'The Pendulum is Swinging Backwards': Gender, Politics and Modernity in the Interwar Writing of Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, and Rebecca West

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the
University of Liverpool for the degree of
Doctor in Philosophy

by
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November 2002

Abstract:

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This thesis analyses the interwar writings of Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison and Rebecca West for the purposes of both expanding upon previous feminist criticism of their better-known texts and introducing their neglected fiction and drama to literary historical scholarship. The overall use of gender theory is based upon recent feminist studies of the period by such scholars as Joannou, Lassner, Maslen, Montefiore, Plain, and Shaw. New theoretical perspectives (influenced by Benjamin, Cixous, Debord, and Kristeva) and previously overlooked contextual material and archival sources also inform my discussions. Six of the seven chapters discuss the authors individually. Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* is treated as a documentary novel and read in the context of Mass Observation writings. Film theory reveals different middle-class perspectives in the text than have been identified by previous Holtby scholars. Likewise, Holtby's feminist and anti-fascist fictions, when analysed in terms of popular Freudian notions of fascism, are shown to contain negative portrayals of male homosexuality that are at odds with previous critical interpretations of the author's open-mindedness regarding sexual identities. Storm Jameson's *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy, and her little-known novella, 'A Day Off', are read in dialogue with Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in order to present Jameson's works as examples of urban writing, thus newly situating her as a modernist writer. The sexual politics of Naomi Mitchison's long novels of the 1930s are discussed in terms of Cixous' theory of the feminine realm of the gift, to analyse the ramifications of Mitchison's use of female sexuality as a middle-class method of associating with the working classes. The gender and class politics of her pedagogical writings for children are also analysed for the first time. A concluding chapter surveys the politics of all four authors' neglected futuristic, anti-totalitarian writings of the 1930s, including Holtby's drama, *Take Back Your Freedom*, West's science fiction essay, 'Man and Religion', and Jameson's disaster novel, *The World Ends*. The variety of texts analysed within the thesis indicates the continued necessity for scholarship in this fascinating area of women's writing. New analytical approaches towards these texts demonstrate the multiple feminisms, socialisms, anti-fascisms and modernisms that existed even amongst a group of closely associated authors, expanding political and critical understanding of the interwar period and continuing the recent revisionist scholarship regarding the nature of modernism in the 1930s.

Word Count: 82,749

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Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my two thesis supervisors, Dr. Val Gough (Liverpool, 1998-2001) and Dr. Faye Hammill (Cardiff, 2001-2002), for their tremendous support, advice and guidance during the course of my research. My thanks also to Professor David Seed (Liverpool) for his advice during the latter stages of my writing-up.

I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the following libraries and departments: at the University of Liverpool, the staff of Sydney Jones Library, the Inter-library Loans department, and the Special Collections and Archives/Science Fiction Foundation Collection; at the University of Manchester, the staff of Manchester John Rylands University Library; at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the staff of the undergraduate library; at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, the staff of the Special Collections Department; at the British Library, the staff of the Humanities Reading Rooms; the staff of the National Newspaper Library, Colindale; at the National Library of Scotland, the staff of the Reading Rooms and Manuscripts and Archives division; in Liverpool, the staff of the Picton Library Collection at Liverpool Central Library; in Hull, the staff of the Local Studies Library at Hull Central Library.

I would like to express my gratitude to the University of Liverpool Arts Faculty, for three research grants in 1999, 2000 and 2001, without which my visits to so many libraries and archives would certainly not have been possible.

Notes on Manuscripts and Unpublished Sources

In order to abbreviate citations within the footnotes, manuscripts and other unpublished sources are preceded by the location name of the archive in which the material is located, according to the details below.

'Edinburgh' = material from the Baroness Naomi (Haldane) Mitchison Archives, Manuscripts and Archives, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

'Fayetteville' = letters from the Frank Arthur Swinnerton Collection, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville Libraries

'Hull' = letters from the Winifred Holtby Collection, Local Studies Library, Central Library, Hull

'Liverpool' = letters from the Olaf Stapledon Collection, Special Collections and Archives, University of Liverpool

Introduction:

'The Pendulum is Swinging Backwards'

The title for this thesis is taken from Winifred Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilization*:

> During the spring of 1934 a well-known political organisation in London asked a friend of mine to lecture on the subject of "The Rise of Anti-Feminism in Europe." She gave the lecture but changed the title. There was no "rise of anti-feminism" in Europe, she declared. There had been a rise of feminism; there is now a reaction against it. The pendulum is swinging backwards, not only against feminism, but against democracy, liberty, and reason, and against international co-operation and political tolerance.[1]

In assessing the state of feminism in the 1930s within the political context of fascism and international reactionary politics, the metaphor of a backwards-swinging pendulum serves as an apt description for the politics campaigned against by Storm Jameson, Holtby, Naomi Mitchison, and Rebecca West, the four authors whose interwar writing is discussed here. All four writers present feminism as not isolated from but, rather, as integral to international political issues of the period. To varying degrees, they understood gender politics, oppression, and fascism as interrelated problems of their age, and declared their beliefs through anti-romantic novels, critical essays, and futuristic dystopias. Their texts assert that the politics of private life are dialectically related to the realm of public politics. They argue that the individual, often the female individual, is part of history, and that women's marginalisation and oppression ought to be grasped as one problem amongst the social, economic, and political turmoil of the decade. In this thesis, I propose contextualised readings of texts previously analysed by feminist revisionist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, and also extend political analysis to texts neglected by those scholars. My arguments are supported by reference to unpublished manuscripts and archive material, including letters which the authors wrote to one another, indicating their personal and professional links in the interwar period.

The authors

Winifred Holtby was born at Rudston, Yorkshire in 1898. Her father was a farmer and her mother became the first woman alderman of the East Riding County Council. Holtby's Yorkshire would later appear as a setting in several of her novels. Her father's experience of farm ownership formed the basis of *Anderby Wold* (1923), whilst knowledge of her mother's work in local government proved a useful basis for the events featured in *South Riding* (1936). As a child, Holtby attended school in nearby Scarborough. Later she was one of the generation of 'Somerville novelists' to graduate from Oxford. Holtby's university degree in history was interrupted by her service in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in France in 1918. Her time in the Army provided Holtby with material for an unpublished story sequence entitled 'The Forest Unit' (1918), and began her influential friendship with Jean McWilliam.[2] Correspondence between the two women was published after Holtby's death in the collection *Letters to a Friend* (1937). Returning to Somerville after the war, Holtby met Vera Brittain. It is for this friendship that Holtby is remembered, because it was narrated in Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) and *Testament of Friendship* (1940).[3] Holtby and Brittain moved to London after the completion of their degrees and shared flats whilst beginning their careers as novelists, journalists and political speakers. As pacificists, both were involved in the League of Nations Union, although Marion Shaw suggests that there is evidence that Holtby would not have shared Brittain's eventual radical commitment to pacifism.[4] The publication of Holtby's first regional novel, *Anderby Wold,* in 1923 was followed by *The*

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[1] Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (London: John Lane, 1934), 151.
[2] Holtby's short story, 'So Handy For the Fun Fair', is also based upon her experiences in France (*The Truth is Not Sober* [London: Collins, 1934], 151-172).
[3] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London: Gollancz, 1933; 2nd repr. ed. London: Virago, 1979) and *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby* (London: Macmillan, 1940).
[4] See Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999), 228-229.

Crowded Street (1924) and *The Land of Green Ginger* (1927). As a journalist, her articles and book reviews appeared in such papers as the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Yorkshire Post*, *Time and Tide*, the *News Chronicle* and *The Bookman*. She became an editor of *Time and Tide* in 1926, and was closely associated with Lady Rhondda and the feminist Six Point Group. Holtby was a committed feminist of the 'Old', not 'New' variety; she drew the distinction in her polemical study, *Women and a Changing Civilization*, as I will discuss in Chapter 5. Also in 1926, following Brittain's marriage to George Catlin, Holtby went to South Africa to visit Jean McWilliam and later became active in that country's labour movement, raising interest from England. Her association with South African politics is attested to in an undated letter from Naomi Mitchison, requesting Holtby's insights 'about the African business'.[5] Holtby's novel, *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1933) is based upon her work in South Africa. During these years, Holtby established a home in London which she shared in an unusual relationship with Brittain and Catlin, even assisting in the care of the couple's two children. Holtby also published short stories, fantasies, drama, poetry collections, and the novels *Poor Caroline* (1931) and *The Astonishing Island* (1933). Her *Virginia Woolf* (1932) was the first critical study of the author published in English, and Holtby's work resulted in contact which is recorded in Woolf's diaries. In her early thirties, Holtby's health began to decline with the onset of kidney disease. She continued to work as hard as ever during her long illnesses, sometimes in isolation at seaside retreats. Storm Jameson wrote to her during these absences from London, as one of the many friends who involved Holtby in writing projects.[6] After her death in 1935, Holtby was remembered by a special service at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, in several issues of *Time and Tide*, and later in Brittain's memoirs.[7]

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[5] Hull: Naomi Mitchison, letter to Winifred Holtby, no date, file 2.43 item 49.
[6] Hull: Storm Jameson, letters to Winifred Holtby, 29 March 1934 and 15 May 1934, file 2.43 items 23 and 25.
[7] *Anderby Wold* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1923); *South Riding: An English Landscape* (London: Collins, 1936); *Letters to a Friend*, ed. by Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam (London:

Storm Jameson was also a Yorkshire native, born in Whitby in 1891. Her father, a sea captain, was absent for long periods during her childhood. Jameson's mother held high ambitions for her daughter and encouraged her to apply for a county scholarship to Leeds University. She won one of three awards, and attended Leeds 1909-1912. She then won a research fellowship for MA study in London, completing her thesis in 1920 and publishing it later that year under the title *Modern Drama in Europe.* Whilst a student in London, Jameson lived with two male friends, an atypical arrangement for a young, single woman of her class at that time. She married in 1913 and had her only child at about the same time as she began to write her first novels. These were generally tales of unhappy domestic life including *The Pot Boils* (1919), *The Happy Highways* (1920), *The Clash* (1922) and *The Pitiful Wife* (1923). Jameson would later publish an autobiographical trilogy of novels featuring the character Hervey Russell, which were based closely upon her experiences of poverty and an unhappy marriage in these years. Her later memoirs record the resentment she felt in the early years of her career as a writer, over being forced into domestic responsibilities and at being compelled to write constantly to earn her living, so that she never had the time to develop the spare aesthetic which she admired. After the First World War, Jameson left her son in Yorkshire and moved to London to earn money to support him. She worked in advertising and later became the editor of *New Commonwealth.* She eventually divorced her husband after years of living as a virtually single mother. She married Guy Chapman in 1926, and the two worked for the American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, in London. In the 1920s, she also began writing book reviews and journalistic articles for such papers as *Time and Tide*, the *New Statesman*, and the *London Evening Standard.* In

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Collins, 1937); *The Crowded Street* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1924); *The Land of Green Ginger* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927); *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (London: Collins, 1933); *The Astonishing Island* (London: Lovat Dickson, 1933); *Poor Caroline* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931); *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir* (London: Wishart, 1932).

1927 she produced for the *LES* a series of articles on the conditions of modern women's lives.[8] This series attracted the attention of Vera Brittain, and the two began a close friendship which ended abruptly in the late 1930s after they argued about pacifism. After previous association with the British Anti-War Council, Jameson had begun to believe that 'I am not too sure what we do when a war threatens, but I hope it is better than "mere" pacifism, and I would myself shrinkingly lead us in a Crusade'.[9] Jameson's fiction of this period shows sensitivity towards women's issues, but she was never as active in the women's movement as she was in Labour and anti-fascist organisations. Like Holtby, she believed that humanitarian changes, for the good of all of society, were more important pursuits than policies designed to assist women only. In the 1930s, Jameson's activism increased; she became President of English PEN from 1938-1945, and helped to organise groups of writers and intellectuals against fascism. She worked closely with such authors as H.G. Wells, J.B. Priestley, E.M. Forster, Hugh Walpole, Vita Sackville-West and Rebecca West. As a result of these commitments, Jameson edited collections of political writing such as *Challenge to Death* (1934), wrote anti-fascist dystopian novels, and published an influential essay on British socialist realism entitled 'New Documents' (1937). She was a prolific writer in the interwar period, publishing translations, books of literary history and criticism, and at least one novel each year with the exception of 1921. She travelled to Europe in the late 1930s to witness what was happening in Nazi-occupied countries, later fictionalising her observations in the novel

[8] Some of the themes Jameson addressed in the *LES* were 'What Every Woman Knows: Man as the Incurable Romantic' (1 Feb. 1927, 7), 'Domineering Husbands' (18 Feb. 1927, 4), and 'When Brains Wed Brains' (12 May 1927, 7). The series ran through June, 1927.

[9] Fayetteville: Storm Jameson, Letter to Frank Swinnerton, 26 December 1932, Loc. 556 Box 120 Item 7.

Europe to Let (1940). Jameson also assisted in the rescue of intellectuals from Nazi persecution, sometimes using her own money to fund escapes. During the war, the extent of her activism was so widely known that she was placed on a Nazi blacklist.[10]

Naomi Mitchison, née Haldane, was pleased to hear that she, too, was blacklisted by the Nazis because of her outspoken socialism. Mitchison originated from the wealthiest background of the four authors, being born into a Scottish land-owning family. She was raised in Oxford, where her father was a physiologist. She attended the Dragon School until adolescence, a period of her life narrated in her later biography, *Small Talk* (1983). Mitchison did pass exams for a science degree at Oxford, which she worked towards sporadically from 1913-1915. She also benefited intellectually from childhood contact with such families as the Huxleys.[11] From her youth, Mitchison felt herself to be a highbrow and was proud of this identity, although it later caused rifts between herself and the working-class people with whom she wished to make contact. Her period of service as a VAD nurse during the war provided her first independence from her mother's strictness. In 1916, she married Dick Mitchison, a friend of her brother. They had eight children together. When Naomi Mitchison campaigned for the Labour nomination for the Scottish Universities in 1935 she claimed that her 'intellectual outlook [was] strongly reinforced by her feelings as a mother'.[12] Throughout her adulthood she was an active campaigner for the Left, although her passionate support of the birth control movement is indicative of the feminism that she claimed ran deeper in her than anything else. Mitchison and her husband, after early anxieties

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[10] *Modern Drama in Europe* (London: Collins, 1920); *The Pot Boils* (London: Constable, 1920); *The Happy Highways* (London: Heinemann, 1920); *The Clash* (London: Heinemann, 1922); *The Pitiful Wife* (London: Constable, 1923); ed., *Challenge to Death* (London: Constable, 1934); 'New Documents' (*Fact*, 4 [July 1937]); *Europe to Let: The Memoirs of an Obscure Man* (London: Macmillan, 1940).

[11] Vera Brittain enviously includes Naomi's family in *Testament of Youth*: 'in my later teens I often used to consider [...] the incalculable advantages of heredity and being born a member of such families as the Huxleys, the Haldanes, the Frys, the Darwins or the Arnolds' (31).

[12] From a pamphlet entitled *Scottish Universities Parliamentary Election, 1935. The Labour Candidate: Naomi Mitchison* (privately printed).

about their sexual life, practised an open marriage. Mitchison's literature celebrated women's sexuality and female experiences, including the role of women in history. Her first novel, *The Conquered* (1923), began her career as an historical novelist, although she also wrote poetry, children's stories, and sociological and archaeological studies such as *The Home and a Changing Civilization* (1934) and 'Archaeology and the Intellectual Worker' (1935). She also wrote several plays with Lewis Gielgud and dramas for private performance, a practise continued from her childhood.[13] During the 1920s and 1930s, she was in contact with several influential writers of the day. Her archives show correspondence with Stevie Smith, Olaf Stapledon, Aldous Huxley, Storm Jameson, Virginia Woolf and W.H. Auden, of whose poetry she was an early supporter, and whom she hired as her son's Latin tutor. In 1936, she travelled to Vienna as a representative of British Labour following the Dollfuss putsch, and published her experiences in journalistic form as *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary.* She also published long novels during the 1930s: *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), *We Have Been Warned* (1935), and *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939). These texts indicate her increased interest in socialist revolution and anti-fascism. She, like Holtby and Jameson, was also gradually withdrawing from pacifism; in a 1938 letter to Aldous Huxley she wrote that 'I can't see the Nazi regime ending except by blood'.[14] In 1937, Mitchison moved with her family to an estate at Carradale in Scotland, where she attempted to establish socialism within her local community. She also housed war refugees. Her experiences, recorded

[13] See Naomi Mitchison , with Lewis Gielgud, *The Price of Freedom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931) and *As it Was in the Beginning* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939). Privately performed plays include *Kate Crackernuts* (privately printed by Oxford Alden Press, 1931) and Edinburgh: programme for *Barley, Honey and Wine* (no date, Acc. No. 4599/11) which listed Mitchison, Julian Huxley and Jack Gielgud among the performers.

[14] Edinburgh: Naomi Mitchison, letter to Aldous Huxley, 17 October 1938, Acc. No. 8185.

in a diary kept for Mass Observation, were eventually published as *Among You Taking Notes* (1985).[15]

Rebecca West also had connections with Scotland. Born Cicely Fairfield in 1892, West is sometimes labelled an Irish author due to her father's nationality, but her mother's Scottish background seems actually to have had more influence on West, as she and her sisters moved to Edinburgh with their mother after their parents separated in 1901. There she attended school and, as an adolescent, became involved with the suffrage movement, showing the earliest interest in feminism of the four authors. From 1910-1911, she studied at RADA, and at this time also began writing for the *Freewoman* and the socialist paper, *The Clarion.* West quickly developed a reputation as an iconoclast, writing fierce criticism of established male literary figures including the 'Big Four' (Galsworthy, Wells, Shaw, and Bennett), Henry James in her first published book of criticism (1916), and James Joyce in her stream-of-consciousness essay 'The Strange Necessity' (1928).[16] West's desire to challenge literary tradition put her in favour with influential modernists. She published a Vorticist short story, 'Indissoluble Matrimony', in the first number of *Blast* (June 1914), and developed professional relationships with Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and Ford Madox Ford. She also met H.G. Wells in this period, and was his lover from 1913-1922. She gave birth to Wells' illegitimate son, Anthony, in 1914. Her experiences as an unmarried mother are represented in her novel *The Judge* (1922). Later she had an affair with Lord Beaverbrook. Details of her relationships were fictionalised in an unfinished novel from 1925, *Sunflower,* which was

[15] *Small Talk... Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (London: The Bodley Head, 1983); *The Conquered* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1923); *The Home and a Changing Civilization* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1934); 'Archaeology and the Intellectual Worker' in Margaret Cole, ed., *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia* (London: Gollancz, 1933), 249-264; *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (London: Gollancz, 1936); *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931); *We Have Been Warned* (London: Constable, 1935); *The Blood of the Martyrs* (London: Constable, 1939); Dorothy Sheridan, ed., *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945* (London: Gollancz, 1985).

published posthumously. The actress protagonist of that novel is one of many creative female characters to appear in her interwar fiction. West's hugely successful first novel, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), featured an examination of traditional gender roles, marriage, and psychoanalysis, indicating several of the interests which were to shape her fiction in the upcoming years. She also published the novels *Harriet Hume* (1929) and *The Thinking Reed* (1936) in this period, and, like Holtby and Jameson, depended upon frequent book reviews and journalistic assignments for her living. Like the three other authors, she wrote for *Time and Tide,* as well as many other papers in Britain and the United States. Her work for American magazines was especially lucrative. She produced short stories, political and economic analysis, and anti-fascist material at this time. She contributed to Jameson's edited volume *Challenge to Death*, was in contact with Mitchison whom she claimed to have known 'all my life',[17] and was a frequent visitor to the Holtby/Brittain/Catlin home after her marriage to the banker, Henry Andrews. In the 1930s, she continued to speak on feminist platforms, such as at one London meeting 'defending the right of married women to engage in paid employment'.[18] She was also outspoken against fascism, writing to Nancy Cunard in 1937 to append her name to Cunard's pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War.*[19] At the end of the decade, West made three journeys to Yugoslavia to witness the changes in a region which would soon be engulfed by fascism. Her experiences there, and her feminist and anti-Nazi perspective, were condensed into a two-volume narrative of her travels entitled *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia* (1941). The text is considered by several critics to be her masterpiece, and is of interest to recent critics in

[16] See 'Uncle Bennett' and 'The Strange Necessity' in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928); *Henry James* (Writers of the Day Series [London: Nisbet and Co., 1916]).
[17] Rebecca West, letter to Harold Guinzberg, November 1956, reprinted in Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Selected Letters of Rebecca West* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 315.
[18] Rebecca West, letter to Alexander Woolcott, November 1933, reprinted in *The Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, 136.

its depiction of an increasingly conservative and nostalgic point of view, which is at odds with her earlier liberalism.[20]

Methodology

These four were selected from a long list of politically oriented British women writing in this period. Such a list would include Vera Brittain, Katherine Burdekin, Stevie Smith, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Virginia Woolf.[21] In recent years, their relevance to this period of literary history has been argued by revisionist scholars including Maroula Joannou, Gill Plain, Phyllis Lassner, and Janet Montefiore, all of whose publications have informed the arguments I develop throughout this thesis.[22] In my choice of authors, I deliberately selected from the number of British women writers who produced anti-utopian, dystopian, and futuristic responses to fascism. Jameson, Holtby, Mitchison and West were four who used such forms for the expression of their Liberal Left political arguments, and were also related to one another professionally and personally, writing for many of the same publications such as *The Manchester Guardian* and *Time and Tide*, serving on many of the same political committees and lecture groups, and all reporting acquaintance in their memoirs, diaries, and/or letters. Within their personal lives, all four also exemplify non-traditional patterns of relationships. For my

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[19] See Rebecca West, letter to Nancy Cunard, 28 July 1937, reprinted in *The Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, 164.

[20] 'Indissoluble Matrimony' (*Blast*, no. 1 [June 1914]); *The* Judge (London: Hutchison, 1922); *Sunflower* (London: Virago, 1986); *The Return of the Soldier* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1918); *Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy* (London: Hutchison, 1929); *The Thinking Reed* (London: Hutchinson, 1936); *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, 2 vols. (New York: Viking Press, 1941).

[21] I do discuss two of Woolf's texts in detail in Chapter 3, as a comparison to Storm Jameson's urban writings.

[22] See Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-1938* (Oxford: Berg Press, 1995); Maroula Joannou, ed., *British Women's Writing of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996); Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of the Second World War: Battlegrounds of Their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

purposes, they are also compatible in their political and literary ideologies in two respects:

1) Their use of realist forms of fiction. By 'realist' I mean, broadly, the verisimilitude, apparently objective and seemingly reliable narrative voice, and linear, causal plot structures common to late nineteenth-century novels.[23] Elizabeth Maslen and Marion Shaw have discussed the influence of Victorian novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot on these four authors, who, as Maslen indicates, with a 'stake in modernity', chose a 'conservative mode like realism... bending a familiar mode without alienating potential readers'.[24] The texts featured in this thesis follow these formal conventions in the main, but as I will illustrate, often engage with modernist themes and sometimes forms. Raymond Williams has argued that formal and aesthetic innovations and not thematic interests define modernism,[25] but more recent revisionist histories of modernism are beginning to question boundaries between experimental, or 'High', Modernism and traditional forms that were in use in the period.[26] Peter Burger has also argued that Modernism deals 'not with development but with a break with tradition. What distinguishes the category of the new in Modernism from earlier, perfectly legitimate uses of the same category is the radical quality

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Articles by Marion Shaw, Elizabeth Maslen, and Diana Wallace will also be frequently referenced throughout my thesis.

[23] See Lilian Furst, *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995) and Lilian Furst, ed., *Realism*, Modern Literatures in Perspective Series (Harlowe, Essex: Longman, 1992). See also Marion Shaw, 'Feminism and fiction between the wars: Winifred Holtby and *Virginia Woolf*' in Moira Monteith, ed., *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), 171-191.

[24] Elizabeth Maslen, 'Sizing Up: Women, Politics and Parties' in Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham, eds., *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1996), 203.

[25] See Raymond Williams, 'The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism' in Edward Timms and David Kelley, eds., *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 20.

[26] See Keith Williams and Steven Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London: Longman 1997). See also Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) and Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, vols. 1 and 2 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

of the break with what had prevailed heretofore.[27] Burger's classification could be expanded to include texts which break politically, rather than formally, with tradition, such as the novels which I include in my thesis. To distinguish the texts of my four authors from the conventional category of High Modernist aesthetic experiment, I will consistently refer to 'modernism' (with a lower-case 'm') to name a wider-ranging classification of modernity than is suggested by the term 'Modernism' as used by Burger and Williams. I will discuss how each author, whilst retaining the basic structures of realist fiction, also introduces modernist themes such as psychoanalysis and urban alienation, isolation and *flânerie*, and occasionally modernist forms, such as stream of consciousness, and cyclical or repetitive plotting. I will also analyse uses of futuristic fantasy and historical themes within political and realist writing. Existing studies often segregate modernist writers, such as West, from authors such as Mitchison, Holtby and Jameson who have consistently been characterised as realist, yet the boundaries between those forms actually appear flexible within their writing of this period.[28] By focussing on a body of West's realist fiction, and by examining the non-realist aspects of the texts of the other authors, I will expand their previous literary classifications and contribute to revisionist literary histories of the political 1930s and of modernism.

2) Their political affiliations. As socialists and anti-fascists, all four authors were aligned with the literary, Liberal Left of the interwar period. In my discussions, I will follow up recent critical studies of the politics of their writing to show the variety and multiplicity of their socialisms, feminisms, anti-fascisms, and pacifisms. Despite the fact that they were Left-wing, conservative aspects can

[27] Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 16.

be located throughout their texts. Elizabeth Maslen and Alison Light have written on conservatism in women's writing of this period, and their arguments will contribute to my detailed readings of neglected fictions as well as better-known texts.[29] My arguments will problematise previous categorisation of these writers as simply 'feminist' (and therefore 'progressive') by showing how complicated and multiple political affiliations were, even amongst this group of closely linked writers.

My measuring of the degree of conservatism present within the political writing of these authors requires that I describe the politics of my *own* analyses, and clarify what I mean by my use of the following political terms and concepts across the thesis:

1) Feminism. As early as the 1930s, feminism was concerned with the question of whether to pursue equality or difference. In my discussions I will assess the definition of feminism suggested by each author's personal politics, and assess to what degree their work is marked by overt commitment to issues of either women's equality in society, women's specific needs and abilities, or other concerns. Rebecca West, for example, seems to foreground women's consciousnesses and gendered perspectives much more forcefully than the other authors do. Storm Jameson, by comparison, labels herself in her memoirs as a socialist and anti-fascist and these political affiliations are at the forefront of her political arguments, but her writing nonetheless lends itself to feminist interpretation because she, too, represents the lives of marginalised women in her fiction. By discussing the politics of their writing in context, the notion of feminisms, as opposed to a singular interwar feminism, will emerge throughout

[28] For example Bonnie Kime Scott consistently classifies West as a modernist despite the realist qualities her fiction shares with that of Holtby, Jameson and Mitchison.
[29] See Maslen, 'Sizing Up', and Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).

the thesis. These historical feminisms will be assessed by my own, contemporary notions of gender politics which have been influenced by the feminism of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, and by the more recent writings of Judith Butler, Susan J. Hekman, and Chris Weedon on postmodern and poststructural feminism.[30] These theorists have shaped what emerges in my thesis as a general concern with the degree to which each author's individual feminism addresses the notion of oppositional gender dichotomies, and of the related public/private dichotomy that is correlative to a central masculine/feminine binary. Where a feminist text negotiates the notion of gender difference, I assess whether or not it engages with binary configurations. Does the text propose alternative configurations? Where oppositional male/female relationships are focussed upon, does a text necessarily present heterosexuality as the norm, and what is the text's attitude towards homosexuality? What is the text's attitude towards relationships between women which ignore or challenge the importance of the male/female binary? Such contemporary questions inform my assessment of each author's conservatism and my examinations of the presence, or lack, of female friendships and homosexuality as an indication of the nature of their feminism. Because these texts present gender relationships as part of a debate about public and private politics, they lend themselves quite naturally, I feel, to the debates articulated by contemporary feminism.

2) Socialism. It seems crucial to assess the socialist commitment of the texts featured, in terms of the debates which existed in the interwar period regarding

[30] See Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986; repr. ed. 1990); Susan Sellers, ed., *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Susan J. Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern*

representation of the working classes by middle-class writers. I discuss how each author addressed this issue or overlooked the debate, and as I will demonstrate even the most propagandistic pieces, such as Naomi Mitchison's children's literature, feature conservative perspectives or methodologies within their Left-wing approaches. One question which pervades my discussions is of the relationship between the voices of the narrator and working-class characters within a text. Do the voices appear to elide, as in Storm Jameson's 'A Day Off'? Or does the narrative voice, or certain characters, observe and report on working-class behaviours, as in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*? The act of watching, either as *flâneur* or Mass Observation voyeur, is important in my analyses, and my focus on watching/policing and use of contemporary film theory to aid my discussions presents these texts and their socialist politics from a new critical position.

3) Anti-fascism. All four authors share a passionate, active anti-fascism which is apparent in their fiction, journalism, and various committee memberships in this period. In my analyses I compare the accepted anti-fascist status of several texts with the conservatism already described in other aspects of the authors' politics. Despite their affiliation with the Left, these authors sometimes adopt certain ideologies usually associated with the far Right, echoing the language of the Right, and of popular and psychoanalytic understandings of fascism, particularly in relation to Nazi homoeroticism and homosexuality. Klaus Theweleit and Martin Durham have assessed the relationship between homoerotic imagery and fetishism within Nazi ideology, but as I will illustrate these relationships were

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Feminism (Cambridge: Polity/Blackwell, 1990); Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

commonly accepted in the 1930s.[31] Psychologists and writers, including those featured in my study, were aware of this relationship and relied upon it to characterise Nazi males. In my analyses of the four authors' anti-fascist writings, I will illustrate how their texts did not immediately reject all aspects of Nazi ideology, expanding upon previous readings of their anti-fascism and adding to critical awareness of the conservatism within Liberal Left thinking in this period. For example, an interest in eugenics was not uncommon amongst members of the British Left in the 1930s despite our contemporary association of eugenics with the far Right. My analyses of the conservatism of Left-wing anti-fascist writing will contribute to discussions of the complexity of that perspective in the interwar period, destabilising its status as the polar opposite to Right-wing, conservative thinking.

4) Pacifism. Examining the texts these writers produced in the 1930s captures their politics in the interwar, as opposed to the immediate post-Armistice, period. By the 1930s, they were debating whether or not an absolute commitment to pacifism could be continued in the shadow of the perceived fascist threat to civilisation. I will assess the variety of responses they produced to this issue, and trace their evolving attitudes to it throughout the interwar period, and the difficulties faced in declaring an outright position.

Like most political writers of the mythical 'Thirties, Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West also considered the relationship between art and politics. They wrestled with this issue in their propagandistic fiction and journalism, and in their attitudes towards literary/political committees. Throughout my thesis, the notion is debated of how these questions play out amongst the other political concerns of the period. How are women,

[31] See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, 1: Women, floods, bodies, history* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987) and *Male Fantasies, 2: Male bodies: psychoanalysing the white terror* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Martin Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1998).

as busy mothers or dependent wives for example, to be involved in politics, and what attitudes do these feminist authors take towards this question? Do their texts speak to the working- and middle-classes equally about political involvement?

A final concern to be addressed in this introduction is my treatment of the 'Thirties as a 'long decade'. I look back to the beginning of the writers' feminist and socialist sensibilities in their writing of the 1920s, and generally use 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War as the endpoint of my choice of texts, but occasionally look at early wartime publications where these follow on from political concerns of the 1930s writings. Although I concentrate on the decade 1929-1939, I usually refer not to the '1930s' period but to the 'interwar' period, because the texts studied were often both reacting to the First World War and anticipating the Second. All four authors show an early perception of what was potentially in store, and their insightful political arguments alone make them worth reading and remembering. In choosing Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West for inclusion here, I can contribute to the current expansion of understanding of interwar literary history, to the continued feminist revival of neglected women's texts, and to the body of political criticism of these texts from a late-twentieth century perspective, proving that these writers are also worth reading because their work continues to generate question and debate.

Structure of the thesis

Because the seven chapters of my thesis all share common themes and approaches, particularly in their examination of gender and class politics, ordering the chapters proved a challenging task. My analytical approach throughout the thesis is firmly based in gender theory, as described above, and develops out of the feminist approaches used by recent critics in their studies of the four authors. I continue to use similar critiques in my discussions of neglected groups of texts, including urban writing, children's

literature, and writing about the United States. Analyses of such a variety of texts is necessary to the literary historical approach that I have undertaken, because it contributes to both the recovery of forgotten texts by women writers and to critical understanding of the interwar period. In several chapters, I employ approaches from the field of cultural studies, particularly film theory, in order to contribute new interpretations of better-known texts and expand discussions beyond of the realm of feminist literary theory. I have ordered these chapters, which are each unique in approach yet develop common themes throughout, in such a way as to shift from discussions of texts concerned with gender politics specifically, towards those which reflect both the wider concerns of international, interwar politics as well as the four authors' feminist interests. Overlapping ideas within this progressive structure will, I believe, be apparent.

The first three chapters discuss texts by Holtby, West and Jameson respectively which are concerned with differing feminist examinations of gender roles between the wars. For Holtby and Jameson, the consideration of single women's lives is central to their politics, although the relationship of male homosexuality to fascism that Holtby's texts eventually propose contains conservative ideas which have not been previously discussed. West examines the male/female binary as played out within the United States at the start of the Great Depression, in a body of realist texts which have been neglected by previous West scholars. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 feature analyses of the class politics suggested by Jameson's urban modernism (a new critical classification of her fiction), Mitchison's long novels, and Holtby's *South Riding* (which I also subject to new analysis, by placing the text in the context of Mass Observation and documentary writing). Gender and sexual politics inform each author's socialist depiction of class difference, but I will argue that Mitchison and Holtby propose models of difference that are closely related to sexuality by shifting the focus of my analyses towards the class

politics of their writing, taking a different critical perspective than that of previous scholars. These chapters also indicate the authors' specific interests in the possible forms for political writing in the 1930s. This interest is continued in texts featured in the final two chapters. In Chapter 6, I examine Mitchison's socialist writings for children, which are discussed here for the first time. Chapter 7 features all four authors' experiments with futuristic forms including dystopia, science, and disaster fiction. The final chapter actually considers the texts which originally sparked my interest in these specific writers, yet as a survey, the chapter is an appropriate conclusion to the thesis because in their various futuristic writings, each author's individual feminist, socialist, pacifist and anti-fascist perspectives are clearly rendered. The multiplicity of their politics, and their literary forms, is the lasting impression which I wish to create.

1.

Spinsters, homosexuality and fascism in Winifred Holtby's interwar writing

In her *Testament of Friendship* (1940), Vera Brittain described the feminist dimension of her relationship with Winifred Holtby: 'Those years with Winifred taught me that the type of friendship which reaches its apotheosis in the story of David and Jonathan is not a monopoly of the masculine sex'.[1] In Holtby's writing and within her personal life, intimate friendships between women challenged societal pressures towards heterosexual marriage and indicated, as Marion Shaw has argued, that singleness was 'a genuine alternative to marriage, and not merely its unfortunate second-best'.[2] Writing in a period in which women's choices were limited by what Holtby termed 'the legend of the frustrated spinster',[3] she created unmarried protagonists whose careers and friendships with other women provided fulfilment. Her 1934 study, *Women and a Changing Civilization*, traced attitudes regarding women's traditional roles in the private, domestic sphere, locating damaging anti-feminist thought in the contemporary trends of fascism and psychoanalysis. Throughout her career, she encouraged her readers to 'shake off this tyranny of sex'[4] and challenged the 'authority of the psychiatrist' who advised that women 'must enjoy the full cycle of sex experience'[5] in order to be healthy and avoid frustration.

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[1] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship: The Story of Winifred Holtby* ([1940] London: Virago, 1980), 117.
[2] Marion Shaw, 'Feminism and Fiction between the Wars: Winifred Holtby and *Virginia Woolf*' in Moira Monteith, ed., *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1986), 189.
[3] Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* ([1934] London: John Lane, 1941), 125.
[4] Hull: Winifred Holtby, letter to Vera Brittain, 21 August 1928.
[5] Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Wishart and Co., 1932), 29.

Holtby's fiction of this period challenges such emphasis on physical sexual activity with the introduction of spinster protagonists in her anti-romantic novels. The plots of *Anderby Wold* (1923), *The Crowded Street* (1924), *The Land of Green Ginger* (1927), and *South Riding* (1936) build toward heterosexual love scenes which inevitably fail, a trend analysed by Shaw in her 1999 biography of Holtby. Against these failed love scenes Holtby juxtaposes fulfilling and important relationships with other female characters. In *The Crowded Street* and *The Land of Green Ginger*, the protagonists befriend and share homes with women of their own age. The novels *South Riding, Poor Caroline* (1931), and *Anderby Wold* feature relationships between younger protagonists and older mother-substitutes. In this chapter, I will examine more closely the fictional female relationships discussed in previous critical studies, developing detailed readings of the gender politics of Holtby's novels and illustrating that although her treatment of gender is progressive, especially in depicting masculinity and femininity as socially constructed,[6] it is also marked by a conservative, heterosexual bias that counters her overall challenge to contemporary expectations of women's gender roles and sexuality. I will discuss moments of overt lesbian eroticism which arise in Holtby's writing and suggest reasons why these episodes are later denied development, building upon Shaw's analyses.[7] This chapter will also contextualize for the first time Holtby's treatment of same-sex desire, as experienced by both female and male characters, within contemporary psychological attitudes towards sexuality, and illustrate how Holtby's writing sometimes echoed the Freudian and sexological arguments she was elsewhere keen to challenge. Finally, I will compare her representations of male and female homoeroticism by placing her politicised treatments of homosexuality within contemporary 1930s readings of

[6] Shaw makes this argument specifically in reference to Holtby's drama *Take Back Your Freedom* in *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999), 232.
[7] See Marion Shaw, '"Alien Experiences": Virginia Woolf, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain in the 1930s', in Keith Williams and Steven Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London: Longman, 1997), 40.

masculine homosexuality and fascism. It is within her representations of male homosexuality that her arguments most closely parallel those of contemporary psychological theories of male sexuality formation.

Receptions of lesbianism in the interwar period

The issue of homosexuality in Holtby's fiction has been of concern to several recent feminist critics including Sheila Jeffreys, Anthea Trodd and Maroula Joannou. However, possible lesbian readings also drew attention during Holtby's lifetime. Both Holtby and Brittain witnessed the censorship case of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and would have been aware of the legal dangers of publishing an overtly lesbian novel. Despite her willingness to testify in favour of Hall's novel, Vera Brittain's personal fear of association with lesbianism is apparent in her biographical treatment of her relationship with Holtby in *Testament of Friendship*. After their meeting at Somerville College, Brittain and Holtby moved to London together to write and lecture. As active socialists, pacifists and feminists, the women pursued change for the post-war world, giving speeches on behalf of many political organisations, and proving their commitment to leading atypical private lives as independent career women in working partnership. When Brittain married George Catlin, that partnership developed into ownership of a London home between the three of them on equal terms. The story of this experimental relationship is recorded in Brittain's memoir, which indicates her anxiety about possible misinterpretations of her partnership with Winifred Holtby:

> Sceptics are roused by a record of affection between women to suspicions habitual among the over-sophisticated.
>
> "Too, *too* Chelsea!" Winifred would comment amiably in after years when some zealous friend related the newest legend about us current in the neighbourhood.[8]

[8] Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 118.

Although Holtby argued that 'to love other women deeply is not pathological',[9] Brittain seemed to feel that ideal women 'carr[ied] no taint of lesbianism'.[10] In Shaw's analysis of the following quotation from the Prologue to Brittain's *Testament of Friendship*, she argues that such a 'taint' is to be inferred from Brittain's reference to 'tarnished interpretations'; the reader may also understand that Brittain is referring to women's friendships being 'falsely interpreted' as homosexual in nature:

> From the days of Homer the friendships of men have enjoyed glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women, in spite of Ruth and Naomi, have usually been not merely unsung, but mocked, belittled and falsely interpreted. I hope that Winifred's story may do something to destroy these tarnished interpretations, and show its readers that loyalty and affection between women is a noble relation which, far from impoverishing, actually enhances the love of a girl for her lover, of a wife for her husband, of a mother for her children.[11]

In this statement, Brittain relies on heterosexual gender roles to identify women paired in friendship. Shaw criticises Brittain's *Testament of Friendship* for its enclosure of Winifred Holtby 'within a heterosexual narrative for her own heterosexual agenda'.[12] Brittain identifies and asserts Holtby's heterosexuality by representing her failed romance with Harry Pearson as a shaping force in Holtby's life. Shaw's research indicates that this depiction is inaccurate, and that it ignores Holtby's vehement arguments that romantic relationships ought not to be central to the narratives of women's lives. Awareness of her friend's dread of rumours of lesbianism may have informed Holtby's selection of heterosexually identified adult women for her protagonists, particularly in texts such as *The Crowded Street* and *The Land of Green Ginger* which featured single women living together with no apparent desire for male companionship.

The friendship between Brittain and Holtby also features in Sheila Jeffreys' socio-historical study *The Spinster and Her Enemies*. Jeffreys locates Holtby's *The Crowded*

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[9] Quoted in Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 290.
[10] Hull: Winifred Holtby, letter to Vera Brittain, 21 August 1928.
[11] Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 2.

Street within a group of lesbian narratives published in the 1920s, including Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924) and *The Well of Loneliness* and Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927). Jeffreys comments that Holtby was aware of 'the social constraints that were developing to create a climate in which passionate friendships between women were regarded with suspicion'.[13] Jeffreys also describes how sexology and psychoanalysis influenced social attitudes towards intimacy between women, and constructed spinsters as unfulfilled, or even dangerous. The traits which characterised many of Holtby's spinster protagonists, such as cigarette smoking, confident and direct speech, and an assumption of equality with men, feature in Jeffreys' discussion of the 'classic stereotype of the female homosexual' established by Havelock Ellis. She writes that 'the importance of his description is that it classified as "homosexual" precisely those forms of behaviour for which spinster feminists, like the "New Women" of the 1890s, were criticised by anti-feminists'.[14]

In her polemical texts, *Women and a Changing Civilization* and *Virginia Woolf* (1932), Holtby predated Jeffreys' conclusions by fifty years. Holtby's writing indicates that within the period which Jeffreys was analysing, feminists were theorising gender identity and were aware that, as Maroula Joannou's description of interwar spinsterhood asserts, 'a woman attempting to escape from the traditional limitations of domestic obligations might well find herself thrust back into them again by the authority of the psychologist'.[15] *Women and a Changing Civilization* embraces similar feminist arguments to those of Shaw, Jeffreys, and Joannou, but also discusses from a humanistic perspective the limiting effects of contemporary psychology on notions of gender and sexuality

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[12] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 290.
[13] Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London: Pandora, 1985), 122.
[14] Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 106.
[15] Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness, and Social Change 1918-1930* (Oxford: Berg Press, 1995), 81.

across society as a whole. As I will discuss below, these comments demonstrate Holtby's awareness of contemporary anxiety regarding homosexuality, but in denying lesbianism as a widespread phenomenon, her text can be seen to share in that anxiety, even as it seeks to calm it.

Holtby testifies in *Women* that during the Great War, the close proximity of female nurses and military personnel did not lead to sexual 'peculiarity'. However, she is referring only to adult heterosexual promiscuity, not to lesbianism. She characterises the behaviour of WAACs by claiming that during her time in the Army, she knew of only one woman discharged for pregnancy. Her discussion of spinster and feminist sexuality focuses on the advent of contraception, which allows women to engage in (heterosexual) sex without producing children. Early in *Women*, she refers to same-sex love between women on the island of Lesbos, but it is only in allusions to past cultures that adult female homosexuality is explicitly described within the text. A related pattern of referring to homoerotic desire between young women, then describing heterosexual desire in adulthood, is common within Holtby's fictional representations of female sexuality. Such a pattern avoids overt lesbian interpretation, and accords with psychoanalytic models of female development which describe childhood bisexuality as being eradicated in healthy adulthood. Holtby was writing at a time when lesbianism was reviled, as described by Jeffreys, and when the term 'spinsterhood', according to Shaw, 'supposedly held horrors for women'.[16] Alison Oram traces the effects of links created by sexology between lesbianism and spinsterhood, and writes that 'non-sexual attachments' between women were also included within Havelock Ellis' definition of lesbianism. [17] Any retreat from a full expression of adult lesbian erotic desire, particularly within those of her novels which assert the 'non-sexual' nature of

[16] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 291.
[17] Alison Oram, 'Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses' *Women's History Review*, 1.3 (1992), 415.

attachments between spinsters who live together, may have been due to either Holtby's sensitivity to these attitudes, or her anxiety to save Vera Brittain's carefully guarded reputation, as well as part of her deliberate wish to portray a spinster's celibacy as part of her fulfilling and rewarding life.

Mothers, daughters and spinsters

Marion Shaw identifies *South Riding* (1936) and *Poor Caroline* (1935) as Holtby's two major spinster novels, and remarks that she was not the only woman author producing spinster protagonists: Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, E.M. Delafield, Sylvia Townsend Warner and others were using successful, unmarried women as their central characters in the same period.[18] Both of Holtby's novels feature failed heterosexual love scenes and friendships between women.[19] The spinster protagonist of *South Riding*, Sarah Burton, is a forty-year-old, sexually active, socialist, feminist headmistress of a local girls' school. She falls in love with her political opposite, the conservative aristocrat, Robert Carne. He is already married, to an insane wife whose expensive institutionalisation has led to the bankruptcy of his estate. Although their relationship is clearly an ill-fated romance of opposites ('into Sarah's inner and well-educated mind there flashed the memory of Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester'[20]), when they coincidentally meet at a hotel in Manchester Sarah invites Carne to her room. The relationship is never consummated because that night, Carne experiences a mild heart attack in Sarah's bed. This development is one of the 'failures of heterosexual romance' which Shaw

[18] Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 151. In *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows'*, Maroula Joannou provides a footnote list of other authors including Radclyffe Hall, Sylvia Lind, Katherine Mansfield, F.M. Mayor, Sheila Kaye Smith, May Sinclair, Sylvia Stephenson, and E.H. Young, 78.
[19] See Shaw's reference, *The Clear Stream*, 236.
[20] *South Riding*, 120.

identifies throughout Holtby's fiction. Critic Diana Wallace also describes such scenes as crucial to Holtby's challenge to the expectations of popular, romantic novels.[21]

Sarah realises Carne's feelings for her after his funeral, when she hears his last words about her from the Alderman, Mrs Beddows. Sarah's troubled friendship with this elder woman outlives the romance with Carne, and by the novel's conclusion Sarah seems inspired by Mrs Beddows' example of utility and service continued beyond middle age. Through what Shaw calls the novel's 'rapprochement between old and young',[22] the relationship assumes the 'mother-daughter' shape described by Shaw which is present in many of Holtby's novels. I agree with Shaw's reading that their relationship partially originates from the women's competitive, shared, heterosexual desire for Carne. My extended examination of the nature of Mrs Beddows' feelings for Carne is helpful in determining the place of heterosexual desire within the novel's depiction of female relationships.

Mrs Beddows narrates her desire for Carne, 'so handsome, so big, so masculine',[23] and the extent to which she wishes to be desired by him, despite the fact that both of them are already married. Her desire to comfort him reads as simultaneously maternal and erotic in its continuing awareness of his masculine appearance and voice:

> From the dining-room came [...] another voice, deep and vibrating – Carne's voice.
> While her hands and tongue were busy in the kitchen, she had been busy thinking of him with such love and sorrow that this unexpected re-encounter shocked her almost as though she had met a ghost [...] she had been grieving over him, wondering what she could do to help him [...]
> On her return from the kitchen, she had forgotten to remove her apron. Passing the mirror in the hall she saw reflected her plump, sturdy, plebeian figure beside his tall one and sighed, desiring the impossible, that she could comfort him in his adversity.[24]

[21] See Diana Wallace, 'Revising the Marriage Plot in Women's Fiction of the 1930s', in Maroula Joannou, ed., *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
[22] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 236.
[23] *South Riding*, 41.
[24] *South Riding*, 365-367.

