera Brittain.

JEALOUS GHOST

My feet are treading the long green meadows
My body swims on the cool green sea.
The sliding shadows of twilight cover
The sunsets crimson, delighting me.

These winds and waters, the summer pleasures
Were yours for the taking if you choose
No hoarded treasures that I must ransom,
By more forsaking what you would lose.

Ah ghost, grey ghost in the dark earth lying
Was there no rapture to keep you there?
Must you in dying steal joy for ever.
And jealous, capture the sweet o' the year

Winifred Holtby, Hull

BERKSHIRE RAIN

The coloured clouds on polar stems
Uncurl above the dripping trees:
While moving slowly down the Thames
Go swans more flower-like than these,
As though lilies taller grew
And blossomed into cloudy flowers
Then, wind blown, poured their load of dew
Upon the street, in birds and showers.

Thus Leda came, and on the green
Dark water saw her floating swan,
And thought she has a lily seen,
So waved her hand, and wandered on,
Demeter's daughter passing by,
Saw clouds like lilies budding there
So plucked the blossom from the sky
And wore it in her rain-wet hair.

Winifred Holtby
Hull

TREASURE IN HEAVEN

I had an hour, a darling eager hour;
Time, you cannot touch it; this is mine, mine, mine,
An hour of dahlias and poetry and elephants

I had an hour, a secret, silver hour;
All the trees were singing songs I could not understand,
Cedars sycamores, laburnums and acacias,
While the sun rose shyly on the unknown land.

I had an hour, my love was here one hour,
She it was who smiled at me, hers the voice I heard,
Hers the gown of green and gold, hers the laughter
Hers the head as soft to kiss as feathers of a bird
Magical.

These are my treasure, these are my dominions;
Moth and rust cannot corrupt nor thief break through
and steal
Rich beyond all reckoning, glorious, secure am I,
Rich am I in heaven, these immortal joys I feel.

Winifred Holtby
Hull

THE DEBT

I Owe so large a debt to life;
I think if I should die to-day
My death would never quite repay
For music, friends and careless laughter,
The swift, light-hearted interplay
Of wit on ready wit, and after,
The silence that most blessed falls
Across the room and fire lit walls
And quells our flame of jesting strife.
I owe so large a debt to life
No gift can wipe it away
Nor any tears that I can borrow
From watching all the world's wild sorrow,
As autumn never can allay
The promise of a sunlit morrow
We had a legacy from May.
I owe so large a debt to life
That I am bankrupt evermore
While Misery about my door
Stops, hungry eyed, to stand and pray
That I should give him of my store.
"Oh, Misery" I cry, "Away!
Why come you begging from a debtor?
Whate'er I give is not my own,
To seek at other doors were better.
You should have begged from such as they
Won nightly weep with bitter tears
The glory of their wasted years.
They hold credit still with fate,
Go forth and ask them for a loan."
But Misery, importunate,
Before me sweeps and will not wait,
Standing in sorrow at my gate,
While in the wind his tatters sway
And from his wrist clanks fear's harsh fetter.

And I must listen to his moan;
He holds before my heart a knife,
And threatens me to buy or borrow.
But only sorrow gives to sorrow.
How can I give, who am a debtor?
I owe too large a debt to life,

Winifred Holtby 1923

The next six poems are of Winifred Holtby's early work.

ON SAD ASCENSION DAY

Mourning Mother weep no more
O'er my uncles death so sore,
Others need your care much more
Than he.

He is in heaven is at rest
Leaning on Lord Jesu's breast
He is now forever blest
Up There.

Far' way ore the crystal sea
There a place is kept for thee,
Father, Kitty, Grace and me
With him.

Winifred Holtby aged 8 (1910)

ONLY

Only a rose-bud
Tender and soft
Dropped from a tree
Waving aloft.

Only a kind thought
Spoken by love,
Dropped like a rosebud
From heaven above.

But the wee rose bud
Once pleasure gave,
The kind thought's remembered
Unto the grave

Written by Winifred Holtby 1910
Hull

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Oh, how long is the path and how weary the struggle!
The road is so rough and so steep.
Oh! How far must I must, climb and how long must I
suffer
Before I can lay me to sleep?

