

The Long Arm of Discipline: *South Riding*, Documentary Writing, and the Cinematic Gaze

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[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 it is only one thread among several...Her presence is justified less on account of her emotional life than as a vantage point from which a social landscape can be viewed.

--Marion Shaw, *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (242)

Winifred Holtby's panoramic Yorkshire novel *South Riding* (1936) follows in the tradition of Victorian social problem narratives such as Eliot's *Middlemarch*, but has also been identified as simultaneously taking a modern approach, positioning itself as a "topical fiction of fact" that is "saturat[ed] in detail...in the spirit of Storm Jameson's call for documentary fiction" (Trodd 116, 101).¹ Holtby's dual modes of realism, Victorian and modern, make up an appropriate form for a novel that dramatizes clashes between polarized opponents. These include union leader Joe Astell and the proto-Fascist Alderman Snaith, as well as the novel's central romantic figures, Leftist headmistress Sarah Burton and failing aristocrat Robert Carne, themselves symbols of competing traditional and modernist forces, a conflict Holtby also dramatized in *Anderby Wold's* (1923) battle between labor socialism and feudal paternalism. This article will discuss Holtby's documentary approach and use of cinematic tropes.² Holtby's reliance upon the literary equivalent of framed shots—repeatedly placing a socialist observer, Sarah Burton, both above and hidden from the view of the working-class objects of her concerned gaze—creates a narrative perspective that is at once politically progressive and dangerously voyeuristic: Sarah's intense focus often generates sexualized interpretations for the behaviors of those whom she secretly observes, while her own troubled erotic life is shielded from such public scrutiny. The novel's underscoring of class differences by reliance upon a mediating gaze is more than a mere byproduct of Holtby's engage-

ment with cinematic tropes; indeed, the novel's refusal to explore fully the eroticizing nature of Sarah's gaze unintentionally detracts from Holtby's egalitarian project—a problem of narrative or authorial class privilege evident in many other Thirties documentary texts that also created sexual spectacles out of working class objects.

Holtby does show sensitivity to some aspects of the class politics of Sarah's voyeurism; even Sarah's earliest observations are undercut by the text's awareness of her imperfections, which include an illicit desire for her married political opposite, Robert Carne. As Sarah's own private behaviors grow more risky, she begins to understand the perspective of her working-class neighbors, who unwittingly challenge Sarah's moral-political views and enable her to see the class subjectivity of her own judgments. By the novel's end, Sarah's self-opinion and privileged, judgmental gaze are metaphorically humbled in a spectacular plane crash. Sarah's realization of her own flaws, which rival those of her lowliest neighbors, causes her at last to feel morally at one with them, embracing the notion that "we are members, one of another" (490) and joining her community in listening to a radio broadcast on Jubilee Day that links the South Riding to England, the Empire beyond, and to a Europe already troubled by fascism. However, a crucial slippage occurs between Holtby's egalitarian intent and the cumulative textual-political effects of Sarah's episodes of voyeurism. Holtby wisely refuses to turn Sarah easily into a prole; after the plane crash, Sarah observes that her neighbors 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" (489). But beyond this lingering difference in cultural tastes is a more troubling difference in status effected by the text's protection of Sarah's privacy and dignity. Despite her humbling experiences, Sarah is provided with a series of secure surfaces and spaces (hidden windows, silencing doors, private rooms) behind and within which her potentially scandalous sexual feelings are allowed to hide. Beyond this layer of protection—one that Holtby's novel does not attempt to dismantle—lie the exposed sexual lives of the objects of Sarah's gaze.

Sarah acts as a moral police of scenarios, not by direct intervention, but through her use of judgmental language—language that often reads as highly erotic. Indeed, the sexual thrill of Sarah's perspective, and Sarah's failure to move beyond a paralyzing state of excitement into active management of her community's sexual health, is never addressed. In this respect, the novel takes up the erotic obsessions implied by the voyeurism of other socialist documentary writings of the period, including Mass Observation studies and Storm Jameson's intensely physical novella "A Day Off" (1933), so that Holtby's humanitarian project is tainted by the same class subjectivity that problematized the often earnest work of other documentary writers in the 1930s. The ambivalence of Holtby's documentary project

thus provides a fictional example of how both judgmental, pedagogical language and eroticism entered the contemporary documentary mode, the ostensible objectivity of which protected its practitioners from accusations of sexual titillation.