The maternal quality of her love for Carne is also evident in her wish that he could have married her daughter, Sybil, and had a better and easier life that the one he had experienced with his mad wife, Muriel. At the end of the novel, she confesses to Sarah the mixed maternal and erotic qualities of her feelings for Carne:

> For years I've thought far more of Carne than was good for me [...] Mind you, I don't say I loved him the way you did. More as a son. I'm an old woman. But when you're seventy you don't always *feel* old. I know I don't. There are times when you find yourself thinking of yourself as a girl [...] And if I'd been your age – and thought I could comfort him – though it is always wrong and leads to misery, I've sometimes wondered.[25]

Mrs Beddows' desire is articulated most clearly in the moment she realises that Carne and Sarah are attracted to each other. She walks in on the couple in Carne's house, and is taken aback by their intimacy:

> She observed, seated comfortably in two arm-chairs, tea-tray between them, Robert Carne and a woman [...] The firelight caught the red gleam of the woman's curling hair, and she knew Sarah Burton.
>
> She had dragged herself there to comfort, warm, uphold him, to offer help with Midge and counsel about finance. She saw that he had already found a confidante.
>
> Her quick wits failed her.
>
> "Oh," she gasped.[26]

The brief, single-sentence paragraphs of the above passage emphasise both Mrs Beddows' extreme shock and her sudden comprehension of her place as solitary outcast. The text depicts the younger woman's sexual success as a modest victory against the elder, although this is undermined by Sarah's failed liaison with Carne and his eventual death. The sense of Sarah's sexual victory is upheld by the novel's conclusion, in which Mrs Beddows' temporarily withholds, jealously, Carne's final message of affection which she was meant to pass on to Sarah. The older woman's action seems the concession of a defeat.

In this victory of the daughter-figure over the vital, domineering mother, there seems to be an outcome which contradicts that urged by Holtby in her claim that a

woman's life grows more interesting as she approaches 'the right side of forty'.[27] In writing the relationship between the two women as a sexually competitive one, Holtby imagines the pain of age and sexual decline and the sense of replacement an older woman may feel in the presence of a younger female. However, like Sarah, Mrs Beddows will not be destroyed by Carne's rejection because she has her public life to fulfil and stimulate her in her older age. Thus, the novel contains an interesting tension between Holtby's polemical arguments about women's productive older age, an idea also upheld by her choice of forty-year old romantic protagonist in Sarah, and her insistence upon writing scenes of victory and defeat between sexually competitive women of two different generations.

In the novel *Poor Caroline*, the constructed mother-daughter relationship between Caroline and Eleanor features a similar plot of sexual competition. In this novel, Eleanor, a young university graduate, is befriended by her cousin Caroline, a middle-aged spinster who unashamedly pesters the family for money to fund various schemes, including the Christian Cinema Company which fails in the course of the novel. As Company founder, Caroline feels she has power and influence over young Eleanor and is initially oblivious, as was Mrs Beddows, to the younger woman's potential. Caroline's passionate dependence upon the young Father Mortimer, a member of her Company, is shattered when she realises his love for her young cousin:

> [Eleanor] was young and strong and selfish. Let her work. She has everything, thought Caroline. Youth and hope and ambition and love – and love. Father Mortimer's love... Caroline had nothing but the privilege of old age, to sit back in

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[25] *South Riding*, 471.
[26] *South Riding*, 327.
[27] Winifred Holtby, 'The Best of Life', in Paul Berry and Alan Bishop, eds., *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1985), 87. See also her short story 'The Right Side of Thirty' (Paul Berry and Marion Shaw, eds., *Remember, Remember! The Selected Stories of Winifred Holtby* [London: Virago, 1999], 222) in which she writes: 'I will say this for youth; that when one is seventeen one falls in love more easily, minds tepid bath-water less, and has a better figure. Having said this, I think I have said everything'. In *Women and a Changing Civilization*, she argues that most post-menopausal women 'regain their second youth, and live to a longer, healthier and more active old age than their husbands' (102).

her rocking chair and let Eleanor wash up.

So he's been in love with Eleanor from the beginning and he's never told me, she thought. That was the lovely thing she had given him. He probably thought her a terrible old bore. Their friendship was all one-sided. He was young. He turned to youth [...] He did not need her [...] Everything was slipping away from her, because she was growing old. Her time was passing.[28]

Once she realises the minister's attraction to Eleanor, Caroline feels defeat in terms of her older, weaker body. The reaction is similar to those of Mrs Beddows and Sarah, upon feeling the futility of their desire for Carne.

For both Caroline and Mrs Beddows, the realisation of their lack of sexual desirability causes them to feel their physical age when they had previously thought of themselves as being still young women. In *Poor Caroline*, this rejection occurs simultaneously with the failure of her cinema company, which leads to Caroline's quick decline and death. At the same time, Eleanor decides to accept Father Mortimer's offer of an experimental marriage of equals: she will carry on her career in chemistry, sharing his progressive belief that a more traditional marriage would be a misery. Shaw argues that although Caroline annoys with her unrealistic requests and constantly jangling beads and lorgnettes, she is an example of the potential of spinster women and is the novel's heroine because of her spirit and willingness to work energetically. Had she experienced Eleanor's progressive university education and rearing in the open plains of South Africa, the outcome of her life might have been different. As a modern young woman, Eleanor possesses stereotypically masculine qualities which confound Caroline and her other relatives; she drives, has boyish hair and clothing, and converses with men with a 'clear, critical glance and abrupt questions [...] listening as an equal listens'.[29] This modern young woman is a suitable match for the progressive Father Mortimer, who cannot feel attracted to either Caroline's appearance or tragically futile attempts at independence and success. In Eleanor, Holtby creates a romantic figure who lacks

[28] Winifred Holtby, *Poor Caroline* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), 260-261.
[29] *Poor Caroline*, 159.

traditionally feminine qualities, challenging both the lesbian stereotypes created by contemporary psychology and 'the way "the lesbian" becomes synonymous with "the modern"'[30] which Erin G. Carlston identifies in other interwar texts. However, this progressive element of Holtby's text contradictorily leaves the older spinster once again in the role of rejected, heterosexual woman.

Both novels seem to connect the end of woman's sexual desirability with solitude and death, agreeing with the view of middle age taken by Clarissa in her attic room in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925):

> As she paused by the open staircase window which let in blinds flapping, dogs barking, let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed [...]
>
> Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs... There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. Women must put off their rich apparel... The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be [...] So the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading, for she slept badly, she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childhood which clung to her like a sheet.[31]

Holtby quotes part of the above passage in her 1934 study, *Virginia Woolf*, which was published two years before *South Riding*. She perhaps had that scene in mind when she wrote the following in *South Riding*, during an episode in which Sarah retires to her own attic room to watch a young couple's liaison from her window. Seeing the young boy and girl together makes her realise she has fallen in love with Robert Carne:

> She moved from the window and switched on the light as though the bold realism of electricity might dispel the revelation. But the small white room with its sloping roof, its painted chest, its narrow virginal bed, only imprisoned her all the more closely in her knowledge [...] She became vulnerable, afraid, disarmed before a hostile world.[32]

In both scenes, age, sexuality and loneliness are expressed as worrying aspects of the

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[30] Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 33. Carlston makes a specific example of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* in the quoted discussion.
[31] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* ([1925] New York: Harvest/Harcourt Brace, 1990), 30-31.
[32] *South Riding*, 257.

women's future lives. Although Sarah is younger than either Clarissa Dalloway or Mrs Beddows, she too, although apparently not a virgin, feels anxious over her current 'virginal', undesired state. In her analysis of *Mrs Dalloway*, Holtby wrote that Clarissa realised that 'she is growing older; life is receding from her',[33] and that Clarissa (like Caroline, Mrs Beddows and Sarah) 'is already facing death; narrower and narrower will her bed be made'.[34] Such responses in Holtby's female characters seems to contradict her argument that women ought to look forward to achieving the right side of forty, because even Sarah Burton, a professional, younger spinster, feels 'imprisoned' and 'vulnerable'. Women's middle age is not simplified as a completely confident period in the lives of Holtby's fictional spinsters.

Other novels that feature competitive mother-daughter relationships are Holtby's *Anderby Wold* and *The Crowded Street.* In *Anderby Wold*, Sarah Bannister acts as the domineering mother-substitute for her younger sister-in-law, Mary Robson. Sarah sees herself as a more appropriate wife figure to her brother, John, for whom she kept house until his marriage to Mary. Resentful of Sarah's interference and determined to manage John in her own fashion, Mary finds herself falling unexpectedly in love with David Rossitur, a visiting Labour campaigner. After Mary and David kiss, John suffers a stroke and his farm fails due to labour disputes. Mary is forced to succumb to circumstance after David is murdered, moving with John away from her farm to live nearer to Sarah. The larger theme of the novel regards the nobility of conservative people who step aside to let progress happen, at great cost to themselves, but contains the same paradigmatic mother-daughter relationship as the two previous novels, particularly in its competition between the two women who want to be the better wife to one man.

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[33] *Virginia Woolf*, 154.
[34] *Virginia Woolf*, 157.

In *The Crowded Street*, Muriel Hammond's success in finding a husband is regarded by her mother, Mrs Hammond, as a measure of the older woman's own achievement and management. Mrs Hammond has a friendly relationship with Godfrey Neale, the wealthiest bachelor in their community and the man to whom she would most like Muriel to become engaged. Muriel fails to win a fiancé, but her younger sister, Connie, is forced by the Hammonds to marry a man from a hateful family in order to hush up her pregnancy by another lover. Connie's eventual death is linked to Mrs Hammond's blind concern for her daughters' virginal reputations and her patriarchal expectations for their eventual marriage and obedience. Muriel eventually escapes to London, saving herself from the dangerous pressure exerted by her mother and her local community by moving in with her friend, Delia, and starting a career.

In this text, the conservatism of the mother's desires is depicted as destructive and potentially fatal, and the daughter's choice of spinsterhood and career are comparatively the better options. However, Muriel's unconventional success leads to humiliation and a sense of personal failure for Mrs Hammond. In the penultimate chapter, Mrs Hammond rejoices at what her community must think when they see her standing on a rostrum during a picnic with Godfrey Neale and the now stylish, confident Muriel. She feels relief when imagining her daughter's imminent engagement: 'here, unequivocal and public, would lie the announcement of her triumph'[35], the pronoun 'her' referring to Mrs Hammond and not to her daughter. The reader discovers in the final chapter that Muriel refuses Godfrey Neale's proposal, and hints that he will go on to marry the daughter of Mrs Marshall Gurney, Mrs Hammond's friend and competitor. Once again, the older woman is denied a final victory by her daughter's unconventional success.

[35] Winifred Holtby, *The Crowded Street* ([1924] London: Virago, 1981), 262.

In the later novels *Poor Caroline* and *South Riding*, older women's lives are celebrated, although the drawbacks of their position – particularly loneliness and loss of desirability – are addressed. Mrs Hammond, Caroline and Mrs Beddows often feel young and energetic, working and scheming with an intensity and sense of righteousness sometimes lacked by their younger counterparts, such as Muriel and Eleanor. But for each of these older characters, their faith in themselves is shattered by the daughter figure's success, be that sexual or professional. It seems that the older women's identities are at least partially informed by their heterosexual desirability and the continued possibility of romance. The loss of these characteristics in the eyes of younger men, even the men they wish to marry their daughters as in *The Crowded Street* and *South Riding*, causes the characters suddenly to age and weaken. This depiction diverges from Holtby's feminist belief that spinsterhood, middle- and older-age in women are not to be feared, as psychoanalysts and sexologists imply by naming sexuality as key to healthy human development. Both Caroline and Mrs Hammond suffer, and ultimately experience tragedy. It is perhaps significant, and more in agreement with Holtby's feminist politics, that because she has a public career, Mrs Beddows, like the headmistress Sarah Burton, is not beaten by the realisation of her un-romantic future. Sexual desirability is important to Mrs Beddows' self-image, but is not its cornerstone; perhaps if Caroline and Mrs Hammond had had other, more secure outlets for their energies, they would not feel so much superseded by younger women.

By constructing her narratives around women's relationships, the details of women's lives and failed heterosexual love scenes, Holtby challenges both contemporary psychological theories and the expectations of romantic fiction. However, because her novels also rely on sexual competition, desirability, and the need for romance, emphasis is ultimately placed upon sexuality, specifically female heterosexuality. Holtby is more critical in her engagement with other conventions of

classic romantic fiction. As Diana Wallace has argued, the provincial balls and courtship rituals of a small community in *The Crowded Street* are similar to the settings of Jane Austen's novels. That text, like *South Riding* and *The Land of Green Ginger*, addresses the reader's expectation that courtship ought to be the central drama in a female character's life, with engagement and marriage as the climax of the plot. Holtby challenges those expectations, sometimes playfully, as when one of her characters describes a hatred for romance novels about 'beautiful girls who get married or married women who fall in love with their husbands'.[36] However, by continuing to reserve romance for younger characters at the expense of their elders, these novels do somewhat follow one conventional expectation of romantic fiction. A contradictory tension exists between that conservative aspect of Holtby's writing and the progressive challenge she makes by repeatedly registering the romantic and sexual disappointments of her younger characters.

Also, Holtby's younger unmarried women characters pose more of a challenge than older characters to prevailing romantic and sexual expectations in their appearance and behaviours. Sarah Burton, Eleanor, and eventually Muriel Hammond are politically active and aware, enjoy travelling and living alone, are financially independent, and venture into areas, particularly within London, where 'nice' women should not go. Holtby loved the idea of driving her own car and wrote female characters, Sarah Burton and Eleanor, who shared this unfeminine passion.[37] Such characteristics differ from those assigned to the female sex by essentialist ideologies influential in this period, including psychoanalysis and sexology. Holtby emphasises these characters' femininity, however, in their dress: her independent female characters are often passionate about

[36] *The Crowded Street*, 219.

[37] Holtby wrote to her friend Jean McWilliam that 'I do want a little car to go rollicking away down the Edgware Road' (Letter dated 21 October 1926 in Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam, eds., *Letters to a Friend* [London: Collins, 1937], 430) and 'I like motoring so much that I would willingly go for days and days without doing anything else' (Letter dated 27 March 1927, *Letters to a Friend*, 454).

clothes, and like to make themselves attractive to men. In an early scene in *South Riding,* Sarah poses on a beach for a man watching her as she leaves the sea after her swim. Sarah's position as both voyeur and object-to-be-looked-at is analysed in Chapter 5, but it is worth mentioning the scene here as an example of Holtby's strategies for asserting the heterosexual identity of female characters who are elsewhere described as not conventionally feminine. Such contrasts are another way in which Holtby's challenges to traditional expectations are limited in order to avoid lesbian identification.

Schoolgirl homoeroticism and adult sexuality

Shaw suggests that perhaps Holtby, 'like many women, given an appropriate context and a willing partner whom she loved of either sex, [...] could have been lesbian, or heterosexual, or both',[38] contrary to Vera Brittain's biographical construction of her friend as the heroine of a tragic heterosexual romance. This comment agrees with Holtby's own open attitude towards sexual identification:

> We do not even know how much of what we usually describe as "feminine characteristics" are really "masculine", and how much of "masculine" is common to both sexes [...] We do not know - though we theorise and penalise with ferocious confidence - whether the "normal" sexual relationship is homo- or bi- or heterosexual.[39]

In *Women*, Holtby criticised contemporary classification of unmarried and childless women as unhealthy, and considered as unrealistic concerns that all-female environments, such as girls' schools, produced homosexuality. Of her own experience at school, Holtby wrote that 'I do not know that one of my contemporaries - and we talked pretty freely - knew the precise nature of Lesbianism'.[40] She claimed that 'I know of one instance where a student was suspected of Lesbian practices, but nothing was proved, and the bulk of the students appeared quite ignorant of the supposed nature of

[38] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 290.
[39] *Women and a Changing Civilization*, 192.
[40] *Women and a Changing Civilization*, 123.

her peculiarity'.[41] These claims apparently refer to physical expressions of erotic desire and not the intense friendships to which Shaw refers when she asserts the likelihood that 'Winifred, like many girls, particularly at single-sex schools, had passionate friendships'[42], and mentions a poem written in praise of Winifred by a fellow student. Within Holtby's fiction, the erotic desire avoided between her adult female characters is often overtly present between her schoolgirl characters, and in one novel recurs in a woman's adult fantasies but is controlled so that she is still represented as ultimately heterosexual. Holtby's representation of homoeroticism as a childhood phenomenon that has disappeared by adulthood follows the patterns of sexual development explained by the Freudian models which she elsewhere tries to undermine.

Schoolgirl erotic crushes are an important aspect of life in Sarah's school in *South Riding*. She is aware of her girls' desire for her, and capitalises upon it: 'we needs must love the highest when we see it. I take good care to be the highest in my school'.[43] Sarah recognises that one of her brightest pupils, Lydia Holly, has fallen in love with her, 'but she reckoned it would do the girl little harm',[44] as Lydia 'was not more homosexual than any other romantic adolescent'.[45] Amongst themselves, the girls admire 'the amazing intricacies of [Sarah's] wardrobe'[46]. Carne's daughter, Midge, gossips to the others that 'Miss Burton has worn my combinations'[47] after her teacher changes out of ruined clothes at Carne's home:

> Her own things were pale green silk. Yes, fancy, and a sort of belt with net frilling instead of stays; but she wore my brown tights, and sent back all the clothes washed and ironed in a box from Marshall and Snelgrove.[48]

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[41] *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, 123.
[42] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 29.
[43] *South Riding*, 110-111.
[44] *South Riding*, 111.
[45] *South Riding*, 174.
[46] *South Riding*, 198.
[47] *South Riding*, 198.
[48] *South Riding*, 198-199.

South Riding is one of several of Holtby's novels which affirms a psychoanalytical understanding that the expressions of bisexuality which are normal in childhood are replaced by opposite sex love objects in healthy adulthood. It seems likely that Holtby would have been aware of such models; in a letter to Vera Brittain she reported excitedly that she was 'reading Freud',[49] and in *Virginia Woolf* she criticised the 'authority of the psychiatrist'.[50] In her novels *The Land of Green Ginger* and *The Crowded Street*, which narrate the female protagonists' lives from childhood into their early thirties, Holtby features such childhood moments of same-sex desire which do not indicate an adult homosexuality.

Muriel Hammond, the protagonist of *The Crowded Street*, experiences an erotic crush on her school friend, Clare. She 'gave her heart to Clare'[51] with 'passionate emotion, stronger than any she had known, even on the hushed silver morning of her First Communion'.[52] Muriel's feelings are sensually articulated once Clare moves into her dormitory room: 'to sleep in the same room with her, to see her bath-salts and her powder, [...] to touch her underclothing, embroidered in a Belgian convent – this was to live perpetually on the threshold of a marvellous world'.[53] This action, similar to Midge Carne's interest in Sarah in *South Riding*, endorses a model for abnormal sexual behaviour outlined in Freud's 1927 article on 'Fetishism', which argued that 'pieces of underclothing [...] are so often chosen as a fetish'.[54] In *The Crowded Street*, the fetishistic desire is attributed not to a minor character such as Midge Carne, but to the protagonist, whose development through adolescence and adulthood are plotted for the reader. By the time Muriel Hammond reaches adulthood, her memories of Clare lack the erotic

[49] Winifred Holtby, letter to Vera Brittain dated 18 July 1926; quoted in Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 203.
[50] *Virginia Woolf*, 29.
[51] *The Crowded Street*, 31.
[52] *The Crowded Street*, 34.
[53] *The Crowded Street*, 33.
[54] Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism (1927)', in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the History of Sexuality and Other Works*, Penguin Freud Library volume 7 ([1977] London: Penguin, 1991), 354.

images and excitement of her earlier descriptions. The overtness with which her childhood feelings were expressed is no longer present.

However, as mentioned above, Muriel eventually chooses to move to London to set up a flat and work alongside her friend, Delia. Because she was once engaged to a progressive young man who died in the War, Delia is characterised as having heterosexual inclinations, foreclosing any potential readings of her political activism, ambition, blunt speech, and athleticism as suggestive of stereotypical lesbianism. Muriel takes great pride in creating a comfortable home for Delia, acting as a wifely homemaker to the other woman, but her desire to please Delia is also grounded in her professional ambition to do 'good work'. Delia is an influential companion for Muriel, but there is no passion or even tenderness evident between them; their relationship is professional and mutually beneficial. It may even be temporary; Delia's health declines after the death of her fiancé and she hints that she may not live much longer. Vera Brittain was supposedly the model for Delia's professionalism and commitment, but the exchanges between the two fictional characters contain none of the passionate language of Brittain and Holtby's letters, which Shaw indicates was typical for their class and period and not to be understood as an expression of lesbian desire.

Delia is described as having just those qualities that Holtby claimed were usually characterised as male, and like Eleanor in *The Crowded Street* is also heterosexual. Muriel's sexuality, despite her early passion for Clare, is hinted at near the conclusion of *The Crowded Street*, when Godfrey Neale proposes. She refuses his offer with the caveat that 'some day perhaps, I may marry, but it won't be you'.[55] This statement reasserts her heterosexual inclinations. If she is bisexual as an adult, this is never as clearly articulated as her childhood homoeroticism.

[55] *The Crowded Street*, 270.

The novel concludes with Muriel's satisfaction over her new life with Delia. Although the women's lives seem lacking in erotic pleasures, they are fulfilled by their work and independence. Their happiness in single life, including abstinence, challenges contemporary expectations of how a novel about a young woman's life ought to end: Holtby even teases the reader with the final potentially romantic scene and marital conclusion of Godfrey Neale's proposal. Despite the novel's early suggestions of lesbian desire, by adulthood such passionate feelings as Muriel had once had for Clare have been exchanged for/replaced by/repressed into contentment in work and in a relationship with a woman in which physical intimacy and desire are non-existent. Her friendship with Delia does not seem passionate enough to earn classification as a lesbian relationship, which Sheila Jeffreys indicates was a possible reading of women's close friendships in the period in which Holtby wrote.[56] By allowing Muriel to admit that she has not completely given up on the idea of marriage, the text avoids the suggestion of homoerotic desire as an unarticulated presence in Muriel's adult life.

The Land of Green Ginger is the only one of Holtby's novels which explicitly narrates adult female same-sex attraction. In this text the protagonist, Joanna, articulates passionate feelings for other females from an early age. Her desires take the form of bisexual fantasies, both in childhood and adulthood. She dreams of meeting romantic, adventurous heroes of both sexes. As a child, she often daydreamed about Sir Walter Raleigh, and was equally interested in her intriguing female classmates. Her adolescent crushes continued into adulthood as fantasies of travelling with her long-lost school friends. When, as a married adult, she meets the inspiring world traveller, Lorna Lavine, Joanna knows 'by all signs of her small experience that she was in love again. She did not want to part from Lorna Lavine'.[57] Although Joanna's desire for Lorna is

[56] See Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 122-124.
[57] Winifred Holtby, *The Land of Green Ginger* ([1927] London: Virago, 1983), 66.

more spiritual than physical, the intensity of her emotion would, according to Sheila Jeffreys' analyses, have qualified Joanna as a lesbian character by the standards of the 1920s. However, the text subtly counteracts such an interpretation by ensuring that Joanna's love for Lorna, her school friends, Raleigh, and other fantastic heroes, is narrated in different language and imagery from the physical, erotic feelings she expresses for her husband, Teddy. For example, on their wedding night she 'pirouetted, half timid, half audacious, clad only in gold high-heeled shoes',[58] an erotic performance neither imagined nor repeated in any of her fantasies or actual meetings with other loves.

As with Sarah Burton and Muriel Hammond, Joanna's narrative ends with her association with other female characters. Following the death of Teddy and a failed romance with Paul Szermai, the dark romantic Hungarian forester whose friendship with Joanna provides the central turn of the plot, Joanna decides to move to South Africa where she will live with one of her old school friends. She travels there with her two daughters and is pregnant with another child whom she is convinced will also be female. Joanna escapes many of the expectations of women's heterosexuality in her journey to the all-female 'utopia' of her adventurous fantasies after surviving both an unhappy marriage and her community's criticism over her friendship with Szermai. Despite Joanna's articulations of love for several men and women throughout the text, by establishing her as a character whose physical desires are aimed only at males, Holtby's text ensures Joanna can comfortably be read as primarily heterosexual. In this way, Holtby's text encourages interpretation in terms of sexual categories that consider the experience of physical desire to be more relevant to identity than other kinds of passion. This may only be a careful strategy to avoid the criticism of writing an openly lesbian novel in the 1920s. Nevertheless, *The Land of Green Ginger* suggests that physical

[58] *The Land of Green Ginger*, 219.

experience is more of a determinant than other kinds of love, which seems to contradict Holtby's desire both to 'shake off this tyranny of sex' and present women's friendships, and women's non-sexual pursuits, as being of great dignity and relevance.

Male homosexuality, psychoanalysis and fascism

Holtby's polemical writing criticises strict categorical expectations prescribed for males as well as for females. She was writing in a period in which male homosexuality suffered legislative as well as social stigmatisation, a crucial distinction in Sheila Jeffreys' study of the decades in which Holtby was writing. Although most of Holtby's male protagonists are heterosexual and traditionally masculine, being physically powerful and attractive, and involved in public life, two of her posthumously published works, *South Riding* and the drama *Take Back Your Freedom* (1939), feature homosexually orientated, adult male characters. Both texts link homosexual inclinations directly to fascist/proto-fascist tendencies, according with contemporary psychological models of fascism as a homosexual/homoerotic ideology.

Writing in 1943, the British socialist psychoanalyst Peter Nathans described fascism as a 'masculine homosexual movement' that was as much a misogynistic reaction to 'the emancipation of women'[59] as to the political or economic climate. The relationship between feminism and reactionary fascism will be discussed in Chapter 7 in relation to works by Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West, illustrating the currency of that notion within political, psychological, and literary texts. Nathans located the nature of fascism in the phenomenon of 'desexualized, sublimated homosexual love for other men, which springs from work in common'[60] explained by Freud in his 1921 essay on

[59] Peter Nathans, *The Psychology of Fascism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), 61.
[60] Sigmund Freud, 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1921)', in *Civilization, Psychology and Religion*, Penguin Freud Library volume 12 ([1985] London: Penguin, 1991), 132.

group psychology. Holtby's writing replicates this emphasis on male friendships as more potentially dangerous than female. Virginia Woolf, in *Three Guineas* (1938), which Maggie Humm describes as 'that most sustained account of masculinity and fascism and women's difference',[61] similarly focuses on the harmful nature of all-male establishments and asks women to form an Outsiders' Society. Woolf's argument also concludes that an exclusively female culture might not uphold the violence and militancy associated with traditional male organisations such as the Church, Army, and universities. In *Women and a Changing Civilization*, Holtby criticises the same institutions, as well as the masculine ideals of the male breadwinner, chivalry, and hero-worship.[62]

Holtby's drama, *Take Back Your Freedom*, is an antifascist dystopia set in the late 1930s. It describes the rise to power of Arnold Clayton, an Oxford don and MP, who turns fascist in a manner based on Oswald Mosley's conversions from Tory to Labour and finally to leader of his own party, the British Union of Fascists. Clayton's followers evolve into an increasingly violent and misogynistic regime, until the exclusively male group nearly starts a second European war as a result of Clayton's desire to spread his influence over a larger population. He is only stopped when assassinated by his mother. *Take Back Your Freedom* challenges the reactionary sexism of Nazi and British policies in the mid-1930s, and exhibits Holtby's progressivism in its argument against women's socially constructed gender identity and the notion of oppositional masculinity and femininity. However, because the text follows conventional psychoanalytic models about the formation of a fascist, and necessarily homosexual, psychology, it simultaneously contradicts the gender politics of Holtby's feminism.

The relationship between Arnold Clayton and his mother, Mrs Clayton, is central both to the plot and to the explanations the text provides for Arnold's fascistic

[61] Maggie Humm, *Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 32.
[62] See *Women and a Changing Civilization*, 102.

tendencies. Their relationship could have been modelled on Freud's notion that 'future inverts often experience a childhood mother fixation'.[63] Holtby, elsewhere determined to challenge the Freudian emphasis on sexuality, focuses her drama on a Freudian interpretation that 'homosexual love is [...] more compatible with group ties'[64] because within fascism, as within other 'great artificial groups, the Church and the Army, there is no room for woman as sexual object'.[65] In her drama, Holtby's dialogues debate the exclusion of women from the labour market by describing Clayton's politics as specifically sexual, not economic, in nature.

Somewhat awkward, overtly psychoanalytic, discourse describes Arnold's behaviour; the language used establishes psychoanalytic links between his desire for power, his sexuality, and his mother's influence. For example, Clayton tells his friend and supporter, Major Lawrence, that 'Seymour's a psychologist [...] He says that the urge to power is a symptom of belated adolescence usually associated with homosexuality and the mother fixation'.[66] The reader/audience knows that due to Mrs Clayton's early desire to masculinise her young son with a strict diet and exercise regime, so that he might one day enter the political world from which she was excluded upon marriage, her son did suffer just such a belated adolescence as that suggested by Clayton's psychologist friend. In similar language, Mrs Clayton also interprets her adult son's urge for power as a masculine desire to prove that he is 'a potent being'.[67] Such dialogue employs the language and ideas of popular Freudian psychology to ascribe sexual explanations for Arnold Clayton's behaviour, relying on the psychoanalytic emphasis on sexuality which Holtby was determined to undermine as explanatory of women's behaviour.

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[63] Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality I: The Sexual Aberrations (1905)', in *On Sexuality*, 56.
[64] Freud, 'Group Psychology', 176.
[65] Freud, 'Group Psychology', 175.
[66] Winifred Holtby and Norman Ginsbury, *Take Back Your Freedom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 67.

Mrs. Clayton is also aware that her son's desire to prove his potency is related to his friendship with Major Lawrence, his closest military supporter and leader of the Greyshirts, his private militia. Arnold is both attracted to and competing with Lawrence, who is described as aggressive, strong, and charismatic, possessing all the qualities of masculinity that Arnold lacks. Arnold Clayton hopes that his friendship with Lawrence will allow him to create a hyper-masculine, aggressive regime by association. Lawrence is the 'man of action' that Arnold desires to be, and that he also seems to desire: he surrounds himself with that kind of man by creating an all-male regime. Other characters notice Clayton's homoerotic desires. When Lady Carter, a supporter who is attracted to Clayton, accuses Lawrence of 'try[ing] to keep [her] away from him', Lawrence responds by asking, 'Are you suggesting there is some kind of rivalry between us?" Lady Carter replies: "You know there is. More kinds than one'.[68] Holtby also writes that the *Daily Worker* refers to Clayton as a 'pansy'.[69]

In Chapter 7, I shall discuss in greater detail how this text argues against fascism's reinstitution of the sexist 'separate spheres' ideology. When Holtby was writing, she was aware that Oswald Mosley was promoting that Nazi ideal in Britain; her polemical essays and journalism protested such reactionary policies against women at home and abroad.[70] For the purposes of this chapter, it ought to be noted that Holtby's text challenges biological essentialism by allowing Mrs Clayton to assassinate her son, so that a female character performs a public, political act that is violently anti-maternal. In this challenge, Holtby's text undermines essentialist expectations of women, so that as well as being anti-fascist, the drama demonstrates the extent to which gender identities

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[67] *Take Back Your Freedom,* 114-115.
[68] *Take Back Your Freedom,* 77.
[69] *Take Back Your Freedom,* 43.
[70] See *Women and a Changing Civilization* beginning page 65. Also see, in *Testament of a Generation*, the articles 'Shall I Wear a Black Blouse?', 'Unemployment and the Women Who Work', and 'Fear and the Woman who Earns'.

are socially constructed.[71] Holtby demonstrates the effects of patriarchal culture on Mrs Clayton's, and through her Arnold's, imbalanced development. However, because this text draws attention to the relationship between sexuality and normality in men, it is unlike Holtby's anti-essentialist polemical writings on women's sexuality and mental health. By demonstrating that Clayton's aversion to women, and his decision to exclude them from the labour market, is not economic or political, but rather sexual in nature, Holtby agrees with Nathans' argument that 'the result and purpose of masculine homosexuality, whether open or hidden, is to degrade women'.[72] Like Nathans, Holtby links male homosexuality necessarily with misogyny, representing Clayton's homosocial politics as 'anti-feminist', 'a desperate fight of impotent men against the emancipation of women'.[73] It is possible to read Holtby's text as opposing her own feminism of equality as much against male homosexuality as against fascism. Because of his urge for power, homosexuality, and hysteria (he is prone to screaming fits), Clayton is neither mentally nor socially normal. Like Midge in *South Riding,* he is near madness. Because his desires are masculine, public, and militant, and therefore violently aggressive, his possible homosexuality is represented as comparatively more dangerous than the homoerotic desires of Holtby's female characters.

In Holtby's writing, all-male cultures feature none of the redeeming qualities of the all-female South African community imagined at the end of *The Land of Green Ginger.* Women in her fiction seem capable of exhibiting masculine and feminine qualities and can act as mothers, daughters, friends, teachers, and adventurers. They are not without influence: the elder, provincial female socialites in *The Crowded Street* embody the attitudes that pressure Connie into a deadly situation. By contrast, men in groups exhibit differing degrees of public power-hunger, such as Clayton's fascists or the

[71] See Shaw, *The Clear Stream,* 232.
[72] Nathans, 69.
[73] Nathans, 74.

plotting male councillors in *South Riding*, and may admire a dangerous hyper-masculinity, with an occasional feminine hysterical scream included as evidence of their mental instability. Whereas anti-romantic, female friendships imply balance and fulfilment within Holtby's writing, masculine exclusivity suggests a retrogressive conservatism, a change she suggests in her image of the 'backward-swinging pendulum' of contemporary 1930s politics. A logic of equality is not possible within an exclusively male space, and as I will demonstrate in the final chapter, Holtby was certainly not the only feminist writer of the period to imagine fascism in terms of gender exclusivity.

Holtby creates a proto-fascist in the character Snaith in her novel *South Riding*. Throughout the novel he exhibits effeminate characteristics, such as a soft voice and obsession with household and personal cleanliness, which are observed by other characters and commented upon by the narrator. He suffers what Thirties psychologist R. Osborn called the fascist 'God-complex', convinced of his 'own importance as a man of destiny'.[74] The ending of the novel provides uncertain conclusions about Snaith's future; he is already a county alderman, and arguably concerned with making the South Riding a better community, but he is also driven by a desire to see his own influence spread over an ever-widening area.

Importantly, Snaith feels an aversion to sexual intimacy between males and females:

> the horror surrounding all thoughts of mating and procreation haunting him since that one hideous initiation when, a little pink-and-white boy [...] he had fallen into the hands of evil men and fled from them too late, a psychological cripple for life.[75]

His hatred of sexuality leads to violent feelings: 'He did not love the spring. He felt himself alien and outcast among all this [...] mating of birds and animals [...] He was

[74] R. Osborn, *The Psychology of Reaction*, Left Book Club edition (London: Gollancz, 1938), 142.
[75] *South Riding*, 124.

moved by a desire to press down, to raze, to subjugate the spring.'[76] The only erotic experience Snaith has during the novel is also violent, is shared with another man, and implies that Snaith is homosexually orientated:

> Sometimes he wished to frustrate and thwart men's natures, so that they might all be as he was, impotent of passion [...] His bruised body and aching heart reminded him that he had not, after all, that day been quite without the experience of passion. He had literally been swept off his feet by an orgasm of fury [...] And there was an odd masochistic pleasure to be found in this contact with energy, even though this energy was hostile – a sort of vicarious satisfaction.[77]

Snaith is a model of dangerous and abnormal behaviour within psychoanalytic definitions, and his adult behaviour is linked to the vague childhood episode of sexual trauma. In *South Riding*, as in *Take Back Your Freedom*, Holtby represents male homosexuality as at least partially acquired through either childhood trauma or parental influence, not as either an innate quality or as part of a normal psychology. Her version of male homosexuality reflects the interwar thinking of Freudian psychologists and some of her anti-fascist contemporaries. It is also interesting to note that the theories of homosexuality proposed by British anti-fascist, socialist psychologists are similar to those propounded by Nazi ideologues. Himmler was concerned that lack of female contact could result in the spread of homosexuality within the ranks of Nazi youth organisations. Harry Oosterhuis' analysis indicates that Nazi ideology, like psychoanalysis, regarded male homosexuality as an acquired, and therefore curable, psychological malady, because 'inborn perversion was not part of the pure essence of the German character'.[78] For this reason, Himmler argued that re-education was a more viable response to homosexuality than murder, although that violent and punitive response occurred as well. Although Holtby traces female homosexuality back to episodes of childhood desire, and shows that desire to have disappeared by adulthood,

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[76] *South Riding*, 415.
[77] *South Riding*, 445.
[78] Harry Oosterhuis, 'Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32.2 (April 1997), 194.

she suggests no equivalent trigger of homosexuality in women. Desire seems to grow in the presence of other girls at school, but there is no traumatic or parental cause that can be linked to the development of women's homosexuality. It seems to be slightly more innate than in her male homosexual characters, whose sexuality can be traced back to a childhood cause. By contemporary logic, it could be argued that male homosexuality, portrayed as more dangerous, may be prevented or treated, and therefore, that the suggested cause of fascistic desire in male characters, like their sexual inclinations, could be 'cured'.

Two other characters in *South Riding* share a relationship to fascism: Sarah and Carne. Carne's charismatic masculinity characterises him similarly to Major Lawrence. Marion Shaw writes that in his traditional masculinity, Carne's characterisation is an 'endorsement of sex stereotypes'.[79] Sarah repeatedly comments on his likeness to Mussolini, particularly after he argues with her. Despite Sarah's own hatred of fascism and conservatism, she finds herself masochistically drawn to his power: 'she thought that he was going to strike her, and smiled up at him, receptive, mocking, inviting him to lay hands on her'.[80] Carne's relationship to reactionary politics is recognised within the text, but he is not meant to be understood as a fascist. He embodies the masculine physique and personality expected of a Fascist male, but lacks the egomania, hysteria, homosexuality and traumatic childhood of Holtby's fascists. As a potential political threat, he is undermined both by his death and by Sarah's successful socialist ideals. As a failed lover, he does not, I believe, serve as a successful endorsement of masculine stereotypes. His paternalistic, feudal conservatism does not survive. The novel concludes with the suggestion that Sarah's politics may be in conflict with Snaith's in the future. Snaith survives by underhanded plotting and betrayal, qualities exhibited to a more a violent degree by Clayton and Hitler. As for Sarah, she experiences, albeit

briefly, the dangerous erotic attraction of masculine violence and serves as an example of how women may be guilty of complicity in that violence.

Holtby's writing demonstrates kinship with the arguments of other feminist anti-fascist writers such as Jameson, West, and Woolf, as well as with the language and models of Freudian psychology. Valentine Cunningham has commented on the number of male novelists who were writing about schoolboy homosexuality 'in the era of Mr. Chips'.[81] He describes a clique of homosexual authors, 'The Homintern',[82] whose texts dialogued with one another and provided a tentative safety net for expressions of male homosexuality. W.H. Auden, E.M. Forster, Christopher Isherwood, John Lehmann, and Stephen Spender feature among his depiction of a conspiratorial Old Boy network. 'The literary homosexuals did not let each other down',[83] he wrote, adding that 'a strong stomach was needed to stand immersion in this intensely cultivated memory of the English bourgeois male'.[84] Holtby's writing provides a counterbalance to the canonical focus upon male writers in her depictions of female desire and, problematically, by her denigration of male homosexuality. Future Holtby scholars may find it useful to examine the similarities between Holtby's depictions of schoolgirl homoeroticism, which with the exception of the poorer students in *South Riding* are largely concerned with the middle-class, and the works of canonised, Auden-generation male writers. Differences between her fictional schools and the public schools featured in the works of Auden, Isherwood, and other male writers may also be of interest to future critics.

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[79] Shaw, 'Alien Experiences', 49.
[80] *South Riding*, 401.
[81] Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988),124.
[82] Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 148.
[83] Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 149.
[84] Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 122.

Conclusions

Marion Shaw wrote that Woolf's *Three Guineas*, a text contemporary with Holtby's *Women and a Changing Civilization*, described how notions of 'natural, unalterable sexual difference played into the hands' of the European fascist and Nazi dictators in the 1930s.[85] Their political regimes promoted ideologies of separate spheres which asserted that it was the 'essence of men to fight', and the 'essence of women to heal their wounds'.[86] Holtby's text noted the same sexist ideologies at work across reactionary Europe, and as a feminist and anti-fascist polemic deserves to be more well known today. Vera Brittain recorded its success in 1934:

> 'Winifred's book received between sixty and seventy reviews, nearly all long and enthusiastic. The one, perhaps, which surprised her most was a full appreciative column in the *Daily Sketch* on the day of publication. After going through several editions, the book was republished at 5s. in July 1939. During the months which followed its first appearance, a large collection of odd, interesting and tragic letters arrived from Winifred's readers, and she received more invitations to speak than she could have fulfilled in a lifetime.[87]

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, Holtby's book argues against differentiation and essentialism and theorises about equality of sex, gender, and sexuality. In her fiction, she creates several female characters who are drawn to other women, although by adulthood these characters articulate physical attraction only for men, if at all. Many reasons and influences may have prompted Holtby to avoid overt adult lesbian characters. She was certainly aware of the prejudice against women's intimacy, and possible lesbianism, directed even at school-age girls. In *The Crowded Street*, the headmistress of Muriel's school discourages passionate friendships between her pupils:

> Their intimacy, she considered, was usually silly and frequently disastrous. If carried too far, it even wrecked all hope of matrimony without offering any satisfaction in return. Love was a useful emotion ordained by God and regulated by society for the propagation of the species; or else it sometimes inspired the devotion of a daughter to a mother, or a parent to a child [...] But Love between two girls was silly senti-

[85] Shaw, 'Alien Experiences', 48.
[86] Shaw, 'Alien Experiences', 48.
[87] Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 383.

ment. By loving Clare, Muriel knew that she was guilty of extreme foolishness. And she wanted so much to be good.[88]

The above passage contains Muriel's anxiety about the influence of school, Church, and society; her mother's desires pressure her throughout the rest of the novel. Holtby also captures the prevailing attitude that future spinsterhood, or life lived in the company of women, was believed to offer no 'satisfactions', be they romantic or physical. In *The Crowded Street*, as in her other novels of the interwar period, Holtby shows adult women's friendships to be fulfilling and inspiring, part of her characters' advance into professions and wider, more worldly interests and responsibilities. However, the erotic pleasures of childhood do not exist for her characters. The erotic possibilities of friendships with other women seem non-existent, and heterosexual romances fail. Despite this avoidance of erotic, lesbian possibilities, her novels argue that unmarried adulthood is far from disastrous for women, and challenge prevailing claims regarding the centrality of sexual activity to healthy adulthood. However, her texts do adhere to stereotypical categories of male homosexuality, presenting male communities and male homoerotic desire as necessarily attached to fascism. This is not a stereotype which Holtby created; historian Richard Thurlow writes that rumours of homosexuality were 'an occupational hazard for all bachelors in the movement and other fascist organizations since'.[89] She relies on sexual categories to suggest abnormal, extremist males. In this attitude, her texts agree with the *Three Guineas'* depiction of fascism as result of reactionary gender politics, an argument present within the anti-fascist dystopian fantasies to be discussed in Chapter 7. Lingering conservatism within Holtby's texts endorses the sexual stereotyping of males, a trend she avoided for her

[88] *The Crowded Street*, 41.
[89] Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 112.

representations of female characters. In her depictions of homosexuality, the arguments of Holtby's polemical texts and her novels do not thoroughly coincide.

2.

'It's very robot-looking, and the women are hideous': Rebecca West on America, gender and modernity in the 1930s

When the British novelist, essayist, and critic, Rebecca West, made her first journey to the United States in 1923, she found that her reputation had preceded her. As early as 1918, Dora Marsden described West as 'the highbrowed reviewer of books who removed the skin of her victims to the accompaniment of a happy laugh. This is what Americans really mean when they describe her as "the mysterious and amazing Englishwoman."'[1] West was as well known for her barbed feminist contributions to American newspapers and magazines as she was for her ten-year relationship with H.G. Wells, although this affair caused controversy for her in the United States. [2] Victoria Glendenning reports a mixed reception for West in 1920s America. One American newspaper declared her to be 'the personification of all the vitality, the courage, and the independence of the modern woman';[3] a Boston women's group complained about her irregular private life, whilst some conservative American feminists disapproved of her acceptance of child support from Wells.[4] West's letters indicated that her response to America was equally mixed: 'I love America and I loathe it'.[5] She spent two months per year in the United States almost every year from 1923-1928, returning again in 1935. In the intervening years between these visits, she wrote about the country in articles and

[1] Dora Marsden, 'The Work of Miss Rebecca West', *The Egoist*, 9 (Oct.1918), 116.
[2] Bonnie Kime Scott writes that from 1924, West's 'regular writing in *The New Yorker* became the capstone on her popularity in the United States' (*The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], 566). In the 1920s and 1930s, West also contributed regularly to *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The New York American*, and *Harper's Magazine* amongst other periodicals.
[3] From *Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan*, November 1925. Quoted in Victoria Glendenning, *Rebecca West: A Life* ([1987] London: Phoenix/Orion Books, 1998), 84.
[4] Glendenning, *Rebecca West: A Life*, 95.
[5] Rebecca West, letter to Sinclair and Gracie Lewis, 9 December 1923, in Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Selected Letters of Rebecca West* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 74.

letters, and used American characters and settings in several fictional texts which have received little critical attention from West scholars, despite the fact that her professional relationship with America is well documented. Glendenning, Bonnie Kime Scott, Anthea Trodd and Peter Wolfe amongst others mention her American interests, but without analysing her use of American settings or characters.

This chapter will focus on neglected aspects of Rebecca West's representation of the United States, and takes its direction from a letter West wrote to her friend Winifred Macleod in 1923. The letter captures West's first impressions of the United States, describing the skyline of New York harbour as 'miles and miles of... incredibly strange erections of a Robot civilisation'. As for New York City itself, she wrote:

> The mechanical side of life here whirls – telephones, taxis, trolleys, but a pole of humanity patters along in the middle of it [...] Oh, the automobiles! The {back} streets are lined with them {parking} – all set at an angle to the curb, all glistening black, it's very Robot-looking, this place.[6]

Her descriptions of American people are critical: 'everywhere the women are hideous and beyond all belief slovenly [...] bad skins, and untidy though elaborately dressed hair [...] Their utter lack of sex attraction is simply terrifying. Not that it matters, for the men seem entirely lacking in virility'.[7] Finally, she reports that at a party:

> The men all danced divinely – the women were completely uninteresting even in their evening clothes – everybody drank far too much whisky – you can't imagine how strange it is to see quite young women drink whisky here! [...] The amount of attention one gets from men here would turn one's head if one didn't look round at the sallow hags of American women and realise that the standard is very different from Europe![8]

The letter indicates West's interest in American modernity: the contemporary materialism, architecture, and pace of life in a country that appears to her as more

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[6] Rebecca West, letter to Winifred Macleod, 2 November 1923, in *The Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, 66-68. The curly brackets are Scott's and indicate West's hand-written insertions. Interestingly, her depiction in this letter of a mechanised, futuristic America is akin to H.G. Wells' fantastic predictions about the country's technocratic future; see the chapter entitled 'Futuristic America: H.G. Wells' in Peter Conrad's *Imagining America* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

[7] Letter to Winifred Macleod, 65.

[8] Letter to Winifred Macleod, 69-72.

mechanised, futuristic- and 'modern'-looking than Europe. The sexual relationships and behaviours of modern American men and women also draw her attention. The concerns of her letter, modernity and gender in America as compared to Europe, are present throughout her American writings, and will broadly shape this discussion of West's neglected American fictions.

Because these texts critically assess what is progressive and what is traditional in American and European cultures in the 1930s, they are indicators of West's political beliefs in a period in which she was shifting away from the iconoclastic feminism of her suffragette journalism and modernist experimental writings towards the nostalgic gender essentialism present when she composed *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941) at the end of the 1930s. By examining a neglected group of texts, my analysis will build upon the critical discussion of her increasingly conservative outlook which has characterised West scholarship in recent years. Samuel Hynes, Janet Montefiore, Loretta Stec, Peter Wolfe and Scott have discussed West's reliance upon heterosexual binaries and oppositional male and female relationship to shape her plots. West's interest in 'sex war', a term which she first used in a 1913 article for the socialist paper *The Clarion,* also marks her fictional treatment of relations between American men and women. [9] Her use of modernist cities and traditional rural communities as settings for her American characters in the mid-1930s can be discussed in terms of the nostalgia and conservatism which characterise her late-1930s treatment of Yugoslavia in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon.*[10]

[9] See Rebecca West, 'The Sex War: Disjointed Thoughts on Men', *The Clarion* [18 April 1913], in Jane Marcus, ed., *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917* (London: Virago, 1982), 174-178.

[10] See Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s*, 178-215, and Loretta Stec, 'Female Sacrifice: Gender and Nostalgic Nationalism in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*', in Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde, eds., *Narratives of Nostalgia, Gender and Nationalism* (London: Macmillan 1997), 138-158.

West's American fiction may also be discussed in terms of the formal differences which scholars have noted between her modernist writings and those distinguished by more traditional structures. The texts featured in this chapter rely mainly on causal, linear plotting and single narrative personae, and are without the stream of consciousness narratives, surreal fantasy episodes, cyclical plotting and temporal disruptions of her modernist texts such as *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), *Harriet Hume* (1929), the essay 'The Strange Necessity' (1928), and the Vorticist short story 'Indissoluble Matrimony' (1914). Although written late in the interwar period, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is also characterised as modernist by its cyclical disruption of a linear historical narrative and its digressions into personal reflection. Such works share formal qualities with canonical modernist texts, but in their socialist feminist politics are also, according to Scott, 'at odds with traditional, aesthetic definitions of modernism'.[11] In other words, the formal, aesthetic experiments present in West's writing appear to be secondary concerns to her central debates about gender. Although West's American fictions are more conventionally realist in form, there are strong thematic and political similarities between these texts and the ideas articulated through formal experiment in West's modernist writing. Tensions between convention and modernist newness shape West's American writing as well as her politics in the interwar period.