Oh, why should I suffer? Oh, why should I struggle,
When fame is a calling to me?
Oh, why should I toil in the murk of the city
When I hear the grand roar of the sea?

Winifred Holtby 1911

WHY SHOULD WE MORTALS

Why should we mortals rulers of this world
Bow down ourselves to One who went before
And is long dead - One who has passed before,
Whom we have never seen, nor can see
Till the last trumpet should sound, proclaiming all
At end, Both land and sea, and beasts and men
All mortals to be ended, and the world,
And all the universe, one bare blank space,
Devoid of light, of life, of everything
Save his own presence, making all things day;
And life and love perpetually there.
The end of all things, save of Him Himself.

Winifred Holtby Aged 11

Q.M.S SCARBOROUGH

There's a long grey school on a windswept hillside,
Where over garden the wild sea-birds cry:
There's a red roofed town that waves wash ever
And a castle stands guarding it really high.
And far away from the eastward coast line,
Where the wind from the moor land heights blows chill,
We suddenly pause in our work to remember
That red roofed town at the foot of the hill.

When the valley lies still in the soft morning sunlight,
And the looped river gleams like a silver snake,
And the misty clouds that unwraps the shoulders
Of the mountain giants grow tattered and break,
Then we think of the waves in the golden morning,
When the great sun rises beyond the sea,
Throwing living flame on the grey, cold waters,
And the fresh salt sting of the wind blowing free.

Winifred Holtby (Aged 151/2)
Queen Margaret's School Magazine 1915

THE HARVEST FIELDS OF FAIR LORRAINE

The Harvest fields of fair Lorraine
Were Crowded with yellow corn,
And amidst the gold were crimson heads
By poppy stems up borne.
In dewy morn the peasants reap,
In quivering heat of noon,
Till o'er the purple hill-top glides
The primrose harvest moon.
The harvest fields of fair Lorraine
Are not so gold as then,
And midst the gold as then,
And midst the gold are crimson stains,
The blood of slaughtered men;
And by the light of one lone star
And the chill wind's sobbing breath
A reaper gathers his harvest there-
And the reapers name is death.

From the Play Espionage by Winifred Holtby 1915

MY PRAYER

Lord grant me grace
That I may ever keep a little space
Within my heart, for all defilement free,
And consecrate it, Lord of light, to these
That I may go.

And rest awhile within, and ever know
That for our petty woes and pains apart
Thou ever waitest for me, in my heart,
that I may take.

A flame from beauty's altar and may make
A lighted shrine for ever burning fair
So I may steal away and worship there
Oh Lord I plead.

That I may turn aside, in better need
Stifled by spite and ugliness and strife
And all the small, distasteful tasks of life
And may there find.

A shrine to beauty hidden in my mind:
Where sweet refreshment on my heart shall fall
The gracious love that understandable all
Thus may I turn.

Face foremost where the fires most fiercely burn
And greet each coming hour with a smile
Feeling thy strong companionship the while.

Winifred Holtby 1918

NO MOURNING BY REQUEST

Come not to mourn for me with solemn tread
Clad in dull weeds of sad sable hue,
Nor weep because my tale of life's told through,
Casting light dust on my untroubled head.
Nor linger near me while the sexton fills
My grave with earth—but go gay-garlanded,
And in your halls a shining banquet spread
And gild your chamber o'er with daffodils.

Fill your tall goblets with white wine and red,
And sing brave songs of gallant love and true,
Wearing soft robes of emerald and blue,
And dance, as I your dances oft have led,
And laugh, as I have often laughed with you—
And be most merry—after I am dead.

Winifred Holtby 1923

THE HARVEST AT ANLABY

The heavy wains slow moving go
Across the broad autumnal wold
To great brown-throated men below
Who gather in the glowing gold.

And thus it was they harvested,
They harvested at Anlaby
Before the Danes from Bessingly
Flooded the manor like the sea,
And left Earl Godwin's barley red—
At Anlaby.

The lovers linger down the lane
When moths awake and small owls cry.
Their dresses fade, as pale moons wane,
And glimmer as they wander by.

And thus it was they made their vows at Anlaby,
When all the wolds were young as they
Amongst the dusky sheaves they lay,
And kissed beneath the darkened boughs
At Anlaby

Winifred Holtby 1920