Holtby's use of cinema to support the competing class politics of *South Riding* follows her employment of the trope in two earlier fictions: *Poor Caroline* (1931), which satirized the skewed moral imperative of a fictional Christian Cinema Company, and *Mandoa! Mandoa!* (1933), in which a dangerous "modernity is constantly mediated" to an African tribe and its leader, with the result that "movie culture rapidly colonizes them" as they view such films as *Hollywood Parade*, *Diamond-set Divorce*, *College Girls Must Love* and *Red Hot Momma* (K. Williams 71). Holtby's film reviews also indicate critical awareness of the class politics of cinema, particularly documentaries. Keith Williams (86) and Marion Shaw (173-74) have discussed the 1933 *Time and Tide* review in which she unfavorably compared Noel Coward's *Cavalcade*, "with its interesting sidelights upon the behaviour of English natives," to the racist, imperialist documentary, *Round the Empire*, that preceded it in a double feature. Holtby wrote that, in *Cavalcade*,

[t]here are, apparently, two kinds of Englishmen—the Dignified Gentlepeople, whose partings and deaths and sorrows are tragic—and the natives below stairs—the cooks and mothers-in-law, and housemaids and the like—whose goings-on are invariably comic. When Diana Wynyard as June Marryot, said "Goodbye" to Clive Brook, her gallant and loving husband, we bit our lips and blinked our eyes in sympathy. When Una O'Connor as Ellen Bridges said "Goodbye" to her equally gallant and loving husband, Alfred, we giggled in appreciative amusement, because low life in kitchens is, of course, always comic, and the scenes in the East End, with the Graingers and the Bridges—though their content is no less poignant than the scenes in the Marryot's drawing-room, are, naturally, farcical in tone. ("Notes" 281)

Holtby confronts Coward's depiction of an upstairs/downstairs dichotomy with a more equalitarian view of the contemporary post-Edwardian age:

Personally, I do not really think that the Cowardesque glimpses of Night Club life, homo-sexual fondlings and Twentieth-Century Blues with which the film ends, present an entirely adequate picture

of a society which, after all, contains smallholdings and health clinics, nursery schools and growing universities, village institutes and the Workers' Travel Association, hiking parties and bouncing gymnasium classes at the Polytechnic, busy little families planning suburban gardens, and secretaries of hundreds of inconspicuous organizations working conscientiously for the future without hope of gain. ("Notes" 281)

This review foreshadows the detailed, panoramic perspective of contemporary life that Holtby went on to create in her cinematic novel, *South Riding*. In that text, Holtby would offer up working-class voices among her linked multitude of characters, similar to the groups and individuals described in the *Cavalcade* review, across thematic issues that affected individuals of all classes. The cinema, through the trope of a roving camera eye, served as a crucial device for shaping Holtby's narrative and relating upper-class characters with the working-class objects of their attention.

Such linkages are bound up with the genuinely egalitarian intent of Holtby's community panorama: though Carne, for example, lives on a large estate and is admired by the feudal community dependent upon him, he also must grapple with mental illness (an institutionalized wife), education (a troublesome, possibly insane, young daughter attending Sarah's school), unemployment (the loss of his estate), and illness (his own fatal heart condition). Wealthy and poor characters are interwoven via chapter titles that list the different public departments concerned with daily life (including Education, Highways and Bridges, Public Health, Mental Deficiency), the "inconspicuous organizations" that seek to improve standards of living on a local scale. Sarah, as an educator and caring citizen, works with several such organizations. She gains much of her knowledge of local conditions, however, by watching her neighbors closely, usually when they are unaware that they are being scrutinized. It is during these voyeuristic episodes that Sarah's middle-class perspective repeatedly undermines her—and the author's—socialist intent.

In reading the politics of several framed, cinematic scenes throughout the novel, it is useful to employ Guy Debord's definition of the spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). The visual nature of Holtby's scenes—the framed viewing of other characters through windows or beach binoculars, or on stage—mediates a hierarchical social relation between concerned middle-class viewers and the framed, unwitting, working-class objects of their gazes. Most often, these framed images are also filtered through Sarah's concern for the welfare of others. When her erotic language slips out, it is tempered by a return to a carefully Leftist reiteration of the righteousness of her position as an educated viewer,

one who is beyond real titillation.

The text also achieves a safe perspective for Sarah by positioning her much higher in the frame than the objects of her gaze, so that her “camera” eye literally looks down upon members of the less privileged class. In one early scene, Sarah travels through local factory and dockland areas on the upper level of a double-decker bus, her view framed by a window. She observes a woman on the street below:

A bold-faced girl with a black fringe and blue-earrings 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.