Early comparisons of the United States and Europe

Rebecca West's interest in a comparative, trans-Atlantic understanding of gender and modernity can be located in her first published book, *Henry James* (1916), labelled by

[11] Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism volume 2: Postmodern Feminist Readings of Woolf, West and Barnes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 123.

Samuel Hynes as 'surely the first book that could be called feminist literary criticism'.[12] In this text, West studies James' use of 'the international situation' as a source of dramatic tension:

> It took all Mr James' cosmopolitan training to see that there existed an international situation, that the fact that Americans visited Europe constituted a drama [...] The innocent freedoms which they permitted themselves [...] and the terrifying surmises to which these gave rise in the mind of the Old World, unaware of the innocence of the New, made much material for drama.[13]

West uses the international situation in her 1936 novel, *The Thinking Reed*, which is regarded by Diana Wallace as West's revision of James' *The Portrait of a Lady*.[14] West's Isabelle is a widowed American heiress living in France; like James' Isabel Archer, she experiences several romances while abroad, marries a European, and finds that the wasteful, greedy desires of the idle aristocracy take their toll on her. Retrospective awareness of international events adds to the text's drama: the impending Wall Street crash overshadows the relative stasis Isabelle achieves in her marriage at the end of the novel. In *The Thinking Reed*, and in her short stories of the period which rely on British observers' reported impressions of American characters, West continues James' tradition of using the international situation as a plot device.

Writing in the 1920s, West was aware of 'how difficult is America's task in becoming a nation',[15] and like James located differences between American and European society in the country's newness. She hints at America's lack of cultural tradition in her 'Notes on Novels' book review column in the *New Statesman*, in which she often commented on the Jamesian use of the international situation in the work of her American contemporaries. In 1920 she reviewed a novel that made 'one feel... as if

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[12] Samuel Hynes, 'In Communion with Reality', in *The Essential Rebecca West* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), xi.
[13] Rebecca West, *Henry James*, Writers of the Day Series (London: Nisbet and Co., 1916), 30-32.
[14] Diana Wallace, 'Revising the Marriage Plot in Women's Fiction of the 1930s', in Maroula Joannou ed., *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 71.
[15] Rebecca West, 'American Women: Their Work as Reformers', in the *Daily News*, 9 March 1916. Reprinted in *The Young Rebecca*, 316.

one were listening to the homesick ghost of an English person who has died in America and wants to come home'. Her criticism continued:

> One surmises that [the author] is one of those Americans who are so conscious of the disadvantage their teachable spirits have suffered by not being born in a country blessed with a long-established culture, that they go about collecting traditions even after they have arrived at a state of maturity when they ought to follow their own impulses.[16]

In *Henry James*, West points to James' 'odd lack of historic sense',[17] which she sees as a national trait, and to his awareness of 'the incomplete' nature of American culture and behaviour as the motivation for his exile in Europe.[18] In his series of articles for the American *Harper's Bazaar* in 1904-1905, Henry James presented a related critique of American culture, focussing on the speech and manners of the American female and their difference from those of the European lady. His characterisation of American women often agrees with the conclusions West would draw two decades later. James wrote that 'it is not too much to say that men and women alike, in "Europe", stand or fall by their degree of mastery of the habit of employing the vocal organs after the fashion of good society'.[19] In James' observations, the speech habits of European 'good society' vary sharply from 'the voice of the American Woman [which], enjoying immense exercise, is lifted in many causes, but the last it anywhere pleads is that of its own casual interest or charm'.[20] James identifies gender roles and contemporary American economic culture as the cause of American women's vulgarity:

> However it may be with the man, the "educated" man, of other countries, the American male in *his* conditions, is incapable of caring for a moment what sounds his women emit: incapable of caring because incapable of knowing [...] Of what sounds other than the yell of the stock-exchange or the football-field does he himself [...] give the cheering example? [...] Isn't it everywhere written that the women, in any society, are what the men make of them? And isn't it exactly visible, by that law, that the women, in societies where they speak, have taken their cue in the first place from

[16] Rebecca West, 'Notes on Novels', *The New Statesman*, 8 May 1920, 137.
[17] *Henry James*, 27.
[18] See *Henry James*, 9-14.
[19] Henry James, 'The Speech of American Women, Part Two' in E.S. Riggs, ed., *The Speech and Manners of American Women* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Lancaster House Press, 1973), 28.
[20] James, 'The Speech of American Women, Part Two', 25.

> men? Isn't it unmistakable that in England, say, and in France, that the men[...] constitute, in the whole matter, the authority?
>
> [...] The women, on our side of the world, actually enjoy and *use* the authority, pleading in no other connection whatever the least unfitness for it. They have taken it over without blinking, they are encamped on every inch of the social area that the stock-exchange and the football field leave free.[21]

Inez Martinez's 1973 introduction to James' articles criticises the sexism of his ideas.[22] But his arguments, as I will demonstrate, share much in common with West's feminist depiction of American women. Both James and West judge American women against European standards of feminine behaviour, and both refer to the stock exchange as an arena of masculine authority which modern American females have 'taken over'.

Two decades after James' articles appeared in *Harper's Bazaar*, West contributed two articles to *Harper's Monthly Magazine* entitled 'These American Men' and 'These American Women', which were to be included in a planned book-length study of the United States. West's articles describe the behaviours of men and women in modern 1920s America. She seems impressed by a culture of greater sexual equality than that known in James' time, yet agrees with James in his observation that American capitalist culture is still the root cause of differences between American and European, or specifically British, behaviour. Although she was a socialist, West did not criticise American capitalism. Rather, she is interested in demonstrating the extent to which the expansive economy of 1920s America is responsible for people's behaviours. Her comments combine a representation of the American perspective with a tongue-in-cheek tone, and although her anecdotes impress the reader as examples of comparatively vulgar manners and attitudes, she also seems convinced of the attractive, progressive qualities of life in the young country, particularly for women.

West observed, for example, that the American male commuter, unlike his British counterpart:

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[21] James, 'The Speech of American Women, Part Two', 26-27.
[22] Inez Martinez, 'Introduction', in *The Speech and Manners of American Women*, 3-13.

> never talked of gardens or politics at all. If he spoke of a bulb he meant an electric one [...] I was told that the high cost of labour made it impossible to employ gardeners, and that anyway vegetables were not worth cultivating as they could be bought more cheaply than they could be grown by the householder.[23]

West ironically renders such consumerist logic sensible within the American economic climate of the 1920s. She also observes that the material wealth and opportunities of the period affected the American woman who 'had such a chance as was never offered woman before of being comfortably and serenely kept, and she has not taken it'.[24] At this time, West approved of women who sought employment instead of acting as parasites. She offers a fictionalised example of the modern working woman:

> A short story I read in a Chicago newspaper [featured] a heroine from the country named Elsie. Elsie was an old-fashioned girl, who would have liked to make pie as Mother made it, but was frustrated in that desire because the old home had been sold and she had to sell lingerie in a department store in a great city. All day she stood sadly at the counter, selling silk nightdresses to worthless wealthy women while her fingers longed to be making corn fritters and curly crullers and pumpkin pie. There was a happy ending to this story, but it did not consist as I, being British, expected, in the appearance of a good young man who offered love and a cooking stove. No. Instead, Elsie was moved to the household-utensils department where she performed such feats of salesmanship that she was presently earning a prodigious salary.[25]

This story pinpoints differences of economic and social culture between Britain and the United States. The successful sales assistant, whose happy ending leaves her financially independent and single, is the type of self-made career women who will feature in West's American fiction in the next decade. But because West's later plots are shaped by the troubled personal involvements of women with men, the happy single career woman does not serve as protagonist in those texts.

West's *Harper's* articles also analysed the effect of the contemporary American business culture on heterosexual relationships, an early indication of her opinion that the admirable progressivism of modernity could also be hostile. She commented that:

> speed may be a mark of efficiency in commerce, but in other departments of life it may be a mark of most paralysing inefficiency [...] Decidedly, the technic [sic] of

[23] Rebecca West, 'These American Men', *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 151 (Sept. 1925), 448-449.
[24] Rebecca West, 'These American Women', *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 152 (Nov. 1925), 726.
[25] 'These American Men', 450.

> business is not suitable for dealing with marriage. That is the source of woe of the waitresses and beauty-parlor girls who confide to one stories of incredibly rash and swift marriages to young men who have read business magazines till they believe that to stick out your chin, purse your lips, look owlish through your horn-rimmed spectacles, and act quickly is somehow to command success.[26]

Her opinions about the effects of American culture on marriage conclude her 1930 essay 'Divorce is a Necessity', which originally appeared in the British *Daily Express*:

> I myself can at the moment only think of three English friends of mine who have dissolved their marriages. It is different in America; but there are forces over there which tear marriages asunder – for one, the geographic instability of life there, where the economic development of the country constantly takes husband from wife and sends him a thousand miles away, and for another, the housing system in the towns, which shuts up young people in skyscraper apartments no bigger than poultry pens and subjects their affections to merciless strain.[27]

In this essay, West defends divorce as a necessary solution in a progressive society, but also tries to subdue any anxiety that divorce will become as prevalent in Britain as it is in America. Here, she presents a negative opinion of heterosexual relationships in America, and offers the country's extreme size, its phase of expansion, and its modernity as the causes of the high divorce rate which the reader may infer could not possibly occur in Britain. The essay is a polemical statement of the trend within her American fiction of regarding the country's 'bigness' as 'hard to manage and control'[28] and therefore related to the chaotic heterosexual relationships lived within its borders. It also establishes Britain as potentially more socially secure because it is less modern than its trans-Atlantic cousin. Both of these themes will appear in her fictional treatments of the United States.

Throughout the *Harper's* articles, West's comparative criticism argues for the existence of a relationship between gender identity, sexual interaction, and America's contemporary economic culture. Her journalism also illustrates the strain that

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[26] 'These American Men', 455.
[27] Rebecca West, 'Divorce is a Necessity', in Bertrand Russell, ed., *Divorce as I See It* (London: Noel Douglas, 1930), 70-71.
[28] Peter Wolfe, *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker*, Crosscurrents/Modern Critiques Series (London: Feffer and Simons, 1971), 16.

modernist buildings and pace of life may exert on people, suggesting that contemporary urban life is at odds with the development of healthy relationships. These ideas are also demonstrated in her American fiction of the 1930s. West's insistence within these articles on separate treatment of male and female behaviour, and her focus on heterosexual couples, exemplifies the binary treatment of gender that characterises her writing in this period, as discussed by Bonnie Kime Scott. In her American writings, West often challenges binary patterns by placing female characters within the stereotypically masculine domain of business, depicting the modern American woman as caught up in public and private 'sex war' with the threatened male. In the 1980s, critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar[29] celebrated this pattern as a feminist, modernist challenge, but as early as the 1960s, West's 'stereotyped polarizing of male and female qualities' was considered to be 'the very opposite of radical thinking'[30] by Mary Ellmann in *Thinking About Women* (1968). Wolfe has described a 'distrust of worldliness usually equated with the male principle'[31] of acquisition across West's fiction, and her American fictions generally demonstrate the extent to which gambling and speculative finance when practised by men often have more destructive results than when attempted by women. Because male and female are binary opposites within these texts, even business women fit into what Scott calls West's 'restorative woman' archetype which positions them as the antitheses of the greedy, destructive male.[32] Scott's argument that postmodern feminism's rejection of binaries, gender essentialism, and 'even the concept of gender as faulted by Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick for its reliance on heterosexual

[29] See Bonnie Kime Scott, *The Gender of Modernism*, 546; Scott refers to Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the 20th Century, volume 1: The War of Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 96-100.
[30] Scott, *Refiguring Modernism volume 2*, 126. Scott refers to Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (London: Macmillan, 1968).
[31] Wolfe, *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker*, 1.
[32] Bonnie Kime Scott, 'The Strange Necessity of Rebecca West', in Sue Roe, ed., *Women Reading Women's Writing* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), 281.

arrangements and its perpetration of binary thinking',[33] is relevant to a consideration of the feminist gender politics of West's American fiction.

Relations between the sexes within the United States as represented by West had progressed since Henry James made his comparative observations of American and European society. She criticised his 'persistent presentation of women not as human but as sexual being[s]'.[34] However, West's observations sometimes endorse notions of separate spheres and of appropriate heterosexual paradigms, illustrating that the oppositional treatment of gender which critics have located across her fiction is also present, as I will illustrate below, in her depictions of the modern American career woman.

Gender, modernity and the American South

In her American fictions, West uses aspects of contemporary American culture as metaphors for modern gender politics. The nation's unique modernity and its capitalist dream of self-made fortunes emerge as appropriate surroundings for her scenes of contemporary sex war, which she depicts as a war for sexual and economic power bound to the American ideal of financial success.[35] In these texts, sex war arises when women become more successful than their male partners in the masculine realm of business. West places professional female characters in Britain as well: Ellen Melville, the Scottish suffragist protagonist of *The Judge* (1922), is a secretary, whilst the English title character of *Harriet Hume* (1929) is a successful chamber pianist. Working women are not, then, exclusively present in her American fiction, but the financial success of

[33] Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism volume 1: The women of 1928* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), xxxiv.
[34] *Henry James*, 53.
[35] In her farcical short novel *"The Modern 'Rake's Progress"*, West uses an inherited American fortune to cause the quick rise and fall of her British character, George (London: Hutchinson, 1934). The novel does not engage with the same gender politics as her American fictions, but does link American money to corruption, greed, and recklessness.

business women such as West observed in 1920s America is a challenge to public and private gender politics which is specific to her American writings.

Finance, like gambling, is a destructive male pastime in West's Europe as well: in *The Thinking Reed*, such activities 'reject [the] reason and love'[36] which are protected by nurturing females. West wrote that in 1920s America, by contrast:

> the American woman began to discover herself as an amateur of business. Sitting back on the throne of prosperity her husband had built up for her, she could bide her time and pick her chances, see her money increase and multiply in a way that seemed the happiest miracle to a sex which had been tied down since the beginning of time to fixed home allowances.[37]

The stock exchange provided the possibility of success to women lacking both education and business experience, and, according to Scott, 'the rise and fall of fortunes in a male-structured commercial world became an abiding theme'[38] for West. Her language in this passage also articulates ambivalence: 'increase and multiply' indicates that business has replaced women's sacred duty to the family, a situation which is both 'the happy miracle' of self-sufficiency and the danger to stable civilisation which she fears is the result of the eradication of separate spheres.[39] At the time of her American writings, the conservative aspect of West's argument does not fully emerge, but seems to be an embryonic presence in the above quotation.

Chiefly, the passage establishes the stock exchange realm of New York and Wall Street as specific places hospitable to the modern American woman. Women's successes in this traditionally male space, however, cause a crisis of masculinity such as is central

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[36] Peter Wolfe, 15.
[37] Rebecca West, 'Life Sentence', in *The Harsh Voice* ([1935] London: Virago, 1983), 22.
[38] Scott, *The Gender of Modernism*, 560.
[39] West writes that the 'physical superiority of men and their freedom from maternity make them the natural defenders of the community, and if they can derive strength from belief in the inferiority of women, it is better to let them have it [...] It seems that no present she can make him out of her liberty can compensate him for the loss of what he gained through her slavery [...] Perhaps it may be counted the worst that there never can be a society where men are men and women are women' (*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia* ([1941] Canongate Classics edition, Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1993], 678-679). Her language closely echoes that of Oswald Mosley, leader of the BUF, in his famous demand for 'men who were men and women who were women' in his *The Greater Britain* (London: BUF Publications, 1932).

to many of her interwar narratives. New York and Wall Street oppose the American West and Old South, regions in which she represents traditional gender roles as the norm. Modern, Eastern towns and cities seem progressive and more attuned to the feminist attitudes West espoused in her early journalism, yet such texts are also aware of the chaotic effect these locations have upon male identity and heterosexual couplings. Glendenning argues that West's ideas are derived from 'the impotence theory, based on a more general proposition that modern life forced men to abdicate from their primitive maleness'.[40] This model of modern life does not invalidate women's progress in the business world, but does establish female success as a disruptive force. Male-female relationships are characterised by violent conflict in West's fiction, and although many critics have located the source of violence in the opposition of the male death-instinct with the female life-instinct, this discussion of her American writings will indicate the extent to which her texts present female progress as the unintentional source of conflict. This is usually true because her male characters are less adaptable than her females to the new balances of power. This tendency leads to endings in which only the self-sacrifice, death, or murder of the successful woman alleviates the tension between men and women. West's fascination with the violence of modern heterosexual relationships does not direct her characters, or her audiences, towards neat resolutions. Instead, conflict, tension and chaos linger as the result of women's success. In a 1913 article, 'The Sin of Self-Sacrifice', West argued as a feminist against women's perpetual self-sacrifices. In her American fictions of the 1930s, however, female self-sacrifice is often the only solution offered to the problem of violently competitive relationships between ambitious women and the insulted males who are incapable of coping with the changes of the modern world.

[40] Victoria Glendenning, 'Afterword', in Rebecca West, *Sunflower* (London: Virago, 1986), 273.

One of her earliest American characters, Isabelle in *The Thinking Reed*, presents a critical attitude towards European modernity. Isabelle responds negatively to the office tower built by her French husband, Marc Sallafranc, a car manufacturer:

> She detested the modernist architecture of the town, its cement and cubes, shapes that were lavishly dour with meaningless tension. She hated the nakedness of the plate glass and chromium of Marc's office [...] The onyx mantelpiece had the nakedness of a shaved cat. His chromium chairs formed only the outline of cubes, as if they had been begrudged three-dimensionality [...] Such featureless settings threw things, and inhabitants, into unnatural relief.[41]

Isabelle's references to the modernist design and architecture she encounters as a foreigner in France establish her sense of alienation from the late-1920s present and indicate her nostalgia for the designs of a more traditional past. Throughout the text, she indicates a preference for the continental architecture of earlier periods which evokes the quiet family life she desires. The nostalgic themes of the novel are not, however, at odds with the modernist qualities recognised in West's earlier fiction as described above. Peter Nicholls argues that the Anglo-American modernism of Pound, Eliot, Lewis and Joyce 'developed in part as a *critique* of modernity' in so far as its 'cultural renovation', like that of the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelites, 'was frequently projected as a *return* to the values of a previous age'.[42] Nicholls' description may also be applied to West's writing in the 1930s.

In *The Thinking Reed*, West uses Isabelle's experiences in different locations, and with lovers of different nationalities, to demonstrate tension between modernity and tradition. Through Isabelle's perspective, the author compares industrial cities and gambling resorts to traditional homes of France and the American Old South. Although the novel demonstrates the attractive qualities of less chaotic, less modern places, West subtly undermines Isabelle's preferences with suggestions of the violence

[41] Rebecca West, *The Thinking Reed* ([1936] New York: Penguin, 1985), 69-73.
[42] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), 166.

possible in the archaic-looking homes of her French and American lovers: for example, André's Parisian 'old grey house, soft with the stone embroideries of the Renaissance'[43] is the site of arguments, weeping, and scenes of 'abuse, [...] excitement, [...] hatefulness'[44] between the two lovers. In order to drive him away, Isabelle returns to André's house to crush at his doorstep a gift bouquet of roses.

Sexual relationships are also related to a character's acceptance or rejection of modernity in this novel. Despite the text's 'critique of modernity' and its depiction of 'the values of a previous age' as attractive, it shares modernist traits with West's earlier fiction, and with the novels of her male contemporaries, such as George Orwell, Christopher Isherwood, and Graham Greene, whose literature described the alienation of the modern city. Her engagement with contemporary chaos and violence in *The Thinking Reed*, although critical of modernity, is itself an example of Anglo-American modernism by Nicholls' definition. Her other American texts of this period share this quality with *The Thinking Reed*, as well as employing narrative conventions usual in realist fiction.

Marc Sallafranc's modernist office is contrasted against the antebellum design of Mount Iris, the Virginia plantation home of Isabelle's American lover, Laurence Vernon:

> This had been a battlefield [...] That [...] was the avenue that led to Laurence Vernon's home, which would make her forget there had ever been a war in these parts. Every white pillar of the colonnade was intact, though if one looked closely, it could be seen that each and all were pock-marked with bullets. The Gothic chapel by its side was still as it was when the first Vernon in those parts had built it to relieve his nostalgia. Indoors the china and silver shone on the polished table with a lustre that had not been dimmed by the months they had spent buried in the earth while the looting Yankees searched in vain [...] it seemed impossible that this household was not ordered by someone who had at least been in contact all his youth with someone of the old unshattered South.[45]

[43] *The Thinking Reed*, 21.
[44] *The Thinking Reed*, 8.
[45] *The Thinking Reed*, 14-15.

Because Laurence lives apart from the modern world, Isabelle believes she can achieve an almost agrarian ideal of family life with him: 'he would have but one clean-cut image of their marriage, as simple as the year in the mind of a farmer'.[46] Her later life with Marc is comparatively hostile in its modernity, cold design and unnatural quality. In this text, the American South is a potentially anti-modern, anachronistic challenge to the modernity Isabelle encounters in Europe, although it is criticised through West's use of references to the region's bellicose history in the Civil War. It is feminine violence which loses Isabelle her place on the plantation: Laurence ends his romance with her after witnessing her frenzied destruction of André's bouquet of roses.

The plot of *The Thinking Reed* is more involved than indicated in this discussion. Isabelle's other lovers, her first marriage to an American pilot, and the international settings of *The Thinking Reed* set the novel apart from the American short stories which will be discussed in the rest of this chapter. However, the novel's American heroine and her comparative conception of history and tradition as contrasted to the faster-paced (and in this case European) industrial present situate *The Thinking Reed* thematically within the body of West's American writing.

A similar juxtaposition between modern and traditional homes is present in West's 1935 novella, 'The Abiding Vision', which is set in New York and considers the East-coast states as modern. In this text, Sam hires a decorator to furnish the Park Avenue apartment he shares with his self-sacrificing wife, Lulah. The décor suggests old-fashioned, homely comfort and a preference for traditional representational art, with a 'big sofa facing the panel of tapestry' decorated with 'queer beasts that peered through the bushes at the back of the panel, the white dog that lay on the ermine hem of the lady's gown'.[47] Sam later furnishes a Central Park West apartment for his younger, selfish lover, the showgirl Lily: 'it was her taste to have it decorated in the modern style

[46] *The Thinking Reed*, 18.

with lambskin rugs, aluminum and looking-glass tables, square stuffed chairs covered with soft tweeds, and a broad, low bed, which things were apparently as costly as the oldest and most precious furniture'.[48]

Following the 1929 stock market crash, Lulah suffers under the pressure of acting as Sam's supportive wife. When his business begins to falter, she ages, loses her looks, and has a stroke. Lily takes over as Sam's wife in all but name, making the same sacrifices required of Lulah throughout her marriage. Lily eventually loses her youth and beauty, which means the end of her stage career, and moves out of her modern flat into a cheaper, simpler one in which she prepares Sam's daily breakfast. The traditionally furnished home serves as the setting most appropriate for the sacrifices of the nurturing women who act as the polar opposites to the acquisitive, selfish Sam. The likeness of their names, Lily and Lulah, suggests their interchangeability. Although West presented arguments against female self-sacrifice earlier in her career, this text seems to endorse the idea that self-sacrifice is a worthwhile activity. Although both women suffer and Lulah dies, the transformation of Lily from self-centred stage-girl into nurturing and dependent housewife is presented as an improvement in her character. Sam's infidelity and selfishness are never challenged. Lily volunteers to become Lulah's caretaker, an act characteristic of her new role as nurturer. The tension between the positive and negative aspects of female self-sacrifice are never fully resolved, but it seems that the text leans towards an endorsement of self-sacrifice which contradicts the claims of West's earlier feminism.

In the novella 'Life Sentence' (1935), West again evokes the anachronistic Old South as a nostalgic juxtaposition of the contemporary world of investment. In this text, Corrie recalls his childhood visits to the Cherry-garden Bluff estate in his

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[47] Rebecca West, 'The Abiding Vision', in *The Harsh Voice*, 189-190.
[48] 'The Abiding Vision', 197.

northeastern hometown. When he first visited it the early 1900s, the estate was out of place as well as time, because its owner had left the South fifty years before, after he:

> had somehow infringed the code of his society [...] and gone into exile north of the Mason-Dixon line. He travelled disdainfully through the Yankee lands till he found a place so like the estate he had left [...] Then he had closed the gates, and with his coloured people had set himself to play a game of pretending that they were still in the South.[49]

Later, Corrie recalls the afternoon he discovered the plantation. His memories are romanticised, agreeing with West's comment that it was 'no wonder the South, happily enjoying the extremest form of the renounced arrangement of labour, seemed a morsel of the Lost Paradise which ought to be preserved at any cost':[50]

> Corrie, just turned twelve, climbed a fence because a boy with a white gash of teeth in a black face, riding a piebald pony bareback in the paddock beyond, waved at him arms thin as hawthorn branches, and in a voice like the cooing and hooting of birds had dared him to do the same [...] The South seemed to hang on the hillside like a patch of mellow afternoon, and things went as easily there as they do in the South. When he fell from the pony and a trickle of blood ran down his chin it did not seem to matter very much. It ceased to matter at all when he was taken along to a mountainously fat Mammy with a red handkerchief tied around her grey fuzz [...] and she had washed the wound and clapped a cobweb to it, uttering sage words as to the efficacy of this precaution [...] Presences, tall and short, came as white smiles out of the shadows, and sat round singing, shooting craps, doing household chores dextrously and casually. None of them took much notice of him, there was no suggestion he was a stranger. At that date there were not above twenty coloured people in Montarac, and they were segregated either in rich folks' kitchens or in the squalor on the wrong side of the railway tracks. It was his first experience of the dark magic that excludes nothing from its circle but robs all of the ultimate sting by taking it easy.[51]

Corrie's memories depict the segregation West witnessed in America in the 1920s. At Cherry-garden Bluff, the child Corrie is free to cross borders of race, class, region and time in order to escape to the company of servants with whom he identifies, whilst the same freedoms are not available to those servants who seem stuck in the antebellum period. Corrie values their music, wisdom, work, and pace of life, yet the poetic

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[49] 'Life Sentence', 23.
[50] Rebecca West, 'What is this Other Continent?' in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 313.
[51] 'Life Sentence', 24-25.

language, imagery, and admiration of West's writing apparently concur with her character's romanticised, stereotyped images of plantation life.

Corrie's perspective depicts African-Americans as perpetually smiling children operating on herd instinct: when their white master dies, a neighbour observes that 'the coloured folks had been in a terrible way [...] were like a lot of lost kids, didn't know where to go'.[52] In 'Life Sentence', as in *The Thinking Reed*, the Old South is evoked by white characters who romanticise the era as a model of past social stability. West criticises that view in *The Thinking Reed*, but allows Corrie's visions of happy servility to go unchallenged. In these passages, West's narratives observe class in America as a by-product of racism. Within her American fictions, white characters seem classless and able to move up and down a ladder of prosperity as their investments change, whereas African-Americans appear as nameless characters fixed in their servility as railway porters, lift operators, maids, butlers and slaves. These depictions reflect the segregation that she recorded during visits to the United States, but although racial segregation stood out to her as detestable, she did not challenge it directly within her fiction and represented African-Americans, and their specific class position, as background information only. The racist language and attitudes within her American texts admittedly also serve the purpose of assisting characterisation. For example, in 'Life Sentence', the nostalgic evocation of the antebellum South as a desirable, peaceful haven from chaotic modern life serves to foreshadow Corrie's eventual conservatism: he enjoys the memory of the nameless, nurturing, passive mammy – a female slave, similar to the woman he marries after Josie. Racial slurs are attributed to characters and not to the narrative voice, so West distances herself from association with overt racism. However, the degree of critical engagement with troubled American racial politics is not sufficient to undercut West's reliance on racial stereotypes within these texts.

East/West

The contrast between modern areas and the Old South acts as a geographic metaphor for modernity and, in so far as 'new' versus 'traditional' women's roles are concerned, gender. In 'Life Sentence', Rebecca West also relies on an East/West dichotomy and the idea of the American frontier to achieve a second geographic metaphor. Peter Wolfe has argued that West's use of this dichotomy produced 'clumsy, thesis ridden satire',[53] but I will demonstrate that within her American fiction the internal border between East and West takes on a relevant gendered significance. Bernard Bergonzi writes that in European literature of the 1930s, 'the frontier could indeed support [a] sense of enclosure and exclusiveness: but as a category of experience it was also part of the world of contemporary history and politics'.[54] Bergonzi's text refers to W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Edward Upward. Frontiers similarly organise West's discussions of Yugoslavian ethnicities in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941). In her American texts, that nation's East and West are treated as respectively progressive and retrogressive regions in which characters may act out 'modern' or traditional gender roles. Because both regions, and the behaviours of the male and female characters within them, are affected by the 1920s boom and 1929 bust of the stock market, Bergonzi's analysis of the uses of European borders provides a critical vocabulary that is also applicable to West's use of the very different internal American border.

For Corrie in 'Life Sentence', the American West is a region in which he can remake himself after the emasculating experience of Josie's relative success in the stock market and her development of Cherry-garden Bluff into a modern 'luxury garden-

[52] 'Life Sentence', 26.
[53] Wolfe, *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker*, 31.
[54] Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 70.

city'.[55] They divorce after Josie's disapproval of Corrie's lack of financial skill becomes unbearable to him. Corrie moves West and encounters the region as a space in need of development and modernisation. Paternalistically, he considers himself to be as responsible for establishing his city as Josie was for the creation of the new Cherry-garden Bluff. The passage below describes Corrie's perspective on the new city and narrates his desire for power, control, and a higher position, socially and financially as well as physically:

> His factory stood halfway up a winding valley looking down over irrigated plains to a great lake that stretched silver to the skyline and overpassed it. For his operatives he built houses low down on the plains, but he himself lived a mile or two up the valley, where he could step out of doors and find himself at once on trails that led from hills to the mountains, to the feet of the great peaks [...] that wear their snow crests as if they were orders [...] When he sat on the ledge of the black rock, listening to the wind in the high pine forest and looking down on the great lake which still, even from the heights, overpassed the skyline, it was apparent to him that he had found his region [...] 'It's a great life!' he used to say, setting his hat, which he now wore with a rather wider brim than was necessary, farther back on his head. 'It's a great life!' By this he meant, among other things, that nobody who saw him in his present could have guessed anything about his past.[56]

Corrie's enlarged sense of self is reassured by the 'great' lake, 'overpassed' skyline, and 'high pine forest' of his new region. The superior view offered in the West allows Corrie to recover from Josie's acknowledgement that 'he was never going to be a great man in business'.[57] The mythic ideal of the conquering frontiersman is inherent in Corrie's love of the West, which is perhaps why his choice of hat is more suggestive of a cowboy than an industrialist.

The diction and imagery of the above passage also echoes the interest shared by several 1930s male writers in flying and mountain climbing, and in the heroism of such iconic figures as Lawrence of Arabia and Auden's 'Truly Great Man' in the period after

[55] 'Life Sentence', 26.
[56] 'Life Sentence', 42.
[57] 'Life Sentence', 29.

the First World War.[58] Dizzying views and high angles were also prevalent in the 1930s in Nazi propaganda posters and films, such as those directed by Leni Reifenstahl, which were suggestive of a Nietzschean desire for the superman's godlike perspective. In 'Life Sentence', West adopts the masculine heroic discourse of the period to shape her depiction of Corrie's desire for greatness, associating his desires with a stereotypical, contemporary masculinity.

Part of Corrie's attraction to the undeveloped West is that traditional gender roles seem more possible to achieve there than in the East. He marries a nurturing, supportive woman never referred to by name but only as 'his second wife' or 'the voice at the other end of the phone'.[59] After the 1929 stock market crash, Corrie travels to Chicago, a geographic middle ground, to meet his ex-wife Josie because he suspects that her business in the East must have failed, and that she will be in need of money to support their children. His train journey marks the shift to less secure ground as he passes through the Rockies and into the Plains: 'though this was the West, it was the end of the West. To-morrow he would wake up and find the Middle West flat around him, and every moment would bring him closer to the terrible, acid, energetic East'.[60] Josie reveals not only that her finances are secure, but that she is developing mid-Western investments and that she has travelled to Chicago to offer Corrie money. The disturbance of the traditional heterosexual binary which Corrie desires reaches its climax when Corrie, feeling undermined, tells Josie that his new wife is 'a real woman, the kind that can't look after herself'.[61] Josie accuses Corrie of behaving 'like a hysterical woman', indicating her own stereotypical assumptions about masculinity and femininity. The scene indicates that the trouble between them is not merely financial competition,

[58] These images are discussed in Bergonzi and Cunningham's studies of the 1930s 'canon' of male authors.
[59] 'Life Sentence', 43 and 45.
[60] 'Life Sentence', 46.
[61] 'Life Sentence', 55.

but a sense of failed gender expectations aroused by Josie's success. Corrie hates his former wife for her great achievements in the masculine realm of business, and Josie resents him for not being willing to take risks and compete like other men. The novella ends abruptly with the couple collapsing in an embrace, wondering what will happen to them next. The clash between competing sexes, regions, and attitudes towards gender is unresolved. This inconclusive ending is similar to those of 'Indissoluble Matrimony' (1914) and *Harriet Hume*, which suggest that the chaotic, oppositional relations between male and female characters will continue beyond the fictional time of the plot.

A similar pattern of gendered conflict between East and West is present in another novella, 'There is No Conversation' (1935). In this text an American woman, Nancy Sarle, begins her young married life in the West and, through widowings, divorces, and careful remarriages moves further East in stages, building her investments until she arrives as a single, successful woman in New York. An amused male acquaintance reports that Nancy 'goes down to Wall Street every day, just like a man'.[62] She is powerful enough to ruin the fortunes of her French lover, Étienne, who privately considers Nancy to be too involved in her career: 'I do not think women understand how repelled a man feels when he sees a woman wholly involved in what she is thinking, unless it is about her child, or her husband, or her lover'.[63] Such statements render Nancy's challenge to traditional expectations of femininity both an easily identifiable theme and a cause of misunderstanding between herself and Étienne. Whilst under the impression that Étienne loves her, Nancy avoids making an investment which could ruin him; it is only after he ends their relationship that she proceeds with the project that makes her fortune. The text does not indicate that Nancy is motivated by revenge, but rather by business sense. Although described as masculine in her dress, carriage, and voice, Nancy demonstrates the sacrificial feminine nature of most of

West's female protagonists in her willingness to give up her own success in the interests of a heterosexual relationship. Because her side of their story is only told after Étienne gives his hysterical interpretation of the affair, any sympathy the reader may have felt for Étienne's poverty is tempered by Nancy's more reliable revelations. West's narrative strategy clarifies the division between love and professional aspirations that shaped Nancy's decision, and presents another example of the feminine tendency to self-sacrifice. In this case, Nancy saved herself from financial ruin after the revelation of Étienne's true feelings, so that the text does not endorse traditional oppositional gender roles within heterosexual love to the extent of the other fictions discussed in this chapter.

In the short story 'Lucky Boy' (1929), one woman's attempts to combine business with sacrificial love are tragically unsuccessful. Kay, an American dancer in New York, marries 'Lucky Boy' Martin Vesey. He chooses the moniker because he believes himself 'cut out to be a rich man'[64] despite his lack of success in the stock market. When his investments fail completely in the late 1920s, Kay secretly invests against Lucky Boy and makes enormous profits out of his foolish risks. She offers Lucky Boy her amassed wealth in the hopes that they will move West as husband and wife. She plans for him to manage a new farm while she, having given up both dancing and business, will look after their future children. Lucky Boy can live with neither his own failure nor his wife's great financial success, and shoots himself on their train journey West. Kay's deliberate sacrifice of her careers, and her attempt to re-establish traditional separate spheres, are ineffective efforts against his sense of disempowerment.

Lucky Boy, seen only through Kay's reported recollections, emerges as a destructive and selfish character, unworthy of Kay's devotion and sacrifices. Despite

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[62] Rebecca West, 'There is No Conversation', in *The Harsh Voice*, 92.
[63] 'There is No Conversation', 79.

this, the text endorses their heterosexual relationship through its sympathetic valuation of Kay's love. The financial risks she takes are motivated by affection and not by the greed and desire for danger that direct Lucky Boy's decisions. Her participation in the male business world is distinctly feminine by Rebecca West's standards. The text indicates that her success, because it challenges Lucky Boy's masculine sense of self, is partially responsible for his suicide attempt. This stance does not overtly blame Kay for failing to remain in the sphere of traditional femininity, but neither does it dissociate her actions from her husband's violent reaction. Lucky Boy is saved by a doctor on the train, and the story ends without an indication of what may happen to the couple once they arrive at their Western destination. Once again the state of the heterosexual relationship is unsettled by the actions of a modern young woman from New York.

Heterosexual bias and relationships between women

Diana Wallace and Bonnie Kime Scott have separately discussed the 'heterosexual bias' of West's writing, a tendency within her fiction to foreclose the examination of relationships not based on the heterosexual binary.[65] Scott writes that 'where West's women do bond, it is usually in the presence of, or for the sake of a man [...] Perhaps echoing West's experience, heterosexual relationships often make female friendships inaccessible'.[66] The focus in 'Lucky Boy' on Kay's relationship with Lucky Boy ignores the suggestion of female bonding and lesbian desire which marks the unnamed female narrator's language at the beginning of this short story. The hysterical Kay is brought to

[64] Rebecca West, 'Lucky Boy', in Antonia Till, ed., *The Only Poet and Short Stories* (London: Virago, 1992), 135.
[65] Diana Wallace, 'Revising the Marriage Plot', 73. See also Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Refiguring the Binary, Breaking the Cycle: Rebecca West as Feminist Modernist' (*Twentieth Century Literature*, 37.2 [1991 Summer], 169-191), 'The Strange Necessity of Rebecca West', and *The Gender of Modernism*.
[66] Bonnie Kime Scott, 'The Strange Necessity of Rebecca West', 277.

the woman's train carriage whilst the narrator's husband, a doctor, tends Lucky Boy in another car. The doctor's wife describes Kay in sensual, erotically charged language:

> She flung herself on me and wept. I had beauty [...] pressed close to me. Soft she was, soft and ripe and luscious. One could have picked up handfuls of her body off the bone, not because she was fat or because she was old, [...] but because of a deliberate luxuriousness of substance which one could imagine her cultivating by odd kinds of massage and costly baths [...]
>
> In our drawing-room she slipped into the bed that was still hollowed by my body [...]
>
> After several hours, with intervals when she butted her pillow, when the tears rolled down so that she seemed to be deliquescing into something like strawberries and cream, she told me.[67]

The erotic qualities of the narrator's language indicate a desire which is never developed and has no bearing on the tragic events narrated by Kay's dialogue. The presumably heterosexual identities of both women are made clear to the reader prior to the erotic passage above when both are introduced as married women travelling with their husbands. Any lesbian possibilities are undermined by Kay's confession, which recounts the pattern of female sacrifice and oppositional gender roles which typifies West's writing.

Scott notes that although West 'can vividly evoke desirability in other women',[68] she 'carefully distances herself from lesbian identification'.[69] Victoria Glendenning reports that West claimed that because her affairs with men were often troubled, 'if I were young again, I would deliberately (and against my nature) choose to be a lesbian';[70] West's parenthetical comment is itself a distancing strategy. West's American fiction, like her better known texts, privileges heterosexual relationships and relegates friendships between female characters to the status of pauses between the dramatic events of central heterosexual plots. Like 'Lucky Boy', the novella 'There is No Conversation' is structured as a confessional dialogue one woman shares with another.

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[67] 'Lucky Boy', 124-125.
[68] Scott, 'Refiguring the Binary, Breaking the Cycle', 170.
[69] Scott, *The Gender of Modernism*, 564.
[70] Victoria Glendenning, *Rebecca West: A Life*, 125.

The listening female narrator of 'There is No Conversation' does not actively feature in the recounted plot, but does observe the physical appearance of the confessing woman, Nancy. In this story, the narrator's objectifying gaze does not view Nancy's androgynous qualities as the negative product of an incorrect gender identity, which is the view taken by Étienne and other male observers as indicated above. Instead, the narrator affectionately finds her fascinating:

> I have said that her hair behaved in the wind just like the coats of the Sealyhams that were chasing a ball round her feet. That was not the only point of resemblance between them. She was like a dog in the way that she had a more than human power of expressing her inmost feelings without words [...] Even so did Nancy Sarle, by the not so great rise and fall of her not so modulated voice, from the expressions of her not so very mobile little face, give away completely what was going on in her mind [...]
>
> If there was anything contemptuous in this judgement, which I should be ready to dispute, it was immediately swept away by the sweetness of the smile she gave when she said that she guessed we had better go back to the house to have highballs [...] She was a generous woman, who liked giving of her best to people who were neighbourly and came visiting.[71]

The potential for friendship between Nancy and the narrator is overshadowed by the dual confessions of Étienne and Nancy, with which most of the length of the novella is occupied. The understanding and appreciation the narrator feels for Nancy is not explored further, and the end of the text features the narrator's reflections upon her own past romance with Étienne. The title of the novella refers to the misunderstandings between men and women that Alexandra Pringle argues is a dominant theme of *The Harsh Voice*, the collection in which 'There is No Conversation' appeared.[72] However, communication and sympathy are at least temporarily possible between Nancy and the woman narrator. This comparatively successful relationship is merely a plot device framing the main heterosexual narrative. In this way, the female relationships present in 'There is No Conversation' and 'Lucky Boy' fit the pattern of heterosexual bias located within West's better known texts of this period.

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[71] 'There is No Conversation', 98-99.
[72] Alexandra Pringle, 'Introduction', in *The Harsh Voice*, x-xi.

Conclusions

The texts featured in this chapter follow the binary pattern of male success or emasculation versus female success or sacrifice which may be observed throughout Rebecca West's writing through the 1930s. Wallace and Scott have both argued that West 'destabilises binary oppositions traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity'[73] by creating female characters who act from within 'the stereotypically masculine domain[s] of culture'[74] (as dancers and performers) and of business. However, as several scholars have noted, West's reliance on gender dualism also complicates present-day readings of the author's famed feminist politics. The American texts discussed in this chapter contain elements of the binary configuration of 'sex war' and heterocentrism in their depictions of conflict between successful females and threatened male lovers.

Although West's American women, with no education or business training, are adaptable enough to master the masculine world of the stock exchange, their male lovers are inflexible and act to break up the heterosexual relationship and, if possible, reaffirm their traditional masculine authority elsewhere. According to Peter Wolfe, West's politics favour the woman's position, in that:

> The roving acquisitive male seeks meaning outside the self, usually in a measurable commodity or else in an honor or title negotiation as cash, status, or property [...] Ironically, then, the roving male has a much narrower frame than his homebody mate [...] His values are superficial, not organic.[75]

This criticism applies not only to the 'homebody mates' in the novels *Harriet Hume* and *The Judge*, but also to American businesswomen. Most of West's fiction suggests that compromise and sacrifice are necessary in the modern, chaotic world if heterosexual

[73] Wallace, 'Refiguring the Marriage Plot', 71.
[74] Scott, 'Refiguring the Binary, Breaking the Cycle', 182.
[75] Wolfe, *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker*, 9.

relationships are ever to succeed, but only her female characters ever make those necessary sacrifices. This economy, that female sacrifice = masculine success = the maintenance of heterosexual love, characterises West's writing of the interwar period. As Bonnie Kime Scott has commented, West's 'consistent recourse to conflictual binaries, her focus upon heterosexual relations [...] all strain against recent strands of feminism' and it is for these politically ambivalent qualities that West's writing 'has been found unsatisfactory on a number of counts by recent feminists'.[76] The heterocentric, oppositional configuration of gender within her American fictions is troubling for the same reasons. Her fictions demonstrate 'the exclusive fall into twoness' that was the subject of Judith Butler's critique of the gender dualism which characterises Western culture.[77]

The gender politics of West's American writing also address traits of modernism. By writing fiction which observes a contemporary, quite 'modern' culture, West engages with a society dramatically in flux. The instability particular to the United States at the end of the 1920s, the nation's nostalgic recovery of European traditions in pockets such as the Old South, and the relatively new country's lack of its own tradition, are as unsettled as the interpersonal relationships she wished to depict within that setting. As a modernist observer of the contemporary, West represented in literature what she saw as the conflictual nature of her times, on both sides of the Atlantic, describing how changing gender identities disturbed the traditional, oppositional heterosexual binary. Rather than subvert that binary, as I argue elsewhere that Winifred Holtby and Naomi Mitchison attempted in their depictions of spinsters and homosexual and bisexual characters, West represents the heterosexual binary as an ongoing threat to women: it is neither eradicated nor challenged by alternative configurations.

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[76] Scott, *Refiguring Modernism volume 2*, 125.
[77] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 55.

In West's modern world, heterosexual relationships are disturbed, chaotic, even deadly. Bradbury and MacFarland write that 'the idea of the modern is bound up with consciousness of disorder, despair and anarchy [...] and excited acceptance of the belief that the old régimes of culture were over, and a deep despairing in the face of that fear'.[78] Engagement with the 'disorder, despair and anarchy' of modern heterosexual relationships within a chaotic financial climate was a key element in West's gendered approach to modernism, present as a thematic element in her American writings. In this way, her narratively conventional American texts contradict Raymond Williams' assertion that modernism must be aesthetically, and not thematically, defined.

The lack of formal experiment within these texts may have delayed their recognition as examples of West's modernism. Scott includes West among a group of female modernists who whose works 'defy a unified account, even of their modernism, and certainly of modernism in general'.[79] Scott's study follows 'postmodern and feminist[...] lines of attack on high modernism. These include increased interest in popular as opposed to "high" forms of writing, [and] concern for political praxis rather than experimental innovation.'[80] West's American fictions are more concerned with the representation of troubled, lived gender politics than with the formal experiment of either 'dignified' male or 'playful' female modernisms, as characterised by Anthea Trodd.[81] Nevertheless, these texts feature characters who, by travelling across and fantasising about different regions of the United States, arguably occupy multiple temporal and spatial locations simultaneously. She explores the multiple 'Americas' which exist in a single historical moment, so that displacement techniques (although not

[78] Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, 'The Name and Nature of Modernism', in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* ([1976] London: Penguin, 1991), 41, 46.
[79] Scott, *Refiguring Modernism volume 1*, xxxi.
[80] Scott, *Refiguring Modernism volume 1*, xxxi.
[81] Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945* (London: Longman, 1995), 212.

the stream of consciousness writing in *Harriet Hume* and 'The Strange Necessity') are present within these texts which otherwise obey realist conventions of linearity and verisimilitude. That these multiple temporal and spatial possibilities were observable phenomena in the disparate regions and racial communities of the United States should not prevent the modernism of those possibilities from being appreciated.

It is America's fragmented nature, and its unique experience of the stock market crash, which render the country a particular useful metaphor for the chaotic relations between men and women, and between modernity and tradition, which concern West as a feminist and modernist. The ambivalent gender politics of West's American writings locate the texts between the progressive feminism of her early career and the nostalgic conservatism of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon.* Her study of the bordered regions, varied ethnicities and threatened location of 1930s Yugoslavia has been the focus of many studies and is considered to be her masterpiece. However, Loretta Stec asserts that such positive readings have missed the text's nostalgic argument in favour of 'a return to essentialist definitions and roles of gender' which contradicts West's feminism from earlier in the century.[82] *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is openly hostile to male homosexuality, and praises the virile men West believes are produced by rural, traditional Yugoslavia. She argues that Europe in crisis may be defended against Nazism by such masculinity, and that female self-sacrifice would support men and make male success more possible. Rebecca West's American texts also make use of a single, fragmented nation to illustrate her developing understanding of gender politics at a chaotic moment in history, and because they are also concerned with the notion of feminine self-sacrifice, are deserving of the critical attention previously given to her early modernist and suffragist writings and to the nostalgic *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon.*

[82] Stec, 'Female Sacrifice', 139.

3.

Women walking in London: gender and poverty in Storm Jameson's interwar urban writing

Sylvia Vance summarises Jameson's place in the pantheon of interwar novelists: 'if Woolf is the allowed great women Modernist of the 1930s, Jameson is the allowed political woman writer of the same period'.[1] Storm Jameson is remembered today both as a prolific author and political activist, who experimented in a variety of genres to convey her polemical arguments. Her two-volume memoir, *Journey From the North* (1969-70), describes the development of her political consciousness which was shaped by passionate socialism, anti-totalitarianism, and commitment to the defence of artistic and intellectual freedom. Her memoirs do not record involvement in specific feminist campaigns, although she wrote for the feminist journal *Time and Tide* and contributed journalism about the politics of women's professional and private lives to the *London Evening Standard* in 1927, as discussed in my Introduction. Like Winifred Holtby, Jameson was a humanitarian socialist, and considered improvements in women's lives and opportunities to be part of a larger movement towards political and economic equality for all. Of the four writers featured in this thesis, Jameson's feminism was the least dogmatic, but because her texts examine the material and social forces that govern modern women's lives, they invite feminist readings. They also establish themes which Jameson tested further in her dystopias and disaster fiction, which are the focus of Chapter 7.

[1] Sylvia Vance, 'Lorca's Mantle: The Rise of Fascism and the Work of Storm Jameson', in Maroula Joannou, ed., *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 124.

This chapter builds on previous feminist analyses of Jameson's novella, 'A Day Off' (1933), and of the novels included in her *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy: *Company Parade* (1934), *Love in Winter* (1935), and *None Turn Back* (1936). However, I will examine these fictions for the first time as examples of 'urban writing', because their shared London setting is significant to Jameson's portrayal of political arguments. The texts also have in common descriptions of London, voiced by observing characters and narrators, who echo Jameson's own love of the metropolis and her desire to live and work within it. All of these texts examine what is a woman's place in the city, and establish a correlation between gendered experiences of London, national and international current events, and the politics of writing in and about the city.

In 'A Day Off', Jameson imagines a single, working-class woman's survival of poverty in London. This text has been described as an example of socialist realism, but I will illustrate that it also utilises modernist themes and forms in its exploration of the city through the nameless protagonist's body/consciousness. By reading Jameson's novella beside Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), another text structured around a single day in London, the class politics and modernist tendencies of the novella become more apparent. Jameson argues in her memoirs that she found modernist linguistic experiment to be wasteful, even dangerous, in the political climate of the 1930s, but throughout her urban texts she employs modernist conventions. My analyses of 'A Day Off' and the *Mirror in Darkness* novels will challenge the current critical reception of Jameson as a primarily realist author of social problem novels in the tradition of George Eliot, by illustrating how she engaged with modernist ideas on her own terms.

Jameson expands upon her socialist depiction of a woman's poverty in London and includes a wider cast of disparate characters in the *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy. The central character throughout these novels, Hervey Russell, first appeared in her earlier

Triumph of Time (1927-1931) trilogy and the single novel, *That Was Yesterday*(1932)[2]. Hervey, like Jameson in the 1920s, is a virtually single mother and an aspiring novelist. She is also poor, and struggles between her intellectual ambitions, domestic responsibilities, and developing political consciousness, all whilst negotiating a relationship with a metropolis and with other characters all edging towards war. As urban texts, the novels of the trilogy examine how male and female characters relate differently to London topography. Jameson explores their ambivalent responses towards the city, writing characters who in one moment experience elation in their surroundings and identification with the strangers they encounter within it, and in the next moment, isolation and alienation from others and repulsion at the urban landscape. These competing reactions situate the texts as both urban and, at least thematically, modernist. My argument that Jameson's writing ought to be read as partially modernist challenges Raymond Williams' view, presented in my Introduction above, that thematic tendencies are insignificant to a definition of Modernism. Williams writes that:

> it is not the general themes of response to the city and its modernity which compose anything that can be properly called Modernism. It is rather the new and specific location of the artists and intellectuals of this movement within the changing cultural milieu of the metropolis.[3]

Jameson's treatment of the London metropolis illustrates that traditional forms of the novel may convey modernist attitudes and observations, occasionally slipping into imagery and language more usually associated with canonical modernists such as Woolf and James Joyce.

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[2] The *Triumph of Time* novels are *The Lovely Ship* (London: Heinemann, 1927), *The Voyage Home* (London: Heinemann, 1930), and *A Richer Dust* (London: Heinemann, 1931).

[3] Raymond Williams, 'The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism', in Edward Timms and David Kelley eds., *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 20.

'A Day Off', *Mrs Dalloway*, and the class politics of the city

Two of Virginia Woolf's texts, *Mrs Dalloway* and 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927), feature characters who walk about London, anonymously enjoying the streets and parks of the city, and observing and encountering other people.[4] 'Street Haunting' in particular suggests ghostly, unseen movement through city spaces, and in this essay a woman who ventures out into the London streets at night to buy a pencil finds that the anonymity possible in London provides isolation, and also freedom. Clarissa Dalloway glides across London on her famous walk to Bond Street, merging with other people; this tendency culminates in her Westminster home when, during her party, she feels in her own body the sensation of Septimus Smith's fall. Susan M. Squier describes the importance of Clarissa's actions:

> There is a social consequence to Clarissa's tendency to merge with her surroundings. Rather than feeling individual importance as the well-groomed wife of a socially prominent member of Parliament, she accepts kinship with all citydwellers based on their common love of "life; London; this moment of June." This transcendence of class boundaries, affirming a community including even the "veriest frumps" and drunks "sitting on doorsteps", suggest [...] that the urban environment, by its disparate, varied nature, nurtures egalitarian social relations.[5]

Rachel Bowlby has analysed the freedom of Woolf's female London streetwalkers, describing Clarissa as a *flâneuse*, a female version of the Baudelarian modernist *flâneur*.[6] Bowlby also discusses the masculine and feminine Londons that co-exist in Woolf's writing about the city. Jean Wyatt defines the act of identification with the other in Woolf's writing as a specifically feminine extension of self, and according to Deborah Parsons this act occurs during women's *flânerie* and differentiates it from the objectifying nature of the male gaze.[7] The feminist and modernist possibilities recognised in Woolf's

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[4] Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', reprinted in Rachel Bowlby, ed., *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life, Selected Essays: Volume 2* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 70-81.
[5] Susan M. Squier, *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 96.
[6] See the chapter entitled 'Walking, Women and Writing: Virginia Woolf as Flâneuse', in Rachel Bowlby's *Still Crazy After All These Years* (London: Routledge, 1992).
[7] See Jean Wyatt, 'Avoiding Self-definition: In Defense of Women's Right to Merge (Julia Kristeva and *Mrs Dalloway*)', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 13.2 (1986), 120-125. See also

London suggest terms which will be useful in my consideration of Jameson's treatment of the gendered nature of the same city.

A ghostly, nameless woman is also the protagonist of Storm Jameson's 'A Day Off'. She is similar in age to Clarissa Dalloway, but radically different from Clarissa as a working-class, unmarried woman. 'A Day Off' is structured around the woman's day-to-night meandering round London and is punctuated by her encounters with acquaintances and strangers, mainly other poor women. She revels in the city and in the sense of escape and belonging to be found in its streets, parks, and cafés. In this deliberate use of the city's public spaces she may be likened to Woolf's characters, Clarissa Dalloway, the middle-class hostess marginalised by her gender and her age, and Septimus Smith, who is separated from other Londoners by his neurasthenia and poetic language. However, aspects of the day's experience, such as anonymity, encounters with socially marginal strangers, nightfall, and nearness to death, present also in Woolf's writing as liberating experiences, have a different effect in 'A Day Off' due to the nameless woman's 'lower' social and economic position within the metropolis. Reading the texts in dialogue with one another allows for the emergence of two distinct Londons, so that Jameson's novella may be read as a socialist critique of both Woolf's feminist politics and her upper-middle-class version of the female *flâneur*.[8]

Although no critics have written about similarities between 'A Day Off' and *Mrs Dalloway*, Sylvia Vance has analysed Jameson's text in relation to Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and similarly, *Mrs Dalloway* has been read against *Ulysses* by previous critics including

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Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 201.

[8] I have been not able to locate any evidence in either author's criticism or private writings that 'A Day Off' was either intended to be, or ever received as, a direct response to *Mrs Dalloway*. The two writers knew each other: Jameson is mentioned in Woolf's diaries, and she reviewed other Woolf novels. I believe that the repetition of key phrases ('split its husk', for example) and images from *Mrs Dalloway* are too frequent to be mere coincidence and that Jameson must have been influenced to some degree by *Mrs Dalloway* when writing her novella, but until I locate concrete evidence I cannot be completely certain that Jameson's text was a deliberate critique of *Mrs Dalloway*.

Harvena Richter. Teresa Fulker's discussions of Woolf and Joyce's different treatments of the body are useful also to my consideration of the dialogue between 'A Day Off' and *Mrs Dalloway*.[9] According to Fulker, Joyce's Bloom is sensual and indulgent, and his day is organised around bodily functions; upper-middle-class Clarissa Dalloway seems prudish and virginal by comparison. Jameson's text also highlights the daily routines of the body: although the nameless protagonist is as ghostly and anonymous as Woolf's street-haunters, she is also thoroughly embodied, and her day is divided by episodes of hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and urination. In these details, her life echoes those of Bloom and Molly: she eats kidneys, as does Bloom, and Molly's early morning thirst and untidy bedroom are similar to the images used by Jameson to describe her character upon waking.[10] In *Mrs Dalloway*, Elizabeth's governess, Miss Kilman, greedily enjoys her food, and her gross embodiment, visible when she sweats, disgusts Clarissa. As George Ella Lyon writes, 'she is shadowed by Miss Kilman, who is heavy where Clarissa is delicate, coarse where she is fine, who is poor, struggling, ugly, and religious [...] Clarissa, unyielding object, unpossessable; Miss Kilman, ugly object, undesirable'.[11] However, as Fulker has acknowledged, sexuality, illness, death, ageing, menstruation and menopause are present as anxieties within *Mrs Dalloway* and its shorter precursor, the story 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street'.[12] The same anxieties feature in 'A Day Off'. The crucial difference between Woolf's and Jameson's texts is that such shared bodily concerns as illness, ageing and death are, in 'A Day Off', part of the squalid, uncomfortable physical realities of working-class daily life in the city. Whilst Clarissa

[9] Harvena Richter writes that Woolf's 'vow to dwell on people's minds and feelings' from 1923 onwards grew 'perhaps partly in revolt against Joyce's emphasis on the physical' (see 'The *Ulysses* Connection: Clarissa Dalloway's Bloomsday', *Studies in the Novel*, 21.3 [1989], 316). See also Fulker's comparative analysis in 'Virginia Woolf's Daily Drama of the Body', *Woolf Studies Annual*, 1 (1995), 3-25.

[10] See James Joyce, *Ulysses* ([1922] Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 65 and 74-75. See 'A Day Off' in *Women Against Men* ([1933] London: Virago: 1982), 195-197.

[11] George Ella Lyon, 'Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Body', in Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb, eds., *Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays* (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), 119.

may drift and 'perch', with 'a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light and vivacious',[13] through the city streets on a sweltering mid-June day, Jameson's central character, after having worked on her feet in factories, shops, and hotels most of her adult life, finds that walking in London at the same time of year causes her feet to feel 'like burning fiery furnaces'.[14]

Whilst structurally similar to *Ulysses* in its concern with biological cycles, 'A Day Off' is also similar to *Mrs Dalloway* in plot and structure by virtue of its narration of a single, very hot, mid-June day in London. Jameson's narrative follows the meandering path of the protagonist's consciousness as she travels around the city. Clearly delineated transitions between her successive thoughts and impressions, and between her voice and the separate voices, and sometimes consciousnesses, of encountered characters prevent the narrative from being 'stream of consciousness' to the degree of Joyce or Woolf's texts. However, Jameson's narration is certainly related to a stream of consciousness technique in that it drifts between accounts of the woman's present thoughts and sensations, her memories of the past, and her dreams, presenting a constant record of the workings of the woman's mind by recounting in the same tense her thoughts of different periods of her life. This technique is similar to Woolf's, although Jameson's does not allow the imagery and language of the woman's thoughts to seep into that of other characters, or vice versa, as occurs in *Mrs Dalloway*.

Both authors begin their texts in the morning and follow their characters throughout the progression of the day. The measurement of time is significant in my comparative reading of the two texts. Woolf's London is divided by different masculine and feminine systems of time, symbolised by the competing chimes of Big Ben and the church of St Margaret's. Women's time is foregrounded by the text's focus on the

[12] See Fulker, 'Virginia Woolf's Daily Drama of the Body', 10-12.
[13] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* ([1925] New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1990), 4.
[14] 'A Day Off', 264.

domestic details of a woman's daily routine.[15] Jameson's character, in contrast, experiences a day divided according to her own bodily cycles and by the rhythms of the commercial city, constrained as she is by the opening times of cafes and restaurants. In the morning, Clarissa is first seen leaving her house to buy flowers for her party, but Jameson's reader watches the nameless woman wake and dress, taking minimal effort to clean either herself or her room:

> She let herself down carefully and drew a stocking over her foot. Grit, from the carpet, stuck to it. Fastening her corset she drew the suspenders tight and stood up to see the effect. She felt better now that she was held up [...]
>
> The smell of stale scent came out of the cupboard when she finally opened it. She looked doubtfully at the navy silk and finally hung it back, taking out that knitted thing instead. The skirt sagged a trifle at the seams, but she freshened up the front of the jacket with the damp towel and pulled the belt tight.
>
> I ought to tidy up a bit first, she thought, looking round. The rumpled bed was the centre of disorder but everywhere there were clothes tossed down on chairs, bits of paper, a banana skin, used cups [...] Dust, too, everywhere, on the walls, on the shabby paint, on the floor. A film of dust on the water in the hand basin.[16]

Clarissa spends her evening at home, experiencing London life and death as it enters her drawing room during her party. She looks like a mermaid and acts the perfect hostess. Jameson's protagonist, by contrast, stays out in the streets until late before coming home and undressing:

> This was a shorter ritual than the morning's. Sighing with relief she tossed each garment across the chair and reached over for her nightgown. The loosening and falling of her body gave her an exquisite feeling of release. She stood with her legs apart to enjoy the new coolness. Her stained rumpled stockings were flung down with other unwashed garments in a corner between the wall and the cupboard.
>
> The hand-basin was half-full of dirty water. She padded across the landing with it to the sink, but that was to save herself trouble in the morning. She did not wash.[17]

Private aspects of the nameless woman's routine are shared with the reader, such as do not feature in Woolf's narration of Clarissa's day, although when Clarissa retires to her attic room to rest during the hottest part of the day, she does 'put off [her] rich

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[15] The influential term 'women's time' is taken from Julia Kristeva's article of the same name; see Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* ([1986] Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 187-213.
[16] 'A Day Off', 195-196.
[17] 'A Day Off', 290-291.

apparel'.[18] Because it is not witnessed by a voyeuristic reader, Clarissa's routine is not so compromising as that of Jameson's nameless protagonist. The comparative filth of the nameless woman's lifestyle is an important difference between her character and Clarissa's, and also between the political perspectives of the texts.

Clarissa feels connected to 'the veriest frumps, the most dejected miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall)' [19] whom she meets during her day in the city, although because of her class she does not interact with women on the streets. Woolf creates a city in which women's social lives and ability to identify with others challenges the exclusivity and impersonality of the city's masculine institutions. Jameson, by contrast, is attempting to write socialist realist fiction according to the theory she proposed in her 1934 essay, 'New Documents'. In this essay, she argued that unemotional observation of detail, the 'literary equivalent of the documentary film', was necessary to the middle-class, socialist realist writer:

> A dreadful self-consciousness [...] seizes the middle-class writer who hears the command to sell all he has and write a proletarian novel. He discovers that he does not even know what the wife of a man earning two pounds a week wears, where she buys her food, what her kitchen looks like to her when she comes to it at six or seven in the morning. It has never happened to him to stand with his hands in greasy water at the sink, with a nagging pain in his back, and his clothes sticking to him. He (or she) actually has to take a look in the kitchen to know what it smells like. At that he does not know as much as the woman's forefinger knows when it scrapes the black out of a crack in the table or the corner of a shelf.[20]

In 'A Day Off', Jameson observes this level of detail, but complicates the politics of her text by ensuring that the woman's poor lifestyle is not portrayed as merely a function of her class position. Her laziness and slovenliness are due partially to physical exhaustion after a life of labour, but also simply symptoms of her personality. When a German

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[18] *Mrs Dalloway*, 31.
[19] *Mrs Dalloway*, 4.
[20] Storm Jameson, 'New Documents', *Fact*, 4 (July 1937). Extract reprinted in Patrick Deane, ed., *History in Our Hands: A Critical Anthology of Writings on Literature, Culture and Politics from the 1930s* (London: Leicester University Press/Cassell, 1998), 312-313. Janet Montefiore discusses the 'different, gendered forms of knowledge' implied by Jameson's images, an argument which figures in my own analysis in this chapter; see *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 103.

lover abandons her at the beginning of the First World War, he leaves to her the café and flat that they shared; rather than look after the place and earn a living for herself, she shies away from the effort required and quickly loses the property. She lacks both Clarissa's domestic pride and eye for beauty, because of both her natural tastes and the poor, uninspiring surroundings in which she lives.

The woman's room is, like Clarissa's, at the top of the building, but Jameson's protagonist lives in the commercial area of Tottenham Court Road and not Westminster, the centre of London's parliamentary and royal power. The room is not 'a room of her own' because it is being paid for by her current lover, George. The significance of the woman's day lies in the absence of George's expected weekly support payment in the morning post; she suspects his support has been withdrawn without warning, leaving her to face suddenly an insecure, and inevitable, future alone. She reacts by deciding to use her few remaining coins to 'break a day off from the rest', probably the final time she can afford to do so, and travel by Tube to Richmond Park. Preoccupation with destitution and loneliness, and anxiety that George's letter may not be waiting when she returns to her room in the evening, render her day financially crucial, and trivialise the build up to the party which occupies Clarissa's thoughts in *Mrs Dalloway*.

The nameless woman's journey to Richmond, and return home in the evening via Piccadilly Circus, traces a different London topography than that featured in Woolf's novel. *Mrs Dalloway* demonstrates the gendered associations of the buildings of the establishment, such as Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, and St Paul's cathedral. Woolf's characters visit exclusive shops on Bond Street and in Mayfair, although they do also enjoy the same public spaces as the nameless woman, such as streets and parks. Jameson's text emphasises places popular with the consumer and depicts the cityscape experienced daily by the London masses: her protagonist visits

Lyon's Corner Houses, the 'maids of honour' tea room in Richmond, and the Holborn music hall, for example, which identifies the woman's, and the text's, class associations. Woolf's novel emphasises instead the gendered associations of a largely middle- and ruling-class version of the city, by presenting exclusive government buildings, traditionally masculine spaces, as being less important than public spaces to marginalised characters' experiences of the city. In Jameson's London, female and working-class London intersect: streets, parks, squares and circuses are occupied by marginal women, such as the nameless protagonist, beggars and prostitutes. Centres of government, religion and finance do not feature at all in these women's visions of London. The centrality of such established London buildings is destabilised by Jameson's text, which ignores them in favour of a more popular, commercial view of the city, fixing the class and gender orientation of her text differently from Woolf's.

The circuit that the nameless woman traverses coincidentally intersects the journeys made by Clarissa and other characters in *Mrs Dalloway*. Like Septimus Smith, she settled in the Euston Road upon first arriving in London. She sees into a lady's house in Portland Place and notices the owner's black and white floor; Peter Walsh sees into a woman's house in Great Portland Street, in the same neighbourhood, and notices 'halls laid in black and white lozenges',[21] suggesting perhaps a deliberate reference by Jameson to Woolf's novel. But Jameson's protagonist also walks in parts of London that are off-limits to Clarissa, in particular Piccadilly Circus at night, which at this time was a centre for prostitutes. Susan M. Squier has analysed the sexual politics of the walks taken by Woolf's characters, and her arguments are useful in considering Jameson's treatment of the same locations. Squier writes that in Woolf's text, Peter Walsh is allowed into places that ladies, such as Clarissa, are not because, as a male, he has privileged access to 'the haunts of masculine imperial and sexual power, where

parliamentarians and admirals strolled, and streetwalkers dallied'.[22] The boundaries that Woolf recognises between proper and improper, and masculine and feminine, spaces seem to matter differently to Jameson's representation of the city.

The reputation of the London centre began to change after the First World War. According to Roy Porter, it 'wooed couples and women: the male grip on the town was finally loosened. The area around Piccadilly and Leicester Square became something new: a pleasure zone for reputable people in their millions'.[23] Jameson's protagonist, who is not a lady like Clarissa, visits these areas as a working-class, single female consumer of food, drink, and entertainment, and her presence is not problematic, indicating that Jameson's London of the early 1930s recognises changes, and working-class experiences, which were not evident in Woolf's London of 1925. Jameson uses the perspectives of her main character and other women to describe these central London areas, foregrounding the voices and observations of females who represent socially marginalised 'types' of women including a beggar, a German war widow, prostitutes, and a fragile, barely conscious young woman who seems to be either a drug addict or the victim of a violent assault. Such women, and their experiences, are not, however, marginalised within the narrative but presented as characteristic in the daily life of the city. Woolf, by comparison, foregrounds the voices of middle- and ruling-class characters, consigning working-class characters' voices to fleeting passages.

In another scene, Jameson reverses the expected positions of power in the *flâneur/passante* relationship when the protagonist deliberately places herself in the position of looked-upon female object for a male observer. The reverse of this encounter occurs in *Mrs Dalloway* when Peter Walsh follows a woman through the

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[21] *Mrs Dalloway*, 55.
[22] Squier, *Virginia Woolf and London*, 104.
[23] Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* ([1994] London: Penguin, 2000), 394.

streets, constructing her as an object of desire in a manner typical of the male *flâneur*. He is made a fool of when he realises that the woman has not noticed him:

> [A]nd now, and now, the great moment was approaching, for now she slackened, opened her bag, and with one look in his direction, but not at him, one look that bade farewell, summed up the whole situation and dismissed it triumphantly, for ever, had fitted her key, opened the door, and gone! [...] The house was one of those flat red houses with hanging flower-baskets of vague impropriety. It was over.[24]

Peter resorts to sexual categories, deciding on the woman's 'impropriety' in order to assuage his disappointment. In 'A Day Off', the nameless protagonist appears to be in control as a deliberate *passante* willing a weak man to follow her towards Richmond Park. However, like Peter, she is eventually embarrassed when she realises that the man has vanished:

> The train slowed into Richmond, stopped, and she got out, followed by the middle-aged gentleman. She was aware of him walking a few yards behind her in the sunny street. She hesitated, half turned as if meaning to cross the road, walked on, with a smile and a swift glance behind her, the ends of her scarf blowing out as she walked, like an invitation, like beckoning arms. She felt young and gay. "The handsome reckless woman drew all eyes." All at once [...] she felt certain that he had gone; and she swung completely round to look. He was nowhere in sight. Some side street had swallowed him and he had gone without a word or sign. Her eyelids sank slowly at once. She turned; thinking, Oh well.[25]

Her power was illusory, and this mid-morning scene reveals how powerless and invisible the nameless woman actually is in the city.

The challenge that Jameson's text offers by establishing the centrality, and potential power, of the working-class woman's position is complicated by such scenes. The narrative affirms such women's importance as subjects whilst simultaneously demonstrating their actual powerlessness, and this discrepancy is the socialist-realist crux of Jameson's political argument. Jameson's London seems full of women who, as prostitutes or paid mistresses, are dependent upon men for their survival, particularly in

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[24] *Mrs Dalloway*, 54.
[25] 'A Day Off', 205.

middle-age when they begin to feel menopause as a threat to their value as sexual commodities, a danger of which the protagonist is fully aware: 'marry, before you're past it and before *you* know'.[26] A similar anxiety nags Clarissa Dalloway, who worries about the end of her fertility at a time when her daughter, Elizabeth's, future seems full of promise and new opportunities. As Elizabeth's and Clarissa's contrasting interactions with London suggest, with Elizabeth feeling that she can competently board a bus as her mother would never have done, age and sexual value determine a woman's survival in the city. Jameson's text accords with Woolf's: on this day when the protagonist is worried about losing George, younger middle-class women are perceived as enemies, such as the two women in pretty dresses whom she elbows in order to assert her place on the sidewalk.

In this text, women's experiences of London are foregrounded, but masculine power still grips the city. London is represented as a place in which women are always in danger of destitution. Relations between people seem infected by the consumer culture of their landscape, and as commodities women are affected by this environment. For example, when Jameson's protagonist imagines herself finding employment as a servant, she quickly looks beyond the security of earned wages to the idea of marriage:

> I could manage his house for him and then if he wanted anything, a woman's love and guidance, I'll give him that too. He'll soon know what he has in me, and then - it's not too late, I'm not old yet - I could be a good wife to some man.[27]

Elsewhere, the woman's desire for money also leads her to acts which make it difficult for a reader to sympathise with her plight, placing her, as Vance describes, 'among those [women] we have all tried to avoid'.[28] Desperation leads to opportunism when, for example, the woman steals the purse of the German war widow, taking the eight pounds which the widow reveals is all the money she has of her own, and then pawning the

[26] 'A Day Off', 274.
[27] 'A Day Off', 260.
[28] Vance, 'Lorca's Mantle', 127.

purse which was a gift to the widow from her husband. Jameson's protagonist also takes the few coins and notes tucked into the clothing of the semi-conscious young woman after she sees her home, knowing that the young woman's gas meter has expired and that she will have to suffer through the night alone in absolute darkness as a result of the protagonist's theft. When combined with her rudeness, laziness, and abrasive personality, the woman's criminal victimisation of other women renders her highly resistant to sympathy. However, this effect is consistently counteracted by Jameson's depictions of the desperation which leads the woman to such acts. For example, the woman repeatedly imagines finding a job but because of her age and lack of education or training, only long hours as a shop assistant seem possible. Her body is so worn, hot, swollen, and blistered from the years of manual labour that began with her job in a factory as an adolescent, that the reader can ultimately understand her hatred of legitimate employment, and may retreat from condemning her more detestable actions.

In this way, the woman is marked by her class position. Jameson creates a character who, like the other women in this novella, is victimised by her class and gender position in the city, but is equally characterised by her personality and actions, thus creating a political text which extends the boundaries of what a reader may expect from a more rigid polemical socialism. Later in her career, Jameson was accused of betraying the Left in her refusal to create dogmatic revolutionary heroes. In 'A Day Off', Jameson uses documentary writing to offer observations about the conditions of working-class women's lives in a hostile male-dominated city, which was familiar to her from her own experience of poverty and semi-starvation during the early years of her marriage, without succumbing to propagandistic expectations for socialist literature.

At the end of her day, the woman returns home to find a letter from George, announcing his decision to end their relationship. She goes to bed rather than fully contemplate her future. What may await her in the city has been suggested throughout

the text during her encounters with begging, homeless, and nearly dead women. In a city so hostile to women, only a female's fleeting commercial sexual value can keep her alive, and the nameless woman seems to be at an end in that respect. 'A Day Off' thus functions as an urban, as well as socialist and feminist, text. A different London is described by Jameson than by Woolf, and it is determined by the age, education, class, marital status, and personality of the female who encounters the city. Despite these differences, Jameson's protagonist shares Clarissa's sense of freedom and escape when out in London's public spaces. She victimises people, rather than bonding with them as Clarissa does, but eventual sympathy for her is nonetheless possible because her fear of death and decline surpass Clarissa's in their materiality. For a woman in her position, in a city that is comparatively hostile to marginalised women, nearness to death is never liberating, as it is for Clarissa, but only ominous.

Hervey Russell in the interwar city

Storm Jameson referred to 'A Day Off' as 'perhaps the only genuinely imaginative book I have written',[29] but despite the text's political commitments she claimed that by the mid-1930s, she felt that such writing was a 'self-indulgence'[30] because it did not engage with the urgent claims of anti-fascism. At this time, she began writing her *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy. Hervey Russell was used as Jameson's autobiographical 'mirror', a character 'who is and is not myself',[31] in the trilogy and in the single novel, *That Was Yesterday*, which was based upon the early years of Jameson's marriage during the First World War. Hervey's visits to London in *That Was Yesterday* will also feature in my analysis. Recent critics have discussed the *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy because it combines autobiography with what Gill Plain describes as one of the period's 'most cogent

[29] Storm Jameson, *Journey from the North volume 1* ([1969] London: Virago, 1984), 285.
[30] *Journey from the North volume 1*, 300.
[31] *Journey from the North volume 1*, 300.

analyses of the contradictory tensions of interwar life,[32] and places Hervey amidst a panorama of other characters in a portrait of one woman's experiences, and those of the whole country, in the 1920s. The multiple characters present the major political perspectives of the period, demonstrating Jameson's understanding that the causes of the Second World War originated in the Great War, and that allied groups of pacifists and socialists were divided by complex, competing interpretations. The novels present a dialogue of political voices, achieving the deliberate political ambivalence which Phyllis Lassner has argued is characteristic of Jameson's thinking on socialism and feminism in this period.[33] Many recent critics have discussed the trilogy's focus on British and international politics. The three novels may also be regarded as urban texts, because, like Jameson's characters, London itself is significant to the author's political discussions. Hervey and other characters within Jameson's panorama engage with the city specifically as an interwar, politicised, and gendered space.

London also appropriately serves Jameson's literary needs: it is a plausible setting for the interrelation of such a disparate group of characters including unemployed labourers, war veterans, a newspaper owner, industrialists, homeless people, a chemist, abusive husbands, poor mothers, politicians, union activists, writers, critics, advertisers, idle rich mistresses - even a cat, Habbakuk, sneaks about the city streets and rooftops illicitly enjoying his invisibility.[34] London is also a fitting location for the financial, industrial, and propagandistic interests of a group of national businessmen, Thomas Harben, George Ling, and Marcel Cohen, and their allies, who merge their corporations to further their shared capitalist ambitions. These allies, who include scientists, Labour politicians, and power-hungry, militant proto-Fascists, assist them in promoting war and

[32] Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 37.
[33] Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 66.
[34] See Storm Jameson, *Company Parade* ([1934] London: Virago, 1982), 22-23.

stamping out socialism. Jameson's city is politicised by its characters' sometimes unwitting engagement in feminist, pacifist, socialist, and reactionary trends. These large political concerns link all of her characters together, and shape the public and private strands of her plot, strands which become more obviously interdependent as the novels continue. London thus serves both the literary and political interests of Jameson's novels, conflating the 1920s and 1930s into a single, crucial place and moment.

The first novel of the trilogy, *Company Parade*, begins with Hervey's arrival in London just after the Armistice.[35] She is married to an abusive, and largely absent, husband, Penn, who refuses to support their child, Richard, so that Hervey is essentially a single mother. She comes to the city to make a living as an advertising copywriter, having left her son with a woman in her native Danesacre, Yorkshire. These details are modelled upon Jameson's own experiences, but for the purposes of her fiction they establish from the first few pages the tension between Hervey's career and her familial obligations, which are to be enacted within a city that is still under the shadow of the First World War.

After settling into her new room, Hervey enters the city as an elated *flâneuse*:

> She was young, and each morning ran out gladly. She could not stay quietly of an evening in that dreary place, but sauntered about London, pleased with trifles. London to her was a brightly-coloured web, from which now she drew the sound of violins in a café, now a voice crying Victory, now a boy and his sweetheart laughing as they passed, now furtive encounters of which her mind retained a gesture or glance.[36]

She revels in the city which 'in the first months after the War... was gone to pieces and noisy - not gay'.[37] Throughout the novels Hervey oscillates between love and hatred for her urban environment, and her ambivalent feelings emerge as she walks around

[35] *Company Parade* begins at the moment at which *That Was Yesterday* ends. Many of the main characters of *Mirror in Darkness* continue from *That Was Yesterday* and the earlier *Triumph of Time* trilogy, which was based on the life of Jameson's (and, fictionally, Hervey's) shipbuilding grandmother.
[36] *Company Parade*, 10.
[37] *Company Parade*, 10.

London. Jameson uses other characters as either *flâneur* or *flâneuse*, using his/her encounters with others to emphasise the 'web' of connections that exists between people in the city, a modernist image which takes on a more pertinent political significance as the text revises the division between public and private and establishes each individual as part of a wider political frame.[38]

Hervey's arrival in London is actually her long-awaited return to the city where she studied for her degree before marriage and war 'exiled [her] from London'.[39] Her nostalgia for the city, and for that period in her life, is first revealed in *That Was Yesterday* when she visits Penn's parents in London and they restrict their daughter-in-law to their house: 'London, all round her, was as inaccessible as Baghdad'.[40] When she is finally able to escape for an afternoon, she revels in her surroundings:

> On the morning of her last day in London she told the Vanes [...] that she would be expected to call upon her mother's cousin in Chelsea.
>
> This was a lie. Her mother had no cousin in Chelsea.
>
> She left the house about four o'clock and walked towards Oxford Street. The bright sunshine, the crowds, the rolls of coloured silks and dresses in the windows of shops, belonged to another world than the one in which she had been living. The excitement of her escape possessed her. She wanted to sing, to talk, to tell all these people that she, Hervey Russell, was walking down Oxford Street in the sunshine.[41]

In this passage, the city streets offer Hervey a sense of freedom which reflects Jameson's own love of walking anonymously about the streets of London and other European cities, as recorded in her memoirs. Hervey prefers buildings to people and, when depressed about Penn or her desire for literary fame, she can lift her spirits by entering the streets, feeling 'pleased with London and with herself for being abroad in it'.[42] Her

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[38] See Susan M. Squier, 'Tradition and Revision: The Classic City Novel and Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*', in Susan M. Squier, ed., *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 125. See also Bonnie Kime Scott's introductions to *Refiguring Modernism*, volumes 1 and 2, for further examples of web imagery in modernist writing.
[39] Storm Jameson, *That Was Yesterday* (London: Heinemann, 1932), 10.
[40] *That Was Yesterday*, 60.
[41] *That Was Yesterday*, 61.
[42] *Company Parade*, 82.

impersonal *flânerie* often evades the 'merging' with others which Deborah Parsons has indicated is typical of women's urban writing in this period.[43]

Nonetheless, Hervey's escapes into the city have feminist significance because these journeys, and her choice to move to London for employment, are flights from the constraining aspects of home and maternity. The tension between her maternal and intellectual impulses create guilt which Hervey never manages to alleviate, so that the texts recognise a central problem for the ambitious, working mother. In Hervey's return to London, and her desire to re-encounter the pre-war London she knew as a poor scholar, she is revisiting a time/place when she was free to pursue intellectual and creative interests, lived in the company of men as their equals, and was without sexual, or maternal, obligations. Hervey's narrative traces the development of her career and political consciousness during the period of her estrangement and divorce from Penn, and second marriage to Nicholas Roxby. Her struggles to resolve her conflicting public and private desires mean that she returns again and again to the lost ideal of the London she experienced as a single woman whose only commitments were to purely intellectual causes. Years after this time, during the General Strike, she thinks:

> In the end I don't want money, I want to be alone, I want to think and write a few words as sharp as bones, not write as I do, every day and all day, thinking of money and debts. I do know that peace is from within, but I want to live in my own place, with the people who knew me when I was free and innocent. London will be the death of me, she said angrily.[44]

Even several years later, Hervey's conflicts endure, indicating the inescapable pressures she will always feel as a working wife and mother.

Although Hervey's fascination with London is often with its buildings, streets, or lights at night, she is capable of identifying with people she encounters on her journeys, but as I will discuss below this feat of identification is not portrayed as a uniquely female tendency; some male characters achieve it also. Hervey herself 'merges'

[43] See Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, 201-202.

specifically with a general female identity. Although she is a professional, independent woman, Hervey's knowledge of wife- and mother-hood lead her to identify increasingly with her own mother. She also feels a continuation between herself and other anonymous women who have lived before her, particularly in terms of her body. For example, when looking after her editor when he is ill, 'she received a strange image. She thought that she was very old, she had been on her knees here for centuries, she was tired, her arms withered and came again, and she went on with her self-chosen task'.[45] Merging of self and other is possible for Hervey due to her gendered knowledge, and is not an experience specific to the crowded London streets. Jameson's text also realises that for women, merging is a practical result of women's unique experiences, which she explores beyond the modernist sense of connections between individuals. Hervey recognises the detrimental effect that self-sacrifice has had on her career and intellectual ambitions, resenting expectations that she must share herself with her dependants:

> She tried to think of Penn and herself and Richard in London. Can I do it? she wondered. She knew already how the weight of it would be on her. Before, when I was free, she thought confusedly, work was easy. Now half my energy is mortgaged - to be divided by Penn and my baby. What is left will not be enough for me to write my books.[46]

Feminine merging may be understood as a woman's way of experiencing the city's 'others', identifying with others instead of objectifying them, and de-emphasising the distinction between self and other. Through Hervey, Jameson realises the limiting constraints of the expectations placed upon women's separate selfhood, challenging the modernist web of interconnections which she elsewhere explores with interest, approaching the feminist urban ideal of merging with typical ambivalence.

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[44] Storm Jameson, *None Turn Back* ([1936] London: Virago, 1984), 145.
[45] *Company Parade,* 215.
[46] *Company Parade*, 34.

Jameson's exploration of memory in this trilogy also engages with modernist tendencies. Many passages describe the workings of the minds of Hervey and other characters, in which sensory experiences trigger memories of the past and cause temporary confusion between past, present and future. Hervey often slips into other versions of herself:

> Eight years ago this was my life [...] The past invaded her senses slowly, so that for a time she was caught between two moments, until the past opened and closed round her, like moving into deep water. She felt the strange expectancy of that time, stirring along her nerves.[47]

Along with Hervey's comparative descriptions of pre- and post-war London, such memories are one of the several ways in which the text includes experiences of multiple temporal settings. Deborah Parsons describes the 'palimpsestic city' as a common motif in women's urban writing of this period, and discusses Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys and Elizabeth Bowen in her study in terms which are also applicable to Storm Jameson.[48] The London of the past which is always present in Hervey's memory is at once a desire for her intellectual life before the onset of domestic responsibilities, a representation of Jameson's own nostalgia for pre-war London, and an awareness of the kinds of changes, away from intellectual freedom and towards capitalist rearmament, which were prefiguring a second European war.[49]

In *Love and Winter* and *None Turn Back*, London becomes an increasingly hostile place in Hervey's observations. She becomes sensitive to its pollution, overcrowding, and mechanisation. She articulates her later experiences of the city through images of suffocation, choking, and drowning, images which are reinforced by the language of the narrator and other characters. Fog 'caught at their throats and so wrapped them round

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[47] *None Turn Back* 142.
[48] See Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis,* 10.
[49] An early representation of Jameson's nostalgia for the pre-war city was in her memoir, *No Time Like the Present* (London: Cassell, 1933). She describes a café in which she and her fellow students ate perfect Viennese brioches: 'Alas, that long narrow room is now a bank. Could any war-change be more sordid or more typical of a spoiled London?' (77).

and bemused them with prickings in the eyes and nostrils', and later 'caught at the eyes and throat like salt in the air'.[50] The London of the later novels impresses the reader as increasingly uninhabitable, echoing the 1930s fear of air warfare and poisonous gas attacks in the metropolis. Despite these anxieties, Hervey feels compelled to remain in London because, as a writer and political activist, she cannot afford to be away from what is happening there. Her desire for city life and her duties as a mother continue to divide her, as she decides to keep Richard out of the city. Sharing a home with him in the suburbs is not satisfactory, as Hervey feels cut off from the metropolis at that distance.[51]

The novels offer other suggestions of how Hervey's gender, and perspective as a working mother, determine her experience of the city. Despite her eventual moderate successes as a writer and political activist, and the successes of other women involved in literary and cultural circles, London emerges as a male-dominated city in which even some marginalised men are better positioned to enter the realm of public politics than are the women of the city. The notion of separate spheres is exacerbated during the General Strike as depicted in *None Turn Back*. Hervey, as a socialist, involves herself in the Strike, volunteering as a driver for men who need to attend committee meetings, and seeking influential writers to contribute to a volume of Leftist essays. In her support for Labour, Hervey challenges the views of the influential Thomas Harben who argues that the Strike is a time for males: 'There are far too many of you women with

[50] Storm Jameson, *Love in Winter* ([1935] London: Virago, 1984), 257 and 286. These images echo the modernist poetry of T.S. Eliot; Jameson also makes a deliberate allusion to the London of Eliot's *The Waste Land* in her use of the phrase 'The Unreal City' as the title for the first chapter of *None Turn Back*.

[51] According to John Carey, suburbs 'exacerbated the [city-dwelling] intellectual's feeling of isolation from what he conceived of as philistine hordes, variously designated the middle classes or the bourgeoisie, whose dullness and small-mindedness the intellectual delights in portraying (that is, inventing)' (from *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1930* [London: Faber and Faber, 1992], 50). Hervey's sense of separation from the intellectual and artistic life, which she believes exists only in London, appears to reflect this class prejudice against suburbia.

nothing more urgent to do than imagine yourselves Joan of Arc. There's no need for women in this'.[52] Hervey discovers that the only other women in the committee rooms are wives making sandwiches; she, like the other wives, is kept out of the men's decision making despite her political knowledge and connections. Maggie Humm writes that the novel differentiates between the strikers' 'masculine... rhetoric of aggressive militarism' and Hervey's 'semiotic lyricism',[53] describing the marginalisation of Hervey's political consciousness by the united men.

The General Strike of 1926, and the tense class politics of the city which feature throughout the trilogy, also provide opportunities for Jameson to depict men's experiences of identification with, and marginalisation from, others. Repeatedly, war veterans of all classes find that the crowded city and its topography trigger memories of trenches and battlefields. Hervey's husband Nicholas, a middle-class former pilot, feels at home with the working-class men in the strike committee rooms because it reminds him of the classless brotherhood of the trenches:

> Through the open door Hervey saw him come in, warm and smiling, his face younger and lively. Among these men he was happy and at home. She watched him speaking to Henry Smith and Renn, standing in the circle of light below the gas bracket, and it was as though they were in another country and she looking at them through a glass...
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> [...] A man came in [...] and handed Renn a letter. Nicholas was struck by his face. There was nothing extraordinary in slightly hollowed cheeks and a patient, rather puzzled stare, but Nicholas had seen this face so many times, above a uniform, shoulders thrust forward under the weight of a pack and rifle, in rain, in sun on long roads, in light and darkness, that his heart stood still with a feeling between grief and the most intense pleasure.[54]

The other strikers do not return the sentiment, undermining the nostalgic utopia of Nicholas' ideal. Other characters feel isolated by their flashbacks to the horrors of war. In *Company Parade*, a roadside café owner, Frank Rigden, sees his former captain asleep

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[52] *None Turn Back*, 46.
[53] Maggie Humm, 'Landscape for a Literary Feminism: British Women Writers 1900 to the Present', in Helena Forsas-Scott ed., *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), 23.
[54] *None Turn Back*, 60-61.

in a ditch and the other man 'looked so like other figures Frank had seen lying in just that attitude that before he could stop himself he thought, Oh my God, they've got the captain. He ran forward'.[55] Hervey's friend from university, T.S. Heywood, experiences frequent disturbing confusions of past and present when out in the city: 'a dozen other anonymous bodies, faces without names, and bodies with faces mangled out of recognition, crawled towards him over the floor of the restaurant'.[56] Later that evening he identifies with another soldier at the theatre who looks 'frightened. Perhaps the noise bothered him. He smiled and nodded, and the other young man returned his smile nervously'.[57] Such flashbacks are as prevalent in 1926 in *None Turn Back* as they are in the months during the war in *That Was Yesterday*, so that the horrors of the previous war are replayed while Harben and his allies are leading England towards the next.

Memories of wartime, and anachronistic visions of horrific scenes, separate the men who are planning for war from those who would be its victims. Julian Swan, for example, is allied to Harben's conglomerate as the Mosley-like leader of a private military 'club'; he is lame, and the proto-Fascist militia allows him to exert his own power and prove that he is not physically impotent. He is a war veteran, but was sent home after the accident that injured him, and never witnessed action at the front. Swan is singled out from other soldiers by his inability either to imagine or remember the horrors of war. By contrast, Marcel Cohen, the newspaper magnate, holds an equal executive position with Harben and George Ling, and uses his various newspapers to ensure that all political perspectives represent the best interests of the conglomerate. He never seems to share the group's enthusiasm for war and violence, although neither does he challenge it. Cohen is marginalised from the group by this ideological

[55] *Company Parade*, 46.
[56] *That Was Yesterday*, 403.
[57] *That Was Yesterday*, 403-404.

difference, and also by his identity as a Jew, which causes distrust among its many anti-Semitic members, including Swan. Cohen is further distinguished from the rest of the powerful men by his memories of his son's death in the First World War. Like the veterans elsewhere in the novels, Cohen finds that recollections and visions are triggered at inopportune moments, such as during a meeting when he 'had to step past the dead boy to keep his place in the conversation'.[58] By allying Swan and Cohen with opposing camps, Jameson avoids suggesting either that all former soldiers are champions of the Left, or that all capitalists are warmongers. This is a further example of her refusal to present simplified political perspectives within her fiction.

Warfare is represented as a gender-exclusive experience that divides men from women in Jameson's fiction and her polemical writing. In her memoir *No Time Like the Present*, she argues that 'the gulf which divides the women of my generation from their men who fought in the War is impassable on any terms'.[59] Hervey shares Jameson's awareness of this divide and of the continuing effect of the Great War on veterans into the 1926 setting of *None Turn Back*. Despite these differences in experience, Hervey identifies herself, as did Jameson, as part of a war generation that included both sexes. Hervey also demonstrates that although women have not fought in the trenches, their knowledge of pain and patriarchal policy is similar to that of male veterans of the war. She compares the pain of war injury to the pain of childbirth: '"I should be frightened if I were a man," Hervey said. "I hate pain." Unconsciously she laid her hand against her body. Will it hurt very much? A pang of fear shot through her'.[60]

Another character, Rachel, tells her husband, a Labour MP, that he is naïve to think that he can bring about socialist change gradually: 'it's because I'm a woman, but I

[58] *Love in Winter*, 50.
[59] *No Time Like the Present*, 211.
[60] *That Was Yesterday*, 119.

know that a birth isn't possible except through the pain and fear of death'.[61] The pain of childbirth is also politicised through the attitudes of patriarchal and patronising men. During Hervey's pregnancy, her father-in-law, an old man on a war steering committee, writes to Penn to refuse to lend them money for painkillers during childbirth:

> "I hope you will be able to convince Hervey that there is *no need* for her to ask her doctor to make use of chloroform to *assist* her, as it is called, during her confinement. Such *assistance* [...] is contrary to God's will and *entirely unnecessary* (See Isaiah xiii.8 'they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth'. Also Jeremiah, *passim*). I have no patience with *silly girls* (such as I fear *your wife* is) who try to escape the decrees of both God and nature. Suffering purifies."[62]

Like the men who were forced to become soldiers, Hervey is forced into pain by powerful, authoritarian men. Frank Rigden, an unemployed, working-class male character, a former soldier, also experiences marginalisation in terms of his body, having to touch himself to make sure he is still real after an encounter with Thomas Harben effectively reduces him to nothing. Frank's bodily expression of marginalisation is consonant that of the women in the novels. Although working-class men, such as the strike committee members, may be as guilty of exclusivity as Thomas Harben, some men's experiences of marginalisation and humiliating exploitation are represented in language and imagery similar to women's experiences, so that the gendered knowledge of the two groups is related throughout the texts.

Jameson's use of unexpected connections between disparate characters allows her to demonstrate that everyone within her London web is a potential participant in the work of Harben's conglomerate. Through their careers and personal relationships, people contribute to his success. Some of their work is obvious: Hervey's friend, T.S., is a socialist and shell-shocked war veteran, but has become such a nihilist that he agrees

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[61] *None Turn Back*, 236.

[62] *That Was Yesterday*, 147-148. Jameson attributes the same attitude to a male doctor in *Moon is Making* (London: Cassell, 1937). The doctor tells Kezia during her labour, 'The pains are good for you. Don't you know that?' He tells Kezia's wife that 'the pain is natural - it's nothing - women like to make a fuss, but I can assure you it's nothing' (28). Kezia later dies as a result of her protracted labour.

to work in a private lab experimenting with poisonous gases. His research is funded by one of the conglomerate's smaller companies. Hervey is less explicitly connected to their plans. Through her work in advertising, she is guilty of using her talents to convince women that they ought to think about beauty products, and thus enables her audience to remain blind to more crucial political and social problems. Hervey argues to herself that she needs the job to support her child, participating in the apathy she is helping to foster as a copy-writer. During the early years of her marriage, she considers that news from the front 'will never matter as much to me as the price of eggs or what to cook Penn for dinner'.[63] Jameson realises that such attitudes are understandable, and that political activism may be difficult when one is starving, working multiple jobs, or coping with miserable domestic problems. As Hervey's story progresses, and the possibility of another war increases, the relationship between private individuals and public politics becomes more apparent. The texts suggest that no individual should be naïve about their potential political role, and that no one can afford to ignore their political responsibilities. When Hervey's employer points out to her that her son may be killed, or called up to fight, in the next war, she understands that her domestic, literary, and political duties are interdependent.

Several writers besides Hervey feature in the trilogy, and Jameson uses these characters to attack the politics of popular writing and to argue that every novelist has a responsibility to society. Fictional urban texts are used as examples. After the mild success of a few popular romances, Hervey decides she wants to write a book about life in London before the war, echoing Jameson's own desire in this period to record the life she shared with her fellow students in a city that was later spoiled, an impulse which led to the publication of *No Time Like the Present.* One of Hervey's London acquaintances, Ridley, also decides to write about London. While Hervey wishes to record for posterity

[63] *That Was Yesterday*, 134.

the relationship between the London of her carefree student days and the anxiety-ridden city of the 1920s, Ridley plans to write from the perspective of the typical male *flâneur*, observing Londoners and making use of their stories without either identifying with his characters or feeling responsible for his readers. Hervey silently criticises him by thinking:

> I don't like his writing: it makes me think of a grocer setting out his window - with so many sides of bacon, so much sugar, so many heaps of raisins, boxes of soap, pyramids of tins, cunningly set out to rouse your appetite and make you buy. You *must* buy, so that he can live. He has no time to wonder whether you are happy, whether his food nourishes you, and what becomes of you when you leave his shop.[64]

She realises that his book will be the more popular one, but understands that her own London book is politically responsible and, therefore, more appropriate to the interwar age in which her readers are situated.

Modernist tendencies in Jameson's political trilogy

Jameson's panorama of characters and their interdependent, politicised relationships, careers, party affiliations, and conspiracies engage with the crucial issues of the 1930s, and through these aspects of her novels, interwar London is represented as a centre of gathering forces. Jameson firmly believed that realist forms, and not modernist linguistic experiments, were more appropriate for the political purposes of fiction.[65] Her attitude is similar to the separate treatment of interwar modernism and realism that pervaded literary criticism until revisionist scholars such as Elizabeth Maslen discussed how primarily realist writers, such as Jameson, often blended realism with fantasy, and

[64] *Company Parade*, 213.

[65] In *Journey from the North volume 1*, Jameson writes: 'Today I am much nearer seeing Joyce as a purely disintegrating force, a sacred monster, uprooting established forms to create a waste land, a great anti-humanist, the destroyer by his devilish skill and persistence of the thin walls against barbarism. Writers who give themselves up to the disintegration of language are, so far as they know, innocent of the impulse to destroy civilisation. But the roots of the impulse run underground a long way, to the point where the smoke from burning books becomes the smoke issuing from the ovens of death camps' (245).

experimented with forms favoured by avant-garde modernists.[66] Jameson's *Mirror in Darkness* novels use some of the conventions of the nineteenth-century novel, such as single characters which stand for wider political perspectives, and the 'encapsulation' of her multiple plot strands into 'self-contained chapters'.[67] Yet, despite Jameson's own arguments against modernism, she employs several narrative strategies and images usually associated with modernist writers.

As urban texts, these novels feature themes of ambivalence toward the city, the figure of the *flâneur/flâneuse*, and webs of interconnection between the disparate people living in her fictional metropolis. In these qualities, her trilogy again resembles the modernist interests of Virginia Woolf. Jameson also employs Woolfean water imagery to describe the movement of light, sound, and movement through the city streets, and also as visual descriptions of the workings of human consciousness. Jameson also borrows images from surrealist art to describe her characters' perception of the city landscape. Like Woolf, she repeats these images between characters and across texts, creating further connections between their disparate situations. Hervey and other characters witness the spaces around them 'shattering' into unreal images and sharp shapes. Hervey's experience of a restaurant is rendered like a surrealist painting:

> The room, the discreet orchestra, lights, waiters, diners, unfamiliar tastes and odours, formed in her mind a picture which bore scarcely any resemblance to reality. It changed and fell to pieces momently - now the tables were radial lines with a vast bare arm filling the foreground, now a bar of music took shape as a street with lit windows, or an eye, and dominated the pattern.[68]

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[66] See Elizabeth Maslen, *Sizing Up: Women, Politics and Parties*, in Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham, eds., *Image & Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1996).

[67] Edward Timms, 'Unreal City: Themes and Variations', in Timms and David Kelly, eds., *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 4.

[68] *Company Parade,* 120. From the Embankment, T.S. watches the Thames: 'where it met a barge it shattered in pieces and light sprang up from it' (*Company Parade*, 102).

In *Love in Winter*, Hervey's friend David Renn is driven to paint an avant-garde work entitled 'Design for a portrait of Thomas James Harben', which illustrates how modernist forms can be appropriate to political expression:

> The figure of a naked man, erect, arms raised from his sides, fingers splayed out, stretched from top to bottom of the paper. You saw the skeleton, the muscles, and the strong net of nerves. Above, below, and on each side of him were roads, mountains, massive buildings, the sea, rivers, a sky, aeroplanes in formation - a landscape fantastic as a nightmare [...] The man was buried to his knees in the earth. His feet were the galleries of a coal mine, with shafts rising though the veins to his knees. At the knee vast slag heaps and buildings covered the ground as far as the first river [...] The great muscles of the thighs and belly became without changing their anatomy a web of railways. The oil from a hidden source sprang between the thighs [...] the fingers of the right hand were the long snouts of guns [...] From the eye pits men signalled to the aeroplanes.[69]

A similar impression is arrived at by Lise, Harben's mistress, in *None Turn Back*: 'she lost control of her mind and saw him as if he were a man and not, oh, planes of heavy flesh and long cruel lines crossing each other like wounds or like trenches seen from the air'.[70] These images indicate that Jameson was familiar with modernist forms and able to utilise them as appropriate articulations of the fragmented mentality of urban life in this politically-charged period, despite her dread of experimental modernist writers who 'give themselves up to the disintegration of language'.

T.S'.s painting of Harben is significant also because it forges his image out of other dangerous, inhuman aspects of metropolitan existence. Several characters come to fear mechanised, polluted, and overcrowded city life. Images of crushing and choking are prevalent. Here, the narrator describes one of the fogs that descends upon the city of the second novel:

> A fog had extinguished London. People moved about in it half choked, looking to each other like maggots. It was as thick as pitch in north London and Hervey groped her way up the unlit staircase [...] She felt exasperated and dirty - London is perhaps fit for human habitation ten days in the year, not more.[71]

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[69] *Love in Winter*, 42.
[70] *None Turn Back*, 218.
[71] *Love in Winter*, 28.

The unhealthy quality of London life is assessed by a doctor who attributes deadly cancers to modern urban conditions:

> 'Cancer is on the increase', he said, in his slow, thick voice. 'You know it is always in my mind that research is on the wrong path. It is living in cities, it is the anxiety of cities, and the fear of losing hold and being trampled on, it is haste, tainted air... You can't draw an invisible ring round fear and anxiety, as you draw it round the poor so that they remain in their slums out of your sight. If there is imbalance and fear it is everywhere at once'.[72]

The depiction of a sick metropolis as an effect of modernity can be traced back to George Gissing in the 19th century, and in the 20th century appears in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1921). The tainted city also correlated with contemporary public fears of air raids and gas attacks. Jameson uses themes and forms of urban and modernist art and literature appropriate for the expression of fears of the 'next war', demonstrating that modernism and political realism are not necessarily separate entities.

Conclusions

The theme of a simultaneously attractive and hostile urban environment, then, is important throughout Jameson's writing of the 1930s, from the feminist documentary perspective of 'A Day Off' to Hervey's modernist narratives. The *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy's complex interlinking of public and private characters and plots expresses a lingering anxiety that becomes increasingly apparent as city life becomes more dangerous: that, in the next war, there will be no differentiation between military and civilian casualties. That 1930s dread is written into Jameson's representation of the London of the 1920s. Hervey's continual debate about whether to remain in the city or leave, and about the potential harm the capital may pose in the future for her son, increases the sense of tension which Jameson creates. This debate is also an example of

[72] *None Turn Back*, 222.

the intersection of public and private plots within Hervey's narrative. As the fighting of the First World War injures and kills her friends at the Front, she experiences violence at home when Penn repeatedly beats her. Throughout *Company Parade* and *Love in Winter*, she is plagued with pain in her womb that becomes more unbearable as the political situation of the city is becoming more dangerous. During the General Strike, Hervey exhausts herself as a volunteer to avoid thinking about her upcoming hysterectomy. As the strikers realise their own uncertain future, Hervey worries whether or not it is possible for a woman without a womb to be a writer. At the end of the trilogy, as Anthea Trodd writes:

> Both Hervey and the strikers are left to come to terms somehow with the traumatic destruction of their hopes. No new life will grow from what has gone before; renewal must be sought elsewhere. In Jameson's writing this was in commitment to the wider scene of Europe.[73]

As is the case for all of the characters in the *Mirror in Darkness* novels, Hervey's narrative enacts the competing public and private interests of the period, and is always related to the larger historical questions which Jameson wished to raise for her readers.

Through the slow evolution of Hervey's political consciousness, from naïve young mother to responsible writer, the text presents Jameson's belief that each individual ought to realise her potential complicity with war, fascism, and capitalist bellicosity. This morality has insured that critics and literary historians continue to regard her as an important figure of the interwar period. The texts featured in this chapter are unique among her writings for their reliance on the city as an appropriate and significant context for her multiple themes and plots. The competing political views, current anxieties, and nostalgic desire for a return to a more irresponsible age, are all suited to the interwar metropolis, because Jameson effectively utilises modernist techniques to create a setting which is experiencing a 'new' historical urgency. As urban

[73] Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945* (London: Longman, 1998), 101.

texts, these works negotiate a relationship between socialist realism, modernism, and political argument, on their own terms. Reading 'A Day Off' and the Hervey Russell novels as urban texts associates Storm Jameson with categories of interwar literature from which she is usually, and inaccurately, separated.

4.

'But it is quicker in bed': sex, class, and socialism in Naomi Mitchison's *long* novels

In 1970, at the age of 81, Naomi Mitchison published her memoirs of the interwar period entitled *You May Well Ask*. The text describes a life in which socialist praxis was a key theme. In these years, Mitchison explored in her private life, political activism, and imaginative writing a socialism that extended to her interpersonal relationships. In a chapter entitled 'Patterns of Loving', she writes that 'for most of my life, my love relationships affected my writing'. She imagines being able to go back in time and ask her young self if love and sex had really been as important as they were represented to be in her interwar fiction; the younger Naomi, she writes, would probably have answered 'yes - it's important, fuel for the imagination, and it puts brilliance and vigour into one's vision. More, it's mutual kindness'.[1] Mitchison explains that the ideal of love explored in her open marriage to Dick Mitchison mattered to her political writing as much as it did to the development of his political and social life as a Labour MP She believed that 'part of what I got, and I believe gave, was encouragement in what was being thought about and done at a fairly difficult period of social mobility'. She also believed that 'mutually kind' sexual relationships fostered understanding, appreciation, and respect between partners. She wrote that 'one may be able to get this communication in other ways - shared and intense religious or political experience; but it is quicker in bed'.[2] In this chapter, I will explore the political uses of sexuality in Mitchison's long novels of the 1930s. In my close readings, I will build upon the

[1] Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: a memoir 1920-1940* (London: Gollancz, 1979), 76.
[2] *You May Well Ask*, 71.

analyses of previous scholars such as Elizabeth Maslen and Phyllis Lassner and focus upon textual evidence for the development of a increasingly extreme socialist perspective in Mitchison's writing through the decade, one which seems to undermine the sexual agency of women characters in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), the earliest of the three long novels.

In her unpublished diary of a journey to the U.S.S.R. in 1932, Mitchison recorded how she was already theorising about the relationship between sexuality and politics: 'a good Socialist may say: "My body is for you or for any other good person for whom it is happy-making, I will put up no barriers."'[3] On this journey she was aware that her wealthy, middle-class position separated her from the Soviet workers on the ship and this troubled her: 'It is very silly of me, but I am rather looking forward to the time when someone calls me Comrade! How I wish I could make friends with the crew'.[4] During the Second World War, Mitchison kept a detailed diary of life on her estate at Carradale, Scotland for Mass Observation. This diary records her desire to develop a communal life with the farmers on the estate and her frustration with the feudal, 'Big House influence' that is never overcome.[5] She describes a community play performance at Halloween which develops into erotic fumbling at the cast party; at that moment she feels 'part of "the gang"'.[6] All of these examples indicate the extent to which Mitchison believed in sex as a way to overcome class difference. In this chapter I will discuss how idealised, politicised sexual experience is represented as a way of connecting politically and personally disparate characters in her major novels of the 1930s. In its treatment of women's sexuality as an aspect of a social exchange, Mitchison's writing, as I will argue below, suggests Cixous' theoretical realm of the

[3] Edinburgh: Naomi Mitchison, typescript journal of a visit to Russia, ca. 1937, from 1932 ms., Acc. 10899.
[4] Edinburgh: Typescript journal of a visit to Russia, 10.
[5] See Dorothy Sheridan ed., *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945* (London: Gollancz, 1985), 57.

feminine 'gift'. My analysis of such exchanges will illustrate that the middle-class, socialist perspective of the author and texts interferes with the feminist and humanitarian interests of Mitchison's fiction.

Although these novels generally adhere to realist narrative convention, in their introduction of fantastic, magical, and mythical elements, they are formally experimental. In Chapter 6, I will discuss in greater detail Mitchison's use of modern speech within her historical novels, another unconventional aspect of her fiction which was both derided and celebrated by critics in the 1930s.[7] Q.D. Leavis also detested Mitchison's use of a style which Leavis believed 'imitat[ed] *The Waves, Mrs Dalloway,* James Joyce, the moderns in general'[8] in her contemporary novel, *We Have Been Warned.* Of the four authors discussed in this thesis, Mitchison's work is perhaps the least closely related to High Modernism in its formal qualities, but her frank discussions of sexual politics, and use of cyclical and repetitive (as opposed to linear and evolutionary) patterns of time and history are related to modernist thematic and formal concerns. John B. Vickery names Mitchison alongside T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound amongst a list of writers whose challenge to 'Victorian prudery concerning sex drives' was influenced by the anthropological approach of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough.*[9] The novels discussed in this chapter exhibit both formal experiment and explicit discussions of sexuality as a cultural and political artefact that challenge Mitchison's characterisation as a traditional realist.

In her long novels, Mitchison depicts communal love as key to the success of socialism. Particularly in her historical fiction, she writes erotic scenes of sexual love

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[6] *Among You Taking Notes*, 54.
[7] See Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* ([1932] London: Chatto and Windus, 1965) for a general critique of historical fiction, and Alfred Tresidder Shepherd, *The Art and Practice of Historical Fiction* (London: Humphrey Toulmin, 1930), 119-124, for praise of Mitchison, specifically.
[8] Q.D. Leavis, 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', *Scrutiny*, IV.2 (September 1935), 114.
[9] John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 74.

shared outside of heterosexual marriage, during orgies, at community celebrations, and between homosexual and bisexual individuals. Her writing is admired by critics today for its disruption of heterosexual models, yet as I will demonstrate, amongst the main characters of the long novels *We Have Been Warned* (1935) and *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, marriage and heterosexual love are ultimately embraced. Erotic group feeling and the politicised sharing of bodies is also problematic: the sharing of bodies required of female characters plays into traditional forms of feminine self-sacrifice which are at odds with her liberated feminism, and the shared erotic frenzies of certain community groups become shockingly similar to the erotics of power and group violence depicted in her anti-Fascist allegory, *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939). Although Mitchison's later memoirs indicate awareness with hindsight of the middle-class dilemmas of her socialist fiction, other problems with the sexual politics of her writing have yet to be fully explored.

The Corn King and the Spring Queen (1931)

In this text, Mitchison examines how group and individual commitments might be worked out through sexual relationships. This is a similar question to her treatment of politicised sexuality in her long novels written later in the decade, but in the case of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, the historical novel genre allows Mitchison to include sex as part of the invented ritual life of Marob, a fictional Scythian community which features in earlier texts.[10] In this novel, Mitchison imagines a rural, agricultural community which comes into contact with the more advanced cultures of Greece, Sparta, and Egypt. Marob is not a proto-socialist state, but one in which the king, queen and elders are intimately bound to their community through their role in sacred fertility and harvest rituals performed with other members of the community throughout the

seasonal year.[11] The community is not segregated into proto-capitalist classes of rulers and workers, so that some of the doctrinal Marxist patterns of difference which feature in Mitchison's later novels are avoided. However, Marob's small, localised form of government and strong community ethic informed Mitchison's socialism throughout her life, and for this reason the text is not far removed from the more dogmatic socialist arguments of her later fiction. In *The Corn King*, she explores the effect on the Corn King, Tarrik, and his wife the Spring Queen, Erif Der, of new concepts of individuality which they encounter when Spartans arrive in their community and disrupt the traditional rationality of Marob. The separate quests that they each undertake, which lead them to other Mediterranean civilisations over a period of many years, form the plots of the novel.[12]

Tarrik and Erif are brought together through magic and deceit. Erif's father, a Marob Elder, devises a plan to overthrow Tarrik by using Erif's witchcraft to cause Tarrik's failure in an important community ritual. Erif is also required to magic Tarrik into marrying her. The result of her adolescent attempt to manipulate Tarrik is a violent rape. The brutal act is severely traumatic for Erif: 'she didn't think she could ever mind anything after this - he seemed to have broken all the clean, sharp edges of her feeling for ever'.[13] Symbolically, he steals her magic wooden star during the attack, robbing her

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[10] See Edinburgh: programme for Mitchison's privately produced play, *Barley, Honey and Wine*, no date, Acc. No. 4599/11.

[11] Elizabeth Maslen, in 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', describes Marob society as 'a kind of protosocialism with green roots' (see Maroula Joannou, ed., *British Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999], 142). I am defining 'protosocialism' as that form of society which Mitchison shapes in her later novels in Marxist terms, labelling groups anachronistically as working-class and discussing relationships between the workers and their oppressors. Janet Montefiore argues that the novel's 'energy lies in a feminism whose insights Marxists tend to ignore, but its Socialism is much less convincing, mainly because it deals almost entirely with the lives and minds of royalty' (see *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* [New York: Routledge, 1996], 168).

[12] Isobel Murray asserts that *The Corn King* shares concerns with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in its exploration of a distant past where 'myth grew into history' and 'man into full self-consciousness' ('Novelists of the Renaissance', in Craig Cairns, ed., *The History of Scottish Literature,* vol. 4 [Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987], 104.

[13] Naomi Mitchison, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), 58.

of the easy power she had possessed up to that point. Tarrik returns her to her family later that day, and the reaction of her father indicates his complicity in his daughter's violation:

> By and bye Harn Der came up and stood beside her. 'So, you're a woman now, my daughter'. 'And you don't care', she said, 'how I'm hurt, how I'm dishonoured'. 'Well', he said, smiling at her, 'you were betrothed. It's nothing to make a song about. Go to your mother, Erif'.[14]

Her favourite brother, Berris, tells her the attack 'serves her right for magicking people'.[15] Mitchison depicts Erif's violation as the result of several men's hurtful and possessive attitudes towards her body.

Like Dione in *We Have Been Warned*, Erif immediately seeks the company of other females after the rape. She goes to the women's tents and approaches her mother and some of the older witches for healing. However, by the end of the same day, Erif emerges from the women's tents dressed 'as the Spring Queen, quite grown up'.[16] She accepts the loss of her virginity 'with a certain pleasant relaxing of all her muscles' and feels that any hurt she experienced 'was all cured'.[17] Erif then wishes to touch Tarrik's 'arm, and then his neck, his cheek, and his lips with cool, baffling fingers',[18] and from that moment feels loyal to him and finds it increasingly difficult to act against him according to the demands of her father. Erif's rape does not affect her later relationship with Tarrik. However, it is, importantly, the beginning of Erif's questioning of her father's patriarchal exploitation of her magic, which eventually ends in her murder of Harn Der. The novel links rape with other forms of patriarchal oppression present in the novel, but does not go as far as might be expected of a feminist text in addressing the rapist, who is also the male protagonist of the text. Mitchison's depiction of Erif's

[14] *The Corn King*, 59.
[15] *The Corn King*, 59.
[16] *The Corn King*, 63.
[17] *The Corn King*, 61.
[18] *The Corn King*, 63.

easy recovery and untroubled desire for Tarrik is indicative of the text's representation of women's irrational magic as being as powerful as any male law and brutality, and in this way undermines the authority of Marob patriarchy. However, the quick assimilation of violation into the female protagonist's experience is a device repeated in Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned*, and is an indication of the extent to which Mitchison's community-based politics expects women to transcend their ownership of their bodies for the good of others. Because Erif recovers within the day, both her marriage and her political activities, now less on behalf of her father than for the benefit of Tarrik's kingship, continue uninterrupted.

As Erif matures, she comes to question the sacrificial sexual role required of her as Spring Queen and as Tarrik's monogamous wife, but this does not seem to be a result of her rape. Rather she, like Tarrik, is affected by the individuality taught by Sphaeros, a visiting Greek philosopher. As Spring Queen, Erif's main duties are highly erotic plowing and harvest rituals for her community. Mitchison's descriptions were so explicit that they caused her friend, W.H. Auden, to comment that some scenes 'were hotter than anything I've ever read'.[19] The novel did not receive the censorship that was inflicted upon similar scenes in *We Have Been Warned,* which was set in early 1930s Britain. Mitchison's theory, that overt sex is 'apparently [...] all right when people wear wolfskins and togas',[20] is accepted today by critics such as Janet Montefiore, Elizabeth Maslen and Phyllis Lassner as an explanation for the security of the historical novel genre as a vehicle for contentious ideas.[21] The first group ritual depicted in the novel is the Plowing Eve ceremony, in which the Corn King 'opened the Furrow'[22] of the Spring

[19] Quoted in *You May Well Ask*, 121.
[20] *You May Well Ask*, 179.
[21] See Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s*; Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction'; and Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1998).
[22] *The Corn King*, 245.

Queen in front of all of Marob; their staged sexual performance begins the new Year. Once she travels out of Marob, Erif questions the demands placed upon her body by the community as she begins to explore the sexual desires which are denied her within her public role as Spring Queen and private role as monogamous wife. Erif's quest across Hellas and Egypt exposes her to other ways of thinking about individuality and community, and allows her to reconcile her different cultural roles.

Despite Marob's communal sexual rituals, the community does exhibit sexual double standards that affect other women besides Erif. For example, after the Plowing Eve ceremony, the Corn King and other men of Marob increase the good luck of the ritual by having sex with as many women as possible, but the women are more restrained. The narrator indicates that 'it was thought no dishonour to stay in the plowed field this day of all the year, and no husband or father could well complain, but all the same they might mind, and one does not want to hurt those one loves'.[23] Enough young, single women participate to allow all of the men 'to work their own and only magic and help the Corn King to help the year'.[24] Erif's personal quest challenges this social double standard, which permits Tarrik, but not Erif, to take extra lovers. Mitchison and her husband were proponents of open marriage, and throughout her writing of this period she is critical of monogamy. In *We Have Been Warned*, the protagonist, Dione, is willing to share her husband with multiple women, but she worries about the effect on him of any lovers she might take herself, and this concern proscribes Dione's sexuality as it does Erif's in Marob.

Erif echoes the words of Mitchison's later 'good socialist' women, telling herself that 'the Spring Queen should be kind' when she is approached by Murr, a slave rower. With Murr, Erif's compulsion to share the Spring Queen's power and fertility is

[23] *The Corn King*, 247.
[24] *The Corn King*, 247.

combined with physical desire: 'why be unkind? Why be unkind to the man and to herself?' She also considers that 'Tarrik did the same thing because he was Corn King. He must learn to understand and not be hurt'.[25] When Murr is rough with her, Erif pushes him away, but in later situations she happily follows her own desires, and sees this as a direct challenge to Tarrik's male possessiveness and the double standard of Marob morality which allows men to behave differently than their wives.[26]

Throughout this novel, Mitchison explores sexualities which are taboo in her own time. As Spring Queen, Erif's sexuality is made public, but this is both her duty and a genuine pleasure. On Plowing Eve, she is ritually deflowered by members of the community who pluck embroidered blossoms and stems from her dress:

> Suddenly all the people of Marob rushed at the booth of the dancing and at the Spring Queen, lying still and with her eyes shut on the floor. They began to pull the flowers off her dress, snapping the wool stalks, one flower for every household. As they surged round and over her with small rustlings and tuggings, her body quivered and leapt again and again. The Corn King turned her over for them to pluck the flowers from her back.[27]

Erif's pleasure in group sexual encounters is also apparent during her visit to Sparta. She meets the poor farmers who live on the King's estate, and is invited to participate in their summer fertility rituals. Primitive birth control will prevent Erif from becoming pregnant: one of her hosts tells her about a spring with 'very cold water and I do not think it ever fails on this night'.[28] Mitchison introduces the controversial notion of contraception, of which she was an outspoken proponent, at the same time as she indicates that Erif would not want to hurt her husband by having another man's baby.

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[25] *The Corn King*, 260.
[26] Mitchison explored this double standard in an historical short story for *Time and Tide* entitled 'Nothing Over Much', in which a young Greek woman takes a lover during the years her husband is in Egypt; she feels no guilt because she imagines that he has had other lovers whilst abroad (10 November 1929, 1405-1406).
[27] *The Corn King*, 245.
[28] *The Corn King*, 377.

The scene does not go so far as Mitchison's later eugenicist arguments that society would benefit from allowing women to have children with multiple fathers.[29]

Erif feels that as Spring Queen, she ought to use her magic to assist her hosts in their ritual, but she also finds their orgy highly pleasurable: 'someone pulled her hair softly from behind and slid a hand over her shoulder and down under her coat. She turned with immense relief into a man's arms [...] She had not realised how much she had wanted a man all these weeks of summer.'[30] Although Erif understands that Tarrik must have multiple partners for the good of Marob, she admits that after participating in this new ceremony, she 'will not mind much thinking about Tarrik and his Spring Queens'.[31] Erif is capable of nobility regarding her husband's relationships, but also of articulating jealousy, so that her narrative explores all aspects of a woman's feelings within an open marriage. The text depicts women's sexual desire, and taboo sexual behaviours, as normal, healthy, and even beneficial. Because the only result of the ritual is a fostering of generous communal feeling, the reader is encouraged to agree that such behaviours are normal and acceptable.

Mitchison's historical setting also allows her to explore without fear of censorship other sexualities which were taboo or even illegal in the early twentieth century. She writes romantic and erotic scenes of male homosexual love between Spartan men, and describes Erif's occasional incestuous feelings for her brother Berris. In a frequently quoted passage, Mitchison describes breastfeeding as a particularly erotic experience for Erif:

> By and bye he began to give little panting, eager cries of desire for food and the warmth and tenderness that went with it. Erif's breasts answered to the noise with a pleasant hardening, a faint ache waiting to be assuaged. [...] For a moment she teased him, withholding herself; then, as she felt the milk in her springing towards him, she let him settle, thrusting her breast deep into the hollow of his mouth, that seized on

[29] See Naomi Mitchison, *The Home and a Changing Civilization* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1934).
[30] *The Corn King*, 378.
[31] *The Corn King*, 379.

her with a rhythmic throb of acceptance, deep sucking of lips and tongue and cheeks.[32]

Mitchison precedes by several decades Adrienne Rich's feminist writings about the erotic nature of motherhood.[33] In these aspects, the appearance of sexuality in *The Corn King* works differently than in her later long novels of the 1930s: here, Mitchison is as keen to indicate, in a feminist examination, the role of sexual desire in the lives of healthy individual women as she is to explore the possibilities that sexual unions might lead to increased communal feeling. In later texts, the socialist uses of sexuality outweigh the depiction of women as desiring sexual subjects.

In *The Corn King,* Mitchison indicates that she does not challenge the sexual taboos of her own age merely in order to titillate or because it is 'fashionable' to do so, but instead engages with sexuality as an indicator of morality and political ideology.[34] Although she advocates the exploration of all forms of sexual desire, within all of her long novels sexual desire is only approved of if initiated by emotional or political intent. For example, the incestuous desire, homosexuality, and group sex eroticised in Marob and Sparta are differentiated from the grotesque description of similar acts in Egypt. There, King Ptolemy imagines the wedding night he will have with his sister, 'Mother bending over us both; straddling across us; naked. No shame. That place we've both been!'[35] Because Ptolemy's court is corrupt, his marriage has no basis in love either for his sister or his kingdom, therefore his sexual behaviours cannot be excused. The sexual openness of Ptolemy's court, in which sex between any partners is encouraged, reflects the erasure of sexual double standards. However, both Erif and the text prefer the

[32] *The Corn King,* 304.
[33] See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* ([1976] London: Virago, 1992), 182-184..
[34] Q.D. Leavis criticised Mitchison's interest in sexual themes as 'fashionable' in her review of *We Have Been Warned*; see 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', *Scrutiny*, IV.2 (Sept. 1935), 114-115.
[35] *The Corn King*, 552.

nobility and monogamy of the regal women of Sparta, who act out of love and for the good of their State, and despite the fact that those women's relationships with men are unequal compared to the open marriage that Erif negotiates with Tarrik. Ultimately, Erif and Tarrik's arrangement is preferred over the unhappiness of Spartan marriages between loving, monogamous women and bisexual husbands. However, both systems indicate Mitchison's belief in sexual relationships based upon moral and political ideals which is developed in her other long novels of the 1930s, *We Have Been Warned* and *The Blood of the Martyrs*. In its depiction of an open marriage in which both male and female desire are enacted by politically-responsible individuals, *The Corn King* differs from the later texts by insisting that women's individual sexual subjectivities are considered against public and private demands.

We Have Been Warned (1935)

Mitchison's travel diary of her 1932 journey to the Soviet Union was fictionalised in the middle section of her 1935 long novel, *We Have Been Warned*. The novel records the developing socialist consciousness of the protagonist, Dione Galton, who is married to Tom, a Labour candidate. Dione travels to Russia with Donald Maclean, a man who has assassinated a reactionary politician; Donald coincidentally looks so much like her brother that he travels on his passport. The narrative of their journey to the Soviet Union is explicitly shaped by socialist propaganda. Mitchison believed that Soviet communism offered the best model yet witnessed of a society devoid of gender bias, although she was critical of Soviet totalitarianism. In this way, Mitchison's writing differs from other propagandistic travelogues such as Leon Feuchtwanger's *Moscow 1937: My Visit Described for My Friends*, and Ivor Montagu's 'The U.S.S.R. Month By Month' section of the *Left Book Club News*, which were often dismissive about restrictions on liberties under the Soviet regime, and of which Mitchison would have

been aware as a reader of Left Book Club publications.[36] During her stay, Dione follows in Mitchison's footsteps and visits maternity homes and an abortion clinic, and meets single, working mothers who are proud of their private lives. She also meets young female engineers, radio operators, and heavy labourers. These characters speak in affected, politicised language, as does Dione, so that occasionally the polemical purpose of the text distorts plot and dialogue. Overall, the text explores, through Dione, Mitchison's own political anxieties in this period, such as her support of birth control and abortion, devotion to possibly violent and destructive revolution, and concern with how to align herself, as a middle-class wife, with working-class men and women.

The book was, and is, criticised for its confused, multiple political ends, its ham-fisted blending of contemporary realism and fantasy, and its erotic passages and detailed descriptions of contraception and abortion. Mitchison wrote to Olaf Stapledon that her usual publisher, Jonathan Cape, was asking for large sections of the book to be revised: 'I've sweated like a pig over it, and I just can't start working on it again. I don't know what to do. If it's bad, then all my standards of art are wrong'.[37] When it was finally published by Constable three years later, many sexual scenes were deleted without her permission. Elizabeth Maslen writes that *We Have Been Warned* destroyed the literary reputation Mitchison had achieved with her previous historical fiction, although, as I discuss in the other sections of this chapter, her historical novels also contain explicit depictions of sex and early contraceptive methods.[38]

In this novel, Dione is keen to be accepted by her husband's working-class constituents, and to overcome the repulsion she feels when visiting working-class homes, a tendency which Phyllis Lassner has described as a deliberate, 'ironic

[36] Leon Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937: My Visit Described for My Friends*, trans. by Irene Josephy (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), Left Book Club edition.
[37] Liverpool: Naomi Mitchison, letter to Olaf Stapledon, no date, item HIIa/20.
[38] See Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 145.

juxtaposition of snobbery and socialist sentiments'.[39] Lassner argues against Q.D. Leavis' irritation with Mitchison's authoritative class position and indicates that 'Mitchison is being self-critical in her portrait of the Galtons, and so portrays them as realizing that for their class, poverty is comfortably theoretical compared to others' material privations'.[40] One of the relationships which concerns Dione is with Idris Pritchard, a worker she meets whilst assisting her husband on his election campaign. Dione wants to befriend Idris, but he is angered by her paternalistic desire to help him better himself. One night when Dione visits Idris' flat, he rapes her. After the attack, Dione decides not to report the attack either to the police or her husband, and instead tries to rationalise the assault in terms of his class hatred, so that it becomes an act she can understand and forgive. Lassner reads the attack as a 'dystopic war of sex and class. In Mitchison's warning, this is a war that will produce no victory, only the emergence of fascism'.[41] Lassner's reading of Dione's conclusions is that 'her upper-class status provides neither protection nor connectedness, for it has both implicated and targeted her in her violation'.[42] My analysis agrees that Dione's class position informs Idris' targeting of her, however I will also extend previous critical discussion of the novel's sexual politics to illustrate that, as in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, the violation of the female protagonist is a problematic by-product of Mitchison's determination to link woman's sexuality with her public role.

Dione quickly puts the attack behind her, and realises its political implications. Throughout the novel she has dreaded rape as a result of the violent revolution that, as a socialist, she may be required to endorse. This fear is overcome, because Dione emerges from her attack more committed to revolution than ever: she realises that only

[39] Lassner, *British Women Writers*, 76.
[40] Lassner, *British Women Writers*, 76. See also Leavis, 'Lady Novelists', 112-132, which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.
[41] Lassner, *British Women Writers*, 81.
[42] Lassner, *British Women Writers*, 81.

social upheaval will prevent further working-class rage, and she has endured the worst of that rage and now has no more to fear. However, in the dystopic vision of the near-future that Dione experiences at the end of the novel, she reacts differently to the fore-knowledge that reactionary, fascistic soldiers may rape her teenage daughter, Morag, who is also a committed socialist. This attack, although identical to the one against Dione, is portrayed as unforgivable, because committed against a young woman and also because it is not committed by a frustrated, angry member of the Left. One rape is excused by the text, but the other is not. Lassner argues that 'in Dione's vision, the brutality of a fascist junta becomes the mirror image of her rape by the Communist worker',[43] but my reading positions the first rape as a particularly violent and shocking example of Mitchison's tendency to use sexual activity, especially women's, to bridge gaps between the working-class and socialist members of the upper classes, and to be necessary for social change.

The text is clear that the attack on Dione was horrific for her, whilst simultaneously reading the rape in political terms:

> She discovered that this jerking which was going on still in her body and mind was herself sobbing [...] God, how beastly, god, god. And all quite real. It has happened. Happened to me. Happened - for ever. Whatever else I think and imagine it will never not have happened. All the rest of my life to have my skin feeling, my mind feeling [...] It wasn't being a comrade, it wasn't kindness, he wasn't Donald, he turned into a horrible, blind, hurting animal [...] oh, his cruel hairy legs, his sharp knees digging into me.....
>
> She chucked her head about wildly, wanting to bang it into something, stop it remembering. And then she felt like nothing but vomiting.[44]

However, because the experience is quickly and simply assimilated into her political knowledge (a few moments after the attack 'the feel of her body was beginning to change. It was mostly in her mind now that she felt this sickening shame and anger'[45]), it becomes merely one more incident of revolutionary sexual life encountered during her

[43] Lassner, *British Women Writers,* 82.
[44] Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (London: Constable, 1935), 413-414.
[45] *Warned*, 414.

politicisation. When she meets Idris ten days later at a rally, she realises that 'she didn't seem to mind his touching her at all now, didn't mind reminding him or herself of what had passed'.[46] In an earlier example of Dione's politicised sexual life, she offers to have sex with Donald Maclean, as part of her open marital arrangement and because she, like Mitchison, believes that a 'good' socialist ought to share herself. Donald deserts the nervous, aristocratic Dione and tells her the next morning that 'I found a Russian girl, a working girl like I am a working man, and she did want me and I slept with her last night'.[47] Although Dione is attracted to Donald, she does not appear to make her offer out of desire so much as a wish to help Donald with his own sexual needs. Dione's act is characterised as partially self-sacrificial in nature. Later in the text, she unselfishly encourages her husband Tom's affair with Oksana, a young Soviet radio operator. Dione allows her husband freedom from monogamy which she never fully realises for herself. At the end of the novel, Dione discovers she is pregnant with Tom's child, their sixth. She considers having an abortion because that would be more socially responsible than a large family ('I haven't got the right to when people at Marshbrook Ridge haven't got enough food and clothes for theirs'[48]), but in the end decides to keep the baby. Her internal political debates do not lead her to act against her monogamous and maternal instincts. Dione emerges as a character who is able to rationalise a personal version of socialism, but does not always follow the unconventional sexual and reproductive behaviours of which she approves. Men, such as Tom and Donald, embrace the socialist ideal of free love which the text endorses, but Dione, by choice, conforms to more traditional expectations for the behaviour of a wife and mother. This includes acceptance of men's sexual demands, no matter how violent; as a good Socialist woman, Dione is expected to put Idris' angry needs ahead of her own security.

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[46] *Warned*, 458.
[47] *Warned*, 277.
[48] *Warned*, 491.

Mitchison debated the extent to which pregnancy and childbirth were forms of labour, and despaired that even in the Soviet Union women's sexual health concerns were treated as secrets.[49] Dione's choice of motherhood over abortion is neither devalued nor represented as a political failure; she and Tom debate the pregnancy so that her eventual choice is an informed one. Progressive though Dione's sexual arguments may be, her situation is nevertheless gendered and therefore emerges as ultimately different from that of socialist men. For her rapist, sex is an act of revenge; for Tom and Donald, it is both a political act between themselves and women workers, and also an act of erotic pleasure. Dione's sexuality requires her placement in a sacrificial role by comparison: she shares her body as an act of socialist generosity, or else justifies to herself its use as an object of violent attack. Despite the text's arguments for open sexual relationships as an avoidance of personal ownership, unequal gender politics seem to inform the sexual lives of Mitchison's male and female characters. Only Soviet women are outside of the unequal contract and enjoy sex as an erotic experience on equal terms with men. Changed cultural attitudes towards contraception and abortion allow them this freedom so that Mitchison's utopian U.S.S.R. emerges as the only location in which such equality is possible. For Dione, and the female characters of Mitchison's two other long novels of the 1930s, sex is, for women, an act with different political ramifications than for men. In *The Blood of the Martyrs*, the idea that socialist women should use sex to connect with others is rendered in terms that are moral as well as political, because grounded in a Christian ideology that relates communal sexuality to the idea of agape, or the communal love-feast.[50]

[49] See Edinburgh: typescript journal of a visit to Russia, 9-10.
[50] See Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London: Virago, 1997), 66.

The Blood of the Martyrs (1939)

Like *We Have Been Warned*, Mitchison's long novel *The Blood of the Martyrs* engages with the threat of Fascism. In it, she returns to her typical historical genre. This allegorical text represents the Emperor Nero as a Hitler-esque dictator, with early Christians who are fed to the lions in a spectacular mass murder in the final chapters of the novel, standing in for the Jews and Communists persecuted under the German Nazi regime. By referring to Nero's policy of 'extermination', Mitchison ensures that her anti-Nazi subtext is easy to recognise. She presents the early church as a loosely-connected group of underground believers; their secret meetings, which may be betrayed to the police by neighbours, add to the novel's atmosphere of fear and suspicion, which Mitchison witnessed herself in Nazi-occupied areas and reported in her journalistic *Vienna Diary*.[51] Her early Christians are proto-socialists, and she represents Christ as a saviour of workers and the religion as a 'brotherhood' of equals which threatened the wealthy capitalists of Nero's Rome. This is a version of Christianity which Mitchison increasingly depicted in her writing during the 1930s, including her children's fiction, which I will discuss in Chapter 6. She believed strongly in a utopian version of what Christianity ought to have been which contrasted with the wealth-driven, patriarchal religion that developed during later European history.

As well as being anti-Fascist, *The Blood of the Martyrs* also contains a critique of the modern Church's attitudes towards class, poverty, and sexuality. Mitchison's arguments reiterate her theories about a relationship between sex and socialism, and present sex as a source of mutual comfort and understanding between socialist Christians. However, the text also relates sexuality to the appalling behaviour of both the proto-fascist Roman leaders as well as the spectators of their Games, who watched

[51] See Naomi Mitchison, *Naomi Mitchison's Vienna Diary* (London: Gollancz, 1936).

the lion-feedings and were thus complicit in their brutality. In this way the morals of her novel present similar contradictions to those which affect the judgements against rapists from the Right and the Left in *We Have Been Warned.*

Mitchison's most direct critiques of puritanical attitudes towards sexuality are expressed through the character of Lalage, a dancer and a devoted Christian. Lalage is sexualised in an early scene when she performs at a Roman dinner party with one breast 'professionally bared'.[52] She fends off the advances of influential men at the party, and impresses Beric, a Briton prince. Beric's slow conversion to Christianity, which forms the main plot of the novel, is characterised by a rejection of the capitalist spirit of the ruling class of which he is a part, and ends in his murder at Nero's games. Within this narrative, Mitchison explores the role of sexuality in Christian and Roman life, and is particularly interested in the extent to which erotic desire informs shared political experience and group morality.

The narrative specifically debates the role of sexuality in Christian life. Lalage is revealed to have once slept with a fellow Christian as an act of 'charity: not a sin, but a healing'. The man's class position is crucial to her reasoning:

> Once Lalage had met one of the brothers, a Syrian kitchen slave, oldish and ugly and scarred, in the small market near her room. And, seeing him look at her once openly and hungrily before he looked away, she was suddenly aware that he had not had a woman for months, perhaps for years, would never be allowed by his master to marry, did not even have the pennies for one of those worn-out, cellar-haunting things that had been women once. So she asked him back to her room and gave him what he needed, besides food, and what little wine she had by her. And she got one of her neighbours to mend his sandals. She thought nothing of it; she was so sorry for him that she thought of him afterwards kindly.[53]

Although Lalage and other young women in her local meeting felt that the action was just, the deacons and several others were offended by her behaviour. She realises that 'she mustn't just trust to be moved by the Spirit, but must always take care of the weaker

[52] Naomi Mitchison, *The Blood of the Martyrs* (London: Constable, 1939), 14.
[53] *Blood*, 111.

brethren, the ones who are easily scandalised and upset, easily diverted from the main thing to little, personal things'.[54] Later, Argas, a homosexual slave, argues that his fellow Christians who are against homosexuality are actually following old Jewish laws rather than Christ's rationality of love: 'Jesus wouldn't let himself get tied up with any man or woman because He meant His love to be for all'.[55] Argas recounts a story told by an old woman which further associates Christ, and Christianity, with sexual love:

> She was on her way north, telling about Jesus in the new Churches. She'd been in love with Him, and He'd been kind, the way it still made her happy thinking about it, but not different to how He was to all who were in the Kingdom with Him. I think that old lady must have been very beautiful then; maybe it was difficult for Him not to love her more than the others.[56]

Mitchison's criticism of the modern Church is extended when Lalage and several other Christians are visited by Paul of Tarsus in prison. While Paul composes his letter to the Ephesians, Lalage warns him to:

> take care, Paul [...] or you'll write once too often. I tell you how it'll be. You write a letter for some particular Church that's got its own difficulties, but that letter's going to get kept just because it was you that wrote it, and some day someone's bound to find it and say you've left directions for how all Churches are to be, always, everywhere![57]

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a significant one in the context of the politics of *The Blood of the Martyrs*, because it advises wives 'to be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord', slaves to 'obey your masters with fear and trembling', and the Church that 'fornication and impurity of any kind [...] must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints [...] Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person [...] has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God'.[58] By writing a woman's fictional relationship with Paul, Mitchison emphasises the role of women in the early period of Christianity. She also implies the need of the modern Church to adapt to its changing

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[54] *Blood*, 112.
[55] *Blood*, 208.
[56] *Blood*, 208-209.
[57] *Blood*, 342.
[58] Ephesians 5.22, 6.5, and 5.3-5.

social and historical context by figuring Lalage as a Church deacon, a leader in prison, and later a martyr to her religion and to Mitchison's proto-socialism. This aspect of Mitchison's novel continues her feminist commitment to a 'reinterpretation of Western history and thought' which continues to interest feminist critics.[59] However, Lalage's sexuality is characterised by the politicised spirit of giving with which Dione acted in *We Have Been Warned.* Lalage experiences erotic pleasure during group worship, and enjoys being kissed by Beric when he visits her in prison, but she interprets these exchanges as chiefly 'sign[s] of what we want to be towards one-another'[60] as Christians. Because Lalage is such a heroic character, the text endorses her views, but always with the understanding that not everyone is ready to think as she does. Lalage's thinking suggests that all Christians ought to share their bodies with one another, but only a female is depicted as giving her body for moral and ideological reasons, and it is clear that although Lalage apparently had some previous sexual experience, she has derived no erotic pleasure from her encounter with the slave.

Mitchison's novel does not require the same mindset during male sexual behaviour, and thus contains a sexual double standard. As Beric's thinking about class difference is influenced by Christianity, he becomes attracted to Argas, a Christian slave, and they kiss: 'it was meant to be a light kiss, but turned out to be hardly that. Both of their hearts had been set beating'.[61] Whilst Mitchison's descriptions of their relationship are not as erotic as homosexual love scenes in the Spartan sections of *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, her inclusion of a romance between two men is a significant challenge to contemporary attitudes towards male homosexuality, particularly within the Church. Because Beric and Argas' romance overcomes class and religious divisions, the relationship is as highly politicised as those included in *We Have Been Warned.* Class

[59] Jill Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography* (London: Pandora Press, 1990), 74.
[60] *Blood*, 347.
[61] *Blood*, 205.

politics are explicit in Argas' understanding of their relationship, although, unlike Lalage, Argas responds with equivalent desire to his lover:

> It all started when you kissed me, and I liked it, and couldn't say so. There wasn't any harm in the kiss, but it set off everything else. Pride and anger. They woke up. My own pride partly, and partly - oh, the pride of being one of the under-dogs. I wasn't going over to *you*! And at that I didn't think of you as a person - as Beric; you turned into part of a thing - part of the masters. And I was a thing, too - part of the slaves.[62]

Although both men are taking risks in being together, because of their class difference and Argas' Christian and socialist philosophy, they negotiate a way to regard each other as equals. The imbalance between sacrificial giver and needy receiver which characterises Lalage's sexual relationships is not present here, nor is the notion of sacrifice and feminine, almost maternal healing. The love between the two men is more nearly representative of the idealised love between the classes which Mitchison proposes in *We Have Been Warned.*

In *We Have Been Warned*, sex is a presented as a possible catalyst for the ideological goals of the socialist movement. Sex is not such an ideological necessity within *The Blood of the Martyrs*, but eroticism is depicted as an important positive effect of intense communal experience. When Beric is first admitted to Lalage's Church, he takes part in a foot-washing ceremony which has a similar political effect to the sexual acts which were beneficial to overcoming class barriers in *We Have Been Warned.* The sacrament is a symbolic retraction of Beric's former sense of superiority over the working-class and slave members of his new religious community:

> Gravely Manasses sat down on the bench and Beric knelt and undid his sandals. It was the hell of a queer mixed feeling. He'd never be the same again, never be able to be a master. A kind of panic caught him and he stopped, holding on to the edges of the basin, his head down [...] Manasses was the deacon of the Church. Doing this for him, he had accepted it, accepted the superior position of Manasses, who was, all the same, the old Manasses who waited on him at table.[63]

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[62] *Blood*, 206-207.
[63] *Blood*, 193.

The sacraments and meetings are eroticised, again challenging puritanical notions of a proper Christian mindset. During the foot-washing, a young court slave, Phaeon, looked up at Beric 'with a face of sheer delight. If only he could have done a dance like that, Beric thought suddenly, he'd have had us all after him!'[64] At Beric's first communion, he watches the others pass their shared cup around, experiencing:

> the same kind of excitement he had got out of the feet-washing. All these mouths were coming to his mouth. He had never thought deeply about eating and drinking, about the mouth taking food and giving love and wisdom [...] All those lips on the cup and at last his own. He took it with hands that shook a little, and himself said the Name and set his mouth where the others had been.[65]

The narrator describes Lalage's physical sensations during an earlier meeting, which echo the spiritual, and also vaguely sexual, excitement Beric experiences during communion:

> Sometimes there would be such happiness and understanding, such acute temporary experience of the Kingdom, that one or another must stand up and sing or dance [...] Men and women would kiss one another, and often Lalage would throw herself down beside some man, holding to him in heavy delight, and sometimes when it had ebbed away she would wonder how it was that they could have lain in one another's arms so strangely, without the delight ever localising or becoming the other thing which she knew so well.[66]

Rather startlingly, and for reasons which I will analyse below, this sexual feeling is repeated in the reactions of individual, proto-Fascistic Romans and the mass of spectators during instances of torture and murder, particularly during Nero's games. Flavia, a Senator's daughter, finds the atmosphere of violence to be thrilling, commenting that recent arrests of Christians were 'as exciting as the Arena: throats cut!'.[67] When she sees Beric after he has murdered the man who betrayed his Christian friends to the police, she gives 'a little gasp of pleasure and excitement, then suddenly caught at his wrist: "You've got blood on your hand too! And on your tunic! And there

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[64] *Blood*, 193.
[65] *Blood*, 217.
[66] *Blood*, 110-111.
[67] *Blood*, 223.

at your kneel" She pressed her face quickly against the hand. "Yes, you are a man!"'.[68] On the day of the games, the crowd gathers to watch the Christians being fed to the lions after they are wrongly found guilty of setting fire to the city. The expectations of spectators, both citizens and slaves, are narrated in the same sexual terms:

> not just half a dozen murderers might be killed off and eaten in ten minutes at the other end of the Arena, but tens - hundreds! - and women as well: *girls*. You'd see them ripped up, everything torn off them, and with so many there'd be bound to be some close for you to see properly.[69]

A murderous brothel scene precedes the Christian's fight with the lions. Mitchison writes the chapter about the day of the games in the second person, from the perspective of a Roman spectator, thereby rendering the reader complicit in the day's activities: 'you hear the beasts that have been kept hungry for to-day, roaring and howling and angry, all to give you a good show, and you know what they'll get for their dinners!'[70] This narrator observes the apparently erotic effect one performance has on a Roman woman who 'threw herself back simply bathed in sweat: her maid had to fan her for ten minutes'.[71] The crowd reaches a focused, sexualised frenzy as the Christians are brought out:

> As the hot air, laden with other than floral scents, lifted towards the top blocks of the hourly close and sweating thousands, the dream that they had come with and which was the reality of the Circus, had become more and more charged, breaking down all common barriers, so that men, and women as well, abruptly emitted spoken desires towards actions of an extreme and final kind on human bodies opened and wriggling and twitching either in perhaps assumed pleasure or in certainly genuine terror and pain and death.[72]

Mitchison unexpectedly switches tactics during the murder of the Christians. After having happily watched an entire day of killings of criminals and slaves, individuals in the crowd recognise friends in the group of Christians and begin to protest: 'if all those Christians weren't the set of wicked murderers they were made out to be, well -

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[68] *Blood*, 225-226.
[69] *Blood*, 288-289.
[70] *Blood*, 439.
[71] *Blood*, 444.

well, then it was the same as *you* murdering *them*'.[73] The stage manager notices a 'considerable disturbance' in the crowd which he blames on the Christians for 'not looking like the criminals they were'. He decides that next time, he will:

> sew up the lot in beast skins and have them chased by wild dogs! That was an idea. But this lot - they'd hardly run at all. It was as if - as if they wanted to die. So that hundreds of these fools who were too stupid to see past what was exactly under their noses, would start disbelieving what had been told them, shifting the blame for everything they happened not to like off the Christians and onto - the Master of the World and his friends.[74]

The stage manager recognises that 'all the same, thousands had taken it the right way and were now shouting for more. Thousands'.[75] However, by suggesting that some members of the crowd are brave enough to protest after having built up the crowd throughout the chapter as a bloodthirsty, unthinking mob, Mitchison indicates that there is hope for the situation which has arisen in Nazi Germany. She implicates her readers in the violence, but ultimately provides them with a way out, by providing a few sensible and courageous protestors whose views are endorsed by the text.

The terms in which Mitchison presents both Christian and proto-Fascist group feeling are startlingly similar. The eroticised group violence of the proto-Fascists appears grotesque, instead of beautiful or spiritual, but it is important to consider to what extent Mitchison differentiates between the sexual feelings aroused by socialist love and Fascistic rage. One group practises ritual sharing, the other ritual extermination, but the thrill they receive from these actions is of a similar nature. Mitchison separates the two groups by indicating that the Christians experience a sexual thrill based on the successful achievement of political praxis, whilst the mass Roman reaction lacks a comparative ideological basis, and is driven by emotion and physical desire. This difference reflects a critical impression of Hitler's arguments which was

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[72] *Blood*, 451.
[73] *Blood*, 456.
[74] *Blood*, 456.
[75] *Blood*, 456.

already current in the 1930s; Storm Jameson's dystopia *In the Second Year* (1936), discussed in Chapter 7, presents a Fascist leader who is a master of emotional manipulation but lacking a sound philosophy. Implicit within Mitchison's sexual imagery is the warning that because all types and classes of people are subject to the same desires, none should feel immune to the persuasions of a dictator of some kind; this is also reinforced by the erotic thrill felt by slaves at the games, who were watching the murders of members of their own class and were aligned in that moment with their own ruling-class oppressors.

Rape is not explicitly represented as a political weapon of the oppressors in this text as it is in *We Have Been Warned*, but Mitchison's association of sexuality with both right and left suggests that sexuality and eroticism are as much a part of political life as they are of private relationships, thus disagreeing acutely with Winifred Holtby's call to challenge the primacy of sexuality. Mitchison, in contrast to Holtby, is interested in sexual desire as a potentially powerful mode of manipulation, and an experience that binds groups together. In *The Blood of the Martyrs*, sexuality is an important aspect of individual and group morality and psychology, but is still enacted differently by Christian/socialist men and women. Amongst the bloodthirsty, fascistic Romans, men and women are depicted as equally capable of sadistic pleasure. Potentially conservative politics inform her characterisation of Lalage's sexual relationships as acts of generosity and idealistic socialism: the man she sleeps with apparently enjoys sexual pleasure and relief with her, without any indication that her spiritual feeling is reciprocated. Mitchison's socialism thus contains a contradictory thread which permits such noble giving from women, whilst male characters feel desire, and whilst between two men, shared desire and religious praxis result in equal regard for the other. Gender difference continues to characterise the politics of her characters' sexualities in this novel. It is in her earliest long novel of the 1930s, *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, that Mitchison

comes closest to realising goals of sexuality which are as challenging in their feminism as in their socialism, because they go further in transcending difference between men, women, and groups of different social positions and nationalities. This seems to have been more easily achieved in *The Corn King* because its pre-Christian historical setting, and the early 1930s period of its composition, means Mitchison avoids the more complex and urgent religious and ideological associations which influence the moral politics of her novels written during later stages of Hitler's campaigns.

Conclusions

Reading these three texts in comparison, it is possible to see how Mitchison's understanding of a relationship between sex and politics developed during the 1930s towards the socialist morality she was arguing at the end of the decade. The role of sexuality in Mitchison's life at Carradale during the war has been documented by her biographers and in her Mass Observation diary, published in an edited version entitled *Among You Taking Notes* (1985). As mentioned above, she was interested in forming a socialist community of workers at Carradale, and was concerned that she, and her working-class neighbours, would never be able to dismantle her identity as the 'woman from the Big House'[76] in order to achieve that equality. Her long novels of the 1930s indicate the progression of her ideas, from the responsible sexuality which was fostered alongside men's and women's erotic desire in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, towards the gendered ideal of a correct moral mindset for female socialists during the sexual scenes of *We Have Been Warned* and *The Blood of the Martyrs*, in which female erotic desire is no longer present.

[76] Alison Smith applies this identity to Mitchison in her article, 'The Woman From the Big House: The Autobiographical Writings of Naomi Mitchison', *Chapman*, 10.1-2 (Summer 1987).

Gill Plain's analysis of the sexual politics of Mitchison's wartime novel, *The Bull Calves* (1947), is also applicable to my assessment of the relationship between socialism and sexuality in her novels of the 1930s. Plain describes Mitchison's dream of 'small self-governing communities that typified her idea of true democracy',[77] an ideal which Mitchison attempted to live at Carradale. By the start of the Second World War, Plain argues, Mitchison's ideal community was 'more than just a method of social organisation. Primarily it was a state of mind, and this idea is symbolised by the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven'.[78] Mitchison's Christian concept of love is visible in *The Blood of the Martyrs*, and is even referenced as early as *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*. Before King Kleomenes and his Spartan army are massacred, the men, many of whom are lovers, share a final meal which is modelled upon the Christian Last Supper.[79] This specific scene is anachronistic and so proto-Christian, but indicative of the moral and spiritual turn her socialism, and her related sexual ideals, would take later in the decade. Plain describes Mitchison's belief in 'the good' and the loving Kingdom of Heaven as concepts 'that stand outside the corrupt bargaining ethos of capitalist society. They cannot be bought, they can only be given. As such they form a potentially radical excess, transgressing the boundaries of exchange'.[80] In her analysis of *The Bull Calves*, Plain refers to Hélène Cixous' different characterisations of masculine and feminine giving, distinguishing between episodes of masculine 'gifts-that-take', 'stemming from the economy of capitalism', and feminine 'open-handed giving'.[81] Cixous argues that all of the difference between forms of giving 'lies in the why and how of the gift, in the values that gesture of giving affirms, causes to circulate; in the type of profit the giver

[77] Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 151.
[78] Plain, *Women Writers*, 151.
[79] Montefiore writes a more complete assessment of the Christian mythology within this scene: see *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s*, 167.
[80] Plain, *Women Writers*, 152.
[81] Plain, *Women Writers*, 152.

draws from the gift and the use to which he or she puts it'.[82] The 'why and how' of the sexual sharing included within Mitchison's depictions of socialist relationships differentiates male and female experiences of sex: women share themselves with a different mindset than do their male partners. Women's charitable acts of love are 'experiences of the capacity for the other [... and] of non-negative change brought about by the other'[83] and are thus differentiated from the immediate and temporary physical desires of their male lovers. Cixous' and Plain's arguments concentrate on heterosexual relationships and overlook the pairs of male lovers who transcend class difference and achieve identification with the other in the novels discussed in this chapter. However, their discussions are applicable to the unequal heterosexual relationships which Mitchison depicts by writing women who, because of lingering traditional expectations for women's monogamy, give of themselves differently than do their male counterparts.

The sacrificial sexuality of 'good socialists' such as Dione and Lalage, and of the generous Spring Queen, Erif, is a disruptive, transgressive gift, because it challenges taboos and renders politics a private matter in which revolutionary change may occur between individuals. In her *Moral Basis of Politics* and elsewhere, Mitchison argues that any 'good socialist' will share his or her body with worthy people of all classes, indicating that she believes male and female socialists ought to participate in this exchange. However, in her fiction, class and power differences are only worked out through specifically women's giving of their bodies for political purposes; even socialist men do not seem to approach sex with the same attitude. Spartan male soldiers in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen,* the British Labour leaders killed at the end of *We Have Been Warned*, and the Christians massacred in *The Blood of the Martyrs*, are required to give their bodies

[82] Hélène Cixous, 'The Newly Born Woman', in *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. by Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994), 43.
[83] Hélène Cixous, 'Extreme Fidelity', 135.

in another, highly significant, way to their cause. For women, the equivalent sacrifice and violation on their bodies is rape. These dual forms of sacrifice continue to segregate masculine and feminine political positions, with women continually sexualised.

Plain also argues that Cixous' 'distinction between the gift and the proper' is useful to an understanding of Mitchison's later politics. She writes that:

> The realm of the proper is the realm of the masculine subject, from which women as other are effectively debarred. Yet, the very instability of female subjectivity, the lack of an own-self in which to garner possessions of power, gives woman a flexibility that makes her giving an ongoing journey rather than an act of recuperation. This is the realm of the gift.[84]

I would extend her discussion to include the texts discussed in this chapter. Women's sexual giving in the context of open marriage and non-exclusive relationships is intended to counteract the capitalist notions of possession inherent in traditional, monogamous marriage. By giving themselves, even if partially to satisfy their own physical desires, their sexual acts are part of a process of socialist change which will eventually extend to the rest of society. However, the men with whom Dione, Lalage, and Erif have sex are generally either powerful members of the ruling class, who, although lacking the appropriate socialist mindset, experiment sexually with working-class women, or else rapists whose desires are to possess and conquer. Plain argues that by the time Mitchison wrote *The Bull Calves*, the masculine and feminine realms of giving were recognised and criticised within her logic; in the earlier novels which feature in this chapter, however, Mitchison does not appear fully, critically aware of the contradictions in her depictions of socialist sexuality and the sacrificial role of women within her texts.

As characters who survive rape, and as women who are in other cases active in their own sexual pursuits and frank about their own desires, Mitchison's female protagonists are empowered and politically-aware women, and satisfy her personal

[84] Plain, *Women Writers*, 152.

feminist requirements. However, the sacrificial nature of particularly Dione and Lalage's sexuality, lacking erotic desire, positions those characters as traditionally feminine, required to nurture and comfort men with their bodies. There is no indication in her fiction that this role is due to essential biological difference: homosexual men are depicted as capable of mutual comforting and support. Nevertheless, despite Mitchison's desire to write women into history as active agents, in *The Blood of the Martyrs* and *We Have Been Warned* she continues to regard women as essentially creative forces, who use their bodies to generate socialism and understanding in a way that differs from the mutual respect and equality that arises between pairs of male lovers.

Male and female patterns of love and sexuality, then, remain separate and different in Mitchison's long novels of the 1930s. She achieves the fullest exploration of a woman's equal sexuality in the quest narrative of Erif Der in the earliest of the three novels. Later in the decade, her socialism appears to overshadow her earlier feminism so that whilst she continues to write sexuality into politics and history, Mitchison also focuses on challenges to class difference which do not allow room for further explorations of women's physical desires. Although these novels feature frank depictions of male homosexual love and physical bonds between mothers and children, Mitchison does not explore alternative, full sexual relationships for her female characters. Her female characters focus their sexual and political energies on men, so that a compulsory female heterosexuality also clouds her attempts at writing progressive sexual societies. Mitchison's progressive, feminist desire to depict domesticity, private sexual relationships, and mothering as political and potentially revolutionary acts was admirable, but also ultimately essentialist in its dependence on traditional models of gender difference. That 'right' sexual and political relationships are achieved quickly because of women's sexual behaviours suggests that, as Plain argues of *The Bull Calves*, 'constructive partnership between a man and a woman' is possible in Mitchison's

socialism, but that 'in her perception it is women who bear the responsibility - largely due to the incapacity of men'.[85] Mitchison's men are unable to act as women do partly because their political commitments will not overcome the jealousy they feel about sharing their women with other men, but, more crucially, because the texts do not require men to think about private relationships as politically as do women. Men continue to have separate homosocial and homosexual spaces, as well as the public political and military realm, in which to explore equal relationships between the classes, whilst the domestic, private sphere remains the domain of women's exploration. The socialist politics of Mitchison's long novels, then, contains a conservative gender essentialism which is troubling to a non-essentialist feminist analysis of those texts.

[85] Plain, *Women Writers*, 156.

5.

'The long arm of discipline': the spectacle of the working class in Winfred Holtby's *South Riding*

Marion Shaw has commented on the formal and thematic similarities between Winifred Holtby's posthumously published novel, *South Riding* (1936) and George Eliot's social problem novel, *Middlemarch.*[1] Anthea Trodd has expanded this reading of *South Riding*: she agrees that in its use of Victorian narrative structures and its detailed fictionalisation of a single, contemporary community, *South Riding* is similar to *Middlemarch*, but also refers to Holtby's novel as 'a topical fiction of fact'.[2] This description classes the novel with contemporary realist novels, historical fictions, family sagas, and rural writing which typically included panoramic, heavily-detailed reconstructions of community life.[3] Holtby based her fictional Yorkshire community and its troubles on information taken from the discarded notes of her mother, an East Riding county councillor. So similar were the novel's details to those of debates, crises and persons in the East Riding in the early 1930s that Mrs Alice Holtby, fearing charges of slander, tried to influence Vera Brittain's editing of the book, and later resigned from the council. For Trodd, Winifred Holtby's attempt to mirror the social realities of all classes within a single community means that 'the novel works through saturation in detail [...] in the spirit of Storm Jameson's call for documentary fiction'.[4] Jameson argued in 1937 that middle-class writers needed to practise documentary-style reportage and record the facts and details

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[1] See Marion Shaw: *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999), 238; '"Alien Experiences": Virginia Woolf, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain in the 1930s' in Keith Williams and Steven Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After,* (London: Longman, 1997), 49; 'Feminism and Fiction Between the Wars: Winifred Holtby and *Virginia Woolf*' in Moira Monteith, ed., *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 187.

[2] Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945* (London: Longman, 1998), 116.

[3] Trodd, *Women's Writing*, 101.

[4] Trodd, *Women's Writing,* 101.

of working-class life if they were ever to achieve a British socialist literature.[5] Jameson believed that the first half of George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) was the best example to date of documentary writing, although she felt that Orwell's injection of personal reflection in the second half of the text undermined its objectivity. In this chapter, I will build upon previous critics' discussions of *South Riding* in terms of contextual debates about socialist realism, documentary writing, and the middle-class perspective. I will also employ useful critical terminology borrowed from film theory and cultural studies to develop a new reading of Holtby's text.[6] By examining different ways in which Holtby, like many documentary writers, represented the working-class as 'spectacles', to use Guy Debord's terminology, I will demonstrate how Holtby's novel, whilst achieving the documentary detail discussed by Trodd, also participates in the contemporary tendency to observe working-class lives through an authoritative middle-class gaze. As I will illustrate, Holtby manages to partially, but not completely, challenge the moral authority of that gaze through her depiction of the protagonist, Sarah Burton. In this way, the chapter will address the Maroula Joannou's concern over Holtby's absence from critical histories of socialist writing.[7] By reading *South Riding* within the context of 1930s documentary texts, I will demonstrate that Holtby's novel is similar in its images and language to other Left-wing, spectacular representations of the working class of the same period, such as those of Mass Observation.

[5] See Storm Jameson, 'New Documents', *Fact* 4 (July 1937); reprinted in Patrick Deane, ed., *History in Our Hands: A Critical Anthology of Writings on Literature, Culture and Politics from the 1930s* (London: Leicester University Press/Cassell, 1998).

[6] *South Riding* was adapted into film by director Victor Saville in 1938; see Marion Shaw's detailed discussion of the film in *The Clear Stream*, 262-265.

[7] See Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change, 1918-1938* (Oxford: Berg Press, 1995), 59.

The politics of *South Riding* (1936)

South Riding concludes with a statement of Sarah's new commitment to the humanitarian politics of equality which Holtby herself espoused: 'We are members, one of another'.[8] Holtby's belief in the interconnectedness of individuals was expressed in her commitment to Old Feminism, which stressed equality between men and women; Holtby felt that New Feminism's focus on women's difference was limiting and distracting.[9] She claimed feminism only out of temporary necessity, and wrote: 'I am a feminist [...] because I dislike everything that feminism implies. I desire an end of the whole business [...] the suggestions of sex warfare, the very name of feminism'.[10] Joannou indicates that, by contrast, in Vera Brittain's writing about working-class fellow nurses in the First World War, Brittain's language shows segregationist tendencies, whilst Holtby, writing of nurses in the same period, 'felt no need to create artificial barriers'[11]. In her writing and her political activism, Holtby was committed to her claim that 'we might, perhaps, consider individuals as individuals, not primarily members of this or that race, sex and status'.[12] The complex plot structure of *South Riding* ruptures such boundaries and emphasises similarities and links between characters of different social classes and genders, although as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, the novel's challenge to notions of difference is not as thorough as its humanitarian conclusion seems to suggest.

The novel is structured around individual plots woven together through chapter and book headings which delineate the themes of public life managed by the local council, such as 'Education', 'Highways and Bridges', 'Public Health' and 'Mental

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[8] *South Riding*, 490.
[9] Shaw, in *The Clear Stream*, describes Old and New Feminism as 'Equalitarian' and 'Specialised', respectively (140).
[10] Winifred Holtby, letter to *Time and Tide*, 6 August 1926, 714.
[11] Joannou, *Ladies*, 39.
[12] Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilization* (London: John Lane/Bodley Head, 1934), 192.

Deficiency'. Each chapter and book of the novel contains themes and plots which echo those of other chapters and books, so that characters of different social classes and opposing political views are related within and across the many plot lines. In this way, the structure of Holtby's novel implies the text's, and Sarah's, eventual conclusion, 'We are members one of another', from the outset.

As I indicate in Chapter 1, the relationship between Robert Carne and Sarah Burton represents a difficult romance between two political opposites. Shaw writes:

> [Sarah] is of great interest thematically in her opposition to conservative forces, and the narrative of her love story is an important structuring device running through the novel's episodes, but is only one thread among several, contributing to the network of ideas in the novel rather than of prime interest in itself. Her presence is justified less on account of her emotional life than as a vantage point from which a social landscape can be viewed.[13]

As a progressive, socialist feminist, Sarah is surprised at her attraction to Carne, the aristocratic, paternalistic landowner. Shaw argues that Carne's physical appearance is rendered in conservative terms: he is a conventionally attractive romantic hero, dark, broody, and a figure of 'unmediated masculinity'.[14] Sarah's repeated amusement over his likeness to Mr Rochester indicates the text's awareness of its adherence to expectations for romantic fiction. Their pairing is another example of the novel's desire to create powerful links between disparate characters.

Carne dies during the novel, and Shaw reads his death as an indication that his political perspective is 'extinct'. The impending death from tuberculosis of the revolutionary labour leader, Joe Astell, may also be read as the 'death' of another political ideology which the South Riding cannot accommodate[15]. Both men's politics are outlived by Sarah's reformist socialism, and her desire to serve the entire community. Another political opponent, Alderman Snaith, is also victorious. Snaith is

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[13] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 242.
[14] Shaw, '"Alien Experiences"', 49.
[15] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 249.

manipulative, and a proto-fascist (as I discussed in Chapter 1), but his compulsion to improve the South Riding is as genuine as Sarah's, and as the novel ends by looking outward towards the threat of European militancy and Nazism, Snaith may serve as an opponent in Sarah's (imaginary) future.[16] Although Sarah's socialist ideals are ultimately espoused, the text also sees the merits in Astell's unionism and mourns the passing of Carne's way of life. This aspect of the novel may appear to undermine its potentially progressive stance, but its refusal to make an outright condemnation of aristocratic characters simply on the grounds of their class position is an appropriate conclusion to its humanitarian argument. In her first novel, *Anderby Wold* (1923) Holtby offered a similarly sympathetic view of the failing feudal class, representing her belief in the 'courage of those who, seeing the things they have given their lives to, passing, raise no hand to prevent the coming of the new, that may mean for the rest of the world salvation, but for themselves, and all they stand for, certain destruction'.[17]

Already the humanitarian politics of Holtby's novel complicate the socialist intent of the documentary writing demanded by Storm Jameson. Holtby attended the 1935 Paris Writer's Conference, as did Storm Jameson and Naomi Mitchison, and would have shared their interest in contemporary international debates about methods of socialist literature.[18] However, Peter Marks argues that outside of the 'politically engaged' periodicals of the time such as the *Left Review*, 'British writers were left largely unscorched by the flames of this ideological debate'.[19] Holtby, therefore, had not failed to meet the tenets of a defined method of socialist writing because none such existed in

[16] See Shaw, *The Clear Stream* (245) for a more detailed discussion of Snaith's intentions for the South Riding.
[17] Winifred Holtby, *Letters to a Friend*, Alice Holtby and Jean McWilliam, eds. (London: Collins, 1937), 56.
[18] See Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 51.
[19] Peter Marks, 'Illusion and Reality: The Spectre of Socialist Realism in Thirties Literature', in Williams and Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties*, 23.

Britain in the 1930s as it did in the Soviet Union. In such a methodological context, the sense of loss conveyed by Holtby's texts (for example, after the failure of Carne's Maythorpe Hall in *South Riding* and the Wold Farm in *Anderby Wold*) do not necessarily condemn Holtby's socialist, humanitarian arguments to failure, although it is most probably her interest in the perspective of the ruling classes that has prevented her from being read as a socialist writer on a par with documentarians such as George Orwell and Walter Greenwood. Her detailed depiction of the lives and perspectives of the many working-class characters in *South Riding* do, however, follow the socialist, documentary directives of Storm Jameson's 'New Documents' article, and accord with Valentine Cunningham's retrospective estimation that in order for 1930s texts to be classed as socialist realism they ought to be a 'mirror onto reality', written with 'linguistic ordinariness as opposed to self-conscious word mongering'.[20] *South Riding*, using conventional realist forms, adheres to Jameson's and Cunningham's requirements for documentary texts.

The novel is simultaneously progressive and traditional in its desire to overcome difference and appreciate characters as complex individuals. Holtby, as Shaw recognises, was keen to avoid propagandistic, simple polar constructions of Left/progressive and Right/traditional politics, indicating in newspaper articles that an equalitarian socialist society should have room for conservative opinion and varied degrees of Leftist thought.[21] Holtby's comments on *South Riding* indicate that she wanted to examine 'the complex tangle of motives prompting' political decisions.[22] In

[20] Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5. Andy Croft also identifies *South Riding* as a documentary novel, along with Jameson's *Mirror in Darkness* novels, in *Red Letter Days* (255).
[21] See 'Red Flags in London' and 'The Vegetarian Milliner' in Paul Berry and Alan Bishop, eds., *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1985).
[22] Winifred Holtby, *South Riding: An English Landscape* ([1936] London: Virago, 1999), xi.

South Riding, the characters who do the most to bring health care, improved housing and increased employment opportunities to the region are often driven not by socialist ideology, but by financial greed. The text's refusal to condemn all conservative perspectives, and its simultaneous inclusion of Astell's revolutionary (and possibly violent) Marxism, positions the novel in a dialogue between the competing points of view of how a 'socialist' literature should work in the 1930s. The critic and poet Stephen Spender debated whether or not the middle-class 'writer's way out [... is] the proletarianisation of all literature',[23] recognising the 'frustration' of the middle-class writer's obligation to 'break away from the known to the unknown (the bourgeoisie to the proletariat)'.[24] In another example of this period, Naomi Mitchison commented on the ambivalence that she felt about what Joannou refers to as the 'hypothesised socialist society to which [Mitchison] was committed in principle'.[25] Mitchison wrote that 'it will be damned uncomfortable, and I shall never any more have any of the things I like, hot baths and silk clothes and quiet and leisure and a good typewriter of my own'.[26]

Holtby's novel promotes the dissolution of boundaries between private individuals, communities and nations on its own terms, indicating her desire for a social revolution that 'avoid[s] the horrors of [...] insurrection' and explores a 'middle way' that is a constructive, not destructive, solution.[27] She accomplished one widely recognised purpose of socialist literature, acting as a 'mirror on to reality' by reporting the conditions of working class life. However, it is within these scenes of observation that Holtby is also most in danger of undermining her own attempts to challenge

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[23] Stephen Spender, 'The Left Wing Orthodoxy', *New Verse*, 31.2 (Autumn 1938), reprinted in Deane, ed., *History in Our Hands*, 221.
[24] Spender, 'The Left Wing Orthodoxy', 220.
[25] Maroula Joannou, 'The Woman Writer in the 1930s – on Not Being Mrs Giles of Durham City', in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 4.
[26] Naomi Mitchison, Letter to Edward Grant, 8 Sept (?) 1932, quoted in Joannou, 'The Woman Writer in the 1930s', 4.
[27] Winifred Holtby, 'Red Flags in London', *Testament of a Generation*, 177.

political and narrative hierarchies, demonstrating that the 'mirror' is problematic because clouded by class objectivity. *South Riding* reinforces boundaries between the classes in its use of 'spectacular' depictions of working-class characters under the policing gaze of middle-class characters; the text is eventually critical of middle-class moral authority, but ultimately upholds notions of difference by failing to subject immoral middle-class behaviour to any equivalent system of policing.[28]

The spectacle of the working class

In examining such scenes, I shall adopt the definition of the 'spectacle' provided by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle.* In that text, 'spectacle' describes 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images'.[29] The imagistic nature of Holtby's scenes, that is the framed viewing of other characters through windows or on stage, mediates a hierarchical social relationship between the middle-class viewers and the framed, working-class objects of their gaze. This hierarchical relationship often denies the narrative voice of working-class characters and elevates the political, narrative, and sometimes the proximal, position of middle-and professional-class characters whose voyeurism is justified by their desire to monitor and judge the private, and especially the sexual, behaviours of the working class.

An early spectacular scene occurs just after Sarah's return to the South Riding. Travelling through the local factory and dockland areas on the upper level of a double-decker bus, Sarah observes a woman on the street below:

> A bold-faced girl with a black fringe and blue ear-rings stood, arms on hips, at the mouth of an alley, a pink cotton overall taut across her great body, near her time, yet unafraid, gay, insolent.

[28] Holtby discussed the 'highly difficult, delicate, and controversial duty' of policing sexual morality in a 1928 article entitled 'Sex and the Policeman' (see *Testament of a Generation*, 155-159).
[29] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith ([1995] New York: Zone Books, 1997), 12.

> Suddenly Sarah loved her, loved Kingsport, loved the sailor or fish-porter or whatever man had left upon her the proof of his virility.[30]

In this passage, Sarah speaks for the observed woman, passing judgement that the woman should not be 'unafraid', 'gay' or 'insolent'. The narrative that she creates for the pregnant woman includes a sexualised image of a male labourer who is given more agency in Sarah's imagination than the impregnated female (the 'proof of his virility' was actively 'left upon' the passive woman). Both sexes are eroticised by Sarah's interpretation of what she sees through the bus window. Sarah's elevated position in the bus offers her the protection of, in Linda Williams' words, the 'requisite safe distance necessary to the voyeur's pleasure'.[31] Her excitement continues in the following passage:

> On left and right of the thoroughfare ran mean monotonous streets of two-storied houses, bay-windowed and unvarying – not slums, but dreary respectable horrors, seething with life that was neither dreary nor respectable. Fat women lugged babies smothered in woolies [...] Pretty little painted sluts minced on high tilted heels off to the pictures or dogs or dirt-track race course [...]
>
> She was enchanted. Oh, I must come here. I'll bring the staff. It'll do us all good.
>
> She saw herself drinking beer with a domestic science teacher among the sailors at two o'clock in the morning. The proper technique of headmistress-ship was to break all the rules of decorum and justify the breach.[32]

As both narrator and interpreter of this scene, Sarah acts as judge of 'respectability', of the correct way to dress babies (without 'smothering' them), and qualifies the scene with adjectives ('mean', 'monotonous', 'unvarying', 'dreary') and verbs ('seething', 'lugged', 'smothered') which express negative, overwhelming forces from which she is immune in the isolation of the bus which will carry her out of the docklands. The phrase 'pretty sluts' seems also to indicate Sarah's ambivalent reaction towards her surroundings, and a

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[30] *South Riding*, 46.
[31] Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks', in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings, Fourth Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 561.
[32] *South Riding*, 46-47.

judgmental attitude which she does not appear to recognise in herself at this point in the narrative.

Debord suggests that 'the proletariat will never come to embody power unless it becomes the *class of consciousness*'.[33] It follows from this argument that socialist fiction, if interested in promoting the increased power of the proletariat, ought to present the consciousness of the proletariat. Such an approach is not present in the spectacles of *South Riding:* Sarah observes proletarian life, and qualifies her observations with negative diction. As male sailors and fish-porters were represented as 'virile' in the previous passage, the text here describes walking women as 'sluts', assigning gender-specific stereotypes to observed working class characters. Such labels do not seem to apply to Sarah herself: as a headmistress, it is 'proper' for her to temporarily escape to the docks and drink with sailors, whilst for working class women the same activity is read as a breach of decorum which earns Sarah's (and, arguably, society's) epithet 'slut'. Sarah's idea that it might do her staff 'good' to experience proletarian life even briefly indicates her desire to be an example of the Leftist challenge to class divisions. However, by regarding the docklands as a space for escapist 'breach', and its residents as images to be interpreted and consumed for her pleasure, her comments create a hierarchical rift between herself and the people she observes; any socialist, documentary intent of her commentary is undermined, although as I will assert below, this sense of superiority is later challenged by the text.

In a later example, Sarah creates the narrative for an unidentified young couple whom she watches from her attic window as they disappear into a tent on the field below for privacy. Aware of the possible ramifications of their encounter, Sarah wonders if she ought to have intervened:

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[33] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 58.

> Sarah stood entranced, until her lulled reason reasserted itself. "What have I done?" she asked; "perhaps that's one of my girls." It was too late to run out of the house now, to follow the two and interrupt the childish and potentially tragic honeymoon. The lovers were lovers now, and no long arm of discipline, morality or wisdom could undo what they had done together.[34]

Once again, Sarah observes and reports on characters placed below her in their class and in their spatial position in this image. The spatial arrangement of the characters, Sarah hidden in her high attic window and the couple unwittingly visible in the field below, mediates a relationship of class hierarchy in which Sarah assumes the role of educated, moral police for the childlike, potentially tragic figures in the tent. Sarah speaks as one who has the best interests of the pair at heart, and it could be argued that because of their presumed poverty, pregnancy could lead to extreme financial hardship. However, as the 'long arm of discipline, morality [and] wisdom', Sarah is flawed because after she sees the lovers on the beach, she is tempted towards an equally socially dangerous act of extramarital sex with Robert Carne. She even fantasises about having the married man's child. Despite his marital state, her potential pregnancy is not marred by the tragedy she foresees for the couple below her. Sarah's thoughts of Carne also contrast the private nature of her desire with her consideration of publicly exposing the other couple. Working class sexuality is open to intervention by an outsider disciplinarian, but her own sexual behaviour is not. It is significant that her fantasies are imagined in the isolated privacy of her attic or the enclosure of a bus. These locations provide Sarah with the necessary voyeuristic distance suggested by Linda Williams, and also uphold Sarah's notion of her own superiority to the characters she watches over.

In another scene, Sarah places herself in the position of object-to-be-looked-at, in a voyeuristic relationship similar to the *flâneur/passante* pattern I described in Chapter

[34] *South Riding*, 256.

3.[35] After taking her bus tour of the docks, she decides to go for a swim in the North Sea. The narrative perspective shifts from Sarah's to that of the man observing her:

> Taking the hired towel, Sarah perched herself on one of [the] weed-grown stumps and sat in her brief green bathing-dress, one foot in the water, drying her hair and whistling, not quite unaware that Mr. Councillor Alfred Ezekiel Huggins, haulage contractor, Wesleyan Methodist lay preacher, found in her pretty figure a matter for contemplation. He propped his plump stomach against the sun-warmed paling, and remained there, enjoying the pose of her slim muscular body, her lifted arms, her hair like a flaming cresset. From that distance he could not see her physical defects, her hands and eyes too big, her nose too aggressive, her eyes too light, her mouth too obstinate. Nor did he dream that here was the head mistress whose appointment he, as a member of the Higher Education Sub-Committee, had recently sanctioned.
>
> Sarah, her hair dry enough, [...] slid off the breakwater and went in to dress. Aware of approving eyes on her, she increased, unconsciously and almost imperceptibly, the slight swagger of her walk.[36]

Sarah's status as gazed-upon, sexualised object is different from that of the women she observes. First, although Sarah's narrative is determined by the interpretations of Mr Huggins *and* the text's narrative voice, Sarah maintains some control over her status as object by deliberately posing and swaggering for Mr Huggins, whilst appearing as if she is unaware of his gaze. Second, Sarah is depicted as 'muscular' and 'slim', physically superior to the 'plump' leaning body of Mr Huggins. Prior to these paragraphs, when Sarah arrives on the beach, she looks at the people around her and notices their physical and social inferiority to herself: 'It did not worry her that her fellow bathers were spotted youths from Kingsport back streets and little girls with rat-tailed hair from the Catholic Holiday Home'.[37] In this and previously discussed scenes, whether she is gazing or gazed upon, Sarah's moral and class superiority are maintained by the text's qualifying diction. Finally, Sarah is subjected in this passage to the documentary-style bodily description which her own observations have previously imposed upon observed working-class characters. However, her listed 'defects' are safely obscured by Mr

[35] This phrase is adapted from Laura Mulvey's discussion of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Mast, Cohen and Braudy, eds., *Film Theory*, 750.
[36] *South Riding*, 50-51.
[37] *South Riding*, 50.

Huggins' distance from her. Once again, Sarah has the advantage of privacy and of determining distance which other characters do not.

A comparison of the list of Sarah's unseen defects to the grotesque physicality of the mass of people at the shore illustrates the authority and observational distance of her own gaze:

> Kiplington was taking its evening pleasures.
>
> Along the esplanade strolled couples chewing spearmint, smoking gaspers, sucking oranges. All forms of absorption, mastication and inhalation augmented the beneficent effect of the sea air, slanting sun and holiday leisure. Mothers with laden paper carriers and aching varicose veins pushed prams back to hot crowded lodgings; elderly gentlemen in nautical blue jackets leaned on iron railings and turned telescopes intended for less personal objects upon the charms of Kingsport nymphs emerging from their final bathe [...]
>
> It did not worry [Sarah] that the narrowing sands were dense with sweating, jostling, sucking, shouting humanity, that the sea-wall was scrawled with ugly chalk marks, that the town beyond the wall was frankly hideous. This was her own place. These were her own people.[38]

Despite Sarah's humanitarian feeling that she is part of this community, the free indirect discourse in this passage treats the working class holiday-makers as an undifferentiated mass of poverty, physicality and sexuality. The quantity of oral activities – chewing, smoking, sucking, mastication, inhalation, shouting – describes a group that is, perhaps, infantile in its tastes and pleasures, and describes a place which is both unrefined and excessive in providing so many opportunities for bodily satisfaction. In comparison, Sarah's desire for a swim arises more nobly from a sudden 'aware[ness] of the heat and grime of her long journey'.[39] The relative cleanliness of Sarah's bathing reveals the competing interpretations of women's sea-bathing in the 1930s as reported by Catherine Horwood, who wrote that in this period, 'the female body could be seen as a reflection of health instead of purely as an object of sex'.[40] Sarah's observation of the mixed bathers, spotty young males and nymphette females, represents the underlying concerns

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[38] *South Riding*, 50.
[39] *South Riding*, 50.
[40] Catherine Horwood, '"Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions": Women and Bathing, 1900-1939', in *Women's History Review*, 9.4 (2000), 667.

conservative officials felt in the 1930s about the potential eroticism of mixed swimming areas.[41] Although Sarah is probably similarly attired to the 'Kingsport nymphs', as reporter of their grotesqueness and sexuality, and by maintaining a decorous awareness of how she is viewed by others, Sarah sustains her class superiority and self-appointed role of observer of the masses even in a passage which records her physical defects.

The political discrepancy between Sarah's socialist desire to mingle with the masses and the subtly judgmental language of her detailed observations is similar to the perspective expressed by Stephen Spender, writing in the same period. Spender argued that 'the orthodoxy which unites writers of the Left should be a new realism', and that 'the task of the imaginative writer [...] is to realise by every means at his disposal the nature of what is happening, and clarify this realisation for his audience'.[42] Spender's 'new realist' desire to document all details of proletarian life is problematised by his claim that the writer ought to 'clarify' these details for his audience; in interpreting observed details for the reader, all potential for objectivity is lost. This is the problem which frustrated Storm Jameson in her quest for a documentary literature. The language of Sarah's observations in *South Riding* makes the same error, aligning itself with an authoritative middle-class perspective which treats the working class as a mass 'other'. Difference is subtly emphasised, despite Sarah's claims that 'these were her people'.

Holtby's choice to document details of working class seaside leisure, and the language in which Sarah's observations are reported, is similar to the documentary reportage of the Mass Observation writers who visited Blackpool in the late 1930s. Horwood's article on women's bathing indicates the interest in seaside activities shared by both conservatives and Left-orientated Mass Observation writers in this period.[43]

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[41] Horwood, "'Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions'", 658-667.
[42] Spender, 'The Left Wing Orthodoxy', 219.
[43] Horwood, "'Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions'", 664-665.

Peter Gurney describes the wider interest Blackpool held for Mass Observation as a site of 'sin and illicit sex' with 'naughty and vulgar allure'.[44] Gurney claims that Mass Observation 'systematised voyeurism and legitimated it as scientific "observation"',[45] and that their recorded details reveal 'more about middle-class observers and the dissemination of modern sex theory than about the ideas/beliefs of the working-class observed'.[46] The same argument may be applied to the free indirect narration of working class life in *South Riding*, which reveals Sarah's class anxieties. The text, by contrast, appears at least partially aware of the problematics of Sarah's perspective: the reader can compare these moments of judgmental moral certainty with scenes in which Sarah questions her own authority, such as at the first stage performance she attends in the South Riding, during which she realises that vulgar songs and dances may actually be necessary coping mechanisms within her community. However, as I will discuss below, other aspects of Sarah's class perspective are not critically addressed by the novel.

Gurney asserts that by treating the masses as 'outside, other, not us', Mass Observation tended to present its working class observed as 'cyphers that share a collective and therefore threatening will'.[47] The same tendency is present within *South Riding* in Sarah's observations of working class people as large groups of single types of mothers, youths, nymphs, and elderly gentlemen voyeurs in nautical blue jackets. The text's mention of 'narrowing sands' may even express a slight anxiety about the encroaching proximity of the masticating, jostling crowds. By using the seaside as an appropriate location for observation of mass leisure, with the intent of convincing the reader of the middle-class perspective of the mass as vulgar, Holtby creates a 'fiction of fact' out of the same space later treated sociologically by Mass Observation, which, like

[44] Peter Gurney, '"Intersex" and "Dirty Girls": Mass-Observation and Working-Class Sexuality in England in the 1930s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8.2. (1997), 269.
[45] Gurney, '"Intersex" and "Dirty Girls"', 275.
[46] Gurney, '"Intersex" and "Dirty Girls"', 287.
[47] Gurney, '"Intersex" and "Dirty Girls"', 263.

Holtby, recorded the penny slot-machine peep shows and music halls of the seaside as indicative of working class naughtiness. Like Mass Observation, Holtby's text offers interpretations for these activities which deny the opinions of actual working-class individuals, whether real or fictional.

When Sarah poses for Mr Huggins, she is making an 'erotic spectacle' of herself, and, in the words of Laura Mulvey, 'playing to and signifying male desire'.[48] This emphasis of her sexuality challenges contemporary views of spinsters as frustrated virgins, a notion which I addressed in Chapter 1. For Mulvey, the spectacular relationship places the passive female within the active, determining male gaze, but in *South Riding* the sexualised gaze is not always projected by the heterosexual male.[49] As a schoolteacher, Sarah encourages her young female students to look at and admire her, once again placing herself in the position of object-to-be-gazed-at. The relationship is erotic, but one in which Sarah determines the nature of the narrative; she offers herself as an object-model to which her students should aspire. In this spectacular situation, Sarah's authority and superiority as headmistress and professional, politically-minded single woman offer an example of self-discipline to which her admiring students must adhere if they wish to please her. Although the young students objectify Sarah with their gaze, the balance of power is ultimately on Sarah's side. In this way, Mulvey's theory of the active/male passive/female arrangement of the gaze is undermined; in *South Riding*, the gaze may be female, homoerotic, and powerless.

Spectacular relationships exist between the working classes and members of the community other than Sarah. The public nature of working class sexuality is also created through several scenes of highly erotic, staged dance performances by local girls at community events. These performances are narrated so often that the reader is

[48] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 750.
[49] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 750.

positioned as a participant in the voyeurism, having access to the thoughts of the middle- and professional-class watchers and not those of the working-class objects of their gaze. Mr Huggins interrupts one of the girls' rehearsals and experiences the following reaction:

> He found himself engulfed in a flood of femininity. Brown, blonde and red heads tossed, bare arms were waved, sturdy naked legs, grey at the knees, thrashed the hot air. A scent of warm active bodies and cheap talcum powder assaulted his nostrils. The girls he saw, except for their brassières, were naked from the waist upwards. Urgently he told himself that he was there for the glory of God.[50]

Mr Huggins' thoughts affirm Gurney's Freudian argument that 'disgust always bears the imprint of desire';[51] although observing the scene as a lay minister taking interest in the girls' charity performance, he is titillated by the feminine body parts with which he is surrounded. The language of the scene is sensual, concentrating on colour, nakedness, temperature and scent, yet simultaneously violent: Mr Huggins feels 'assaulted', and 'engulfed', sensations which may be read as overwhelmingly pleasurable or frightening. Mr Huggins' sexuality is itself observed throughout the novel; his healthy sensuality leads to an extramarital affair which may ruin his reputation. Unlike Sarah, Mr Huggins' occasional vulgarity seems slightly to align him with the masses, but as a professional businessman and councillor he is just able to keep knowledge of his sexual activities out of the public domain. His slippery financial situation creates an opportunity for Alderman Snaith to take advantage of Huggins' sexual misadventures, so that Snaith may police Huggins' private activities by exploiting his borderline class position.

Mulvey argues that in musicals, song and dance numbers serve to 'break the flow of diegesis [...] to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation'.[52] Gurney also indicates that Mass Observation researchers were interested in music hall performances as eroticised episodes. In *South Riding*, musical performances and

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[50] *South Riding*, 222.
[51] Gurney, '"Intersex" and "Dirty Girls"', 268.
[52] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 750.

sexuality are related, as proven by Huggins' observation, and, earlier in the novel, by Sarah's reactions to seeing the same group of girls in a community performance:

> On to the stage waltzed two big well-grown girls, one dressed as a man in morning suit and topper, the other a "lady" in blue satin and tulle, bare to the waist behind, split to the thigh, revealing a jewelled garter between tulle frills. They began to shout and mime [...] The words were idiotic, but seemed innocent enough, the gestures accompanying them were not. The dance was frankly as indecent as anything Sarah had seen on an English stage. The girl taking the female part "shimmied" her well-formed breasts and stomach, leered and kicked, evoking whistles, shouts, and cat-calls from the delighted young men in the audience [...] Sarah felt sick.[53]

Sarah's observation of female waist, thigh, breasts, and stomach echo the catalogue of body parts listed in Mr Huggins' descriptions of the dancing girls. As a proper lady, Sarah feels able to interpret the inappropriateness of the girls' gestures, yet her own acquaintance with indecency through other performances 'seen on the English stage' is neither specified nor questioned. Although the narrative does not provide the girls' thoughts regarding the erotic nature of their performance and the reaction it caused amongst the young men, the sickness that Sarah felt at seeing her potential students portrayed in such a way 'clarifies', to borrow Spender's terminology, her realisation for the text's audience:

> They're too good for this: it's a shame! Sarah protested to herself, angry and indignant that this vulgarity was the best that Kiplington could offer to such delicious youth, such bold innocence.[54]

In this scene, Sarah's interpretation is challenged by the comments of 'the fat lady in the torn red cardigan beside her',[55] the mother of one of the dancers. She indicates that her daughter hopes to 'go on the films' and could do worse than making a career as a singer and dancer: 'I'd as soon be kicking in the chorus as standing all day at the washtub'.[56] The interruption of Sarah's perspective by an individual working class voice prompts her to question her previous disapproval:

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[53] *South Riding*, 67-68
[54] *South Riding*, 66.
[55] *South Riding*, 68.
[56] *South Riding*, 68.

> It occurred to Sarah that the songs about drunken homecomers and bullying wives which she had found so gross dealt after all with commonplaces in the lives of the young singers. Was it not perhaps more wholesome to be taught to laugh at them [...] than to turn them into such a tragedy as her father's habits had seemed to her mother's ambitious, anxious, serious mind? Jokes about ripe cheese and personal hygiene – ("Take your feet off the table, Father, and give the cheese a chance!"), about childbirth and deformity and deafness – were not these perhaps necessary armaments for defence in a world besieged by poverty, ugliness, squalor and misfortune?[57]

Although there may be some truth in Sarah's revised opinion, she does not take into account the ambitious nature revealed to be the motivation for at least one of the stage performers. Later, one of Sarah's students, Lydia Holly, sees the performances and rehearsals simply as an opportunity for fun, a time to laugh, exercise and mix with girls her own age which offers respite from the tedious domestic responsibilities of home. In the sections of the text in which working class characters provide their own narratives, these are not taken into account by middle-class observers. Sarah's language coincidentally typifies the tendency of middle-class, Mass Observation writers to offer formal, anthropological interpretations of performances which may have simply been intended as light, ironic entertainments[58]. In its descriptions of public performances, if nowhere else, the text suggests that Sarah's interpretations are biased and ignorant of the true feelings and intentions of the individual working class girls who dance in them.

Conclusions

The conclusion of *South Riding*, 'we are members one of another', indicates the new, humble alignment Sarah feels towards her community. After her failed romance with Robert Carne, she feels ashamed of her own sexual desire for a married man. Her friend, the Alderman Mrs Beddows, tells her that it is only now that Sarah has made such a nearly-tragic error in her own private life that she is fit to act as a teacher of, and

[57] *South Riding*, 69.
[58] See Gurney, "'Intersex" and "Dirty Girls"', 270.

example for, others. This ending draws together the similarities developed throughout the text between Sarah's plot and those of working class characters. In the 'Epilogue at a Silver Jubilee', Sarah sings the National Anthem 'with the whole kingdom, perhaps the empire. They were banded together in the unity of mass emotion' from which even 'Sarah could not remain immune'.[59] The previous judgmental segregation between Sarah and the masses seems shattered. She tells her students: 'Don't let me catch any of you at any time loving anything without asking questions. Question everything – even what I'm saying now. Especially, perhaps, what I say'.[60] Sarah's previous sense of authority has been undermined by her humiliating experience with Carne, which she chose to confess to Mrs Beddows.

The conclusion of the novel suggests that the 'otherness' created by Sarah's, and the text's, previous, documentary-style observations of the masses may be ended. She realises her neighbours are 'not very fine nor very intelligent. Their interests were narrow, their understanding dull; yet they were her people, and now she knew she loved them'.[61] She feels connected not only to the people of the South Riding, but to the other English citizens whose Jubilee celebrations are heard over a loudspeaker. The ending of the novel may imply that Sarah thinks she will go on to teach and lead as an equal. The elevated positions from which she previously observed the working classes are symbolically destroyed when, in the Epilogue, she overlooks her community one final time before her aeroplane dives in a mild crash. Despite this conclusion, one aspect of the novel's earlier class politics is never criticised: Sarah's humiliation remains completely private. After Carne's death, the only other person to know of Sarah's feelings for him is Mrs Beddows, and she only finds out because Sarah deliberately confesses to her. Sarah has proven herself to be as capable of sexual error as any other

[59] *South Riding*, 490.
[60] *South Riding*, 488.
[61] *South Riding*, 489.

character in the novel, yet remains immune from the judgement and categorisation to which working class characters have been subjected. She seems able to continue acting as moral and political judge of the community without ever being judged by them. In this manner, her class position and decorum remain intact.

So, although Sarah is humbled by her experiences and symbolically 'brought down' by the text during her plane crash, the text only partially undercuts her perspective. Also, the changes which Sarah envisions for the South Riding, and which are endorsed by the text's criticism of poverty, are consistently paternalistic. For these reasons, the communitarian ending of the novel does not completely challenge the superior position Sarah has maintained throughout. Although she symbolically loses her high position, her language continues to indicate a sense of otherness regarding her views of the people in her community. Sarah will perhaps not behave so much as if she were superior, but the text does not require her to sacrifice the middle-class position that leaves her immune from criticism. Through Holtby's treatment, the middle-class sense of unquestioned moral authority is challenged, but overall Sarah's respectability is left intact because of the protection offered by her class position, and in this the text fails to be as revolutionary as Sarah's conclusion, 'we are members one of another', would suggest.

As a 'social problem novel',[62] Holtby's *South Riding*, like *Middlemarch*, records a contemporary community in great detail, including its politics within its rich backdrop, and presenting contemporary social and political issues in a realist form which has proven successful with readers since the novel's publication in 1936. By 1930s definitions, the novel may be classed as both humanitarian and socialist in its attempts to link characters of all social classes through the variety of common problems which

[62] Shaw, *The Clear Stream*, 243.

construct its many plot lines. Daily life is recorded in such detail that the novel may also be categorised as an example of 'documentary' writing being developed by some middle-class, Left-wing writers, such as Storm Jameson, Stephen Spender, and George Orwell in the 1930s. Documentary reportage was also the intention of the Mass Observation project, which relied on middle-class observation and voluntary working-class diaries to form its reports and analyses of all aspects of British life. Like the other documentary forms produced in the 1930s, Holtby's novel, which shared the political intentions of the Mass Observation and the writers listed above, illustrated some of the same tendencies toward the construction and emphasis of class difference as these other Left-wing projects in its judgmental, authoritative narration of working-class life.[63] In her conclusion, Holtby demonstrates how true equality and humanitarian love may be expressed, but the rest of her novel shows how easily the middle-class desire for understanding of 'the other' may result in misinterpretation and the denial of individual working class voices. Sarah's final thoughts in *South Riding* may indicate that the spectacular qualities of her previous observations were deliberately and knowingly constructed by Holtby. However, the fact that Sarah's privacy remains intact, after so many other working-class characters have been policed, illustrates how many of the novel's subtle class divisions, and notions of and anxieties about difference, are not thoroughly challenged. Despite the novel's hopeful ending, class difference is maintained, and the sexual privacy and middle-class status of the protagonist appear to be safe.

[63] Trodd also notes that detailed documentary fiction, such as *South Riding*, in its 'insistence that only hard attention to fact can reveal the truth of lives in the 1930s also anticipates Mass Observation later in the decade' (see *Women's Writing*, 101).

6.

Naomi Mitchison's literature for children

Despite her well-known status as a children's author in the interwar period, recent revisionist studies of Naomi Mitchison's literary career have largely ignored the substantial number of plays, stories and radio sketches she wrote for children. Her career as a writer for children was varied and she enjoyed popularity in several media. In 1929, newspapers in Glasgow and Edinburgh featured captioned photographs to announce that several of her fairy tale plays were being performed during the Christmas week at the Edinburgh Music Hall Children's Theatre. Her book *An End and A Beginning and Other Stories* (1937) is a collection of short dramatic sketches which had been performed as after-school history plays on the BBC. In 1935, she was a children's book reviewer for *Time and Tide.* In this chapter, I will examine many of her neglected children's texts from this period, and will discuss the politics of these texts within the context of her better known historical fiction for adults.

Of Naomi Mitchison's, née Haldane's, four published memoirs and diaries, the first two, *Small Talk* (1973) and *All Change Here* (1975), are devoted to her childhood and adolescence and are indicative of her desire to examine that phase of life. The conditions of upper-class children's lives, and of female children in particular, in the Edwardian period were of great interest to her. She writes that as a young child, she thought of herself as a boy, and was happiest playing with her older brother, J.B.S. Haldane, and his male school friends. She enjoyed the company of boys and a co-educational private school career which included a gentleman's education in Classics such as was denied Virginia Woolf and other females of her social class, a fact Woolf lamented in her own writings. Because her mother required the young Naomi to keep

detailed diaries, she had a record of her childhood reading tastes. She enjoyed popular books, such as *The Railway Children* (1906), *The Treasure Seekers* (1899), and the *Alice* and *Peter Rabbit* books. In later childhood and adolescence, her preferences included Saga books, Celtic history, Norse mythology, Romantic poetry, H.G. Wells' science fiction, 'baddish historical novels' such as Bulwer Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1835), all twelve volumes of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), and Plato's *Republic*, texts mentioned in her memoirs because they are amongst the works whose influence in her later literary career is apparent.[1] Thinking, as was typical for her, of gender difference, she wrote of her youthful encounter with *The Republic*: 'It is odd that I wasn't put off by the undoubted fact that all Plato's Guardians were male and that he said many unpleasant things about the inferiority of women. But in my inside stories I don't suppose I was ever a Greek woman'.[2] This statement is significant because it indicates her early disappointment that, as a female, she was shut out from heroic action, an imbalance she sought to rectify in her fiction. It also shows her tendency to situate herself comfortably within an androgynous ideal.

Naomi Haldane's co-educational schooling continued until age twelve, when she was suddenly removed from school upon beginning menstruation. She had had no prior warning about menstruation, and received very little explanation once it had begun. From that age, she was educated with her 'fellow Home Students', many of whom 'were the daughters of Oxford parents' and 'were kept within the family bounds',[3] increasingly prevented from spending time associating with males. Although she benefited from her family's friendships with other intellectual families, and from her father and brother's connections to Oxford, even passing the Oxford science prelims so

[1] See Naomi Mitchison, *Small Talk... Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973) and *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975), reprinted as a single volume by Argyll: House of Lochar, 2000.
[2] *All Change Here*, 40.
[3] *All Change Here*, 113.

that she could embark 'desultorily'[4] upon some university study, she always regretted that she was groomed for marriage and not encouraged to extend the childhood interest in biology which she experienced whilst studying guinea pig genetics with her brother. Other gendered differences stand out in the hindsight of her personal writings. She records the increasingly constrictive clothing she was required to wear as an Edwardian female, and laments that during family prayers, her brother was allowed to read scripture but she, as a female, was not. Naomi Haldane became engaged at age 17 and was married by 18, and because both she and her husband, Dick Mitchison, knew very little about sex, their relationship suffered in its early years. She recalls that just prior to her marriage, 'my mother was clearly longing to have a cosy last-minute chat with me, but I brushed her off, convinced that anyone who knew as much as I did about guinea pigs had no need of further knowledge'.[5] Later, Naomi Mitchison read Marie Stopes' *Married Love* and sent a copy to her husband while he was at the Front, and she came to believe that information and openness about sexuality and reproduction were essential to happy relationships.

Aspects of childhood and adolescent life which were important to Mitchison in retrospect, such as her exclusion from the world of men, the secrecy and shame attached to sexual life, and her desire for epic and historical experience, inform the feminist dimension of her historical literature for children. In these respects, her writing for children is similar to the fiction she wrote for adult markets. Although the interwar period saw, according to Anthea Trodd, an increased differentiation between child and adult literary markets, Mitchison produced popular children's books which were equally appealing to a crossover adult audience. Mitchison used an identical style to engage both audiences, an aspect of her writing previously neglected by scholars, and which

[4] *All Change Here*, 135.
[5] *All Change Here*, 87.

contributes to current knowledge of the debate between highbrow and lowbrow literature which surrounded her critical reception in the interwar period.[6] At this time, historical fiction was derided by the influential British critic Q.D. Leavis, but was also highly valued in the theoretical writings of Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukács as a powerful challenge to the fascistic tendency to appropriate history. Mitchison's historical writing for children was highly politicised, and characterised the Left's use of the genre in an attempt to 'intervene in the popular apprehension of history'.[7] As feminist texts, her children's stories also emphasise women's historical roles, continuing the gender politics of her long novels for adults.

***The Hostages* (1931), *Boys and Girls and Gods* (1931), *Historical Plays for Schools* (1939), *An End and a Beginning* (1937)**

Cicely Hamilton's review for *Time and Tide* of *The Hostages and Other Stories for Boys and Girls* (1931) praises Mitchison's refusal to hide the more brutal aspects of history from her young audiences: 'Mrs. Mitchison has a gift for saying the terrible simply; because these stories are for boys and girls, it is less apparent than in her other books, but she could not write for anyone [...] without letting it flash through at moments'.[8] *The Hostages* is a collection of historical stories, many of which were previously published in collections that Mitchison had written for adults, and presents scenes of slavery, war, and invasion in Europe as 'a kind of continuous chain of vision between the fifth century B.C. and the eleventh century A.D.'.[9] Mitchison's stories were well researched,

[6] Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945* (London: Longman, 1998), 137.
[7] Andy Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 205. See also Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations* ([1939] London: Fontana, 1992), 245-255, and Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* ([1937] London: Merlin Press, 1962).
[8] Cicely Hamilton, 'Children of Yesterday', *Time and Tide* (11 October 1930), collected in Edinburgh: Mitchison's scrapbook, no page reference, Acc. No. 8185.
[9] Naomi Mitchison, *The Hostages and Other Stories for Boys and Girls* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), 7.

but she begins her book with a disclaimer that 'I don't claim that this is good history. How can it be, when one is compressing the history of fourteen hundred years into as many thousand words?'[10] One reviewer complained that Mitchison's 'time-sense is sacrificed unduly to her desire to humanise and make the past alive', but praised her attitude towards history for being 'exactly the reverse of that of the professional historian who defines the past in a series of external political events. She interprets it always in terms of individual men and women and children'.[11] In *Boys and Girls and Gods*, published in the same year and featuring several stories reprinted from the feminist weekly *Time and Tide*, Mitchison argues that there are 'lots of different possible interpretations' of what everyday life was like for children who lived in the period 1500-280 B.C., but that 'none of them, at this distance, is likely to be quite right'.[12] The desire to challenge 'official histories' by imagining the lives of neglected figures such as children, women, and slaves is an 'appropriat[ion of] a past that had been largely denied' and is also present, according to Marion Shaw, in Mitchison's historical writing for adults.[13] *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931) begins with a disclaimer similar to those of her children's texts, and is one of Mitchison's adult fictions which is admired by late twentieth-century critics such as Elizabeth Maslen and Janet Montefiore for the challenge it poses to conventional constructions of history.

Each story in *The Hostages* begins with a chatty introductory note from the author, which explains what she knows about the historical setting of the text and offers background information to establish the scene, occasionally providing insight into the philosophical questions which Mitchison debates within the text. The first story, 'Nuts

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[10] *The Hostages*, 7.
[11] Anonymous review, 'History in Story', *The Manchester Guardian* (30 October 1930), collected in Edinburgh: Mitchison's scrapbook, no page reference, Acc. No. 8185.
[12] Naomi Mitchison, *Boys and Girls and Gods*, The World of Youth Series no. 6 (London: Watts & Co., 1931), 2.
[13] Marion Shaw, 'Feminism and Fiction Between the Wars: Winifred Holtby and *Virginia Woolf*', in Moira Monteith, ed., *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 181.

in May', narrates an unlikely friendship between Kleas, a Spartan, and Pheidon, his Athenian rescuer. Kleas wants to be like a brother to the Athenian, rather than continue the warring hatred between the two cities. Mitchison describes for her reader the larger moral questions behind her scene of a moment of fluctuating political and moral opinion:

> Sometimes people feel very deeply that they are all one nation or one city and that the individual, the single person, does not matter compared with the community; and sometimes they separate out and all want to live their individual lives as hard and as interestingly as they can. When this last thing is happening - when men and women begin to know very clearly that they are their own separate selves - they begin to question and puzzle over things which they had accepted before; they are often unhappy, but they get fresh ideas and some of them are almost sure to be poets or scientists or artists or the really interesting kind of statesman or philosopher. They are all producing their own kind of thing as hard as they can, and their civilization goes fast and gets more and more interesting and reaches what one calls a peak.[14]

Mitchison's knowledge of the philosophical debates of this period of history is based on her extensive academic reading and background in Classical studies. In her children's writing, she presents these arguments in simplified language for the benefit of non-specialist readers. It seems that such writing was aimed not only at child readers of all classes, but also perhaps at adults whose grasp of history and philosophy was not as thorough as Mitchison's. Cicely Hamilton writes in her *Time and Tide* review that the author's:

> method of setting the historical scene, though it may be intended for the use of the child, will not lack appreciation from Mrs. Mitchison's adult public; perhaps it is less often the child than the reader grown who is worried by uncertainty with regard to past manners and conditions, and who will be correspondingly grateful to an author who recalls and sets in order the half-forgotten lore of his schooldays.[15]

The pedagogic purposes of the books discussed in this chapter, and the mixed audience of child and adult readers interested in historical and political education, also seemed to have caused Mitchison's fiction to be associated with 'lowbrow' writing by some critics, as I will discuss below.

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[14] *The Hostages*, 12.
[15] Hamilton, 'Children of Yesterday', no page reference.

In the example above, Mitchison praises individuality, challenging her own preference for community, which is expressed throughout her fiction as discussed in Chapter 4. Elsewhere in her children's writing, her chatty language presents ideological arguments which are closer to her own political beliefs. In the story 'Maiden Castle', which depicts an early Briton pagan or Druid family in the third century A.D., the period in which 'Christianity was spreading, especially among educated people', Mitchison implicitly criticises modern Christianity for having strayed from the socialist possibilities she saw in the early church: 'much was being written about it, the fathers of the church were trying to bring it in line with the philosophical concepts of the day. Inevitably perhaps, it was getting further and further away from the ideas of the founder'.[16] In her story 'For This Man is a Roman', from the volume *An End and a Beginning and Other Plays* (1937), one of Mitchison's characters says of Paul of Tarsus:

> He is the follower of a rebel who was killed a few years back in this very city - a man called Jesus Christ. He was a rebel with all sorts of queer ideas about brotherhood and poor men being as good as rich men. And his followers call themselves Christians.[17]

This stance echoes the socialist version of Christianity Mitchison presented in *The Blood of the Martyrs* (1939). Her children's fictions seemed to encourage readers towards similar, rather sophisticated challenges of accepted views of history. Sometimes, the revolutionary intent of her arguments was less explicit than in the passages quoted above. In 'For This Man is a Roman', she hints that the overthrow of masters in Jerusalem by their slaves is a revolution:

> You can see, in this crowd, that there are men with iron rings round their necks carrying heavy sacks as though they were mules. Hardly anyone thinks it is wrong that some men should be slaves and others free; everyone thinks that because there has always been slavery in the world, there always will be. Yet new ideas can alter even that.[18]

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[16] *The Hostages*, 151.
[17] Naomi Mitchison, 'For This Man is a Roman', in *An End and A Beginning and Other Plays* (London: Constable, 1937), 22.
[18] 'For This Man Is a Roman', 20.

Adults familiar with the body of Mitchison's writing, and in particular socialist readers, would recognise in this paragraph the core of her arguments regarding revised thinking about the British class system. Because of their pedagogical slant, these texts read more like propaganda than her long novels, which develop similar ideas more gradually and across more complex plots.

The historical vehicle of the children's story likewise proves to be a useful mode for her other critiques of contemporary thought. Mitchison was outspoken against the Catholic Church in the 1930s, particularly regarding its Encyclicals on contraception. In her children's literature, she did not shy away from challenging the authority of the Church by representing it as standing in the way of progress. In her *Historical Plays for Schools*, the play 'But Still It Moves' narrates a scene set in Rome in 1633 at Galileo's heresy trial. The value of medical science is debated by John Wedderburn, who argues that at the College of Physicians in London he saw a demonstration by William Harvey which proved that blood is circulated by the pumping action of the heart. Wedderburn's argument benefits from the biological knowledge of Mitchison's twentieth-century reader, who will understand that Wedderburn is correct to support 'thought backed by experiment and truth'.[19] He instantly undermines the argument of the Cardinal who represents the desire of the Catholic Church to protect 'the ordinary folk who look to us for guidance and for the keeping firm of old beliefs. We have saved the plain man's security in his own fixed earth that he must walk on, work on, and marry on'.[20] By examining the Church's stance towards 'ordinary' and 'plain' folk, Mitchison is certainly criticising the Church's relationship to the working-class; by invoking work and marriage, she encourages a reader to question the Church's authority in those realms of contemporary life as well.

[19] Naomi Mitchison, 'But Still It Moves', in *Historical Plays for Schools Series II* (London: Constable, 1939), 131.
[20] 'But Still It Moves', 131.

This critique is an example of the questioning attitude to authority, both official and social, that Mitchison encourages in the several children's stories and plays in these collections which discuss previous cultures' acceptance of slavery as normal, and dramatises the fear of innovation. Another example is her play 'The New Calendar', in which characters would prefer to adhere to 'their muddled old years'[21] rather than adjust to the new Gregorian calendar. History once again allows Mitchison to benefit from hindsight so that characters who stand in the way of change are rendered foolish. Her play about the end of the American Civil War, 'An End and a Beginning', depicts Southern neighbours arguing about the sense of loss they feel at the end of slavery. Mrs Shepley represents the perspective of the slave-owner: 'Without slavery there can be no leisured class, and without leisure no beauty, no culture, none of that mellow Southern quiet that makes brave boys and lovely girls'.[22] In a contrived coincidence, Abraham Lincoln arrives in the town and is treated as a saintly figure by the liberated slaves who refer to him in dialect as 'Marse Linkum'. Mrs Shepley mourns the end of her culture, but her neighbour, Hatton, argues against her fear: 'it seems as though folks never can make a beginning without ending something first. But it's hard on what ended, mighty hard [...] But now something new has got to be begun. And maybe it will be better than we think'.[23] As a socialist and feminist, Mitchison was committed to social change and, as indicated in Chapter 4, was courageous in admitting to her own upper-middle-class fears about the violence and loss which a socialist revolution would entail. In *We Have Been Warned* (1935), that anxiety is debated through Dione's perspective. In the texts which feature in this chapter, however, debate is generally eliminated in favour of a politics which accepts social change gladly and positions those who stand against it, either the ruling classes or the frightened masses, as either morally corrupt or unwise.

[21] Naomi Mitchison, 'The New Calendar', in *Historical Plays for School,* 139.
[22] Naomi Mitchison, 'An End and a Beginning', in *Historical Plays for School,* 166.
[23] 'An End and a Beginning', 174.

Whether her texts are read by children or interested adults, as works of propaganda they perhaps do not encourage dialogue between text and reader as much as they claim to through Mitchison's conversational, first-person introductions, her refusals of historical accuracy and authority, and her occasional recommendations of other titles her readers may want to explore if they wish to know more about the periods she dramatises. In this way, the discussions which her children's texts wish to open are already foreclosed by Mitchison's commitment to a singular, socialist point of view.

Similarities between Mitchison's treatment of her child and adult audiences emerge also in her representation of injustice, violence, and sexuality. As Cicely Hamilton indicated in her review of *The Hostages*, Mitchison does not avoid 'the terrible' aspects of history, and these are often witnessed through the eyes of child characters. In her story 'The Hostages', Mitchison describes the feelings of three boys who are captured by a Roman general after their city is defeated. The story is narrated by a fifteen year-old prisoner, who says that he and his fellow hostages have to struggle to be men and not cry. Details of the violence against Christians in 'For This Man Is a Roman' include the use of chains, whips, and stones which splatter blood on walls. A young boy, Julian, fears for his own life and watches the murder of a Bishop by Huns in the play 'Wild Men Invade the Roman Empire':

> They've stopped. They're looking at him. (*In horror.*) They're hitting him! They're hitting him across the face. And he isn't hitting back. He's on his knees, holding on to the cross. Oh, they've killed him, they've killed him.[24]

Julian describes the scene to his mother because she cannot bear to look. This play is one of several texts in which Mitchison's children are forced bravely to endure brutal events. Her child characters also share an awareness of politics and an ability to articulate political thought which is perhaps beyond their years. For example, a young

[24] Naomi Mitchison, 'Wild Men Invade the Roman Empire', in *An End and A Beginning*, 59.

Egyptian girl, Meritere, discusses her King, Ikhnaton, and his new religion. She questions it, but also sees that it could lead to a more hopeful future. She is already more open to political debate than her father and the priests, and wonders what if the men 'were wrong, and there was nothing to fear, nothing to propitiate, no horrible darkness or pain, but everything light and clear?'[25] Throughout her writing, Mitchison creates politically-aware and -responsible child characters, such as Phylilla in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* and Morag in *We Have Been Warned*, indicating her belief that children ought not to be sheltered from the political realities of a separate adult world. This aspect of Mitchison's thought is most apparent in her socialist guide, *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents* (1932), discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Mitchison also believed that children and adolescents should not be kept, as she was, ignorant of sex. She felt that early understanding of reproduction and birth control was healthy for human relationships and benefited society generally, but she also wanted children to understand the role of sexuality and gender in history. In *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents*, reproduction and contraception are clearly explained, but in the stories and plays discussed in this section, sexuality is presented as part of character and plot development, and differences in men's and women's historical experiences are emphasised so that her texts introduce the gender politics of which she was aware during her own childhood. Mitchison describes sexual violence against a Roman woman, Cottia, through the character's first-person narration:

> Those hairy great giants with their swords and wolf-skins, all shouting and roaring with laughter every way I looked! One of them threw a wine-cup over me, and then the others[...] I stood there with my hair and clothes all drenched with the wine, and my hands over my face; then I was pushed from behind and one of them caught me and kissed me; I screamed, and he pushed me across to another. Then it was just a nightmare of a five minutes with all those drunk barbarians pulling me about one way and another; I was struggling all the time, trying to get away, and feeling an open mouth or a great mat of a beard under my hand every time, and shrieking to [my slave] to help me. I ended up in a man's arms with my hands held over my head, and

[25] Naomi Mitchison, 'The Founding of the New City', in *Boys and Girls and Gods*, 27.

> he squeezing me up to him and kissing my neck; I could feel his great hot body against mine, and I didn't know what was going to happen. But anyway I bit his ear as hard as I could, and he let go and swore.[26]

The scene does not end in rape, because Vercingetorix, the commander of her attackers, intervenes, but from her claim that 'I didn't know what was going to happen' it seems that rape is what Cottia fears. It is troubling that, like the rape survivors in Mitchison's adult fiction, Cottia quickly forgives the men who assault her, although there appears to be no explanation for her change of heart.

The love relationship that develops in the story 'Quintus Getting Well' between the Roman soldier, Quintus, and his young male slave, Brig, is perhaps the most erotic relationship present in these texts. Quintus is sickly, and purchases a strong slave to ride with him in the country and help him to recover. One afternoon he sketches Brig's 'perfect muscular body, gazing with arched eyebrows at Quintus'.[27] Brig's tree climbing is described in erotic language: 'He went straight to the oak, threw up his hands over a low branch, and swung himself up on to it with a supple heave-over of back and loins'.[28] The two men talk together one night, in moonlight 'that showed eyes and faces but not too clearly the difference between master and slave',[29] and Quintus realises that Brig is not a 'savage', and decides that in order to extend their time together they will travel into Gaul where Brig's people live. The two men sleep in the same room every night on their journey; Quintus holds Brig's hand whilst speaking to him as an equal; however, Brig's kissing of Quintus' hand connotes both loyalty and inferiority. At the end of the journey, Brig feels torn between wanting to stay with Quintus, telling his master 'you know I'm yours, I owe you my life',[30] and becoming a slave again in order to stay near his people. Quintus passionately explains his desire to be with Brig, but Brig cannot

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[26] Naomi Mitchison, 'Cottia Went to Bibracte', in *The Hostages,* 101.
[27] Naomi Mitchison, 'Quintus Getting Well', in *The Hostages,* 123.
[28] 'Quintus Getting Well', 122.
[29] 'Quintus Getting Well', 126.
[30] 'Quintus Getting Well', 142.

articulate his feelings, being 'full of regrets that he could not explain'.[31] Anthea Trodd asserts that the ideals of homosocial bonds were quite common to children's literature of this period, with girls' school stories and boys' adventure narratives being extremely popular depictions of same-sex communities.[32] Nevertheless, Mitchison's descriptions of Brig's body seem unusually explicit for a young audience.

Mitchison's text narrates a passionate and erotic friendship between the two men, introducing the loyalty and desire which is present in the relationship between Roman and Christian males in *The Blood of the Martyrs.* In that text, Christian socialism erodes the difference between ruler and oppressed. The inequality between Quintus and Brig is not eradicated, because although Quintus tries to treat Brig as his equal companion, Brig never stops thinking of himself as Quintus' property. 'Quintus Getting Well' does not quite exert the challenge to class consciousness that Mitchison attempts in other texts, although the tension between Brig's individualistic desire for Quintus and his wish to rejoin his community is clearly depicted.

By imagining history from the point of view of children and slaves, Mitchison challenges 'official histories'; she is also keen to depict women's involvement in history and to convey the neglected perspective of the domestic sphere, in Marion Shaw's words, 'in ways which complimented, if not usurped the official histories' of the Classical period.[33] Mitchison describes as 'adventures' the events of Cottia's life, which consist in setting up house in new towns each time her Roman soldier husband gets re-posted. Rather than narrate her husband's actions in battle, Cottia describes a home she had in Gaul:

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[31] 'Quintus Getting Well', 143.
[32] See Trodd, *Women's Writing*, 141-143.
[33] Shaw, 'Feminism and Fiction Between the Wars', 181. Mitchison's objective also agreed with Benjamin's thesis III, which urged historians to avoid distinguishing between major and minor events of history because 'nothing that has ever happened should ever be lost to history' ('Theses on the Philosophy of History', 246.)

> We had the dearest, silliest wooden house, all thatched into a point at the top; of course it was all too ridiculous to begin with - almost nothing but a table and some cooking pots - but I set to work and bought carpets and curtains, and got some chairs made on a nice Italian model, and a bed; and then I'd brought a few things from home. So soon I had the sweetest little place of my own for Marcus to come to.[34]

Cottia's life is lived against the historical backdrop of the Gallic wars, and although historically real characters, such as Vercingetorix, are mentioned, or even appear as characters, Mitchison emphasises the effects of political movements on private life by focussing on her invented characters. Mitchison's introduction to Cottia's story includes a description of the kind of detailed domestic setting that she excels at in her historical writing:

> [Cottia and her visitor] are sitting comfortably in the shade of the colonnade round the courtyard of the house, talking and embroidering, a couple of women slaves standing respectfully behind them. There is a little fountain in front of them, which makes a pleasant tinkling, and in four square garden plots there are sweet herbs and pinks and damask roses, and the scent of them rises thickly and deliciously under the strong sun.[35]

It is a significant indicator of Mitchison's feminism that in a book which examines different periods of European history, she deliberately chooses a domestic scene as a representative moment and presents the figure of Vercingetorix through the impression he makes on an officer's wife. Cottia's meeting with the Gallic leader is just as important in her memory as her marriage and homemaking. Likewise, in her story 'The Lady of the City', Mitchison establishes the importance of the goddess Athena in the lives of the Athenian people by describing the actions of a young female weavers, elevating their work to sacred status: 'These stories became entangled in the girls' minds with the close threads of their weaving; when they thought of one they thought of the other, and in any weaving that they were to do in their later lives there was a sense of the Goddess'.[36] Mitchison similarly foregrounds domestic life and the experiences of

[34] 'Cottia Went to Bibracte', 85.
[35] 'Cottia Went to Bibracte', 81.
[36] Naomi Mitchison, 'The Lady of the City', in *Boys and Girls and Gods*, 84.

neglected women characters in her representation of Sparta in *The Corn King and the Spring Queen.* In that novel, Queen Agiatis is a fully developed character, and her relationship with King Kleomenes and the activities of her home life are imagined in much greater detail that was included in the original Greek and Latin histories on which Mitchison based her Sparta.

Mitchison was knowledgeable about the history of marriage, family life, and feminism; some of this information was written into her anthropological study *The Home and a Changing Civilization* (1934), and she also worked on extensive notes for a history of feminism that she never completed.[37] Some of this knowledge is written into Mitchison's texts for children, so that the conditions of women's lives are represented in some detail. In one of Mitchison's tales set in the Aegean, she describes a community in which the adult men travel away on war-ships for part of every year. In official histories, the activities of those men in battle would probably be recorded, but Mitchison describes 'women's time on the island', which is so exciting that 'even the little girls felt it. Phylo and Aktoris, walking back with their mother, felt twice as important as they had been yesterday. The boys wouldn't tease them now'.[38] The story narrates how life and work continue on the island in the absence of the men, with the women and children bringing in the rest of the harvest, weaving, maintaining the farms, and also making the sacrifices necessary to the religious life of the community.

Finally, Mitchison imparts to her reader a sense of the different experiences women have during moments of historical change which appear in official histories. She describes Europe in the period around A.D. 750 and the reign of Emperor Constantine V:

[37] Naomi Mitchison, *The Home and a Changing Civilization*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1934). The anthropological influence of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* is also felt in this text.
[38] Naomi Mitchison, 'The War Ship Sails', in *Boys and Girls and Gods,* 34.

> [T]he names of more and more women appear in history, not simply as pawns in the political or royal game, but as people on their own. In the Byzantine Empire they were beginning to be allowed education; they took a chief part in some of the theological controversies. Among the invaders there were queens and princesses who led their people. But even so, a woman's ultimate goal was either marriage or the nunnery.[39]

The unequal status of men and women is also conveyed through her description of invasions during the early years of Christianity in Europe:

> The men could take their swords and axes with them wherever they went and always be ready and wanted in a world where there was always war, but distaff and spindle were foolish things without a house, and loom and cooking pots and all the hundred and one things that go to make a woman's life must be left behind.[40]

Such narratives of women's domestic activities describe different events to those included in conventional political histories, and as such are a challenge to established versions of historical events. However, Mitchison's children's tales tend to examine women's lives at seminal historical moments, and so adhere to a prevailing linear depiction of time and progress. Her long novels explore, to borrow Kristeva's terminology, cyclical and monumental conceptions of time in a feminist approach to history which is similar to Virginia Woolf's.[41] In her children's texts, Mitchison deliberately presents her reader with unorthodox versions of history, but these are not the most radical models of which Mitchison was capable of depicting.

Mitchison's historical writing for children addressed themes and political perspectives similar to those in her writing for adults, and in a voice and idiom identical to that of her adult historical novels. Her children's books do not explore sexuality to the same extent as her adult novels, but nor do they avoid sex. Her use of modern speech was appreciated by critics of her children's writing, even if her irreverent attitude towards dates was criticised. One reviewer wrote of *The Hostages*:

> Mrs Mitchison's people talk and think like one's own cousins and aunts, and it seems

[39] Naomi Mitchison, 'Bread and Water', in *The Hostages*, 203.
[40] Naomi Mitchison, 'The First Breaking of England', in *The Hostages* 298.
[41] See Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 187-213.

> hardly fair to set them about with the perils and discomforts of long ago. But it is just this odd mixture of ancient and modern that makes the stories so real. They are written with clarity and simplicity.[42]

This reviewer touches upon Mitchison's unusual inclusion of children and women, so like 'one's own cousins and aunts', in her dramatic historical writing, and also describes the simplicity and modernity of Mitchison's arguments and dialogue. In response to her adult fiction some critics, such as Winifred Holtby, appreciated Mitchison's innovative use of modern speech. Mitchison predated by several years Georg Lukács' criticism of archaism, which he wrote 'must be ruled out of the general linguistic tone of the historical novel as a superfluous artificiality. The point is to bring a past period *near* to the present-day reader'.[43] Other critics, including Q. D. Leavis, labelled her approach to history 'lowbrow' and were critical of her upper-middle-class attempts at popularising socialism. Because of the thematic and formal similarities between her literature for children and for adults, it is useful to apply to her children's books the political analyses which both contemporary and late twentieth-century critics have found appropriate for her interwar writing for adults. Such criticisms are helpful in my analysis of the politics of writing propagandistic fiction for a child audience, because similar questions of paternalism are introduced by the educational position assumed by both groups of texts.

An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents (1932) and the politics of Mitchison's fictions

The children's texts discussed above are educational in two senses. First, through dramatic and engaging storytelling techniques, they inform their readers about the everyday, often domestic, life and the larger intellectual or social questions of specific periods of history. Secondly, these texts level an implicit critique at the audience's own

[42] Anonymous reviewer, 'Children of History', *John O'Loudon's Weekly* (1 November 1930), from Edinburgh: Mitchison's scrapbook, no page reference.

culture through Mitchison's use of socialist or feminist discourse to politicise the relationships among her characters and classes. Elizabeth Maslen has analysed this dual functioning in Mitchison's long novels for adults as an effect of Aesopian language, which many writers of the 1930s used as a way to get 'contentious issues [...] past censorship, not only the official censorship of Thirties' society, but also personal and consensus censorship which a reader may have absorbed from the political, cultural and moral climate of the times'.[44] Aesopian writing:

> supplied entertainment on one level, the story level, for those who merely sought entertainment, but also offered signals (by epigraphs, for instance) that the story cover could be penetrated by readers who shared the writer's political concerns, and could then be read at another, subversive or polemical level.[45]

Mitchison's encourages the willing or knowledgeable reader to engage intellectually with her texts. In her children's literature, she attempts to induce children to think politically from an early age, counteracting the conventional lessons of obedience and acceptance of authority common in schools at the time, attitudes which were criticised in her edited non-fiction volume, *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents.*

As well as serving her political ends, the historical fiction genre that Mitchison adopted for her children's writing continued to explore religious, mythic, and classical motifs present in her adult fiction, which she seemed to believe, after Frazer's *Golden Bough* and her understanding of modern dream interpretation, were motifs common to all cultures and periods. These were also apt forms for her exploration of large moral concerns in past and present ages, such as good and evil, greed, injustice, love, prejudice, and war. Maslen writes that 'in the bulk of her fiction, it is as if [Mitchison] aims to reinvent for adults the storytelling mode found more commonly in children's literature,

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[43] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell ([1937] London: Merlin Press, 1962), 195.
[44] Elizabeth Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', in Maroula Joannou, ed., *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 139.
[45] Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 139.

offering the illusion of an oral tradition'.[46] Her distinction between writing for adults and children is blurred by the inclusion in her children's collections of stories which originally appeared in adult newspapers. In her book *The Fourth Pig* (1936), aimed at an adult audience, Mitchison rewrites fairy tales such as the Three Little Pigs, using contemporary settings to explore such themes as the threat of Nazism, in the guise of a bad wolf, and the difficulty of conventional expectations of wifehood on professional women in her revision of the Snow Maiden, whose marriage to a prince slowly kills her.[47]

Maslen's analysis of the long novels argues that 'it is easy to underestimate Mitchison [...] as she opts for a very accessible idiom'.[48] She praises Mitchison's 'keen awareness of an audience beyond her own class, a keen ear for idiom, and a refusal to "write down" to any section of that audience'.[49] Had Mitchison, an educated and cultured upper-middle-class writer, used a more highbrow or even middlebrow literary style, Maslen argues, her writings would 'ring true only to a limited audience'.[50] These arguments may be used to appraise Mitchison's children's writings: she also refuses to 'write down' to children, considering them just as politically cognisant as any of her adult readers. The main differences between her adult and children's writings are their length the explicitness of sexual content; her political arguments are the same, as are her demands on her audience's intelligence and willingness to learn and to analyse. In writing historical fiction in a modern idiom, Mitchison ensures that her ideological arguments will be as universally appealing as possible, although contemporary reviews seem to suggest that most of her fiction was appreciated by middle- and highbrow members of the Left. However, because Mitchison was an upper-middle-class writer

[46] Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 141.
[47] See Naomi Mitchison, *The Fourth Pig* (London: Constable, 1936).
[48] Maslen, Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 141.
[49] Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 141.
[50] Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 141.

striving to educate readers outside of her own class, it seems important to consider the class politics of these writings.

In the 1930s, Q.D. Leavis derided historical fiction as a 'lowbrow' form of writing, arguing that the communication of serious ideas was only possible in highbrow forms, which reached limited audiences.[51] Leavis specifically attacked the lowbrow qualities of Mitchison's novel *We Have Been Warned* in a review for *Scrutiny*, asking:

> What confidence can be placed in the political 'thought' of a writer who visualizes in terms of magazine-story situations, whose perceptions can be embodied in *pastiches* and clichés, and whose emotional equipment is no more refined than that of a bestseller of the corrupt bourgeois public?[52]

Maslen responds to such thinking by enquiring whether readers ought to be 'surprised that [Mitchison] adopts the accessible language of the "lowbrow", when she wants to reach a wide audience?'[53] Valentine Cunningham also criticises the:

> very traditional assumption that overt political propaganda... and simplicity of address to readers, will axiomatically mark a poem or poet down. According to these views, temporal or worldly interests and commitments automatically make a work of less importance than more formalist, or more language-centred, or (save the mark) more 'eternal-verity' writings - even if the 'eternal-verities' in question are, in the end, just as ideologically skewed as the propagandistic dispositions which are being disallowed.[54]

Although contemporary critics have challenged both the devaluation of the lowbrow as a medium for the 'communication of serious ideas' and the very segregation of literary writing into 'high' and 'low' categories, part of Leavis' analysis, regarding the conflict between Mitchison's class position and her attempts to write for a working-class audience, accords with criticisms of some late twentieth century critics of Mitchison's politics.

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[51] See Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* ([1932] London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 262-263.
[52] Q.D. Leavis, 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', *Scrutiny* vol. IV no. 2 (Sept. 1935), 114.
[53] Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 141.
[54] Valentine Cunningham, 'The Age and Anxiety of Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents' in Keith Williams and Steven Matthews, eds., *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London: Longman, 1997), 6. Quoted in Maslen, 'Naomi Mitchison's Historical Fiction', 138.

What Leavis finds 'peculiarly irritating' about Mitchison's socialism is that the novelist's 'implicit assumption of authority [... is] grounded, it would appear, on nothing but class'.[55] Because Dione is disgusted by the working-class homes that she visits in her husband's constituency, and because she desires working-class characters to embrace bourgeois cultural values, Leavis criticises the text's denial of working-class culture and writes that Mitchison is the sort of novelist who has 'no first-hand experience of the kind of life and feelings they are trying to reproduce'.[56] Storm Jameson, as previously discussed, was also interested in the tension between middle-class writers and the working-class lives they sought to represent within socialist fiction. According to Jameson's arguments in 'New Documents', Dione's role as an observer, which truthfully concedes her position as an outsider in the working-class home, would not have been regarded as antipathetic to the socialist intents of Mitchison's novel. However, I would agree with Leavis that Dione's desires for a revolution that will raise everyone to her standard of living, although spurred by her generosity, do avoid engagement with working-class culture on its own terms. Dione realises that her values are bourgeois, but apart from her observations of a utopian Soviet Union she does not critically assess her own position. It is this uncritical regard for the text's underlying bourgeois values which irritates' Leavis, and although, as I indicated in Chapter 4, I find Mitchison's refusal to apologise for her own tastes and values to be courageous, Leavis' assessment of Mitchison's authority is nevertheless useful to my assessment of the politics of Mitchison's books for children.

As indicated above, Mitchison admitted in several of her introductions that the historical scenes presented in her books were her own interpretations, thereby undermining the authority of traditional histories whilst simultaneously effacing herself

[5] Leavis, 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', 112.
[6] Leavis, 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', 127.

as an expert historian. Her texts encourage children to question authority, as do her characters who debate, for instance, the injustice of the slave tradition, or the unscientific teachings of the Church, therefore distancing Mitchison from arrogation of indisputable authority to herself. Her preface to *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents* is called an 'Apology', and in it Mitchison argues once again that the text is not authoritative, despite the encyclopaedic length (nearly 900-pages) of the volume, which features chapters on topics including revolutions, history of religion, economics, birth control, astronomy, and speculative descriptions of the 'next war' by expert contributors including Margaret Cole, Olaf Stapledon, and W.H. Auden:

> This book doesn't pretend to be an encyclopaedia, giving all the information about everything; what it does do, I think, is give the beginning of things, the foundations of knowledge, and to show why they are exciting.[57]

By presenting the book as a starting point for discussion and further exploration of the arguments presented, Mitchison's *Outline* expects its readers to think independently and to question, as do her other children's texts in which she encourages her audience to read other titles and judge the validity of her argument for themselves.

Archival material on Mitchison deposited at the National Library of Scotland includes her original plans for *An Outline*, and her notes reveal that she envisioned a text which would present contentious, socialist views on issues such as sexual reproduction, contraception, and the patriarchal, nuclear family. She proposed the volume to the Left-wing publisher Victor Gollancz, who agreed with Mitchison that the book ought to be 'as radical as it possibly can be' without alienating 'a certain type of person'.[58] Gollancz was pleased that a *Daily Herald* might review the text as 'a piece of socialist propaganda'.[59] His advertising leaflet for the book argued its purpose:

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[57] Naomi Mitchison, 'Editor's Preface/Apology', in *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents* (London: Gollancz, 1932), 4.
[58] Edinburgh: Victor Gollancz, letter to Naomi Mitchison, 29 October 1931, Acc. No. 9152.
[59] Edinburgh: Victor Gollancz, letter to Naomi Mitchison, 2 September 1932, Acc. No. 9152.

> Even the best modern education seems dreadfully slow and cautious to intelligent parents [...] They know their children will almost certainly not be taught either honest and straightforward physiology - the one thing which really helps a boy or girl through the critical stages of puberty - or any modern science, still less the history of his own times: that would be dangerous![60]

By mentioning educators and parents, his advertisement introduces the concerns of Mitchison's 'Apology', in which she writes:

> I expect that some of the chapters will leave you wanting to ask questions; that means that your fathers and mothers and teachers will have to think hard and do some more learning! For no one knows everything or can know everything - there is too much to know - but most of us know much too little; we ought to be ashamed of ourselves but we aren't. Most of us think we are capable of governing the country (that is what being a democracy is), but very few of us are - including the ones who do! Government doesn't mean ordering about (anyone can do that), but planning, and planning means knowledge.
>
> Intelligent grown-up people are very apt to know a lot about one kind of thing, but very little about all the other things; that is to say, they are experts. This is bound to make for muddles and misunderstandings. *The Outline for Boys and Girls* is an attempt to clear up these muddles, to make the people who will be running things in another twenty years aware of all the different kinds of knowledge and values.[61]

Mitchison's language includes herself in the group of adults who know too little and are incapable of running the government, and presents her 'expert' writers as limited, rather than authoritative. In her introductions to each section, she presents the writers as private individuals with families and hobbies, instead of as world-renown scientists, politicians, or authors, further encouraging identification of those writers as 'ordinary' people rather than revered members of the ruling class.

An Outline met furious criticism upon publication. The book was denounced in an open letter to the press 'signed by one Archbishop, two Bishops, the Headmasters of Eton and Harrow, and fourteen other prominent men'.[62] They were angered at the book's critical stance in relation to the traditional family, and its lack of references to Christian belief. Rebecca West, George Bernard Shaw, Harold Laski, and Dora Russell

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[60] Edinburgh: pre-publication advertisement by Victor Gollancz publishers for *An Outline for Boys and Girls and Their Parents.*

[61] 'Editor's Preface/Apology', 5.

[62] Jill Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: A Biography* (London: Pandora/Harper Collins, 1992), 83.

were among the figures who responded to defend the book. In *Time and Tide,* Lady Rhondda published an analysis of the open letter, arguing, as Jill Benton describes, that 'the letter purported to speak for organised Christianity, and yet not a single women's signature had been included [...] These gentlemen, she asserted, were not speaking for Christianity; they were speaking for the threatened patriarchy'.[63] Mitchison was greatly disappointed that, because of the furore over its publication, *An Outline* did not sell in the large numbers she had anticipated, nor was it ever published in the United States as she had hoped.[64] *An Outline* indicates her desire to challenge modes of patriarchal and capitalist authority, yet she did not seem to anticipate the backlash that the establishment might wield against a text which was, because aimed at parents and children, perhaps more ideologically challenging than a volume of highbrow, adult fiction. The reaction of conservatives to her book undermines Leavis' argument that lowbrow writing cannot be socially significant.

However, the class position of Mitchison's texts may still be open to criticism. The topics included in *An Outline,* such as its valuation of art, music, medicine, and politics, are bourgeois: neither Mitchison nor her authors explore or engage with working-class careers as worthwhile activities in the socialist future for which they are aiming. The working class is represented in *An Outline* as exploited and demeaned, which is a valid perspective for a socialist text but also inherently upholds the notion that the middle-class cultural values and lifestyles that the text does discuss are somehow superior. In this text, and in Mitchison's children's fiction, there is little or no first-hand representation of working-class daily life, or depiction of any aspects of working-class culture as being worthwhile. In her children's stories and plays, except for describing the violence of slavery, her texts present the class system as a general,

[63] Benton, *Naomi Mitchison,* 83.
[64] Benton, *Naomi Mitchison,* 83.

political evil rather than exploring the material details of working-class daily life. Mitchison achieves such explorations through Dione's upper middle-class observations in *We Have Been Warned*, but her historical fictions do not engage with that level of detail.

Finally, Mitchison's strategies for distancing herself and her texts from institutions of authority are not completely successful. Her books for adults often include lengthy bibliographies, asserting the basis of her visions of history in documented fact, aligning her texts with the authoritative histories that she challenges with her fictions and her re-visions of the lives of neglected historical characters. Also, *An Outline* was marketed not only to adolescents, but to an adult audience that 'will here meet with a very great deal that they did not know, or with knowledge which they never quite absorbed, all correlated with other knowledge and put in a new and brilliant light'.[65] As creator of the project and editor of the volume, it was Mitchison's responsibility to decide how and what information ought to be included in her instructional guide to parents who were obviously less educated than herself and the other experts who contributed to the volume. *An Outline* and her other children's fictions try to reach, and to teach, audiences outside of her own class while disclaiming in her introductions the effects of her considerable education and her connections to influential intellectual and cultural figures. Finally, because she seeks to educate and influence, the paternalistic qualities of her fiction must be recognised. This does not necessarily undermine the liberal intent of her fictions, but considering Mitchison's political fictions alongside those of, for example, Storm Jameson, illustrates the extent to which Mitchison's arguments make closed, and authoritative, presentations of ideology. Jameson's fictions, as discussed in the first chapter, present the political questions of the

[65] Pre-publication advertisement for *An Outline*.

age as debates between characters, and perhaps encourage a greater degree of speculation on the reader's part.

By comparison, Mitchison's writing for children and adults effaces the authoritativeness of its suggestions for the forms that political thought and analysis ought to take. Her expectations for children's literature were high: in reviews of children's books for *Time and Tide* in 1937, she is highly critical of a book which describes middle-class children on a berry-picking outing, and earning much greater wages than a working-class man could realistically expect to earn for the same job.[66] She reviewed children's books on exactly the same terms as she would have reviewed books for adults, illustrating her commitment to serious, political fiction for all readers, and also her belief that even popular, light fiction could have political import. Her idealism is evident in her children's fiction of the 1930s, and the great number of texts which she aimed simultaneously at young and old audiences. There is much about her neglected children's literature which challenges contemporary perceptions of the functions of popular writing, and much to merit her continued reception as a courageous, upper-middle-class experimenter in socialist writing. She attempted to obscure her 'highbrow' background by various strategies, but the within the class politics of her children's literature, as in her writing for adults, tension is evident between the values and authority of her own culture and the unspecialised, imagined audience she so earnestly wished to reach.

[66] Naomi Mitchison, 'What They Like to Read', *Time and Tide*, 7 December 1935, 1854.

7.

Interwar visions of the near-future: Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West

By the mid- to late-1930s, speculative visions of the 'next war' were frequent in publications of fiction and non-fiction authors alike. Political studies such as T.J. Wintringham's *The Coming World War* (1936) and F. Elwyn Jones' *The Battle for Peace* (1938) offered analyses of current events in Europe and imagined the air and gas raids which were likely to feature in any upcoming conflict. Similarly, the novel *The Gas War of 1940*, published in 1931 by 'Miles', a pseudonym for S. Southwold, provided a 'vision of a desolated city and its mutilated inhabitants' which was the very 'image of contemporary fear'.[1] In his study of next-war fiction, I.F. Clarke lists other forgotten authors and texts from this period which 'described war in order to preach peace', including such titles as *The Poison War*, *The Black Death*, *Menace*, *Empty Victory*, *Invasion from the Air*, *Chaos*, and *Air Reprisal* in his list.[2] Such texts are part of a tradition of speculative, next-war fiction which Clarke traces back to the eighteenth century. They may also be included within the dystopian genre as fantasies of a world gone wrong through the abuse of technology or military power. In this chapter, I will discuss the texts contributed to this genre by Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West, and analyse both how these texts engage with conventional genre expectations and what political ends are achieved in their individual uses of speculative fiction.

Clarke also lists disaster novels and such golden-age dystopias as Evgenii Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *1984* (1949). He argues that the:

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[1] I.F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 170.
[2] Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, 170.

> paradox running through the whole literature of imaginary wars of the future is that they begin as an argument on the need to prepare for the next war and they end on the Huxleyan theme of the need to prepare against the possibility of another war.[3]

Several of the texts which will feature in this final chapter also engage with this paradox, debating whether armament or pacifism is the correct stance to take against fascism. These texts suggest modes of resistance against fascism that may include violence or war, suggesting a changed attitude towards pacifism from that which the four writers held, in varying degrees, earlier in the interwar period. Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West each turned to speculative writing and imagined near-futures to demonstrate and to work out their individual political stances in the middle and late 1930s. In this chapter I will discuss the variety of forms which their visions of the future take: fictionalised Nazi regimes in Britain feature in several of the novels discussed here, but the authors also explore other possibilities for the dystopian genre by writing a play, a dystopian ending to a socialist bildungsroman, and a disaster novel. Their texts are formally experimental, and offer a further challenge to generic expectations by choosing to depict social structures and individual personality types, rather than new weapons, as images of contemporary fear. Several of the texts discussed here, in particular Jameson's *In the Second Year* (1936) and Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* (1935), have been recovered by recent feminist scholars, including Phyllis Lassner, Elizabeth Maslen, Janet Montefiore, and Nan Bowman Albinkski, and noted for their depictions of a relationship between fascism and gender politics. My analyses will develop more detailed readings of these texts than in previous studies, and will also include neglected texts by Holtby, Jameson, and West as indications of women's insightful contributions to the speculative writing which was popular at the end of the decade. These texts demonstrate the talent each writer possessed for experimenting with literary forms

[3] Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War*, 4.

unusual to her, and also discuss each author's assessment of the crucial problems in public and private politics in this period.

Holtby's approaches to Britain's future

Winifred Holtby produced fiction and non-fiction which considered the possibility of fascism in Britain, and criticised contemporary politics within her own country. Throughout her anti-fascist writing runs a critique of the backlash against women which she analyses in her discussion of German and Italian policies in her study *Women and a Changing Civilization* (1934). Holtby was sensitive to the backward steps initiated by the Nazis following the relatively progressive period of Weimar feminism, and wrote about similar attitudes in Britain to women's employment in her journalism. Her articles 'Unemployment and the Women Who Work' (1933) and 'Shall I Order a Black Blouse?' (1934) are not as direct as *Women* in addressing fascism's gender politics. Rather, Holtby writes both articles as debates, considering the possible merits Mosley's regime may have in the eyes of unemployed men, and of women who are anxious for political action. She then subtly demonstrates that a feminism of equality will foster change more effectively than will Mosley's fascism. Holtby attended meetings of the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s and was familiar with their policies and the ways in which Mosley manipulated his audience by playing on their economic and class fears.[4] Her journalism analyses the tempting aspects of Mosley's arguments in detailed critiques which require her reader to place herself in the mind of someone attracted to fascism. In her dystopian and anti-utopian fiction and drama of this period, she uses a similar technique, beginning with depictions of the attractive, and utopian, qualities of the cultures she later undermines.

[4] See Marion Shaw's discussion in *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 2000).

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the central character of Holtby's neglected anti-fascist play, *Take Back Your Freedom* (1939), is a self-made politician whose idealistic, Labour interests in his northwest constituency disintegrate into a totalitarian desire for power over England. Holtby depicts Arnold Clayton initially as a man enthusiastic for service, and potentially admirable, aiming to achieve equality, better housing, and reduced unemployment through social action. He is tempted away from his original goals by a sponsor who understands the vanity and psychosexual desire to prove himself that underlie Clayton's political aspirations. Arnold Clayton's calls for 'Action, Isolation, Order'[5] are similar to Oswald Mosley's in the early 1930s, when Mosley was still a Labour party member and proposed an emergency national policy of decisive action to improve housing conditions and reduce unemployment.[6] The violence of Clayton's early party rallies, often directed against Jews in working-class neighbourhoods, also grounds Holtby's imagined nightmare future on a British fascism that already exists in the aggressive, militaristic form of Mosley's Blackshirts.[7] Such contemporary realism creates a future that is immediate because already closely mirrored in tendencies of the reader's present, thus rendering Holtby's dystopic warning even more crucial.

Holtby uses her dramatic genre to create the illusion of the temporal setting. Although a reader would be given the clue that 'the action takes place in Oxford and London in the immediate future',[8] date and time references are not spoken onstage. Instead, Holtby's stage directions refer to seasonal changes, which would be visible through the windows of set interiors, to indicate the passage of time. As Clayton's

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[5] Winifred Holtby with Norman Ginsbury, *Take Back Your Freedom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 27. The publisher employed Ginsbury to 'tidy up' Holtby's finished script after her death, so that the work is primarily her original text.

[6] See Alan Young et al, *A National Policy: An Account of the Emergency Programme Advanced by Sir Oswald Mosley MP* (London: Macmillan, 1931).

[7] Clayton is successful in the East End of London and northwest of England, as was Mosley (see Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front* [London: I.B. Tauris, 1998], 21). The name of Clayton's 'National Planning Party' seems to have been based on Mosley's 'British Planning Movement'.

[8] *Freedom*, 15.

regime takes hold, emblems of its power become more prevalent onstage: flags start to appear, and more characters wear the uniform of his Grey Guards, so that by the end of the text even Clayton's original office staff have been militarised. Visually, the time of the drama is a future that otherwise closely resembles the mid- to late-1930s present, but references to Stalin, Roosevelt, Mussolini and Hitler, all of whom are in power concurrently with Clayton, situate the play firmly in the very near future.

Although violent rallies and mass support apparently usher in Clayton's success, these huge crowds are never seen onstage. All of the action takes place in two interiors, Clayton's London office and his mother's Oxford drawing room. These domestic spaces agree visually with Holtby's intent to focus on the dynamics of the intimate relationships, in particular between Arnold Clayton and his mother, that were as responsible as any social or economic cause for the rise of Clayton's fascistic mindset. Holtby's depiction of these relationships, and of Clayton's psychology, echoes the Freudian discourse that informed analysis of fascism in the 1930s, as I discussed in Chapter 1.

Mrs Clayton reveals that nothing about her son's childhood suggested he would one day be powerful or dynamic:

> Arnold - at six - spotty, knock-kneed and a cast in his eye. I'll tell you what made him what he is to-day - malt, cod liver oil, special exercise, and Californian syrup of figs. I wish to Heaven I knew what I'd done to turn him into a human gramophone.[9]

Mrs Clayton never denies that it was her own desire to strengthen her son and turn him into 'a great man' that helped shape his adult hunger for personal power.[10] Mrs Clayton affirms that the shift in Arnold's attitudes occurred during his young adulthood in the First World War, when he was not allowed to fight as were his male friends:

[9] *Freedom*, 41.'Gramophone' refers to Arnold's new passion for public speaking and delivering his messages to a wide audience.
[10] *Freedom*, 35.

> Then the war came and Dick went to France and they kept Arnold at Whitehall, it was worse than ever. Ever since then Arnold's been trying to force himself into the position of a man of action just to show that he's not afraid.[11]

Clayton's adult longing to create a 'greater Britain' that is 'more virile' is grounded in his and his mother's early obsessions with physical and political masculine achievement.[12] The text ironically undermines his hypermasculine ideals by depicting them as a function of frustrated feminine ambition and maternal discipline.

Clayton's admiration of his friend Dick's (Major Lawrence's) masculine strength results in an adult relationship between the two men with overtones of homosexuality. The link between male homosexuality and fascism also appears in Jameson's anti-fascist fictions, discussed below. In *Take Back Your Freedom*, Clayton's sexual orientation is more explicitly depicted than that of Alderman Snaith in Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), and is reported through speculative comments by the text's characters. Clayton himself seems aware of the possible interpretations of his behaviour, and explains to a friend one psychological theory about ambitious men: 'the urge to power is a symptom of belated adolescence usually associated with homosexuality and the mother fixation'.[13] Lady Carter, a party member who is attracted to Clayton, can see that there is a relationship between Clayton's desire for power and his regard for Lawrence: 'he envied Lawrence. He valued his opinions. He wanted to show off in front of him - all the time. Lawrence was a sort of audience'.[14] Mrs Clayton also participates in the psychosexual discourse of the text when she interprets her son's political activities:

> A stupendous, devilish effort to calm your inner fears! That is your Movement! Concentration camps, medieval tortures and murders to prove to yourself that you, more than all the creatures of the earth, are a potent being![15]

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[11] *Freedom*, 42.
[12] *Freedom*, 59. *The Greater Britain* (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1932) was also the title of Oswald Mosley's first significant statement of what he believed were the goals of fascism.
[13] *Freedom*, 67.
[14] *Freedom*, 103.
[15] *Freedom*, 114-115.

Clayton's attraction to and desire for militant aggression culminate in Lawrence's execution: he shoots Lawrence so that he can be 'a man of action now, too'.[16] He explains his behaviour to his mother as a necessary breach of loyalty: 'What are my friends to the necessity of action? [...] Now there is nothing left but action, action to assert my independent will'.[17] As in the regime of Frank Hillier, one of Jameson's fascist leaders, there is no room for loyalty or intimacy in Clayton's Movement. He turns on his mother and tells her to 'take care, [...] it might become expedient for me to kill you too'.[18] Arnold's actions remove his opponents, and also eliminate intimacy as part of a programme in which traditionally feminine values are driven out.

Clayton's relationship with his mother begins to deteriorate at the same time as he kills Lawrence. An early conversation between the two men reveals that Clayton's mother attempted 'achievement by proxy',[19] living out her ambitions through her son after she was forced to give up her career upon marriage. On the night her son forms his party, Mrs Clayton's language indicates that she sees her interests and his as the same. She asks him, 'are our theories to be put into practice? All our beliefs, all our hopes. Are they going to be realised?'[20] After a lifetime of sharing his career with his mother, Clayton understands the results of withholding from women the choice of paid employment, yet it is this extreme, essentialist policy of gender discrimination that Clayton implements in order to solve the problem of unemployment in Britain once he is dictator. Holtby was aware of Mosley's essentialist desire for 'men who were men and women who were women' in his greater Britain. Holtby was also writing about fascism in a period in which Civil Service marriage bars were widely favoured, a tendency which

[16] *Freedom*, 105.
[17] *Freedom*, 110.
[18] *Freedom*, 112.
[19] *Freedom*, 35.
[20] *Freedom*, 39.

was indicative of popular acceptance of discriminatory policies.[21] In her drama, a nameless woman journalist challenges such policies by attempting to assassinate Clayton. The woman presents a feminist argument for equality against Clayton's patronising essentialism:

> *Clayton*: I have done everything possible to cure this evil of frustrated womanhood. I have withdrawn women from soulless routine and inhumanity of offices into the intimate circle of personal relationships. I have offered them wedding premiums, provided higher wages for married men, encouraged greater social freedom, endowed maternity, restored the home to its proper social prestige. I have given you such chances as no woman had before for love and child-bearing. How dare you blame me because you are frustrated? [...]
>
> *Woman*: Of course we are free to love, as you call it, to bear children. Not even a dictator could deny us that. It's quite true. There never was so much kissing and copulating. [...] It's the only form of energy or creativeness you have left us. We can be free as animals now, all night and day. But we want to be free as human beings.[22]

Although the woman's attempt to kill Clayton is not successful, he is eventually stopped by an assassination. He decides that his next course of action will be to trick his followers into a war by starting rumours that Germany is about to attack Britain from the air. Mrs Clayton tries to convince Party members to turn on her son, but as industrialists and manufacturers they all have too much to gain from war. Lady Carter even finds the idea of war erotic.[23] Mrs Clayton decides to kill her son herself. By sanctioning murder, this ending is a challenge to Holtby's earlier pacifism, and perhaps indicates that she was moving away from the opinions about war she once shared with Vera Brittain, as Marion Shaw has suggested. In murdering her son to save Britain from war, Mrs Clayton also challenges the essentialist view of maternal femininity which has limited her throughout her life, and which her son embraced in his masculinised regime. Both Mrs Clayton and the woman assassin make protracted speeches against fascism, so

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[21] Anthea Trodd describes a 1930 poll in which women Civil Service workers 'overwhelmingly supported the retention of the marriage bar' (*Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945* [London: Longman, 1998], 14).
[22] *Freedom*, 92-93.
[23] See *Freedom*, 125.

that women's speech also becomes a political weapon within Holtby's text. Although the fictional regime is stopped by murder, Holtby does suggest that other alternatives for resistance are available to her readers. The title of the play itself indicates that Holtby intends her reader/audience to view the text as a warning. She fantasises her fascistic Britain as a near-futuristic dystopia, offering her warning while there is still time for readers, perhaps female and feminist readers in particular, to take action against fascism in their country.

Holtby's play also demonstrates a connection between her Old feminism of equality (to which I alluded in Chapter 5) and anti-fascism by emphasising the similarities in the gender politics of fascism and traditional gender identities. Her satires and anti-utopias of the 1930s, although not anti-fascist, also offer critical views of contemporary British culture and indicate that gender politics are as problematic as the other aspects of British life which are the focus of her satires. In a short story for *Time and Tide* entitled 'The Murder of Madame Mollard' (1930), Holtby imagines a women's political party which believes itself to be utopian, but which is gradually shown to be based upon irrational and outmoded theories of difference. Madame Mollard, the party founder, never marries because 'men don't like exceptional women'. However, as her reputation grows, an ironic legend develops that she was actually a 'gentle, clinging, motherly type of woman',[24] because according to the separate-spheres ideology which Madame Mollard herself preached, 'exceptional' independent working women are undesirable types.

Holtby also addresses traditional definitions of gender in her anti-utopian novel of the near-future, *The Astonishing Island* (1933). This text follows generic conventions of utopian fiction and presents the unnamed astonishing island, Great Britain, through the

[24] Winifred Holtby, 'The Murder of Madame Mollard', *Time and Tide*, XI.3 (17 January 1930), 74.

eyes of a shipwrecked visitor, Robinson Lippingtree Mackintosh.[25] Robinson is told that on the island there exists a True Woman, and speaks to journalists, politicians, and other men hoping for a concise definition of this entity. His own experiences on the island indicate that all women are unique individuals, and that they are shaped by their class and educational differences to a much greater extent than men recognise. Robinson also witnesses the violence of cricket, the mob mentality of a football cup tie, and the wasteful littering of countryside holidaymakers before deciding that the islanders are mad and that he ought to escape them. In these texts and other short stories such as 'The D.O.I.: An Interview of the Future',[26] Holtby demonstrates a willingness to experiment with drama, fantasy, science fiction, utopia, and dystopia as forms for her satirical or explicit criticisms of contemporary British politics and culture. Her use of genres other than the social problem novel as expressions of urgent political criticisms illustrates her desire to reach a wider audience. These texts also indicate that women's futuristic texts were more numerous and more formally varied than recent feminist studies of anti-fascist novels have depicted.

Storm Jameson's dystopian experiments

The narrative of Storm Jameson's dystopian novel, *In the Second Year*, also relies upon the conventional detached visitor as observer of events. However, Jameson deliberately ironises this convention to indicate that it is Liberal apathy, such as the visitor's, which allows reactionary politics to flourish in Britain. Like Holtby, Jameson also focuses upon intimate, gendered relationships and a close family structure in her examination of fascism, 'eschew[ing] the marvels of supertechnology', as Phyllis Lassner has described,

[25] See Chris Ferns *Narrating Utopia* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1999), 111 and Nan Bowman Albinksi, *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 11 for discussion of the 'visitor' trope.

in favour of a depiction of the role of private life in the formation of fascist regimes.[27] In this text, Jameson uses the first-person narration of Andy Hillier, a returning expatriate scholar, to observe Britain in the second year of a fascist government. Although no exact date is given for the events narrated, clues in the text allow the reader to estimate that the novel is set in the early 1940s. Andy's narration is spoken from an even more distant future, indicating from the outset that he has either escaped or survived the regime and inflecting the entire text with a hopeful tone; because he has survived, resistance may be possible.

Andy recalls returning to Britain from Norway to visit his sister, Lotte, and to observe the changes that have occurred since their second cousin, Frank Hillier (whose name is suggestive of 'Hitler'), became dictator. Lotte's husband, Richard Sacker, is the leader of the Volunteer army which secured Frank's success. The relationship between Hillier and Sacker is based upon that between Hitler and Ernst Roehm; Roehm was a known homosexual, and his sexuality was used as the excuse for his murder during Hitler's Night of the Long Knives. In Jameson's text, a homoerotic bond exists between the dictator and his military leader, extending the circumstances of Roehm's assassination to include the associations with homosexuality that were current in the 1930s. Hillier, like Hitler, decides that his closest military supporter is no longer needed, and has him killed. Jameson later claimed to have been fascinated by the necessity for betrayal that seemed central to fascist regimes; this political betrayal resonates through almost all of the other relationships in the text, politicising the private lives of her characters. Maslen, Lassner and Montefiore have analysed the gender politics of this text in detail; Lassner has argued that 'the men's bond represents and justifies a male-

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[26] See Winifred Holtby, 'The D.O.I.: An Interview with the Future' in Paul Berry and Marion Shaw, eds., *Remember, Remember! The Selected Stories of Winifred Holtby* (London: Virago, 1999), 128-132.

[27] See Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 63.

centred politics devoid of mutual support and nurturance, qualities which Jameson associates with the feminine'.[28] In this section of the chapter, I will focus more closely than previous critics on the treatment of women under Hillier's regime and Jameson's representation of his personal regard for women, which accords with Holtby's depiction of an hysterical fascist male in *Take Back Your Freedom* and *South Riding.*

Women are allowed to join even the militant branches of Frank Hillier's party, dressing in uniform and participating in the regime's aggression. Despite this, the biological segregation inherent to fascism is crucial to Hillier's policies. His language describes a sexual disgust that reveals his own misogyny and appears to confirm his homosexuality:

> He was struck by the extraordinary appearance of a line of women in uniform, their female hips swelling out behind and their breasts pouting in front. The slender women were the least laughable, naturally, but even they presented, as it were from the shadow cast by the others, the comical effect of a parade of penguins in clothes.[29]

Frank Hillier desires an exclusively masculine, and male, world. His regime apparently requires the support of women militants, but these seem to be admitted under sufferance. Despite his feminine role in his relationship with Sacker, Hillier attempts to quash femininity wherever it appears, eventually eradicating his own greatest loyalty in an act of masculine violence by having Richard Sacker killed.

By also locating her examination of fascism's misogyny within the context of private, heterosexual relationships, Jameson criticises a tendency towards sexual segregation that is easily recognisable in her own contemporary culture. The exclusion of women from male dominated, patriarchal structures of power is remembered from Lotte's pre-fascist youth. As a young woman, Lotte was denied access to a political life except vicariously, through her husband. These limitations upon her are such that when her husband is killed, she commits suicide because, under Hillier's regime, as in the early

[28] Lassner, *British Women Writers,* 93.
[29] Storm Jameson, *In the Second Year* (London: Cassell, 1936), 176.

years of her marriage in the 1920s, there is no outlet for a wife with a political mind such as she reveals throughout the text with her keen understanding of Hillier's true intentions.[30] Through Lotte's situation, Jameson suggests a similarity between conservative British values and fascism, relating the imagined future to the reader's reactionary present. Jameson does not offer models of female resistance such as the working woman in Holtby's drama, but this absence is necessary to the dystopian theme of her text. Jameson's warning draws attention to patriarchal traditions in public and private, encouraging her audience to understand how their present culture may permit fascism's inception.

Her text provides readers with several other models of resistance, however, challenging persistent utopian/dystopian myths. Ferns asserts that in the canonical dystopias by men of this period, 'for all its parodic inversion of the utopian ideal, one feature which dystopia reproduces virtually unchanged is the myth that resistance is futile'.[31] In this way Jameson's novel differs significantly from the more conventional dystopias by Orwell, Huxley and Zamyatin, as do texts by the other women writers included in this chapter. Minor characters such as Sacker and Lotte's nephew, Ernst, and his girlfriend Steffy, demonstrate an intimate, heterosexual relationship in which each partner regards the other as their equal. Neither of them behaves according to the strict gender rules enforced by Hillier's regime or within Lotte's marriage. Although Ernst, a guard in Sacker's Volunteer army, does not participate in the regime's violence, he joins his uncle's military branch out of familial loyalty, challenging the extreme disloyalty and violence that characterises the regime. Steffy is a university student, a Communist, and a tanned, strong hiker, embodying the physical qualities, political mind, and career aspirations that Hillier would argue were undesirable, and indeed unhealthy, in females. They eschew marriage, a choice which separates them from their elders:

[30] Lassner also makes this observation; see *British Women Writers of World War II*, 96.

Andy, as part of Frank Hillier's generation, is shocked to realise that the two are lovers because he does not expect that behaviour from an unwed couple. At the end of the novel, Ernst and Steffy do agree to marry, vowing to love and respect one another, so that they might more easily leave Britain with Andy and escape to Norway. The possibility of their survival, and the continuation of their attitude of gender equality, challenges the success of the fascist regime as well as the traditional, gender essentialism that drove Lotte to suicide, pushed Hillier and Sacker to extremes of masculine aggression, and allowed fascism to flourish.

By writing marriage into the ending of her plot, Jameson embraces a conservatism which she could perhaps have challenged. Holtby's *Take Back Your Freedom* also insisted that its woman assassin was a happy wife and mother as well as a journalist; both texts avoid the critique of marriage and the examination of single womanhood of which their authors were capable in earlier texts, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3. Both texts also seem to assert that they are neither against marriage nor depicting it as a singularly Fascistic institution. Rather, what the texts challenge is fascism's insistence upon separate spheres and the idea that women should not be free to choose careers outside the home. Ferns has argued that in conventional dystopias, 'as a counter to the threat of the utopian future, the dystopian writer often ends up merely reasserting the values of his past'.[32] Jameson and Holtby seem to avoid such a regressive politics, however, because although both Steffy and the woman journalist are married, they are also examples of unconventional females whose contributions to the fight against fascism are emphasised within their respective narratives.

Jameson produced several other speculative fictions in this period. Her wartime novel, *Then We Shall Hear Singing: A Fantasy in C Minor* (1942), although published later than the texts within the scope of my discussion, deserves mention because it shares

[31] See Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 125.

with *In the Second Year* and with Holtby's writing the contemporary notion that homosexuality and fascism are interrelated. Jameson's dictator in *Singing* has a clear mother fixation, visiting the home of an elder woman in one of the villages he has destroyed and turning her into a surrogate mother for a night. In that text, written after the war had begun and fascism and Nazism were accepted threats, Jameson offers even more explicit models of resistance. Male characters form an army and prepare to fight back against the dictator who has subdued his population with lobotomies. The weapons which they use are provided by the old woman who has stolen and hoarded them, so that although women do not join the army they are still connected to the military arm of the village resistance. Women provide their own methods of resistance by singing songs to their children to keep alive the forgotten histories which their lobotomies were meant to have removed. Jameson characterises male and female resistance differently, but asserts that women's domestic offerings are just as crucial as men's military actions. The women's protests act as a potent threat to the regime because they strike against the power the dictator holds over history and memory.

Jameson also produced a disaster novel, *The World Ends* (1937), under the pseudonym William Lamb. This text has been neglected by scholars, but is a further example of the speculative fiction for which Jameson has been praised by recent feminist critics. Jameson used male pseudonyms in the mid-1930s in order to experiment more freely with themes and forms which were unusual for her. In *The World Ends*, she imagines her male protagonist, Blake, waking up the morning after a dinner party to find that the world has flooded. He wanders until he finds that only a single farming family, like Noah's after the Biblical Great Flood, has survived and is living on a small section of dry land in the north of the country. The first-person narrative records the experiences of the rest of his life in isolation, and examines how

[12] Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, 128.

history, memory, family, and politics develop within this post-apocalyptic microcosm.

Although the text focuses on a natural disaster, *The World Ends* may still be read as a metaphoric response to anxieties about war, similarly to the flood in D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915). At the dinner party which begins Blake's narrative, he discusses the possibility of war with his guests who include his wife, his mistress, a general, and a pacifist woman writer. All of the characters are worried about poison gas and air raids, and feel, as do the characters of the texts which I discussed in Chapter 3, that the countryside is going to be a safe escape from both the war dangers and the urban pressures of London. After the party, Blake is unable to sleep because the stormy summer weather is 'oppressive' and 'strange'. He has a fight with his wife and begins driving out of London until he ends up in Yorkshire; Blake falls asleep on the moors and wakes to find that the York plain has sunk underwater. The concerns expressed by the guests at the dinner party do not resurface in the cut-off world Blake experiences after the flood, but the basic anxiety about the survival of civilisation which was Jameson's concern in the late 1930s is apparent.

Blake, as a cultured writer, tries to impart his knowledge of music, history, and art to the three children of the Hutton family who take him in. Art has little place on the farm in the first years after the flood and Blake finds himself labouring under the command of Mr Hutton. A microcosmic patriarchy exists on the farm, in which Mr Hutton's word is law and his wife and children obey him unquestioningly. Hutton's daughter, Miriam, is already aware at age eleven 'that this farm - her world - was not a place where women can be allowed to be troublesome'[33] and knows that Blake can eat her bread 'because she had been brought up to know without argument that a man, even such a one as Blake, less able to work than she was, must be given the better share

[33] Storm Jameson, as William Lamb, *The World Ends* (London: J.M. Dent, 1937), 85.

of everything, food, drink, warmth'.[34] The text does not explore other alternatives to this traditional ideology; the small farm civilisation repeats inequalities of the past. Capitalist expansion and aggression endure as Hutton claims the surrounding moor and clears it badly himself rather than sharing its control communally. Violence also continues: Hutton's sons, Philip and John, become more competitive until John, like Cain, eventually slays his brother. John runs away from the farm after the murder, but Blake finds him on the moor a few days later, asleep like an 'animal', and Blake realises that this 'enemy' is also the future of civilisation.[35] The brutality and greed that Jameson warned against in her anti-fascist dystopias are two human qualities which survive the flood and will presumably be handed down to future generations. In this perspective, the disaster novel is much more pessimistic than Jameson's dystopias; the use of a pseudonym may have allowed her to write a darker text than was typical for her.

Although the Hutton females are oppressed, their maternal and familial love offers hope for the future. As Miriam matures, Blake becomes attracted to her. He notices that her body has the same shadows and curves as 'all women who stoop over their work in firelight and candlelight',[36] objectifying Miriam as an eternal, nurturing female. Blake is anxious about her closeness to her adolescent brothers, and is later shocked when she wishes to marry her brother, John, instead of accepting Blake's proposal. Blake eventually finds his way into the Hutton family by educating John and Miriam's children. He writes a book for one of them, as a record of what he can remember of world history before the flood. He imagines that one of these children will be the one to leave the farm and explore the rest of the world, so that the novel appears to end on a slightly hopeful, forward-looking note. However, underlying Blake's optimism is a simultaneous fear of degeneracy in the fact that a single family will

[34] *The World Ends*, 110.
[35] See *The World Ends*, 183.
[36] *The World Ends*, 189.

populate the earth, and in particular that the murdering 'animal', John, will father this new group. Anything which Blake could have offered either genetically or culturally, such as his memory of a Brandenburg concerto which he failed to pass on, has been lost. This pessimistic aspect of the novel's ending is also similar to fears of degeneracy which Bonnie Kime Scott has located in the modernist fiction of D.H. Lawrence in the same period.[37]

This dark novel offers a much more severe view of the future than Jameson's dystopias. In *Then We Shall Hear Singing* and *In The Second Year*, Jameson's critique of fascism and of reactionary gender politics offers readers a constructive warning, providing them with an imagined future which they still have time to avoid. The natural disaster that determines the plot of *The World Ends* offers no sense of political agency. The humans who do survive continue to re-enact historical atrocities. It is significant that when viewed as a father and inheritor of the family farm, John reminds Blake of 'any private soldier in France, in the war Blake had forgotten',[38] suggesting that the most dreadful aspects of contemporary life have survived and continue to wield influence. There is no attempt to shape their tiny community into one that avoids the violent, destructive future that was dreaded in the dinner party of the opening chapters. In this text, Jameson is uncharacteristically relentless in her depiction of humanity's negative capabilities. All that she hoped to save, as a political writer, is lost. She continues to explore women's domestic lives as a possible challenge to patriarchal law, but because neither Miriam nor her mother ever question Hutton's ideology, the presence of females in this small society is not enough to stop violence, greed, and the masculine desire for dominion from continuing. This hopeless perspective is a side to Jameson's interwar

[37] See Bonnie Kime Scott, 'D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930)', in *The Gender of Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 220-221. Jameson was familiar with Lawrence's work: in a letter to the Editor of *Time and Tide* on March 22 1929, she protested the confiscation of a manuscript of his poems (X.11, 333).
[38] *The World Ends*, 195.

politics which has yet to be fully appreciated by her critics. The text does not suggest that resistance is futile; rather, it depicts a degenerate British culture which has no interest in resistance.

Naomi Mitchison's dystopian ending

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the conclusion of Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* is a series of dystopian visions for Britain's immediate future. Through her close relationships with Olaf Stapledon and Aldous Huxley, Mitchison was perhaps more immediately influenced by dystopian and science fiction than were Holtby and Jameson. *We Have Been Warned* was completed one year after the publication her friend Huxley's *Brave New World*, and in her letters of this period to Stapledon Mitchison discusses the progress of her text and the difficulties she is having with its publishers. Because of the novel's discussion of Soviet politics and British Labour possibilities, Albinski has called Mitchison's text the 'closest [...] to a socialist utopia by a woman'[39] published in the interwar period. But the novel is actually uniquely structured with a dystopian ending which contrasts with the utopian possibilities of its previous chapters. The dystopian section amounts to only 20 pages out of over 550, nevertheless it is the ending of Mitchison's novel which has earned its classification as a dystopia by recent feminist critics including Lassner, Joannou and Montefiore.

Mitchison uses the figure of a witch, Green Jean, to contrive the transition from the blend of fantasy and contemporary realism which has characterised the entire novel, to the series of three dystopian scenes envisaged by Dione. Green Jean appears to Dione carrying a stone with a hole in its centre through which the future may be viewed. With this device, Mitchison uses Dione as the conventional visitor to the near future.

[39] Albinksi, *Women's Utopias*, 7.

Dione's first vision is of herself and her husband celebrating a Labour victory across Britain in an upcoming general election. Conservative onlookers, including Dione's sister-in-law Rosalind, watch the crowds of Labour supporters. The next two visions reveal Britain under the power of a regime of fascistic counter-revolutionaries. Rosalind is the only member of the new party actually seen; she is in uniform, and refuses to help Dione prevent Tom's execution. Dione witnesses her husband's death by firing squad before she returns to the reality of present, in which she feels her new baby move inside her for the first time as the novel ends. Within the visions, Dione sees this unborn baby as an infant in its pram, suggesting that fascism may be a reality in the immediate future.

As in Holtby and Jameson's dystopias, family relationships and gender politics shape Mitchison's depiction of British fascism. Dione's identity as a mother overshadows her commitment to Socialism so that her family, and not her party, are her primary concern in the future. She tries to appeal to Rosalind, Tom's sister, on familial terms, but her sister-in-law denies ties of loyalty and love and puts her regime first. Rosalind embraces violence and argues that Tom is a 'traitor', and tells Dione 'he is not my brother any longer. He and his like must be wiped out'.[40] Mitchison's counter-revolution requires a final separation between masculine and feminine behaviour: the nurturing, forgiving love that Dione feels even towards Rosalind and her children, who all work for the new regime, is categorised by the text as feminine and socialist, and opposes the masculine aggression and militancy of the fascists. Although the anti-fascist ending of Mitchison's novel endorses Dione's maternal values, Mitchison avoids complete gender essentialism by placing a woman in command of the local fascist regime. As a female and a mother who wears a uniform and participates in aggression, Rosalind demonstrates that masculine and feminine behaviours are not biologically

[40] Naomi Mitchison, *We Have Been Warned* (London: Constable, 1935), 549.

determined. However, Mitchison also manages to depict fascism's gender exclusivity as inherent even within Rosalind's regime.

Dione's observes that Rosalind is only a colonel and is not part of the unseen top levels of authority. Rosalind's uniform is specifically a 'feminine version' of the colonel's regalia, indicative of the sex differentiation that existed within the regime which insisted upon repeating contemporary patterns of sexual inequality. Dione's own experience of politics is also gendered, with Labour men arguing about economics and Marxism with their male colleagues whilst Dione visits wives at home to discuss birth control, or else helps to make sandwiches and coffee for campaigning men. Her vision of a utopian, Soviet-model socialism, by contrast, blends masculinity and femininity in the public and private realms through encounters with politically-outspoken, single working mothers in the USSR. Such idealistic models challenge the sexism and patriarchy of the present as much as they challenge those qualities in the fascistic future.

The near-future setting of Mitchison's dystopian ending represents reactionary forces which were already in evidence in the mid-1930s. Hers is not a regime based directly on Mosley's BUF, but a more general European fascism with uniforms, concentration camps, and firing squads. Apart from the mention of poison gas attacks, there is no indication that technology has been employed to bring the counter-revolution about; like Holtby and Jameson, Mitchison chooses to explore the social roots of totalitarianism, setting those writers apart from the technocracies of Huxley and Orwell. Mitchison's text also shares the hopeful quality of Holtby and Jameson's dystopias because, as Lassner writes, it 'registers a warning, not a dirge'[41] since Green Jean tells Dione that her instrument for viewing the future is 'not a stone of truth, but of warning. It means that this might be happening one day, yet maybe it is not even

[41] Lassner, *British Women Writers*, 98.

likely'.[42] Despite the fact that Dione witnesses a militant regime the likes of which already exist in Europe, possible resistance is indicated by her family's attempt to escape to Scotland. From there, away from the Oxford, London, and southern England centres of tradition and reaction, resistance may begin. Because the future of Britain will be in the hands of committed socialists like Dione's daughter, Morag, the text suggests that the next generation may not only defeat fascism but may also bring about the Labour revolution of Dione's utopian fantasies. Mitchison's dystopian ending follows several conventions of dystopian writing but in its suggestion that the imagined future is not the inevitable conclusion of contemporary social and political tendencies, her text challenges the sense of doom offered by her contemporary dystopians, such as Huxley in his *Brave New World.*

Science fiction and totalitarianism in Rebecca West's 'Man and Religion'

Rebecca West had her own connections to dystopian and science fiction through her relationship with H.G. Wells; she published reviews and critiques of many of his works and would have been familiar with the body of his writing. Keith Williams has discussed one of West's essays, 'Man and Religion', in relation to Wells' 1924 novel, *The Dream.* Williams' interest in West's text was its inclusion in the 'feminist symposium' *Man, Proud Man* (1932) and the 'contemporary critique of masculinity' offered by that volume.[43] However, Williams' essay is primarily an exploration of Katharine Burdekin's novel *Proud Man* (1934), and his analysis of West's text is limited. 'Man and Religion' has been neglected in most other contemporary studies of Rebecca West, and I include it

[42] *Warned*, 537.
[43] Keith Williams, 'Back from the Future: Katharine Burdekin and Science Fiction in the 1930s' in Maroula Joannou, ed., *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 152.

here to rectify that neglect and to describe West's use of dystopia in relation to the other dystopian fantasies by women writers featured in this chapter.

The essay uses what Williams terms a 'back-from the future strategy'[44] to narrate its critique of historical masculine attitudes towards religion. A prefatory paragraph states that the text consists of:

> pages from an address written automatically by a medium whose revelations seem to refer not to the past, but to the future. There are indications that she is reporting a speech or a sermon. The name of the speaker is given as Millie or Mollie Ebor.[45]

The speaker refers immediately to 'the case against men', which is 'not so black as it appears', projecting the reader into an unfamiliar setting. It is soon revealed that in the speaker's time, men and women still live and work in separate spheres, but women and their sphere are now considered to be superior. Masculine reasoning is characterised as operating under an illogical 'excess of what the Freudians first identified as the death-wish'.[46] Women's association throughout history with the drive to reproduce has eventually been recognised as the defining factor in their superiority. The speaker examines men's attitudes to sex and death throughout history, in terms of war and religion. She derides the male tendency towards asceticism which is 'cultivated as an end in itself'[47] and which, apart from being illogical in its 'lack of relevance to the Gospel story', is detestable because it epitomises man's 'willingness to torture and degrade the body'.[48] The speaker argues that man's attitude toward the body also informs his love of warfare.

West employs the examples of the extreme ascetics, St. Simeon Stylites and St Jerome, in her analysis of the male religious nature, agreeing with her study *St Augustine*

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[44] Keith Williams, 'Back from the Future', 152.
[45] Rebecca West, 'Man and Religion', in Mabel Urich, ed., *Man, Proud Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1932), 249. Other contributors to the volume were Mary Borden, E.M. Delafield, Susan Ertz, Storm Jameson, Helen Simpson, G.B. Stern, and Sylvia Townsend Warner.
[46] 'Man and Religion', 253.
[47] 'Man and Religion', 256.
[48] 'Man and Religion', 255.

(1933)[49] that the values of the Christian church are determined by gender essentialism, valuing masculine self-punishment ahead of feminine reproduction and sexuality. The opposition between the male death-drive and the female sex-drive also follows binary patterns established throughout West's writing, as I discussed in Chapter 2. However, in this text West's establishment of female dominance in a future society is intended to be read as a dystopian trend, asserting the same critique of totalitarian gender exclusivity as the other texts featured in this chapter. Although the text endorses the speaker's critical view that ascetic attitudes towards sexuality and the celebration of death in warfare, and illustrates by defamiliarisation that traditional cultural devaluation of reproduction and the feminine is an absurdity, it does not argue that the solution to historical masculine dominance is dominance by women. West argues that any culture which is based on exclusivity and oppression is a dangerous one.

West also depicts totalitarian women as being just as violent as male fascists. At the end of her speech the speaker reveals that warfare still exists: she criticises the bloody and 'chaotic' way it used to be practised by 'a large number of male soldiers', yet is uncritical of the fact that in the new society war is 'conducted by fifty young women at a switchboard under the direction of one of our grand old English centenarians'.[50] The speaker then employs traditional masculine rhetoric to justify the oppression of the opposite sex. She claims that 'the lot of men, since the end of the unnatural male dominance, has become happier and happier'.[51] Her attitude towards men, which is cheered by the audience, is paternalistic, and depicts men as having been relieved of the loads of employment and education 'beneath which their fragile understandings used to groan in vain'.[52] Civilisation is a community open to women only because men have

[49] Rebecca West, *St Augustine* (London: Peter Davies, 1933).
[50] 'Man and Religion', 280-281.
[51] 'Man and Religion', 282.
[52] 'Man and Religion', 282.

been reduced to their sexual, biological roles; they are told, as women were in the fictional past, that their 'highest destiny is to be husbands and fathers of good women', and that their inferiority is most obvious if man would:

> only look on his own nature and, blushing, compare the shamelessness of his being with woman's modest concealment of the means of sacred creation, [and] realize that he should cast down his eyes and attempt to expiate the guilt of his sex by behaviour so decent as to be unnoticeable.[53]

West's speaker ironically participates in the same kind of sexist prejudice to which women used to be subjected when male religious leaders taught them to feel ashamed of their bodies.

Elsewhere in her fiction, West depicts men and women as polar opposites who may benefit from a merging of their masculine and feminine qualities. In this text, her repeated use of the word 'counterpoise', to describe the opposite, balancing perspective that women could have brought into culture throughout history, indicates that 'Man and Religion' shares this perspective. West does not directly engage with fascism and Nazism as do the other texts discussed in this chapter, but she does criticise exclusive, totalitarian regimes, and links public and private gender roles with totalitarian politics.[54] West's essay is the most closely related to science fiction of the texts discussed here, in its brief allusions to the hormone stimulants and artificial wombs which have allowed women to gain dominance. However, her essay is in agreement with Holtby, Jameson, and Mitchison's texts in its examination of the role of traditional, sexist social policies and imbalanced gender politics in the creation of terrible regimes.

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[53] 'Man and Religion', 285.

[54] West contributed an anti-Nazi short story, 'Thou Shall Not Make Unto Thee Any Graven Image', to the volume *The Ten Commandments: Ten Short Novels of Hitler's War Against the Moral Code*, ed. by Armin L. Robinson (London: Cassell, 1945), 50-82.

Conclusions

Although women's anti-fascist dystopias have received increased attention in feminist studies published in recent years, the wide variety of women's futuristic responses to fascism has yet to be fully explored. I have included many neglected texts in this chapter, but Maroula Joannou's *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows* indicates that the list of neglected dystopias by women is long and includes writers who, unlike the four included in my thesis, have been utterly forgotten. Joannou's discussion includes several titles which imagine a fascist Britain under the control of a female dictator, emphasising the usual gender exclusivity of such regimes by turning the misogynistic convention on its head.[55] This is a genre of women's interwar writing that requires further critical investigation so that the various forms employed by women writers, to different political ends, may be more fully appreciated. Within this chapter, a picture emerges not only of the unconventional politics of women's futuristic writing in this period, but also of the different perspectives taken on feminism, pacifism and anti-fascism by four closely associated writers. Fascistic politics of difference, in public and in private, are criticised by all four, yet domestic forms of resistance specific to women are also celebrated as challenges to masculinist regimes. This small group of texts is indicative of the multiple feminisms of which I wrote in my Introduction, and also of the experimental forms of writing of which each author was capable, illustrating that other models of literary experiment, besides those conventionally associated with High Modernism, are suggested by the works of Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West.

[55] See Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's writing, feminist consciousness and social change, 1918-1945* (Oxford: Berg Press, 1995), 159-190.

Conclusions, and what remains to be done

Maroula Joannou writes that 'even in what are sometimes mistakenly termed "post-feminist" times the specialised study of women writers is far from exhausted. We have reached a point where much has been accomplished but much remains to be done'.[1] My thesis is a response to the work of feminist revisionist scholars such as Joannou, Phyllis Lassner, Elizabeth Maslen, Janet Montefiore, Anthea Trodd and the others mentioned above, whose publications have contributed to literary history by redressing the neglect of a great many authors against whom 'patriarchal society has traditionally discriminated [...] solely because they were women'.[2] My research has built upon the feminist critiques of these scholars by expanding their close readings of the four authors' major works, examining those works in terms of different theories of gender, class, and culture than those applied by previous critics, and discussing texts by each of the four authors previously neglected in other studies of women's writing in the interwar period. I would not have been in a position to venture into areas of cultural theory that interest me, or to justify my examinations of minor texts, had such feminist studies as Joannou's not broken ground during the last decade. I intended my thesis to exemplify the kind of analysis and recovery which, according to Joannou, 'remains to be done' before critical understanding of British women's interwar literature is exhausted.

I believe that new readings of the four authors' major texts are still possible, as in my chapter on *South Riding,* for example. Certainly more detailed close readings may be, and ought to be, attempted of Jameson's *Mirror in Darkness* trilogy, which I did not have the space to fully explore in Chapter 3. Eventually I would like to write analyses of all of her semi-autobiographical novels of the period, including her *Triumph of Time*

trilogy and the single novels which feature Hervey and her mother, Sylvia Russell, and to compare them so as to form a more complete picture of the evolution of the relationship between Jameson's autobiographical and political interests. Jameson was a prolific novelist and critic between the wars, and a definitive study of her works has yet to be written. There are a number of neglected texts by the other authors left to be analysed as well: I introduced only a few of West's contributions to American newspapers and magazines, for example, so my chapter could be a starting point for more extensive research into her American career. Likewise, Winifred Holtby's extensive journalism deserves more attention. The recently published Virago Modern Classics volume, *Remember! Remember!* (1999) features a selection of Holtby's short fiction, most of which is awaiting critical analysis. That volume and the earlier *Testament of a Generation*, which includes a selection of Holtby and Brittain's journalism, include many pieces which would be useful to a more complete analysis of Holtby's writing career than I had the space to explore in my thesis. There is likewise more of Mitchison's children's writing to discuss, and I would also like to research her mid-1930s venture to the southern states of the U.S.A. and to locate the anti-racist articles she published in American papers there. I believe there is also room for more detailed analyses of all four writers discussions of cultures outside of Britain in the 1930s: Jameson, Mitchison and West's individual ventures into Eastern Europe and the biographical writing that resulted from their travels, and Holtby's interest in South Africa.

Besides further analysis of individual texts and neglected aspects of their politics, it is also necessary to discuss the literary categories into which these writers have previously been placed. Critics have agreed that Rebecca West is a writer whose work is

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[1] Maroula Joannou, *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-1938* (Oxford: Berg Press, 1995), 195.
[2] Joannou, *Ladies*, 195.

so varied that she is difficult to define, although Bonnie Kime Scott tends to class her as a modernist. I have shown that much of her writing adhered to realist conventions, and likewise that within the work of Holtby, Jameson and Mitchison, novelists whose work is generally defined as 'realist' in its narrative forms, there is actually much modernist imagery and thematic material waiting to be teased out by revisionist critics. In addition, studies such as Anthea Trodd's *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900 to 1945* and Alison Light's *Forever England* challenge previously practised 'segregation' between 'High Modernist' and popular forms of writing. Such recent publications indicate that at the present time there is a desire within interwar scholarship to group together and contextualise texts which have previously been separately treated. I intended my thesis to add to such new discussions, by illustrating how the four authors blended conventional and experimental forms for political purposes, and by discussing popular forms such as West's magazine writing and Mitchison's historical and children's fiction alongside the more conventionally middlebrow novels of Jameson and Holtby.

From the chapters contained in this study, it is also possible to appreciate the variety of political interpretations that existed in the interwar period. My discussions reflect the four authors' shared interest in class, sexuality, fascism, and modernism, whilst illustrating the crucial differences between their individual attitudes towards these wider political concerns. As affiliates of the British Liberal Left, these four writers showed different commitments to revolutionary socialism, and competing ideas regarding how writers and intellectuals of their class should address the notion of a proletarian literature. Storm Jameson and Winifred Holtby attempted documentary writing; Naomi Mitchison swung between pedagogical texts and forms which brought her closer to the proletariat, attempts which were best exemplified in her experiment of

writing with a proletarian committee in 1936.[3] West's American fictions, by contrast, show little concern with the labouring classes at all, despite her early interest in the exploitation of working-class females.[4] The writers' anti-fascist commitments developed through the 1930s as each explored the variety of appropriate genres and negotiated shifting relationships with pacifism, resulting in a shared decline in support of that cause. Finally, the four authors show a marked variety of feminist responses. Suffragette Rebecca West emerges as the most consistently essentialist of the group, whilst the humanitarian commitments of Jameson and Holtby are evident within those of my chapters which explore their different representations of single women's lives in their contemporary political moment. Naomi Mitchison, as I have demonstrated, deliberately writes women back into history and politics, elevating sexuality into an important category of knowledge, particularly for political women. All four have been shown to explore the relationship between public and private politics, representing the home as a politicised space. They each challenge gender dichotomies to different degrees with West being perhaps the least 'successful' in the challenge to Enlightenment essentialism which I identified in my Introduction as a relevant measure of the writers' feminisms. The variety of their feminist perspectives indicates a common belief that the modern woman's position is never simple, even for committed feminists such as these. To read the four authors together is to understand how multiple and complex feminism was in the interwar period, as suggested by Winifred Holtby's debates between Old and New feminism in the 1930s.

Readings of these authors, and other neglected women writers of this period, is necessary to a more complete critical understanding of modernism, intellectualism, and interwar politics. As I have demonstrated, their texts continue to generate readings

[3] See David Smith, *Socialist Propaganda in the Twentieth-Century British Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 79.
[4] See Maggie Humm, ed., *Feminisms: A Reader* (London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1992), 57.

from a variety of feminist and cultural studies perspectives. Culturally and politically, their work is as pertinent as ever, because they struggled to develop discourses for the expression of political questions which continue to affect the world seventy years later. In the year that I have been writing up, the Far Right has seemed particularly active across Europe. Today, literature still questions its relevance to politics and to mass culture, and debates ways in which to convey political ideas to a wide audience, or whether such a didactic approach is even appropriate. Holtby, Jameson, Mitchison and West have continued relevance for contemporary readers because of the contributions they made to such cultural debates during the interwar period.

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