Suddenly Sarah loved her, loved King-sport, loved the sailor or fishporter or whatever man had left upon her the proof of his virility.

(46)

Sarah’s qualifying diction invents a narrative for the voiceless, anonymous woman in the street below, eroticizing the imagined male laborer who is given the greater sexual agency in Sarah’s fantasy. Her excitement continues:

On left and right of the thoroughfare ran mean monotonous streets of...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. (46-47)

Sarah, enjoying the “requisite safe distance necessary to the voyeur’s pleasure” (L. Williams 561), experiences both disgust and pleasure in this brief passage. The lives that Sarah believes herself to be witnessing are “neither dreary nor respectable,” and she sees ineffective mothers and “sluts,” but feels enchanted at what she imagines to be the greater thrill offered by life in the docklands—and the excitement she describes is erotic. She fantasizes getting drunk with sailors rather than befriending one of the dreary mothers; but because Sarah will enter the area as a headmistress, accompanied by another professional woman, she can maintain her own reputation as an enlightened observer without danger of being considered a slut herself.

In the above scenario, the possibilities of illicit pleasure for Sarah's observing eye are closed down by the text's assertion of her identity as a teacher; any interpretation of erotic delight is counteracted by mention of her professional position. The possibility of control over the sexual self-image is concomitantly withheld from the anonymous pregnant woman that Sarah first witnessed from a safe seat atop the bus, and the sexualized narrative created for the woman is never checked. Compare, too, the text's qualification of Sarah's gaze with that of Alfred Ezekiel Huggins, a county councilor who is close to people in power but whose own class position, as an uneducated local merchant, is questionable. When Mr. Huggins visits the rehearsals for a community performance of a local girls' dancing class,

[h]e found himself engulfed in a flood of femininity. Brown, blonde and red heads tossed, bare arms 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 brassieres, were naked from the waist upwards. Urgently he told himself that he was there for the glory of God.
(222)

Mr. Huggins's scene is more visceral and tactile than Sarah's. He is not given voyeuristic distance as is Sarah, but is thrust into the crowd of girls and "assaulted." In Freudian terms, Huggins's disgust "bears the imprint of desire," as does Sarah's (Gurney 268). Yet the physicality of the details on which he focuses, and the urgency with which he brings himself back to proper focus, indicates that he, unlike Sarah, registers and judges his deep sexual thrill. However, the difference between Huggins's position as observer and Sarah's is that she is provided with a mediating surface, a window high atop a double-decker bus, that hides her desires from herself and others and keeps them out of the physical, tactile realm; there is no contact, and so her gaze preserves its appearance of "cleanliness." Even where erotic language seeps into her thoughts, it is easily kept in check by her ability—clearly a by-product of her social rank, not of a lack of sexual desire—to return to sociological and professional diction.

Earlier in the novel, Sarah has her own encounter with Huggins that colors the reader's interpretation of the scene in the dance class, one which also allows her a degree of protection not provided to Huggins. Here, Sarah reverses the *flâneur/passante* relationship that Huggins secretly attempts to establish with her; ever-powerful in a voyeuristic situation, Sarah takes control of any narrative that Huggins might attempt to create. This scene does not allow either party the same isolating physical medium (window, windshield) often provided for Sarah. Instead, her safety from the reader's judgment is guaranteed by comparison to Huggins's gaze:

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...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 headmistress 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. (50-51)

Sarah, once again, is in complete control of the sexualized visual narrative, and reference to her role as professional headmistress reaffirms the apparent safety in which she can engage in this behavior; as in the scene on the bus, no one could view her behaviors as those of a slut, because she is a headmistress and a lady. Huggins, though a member of the town education board, is only a haulage contractor, and his gaze can be disgraced. The text's description of Sarah's physical flaws undercuts them both: Huggins does not realize he is being made a fool of, while Sarah's confidence in her sexual attractiveness is perhaps not completely justified. But Sarah still emerges from the passage as having shifted the balance of power away from Huggins's *flânerie* because her imperfections remain hidden; her sexuality is kept within her control and that of the text, while Huggins's position as erotic observer and judge of Sarah's physical beauty is exposed. Such differences between the private and public position of both parties in a visual relationship are determined throughout the narrative by the social class of the characters involved.

Sarah's physical imperfections are also balanced in this passage by descriptions of her body as "muscular" and "slim," so that she is physically superior to the "plump," leaning figure of Huggins, her corporeal inferior. Her flaws are also described in more dignified terms than those she applies to her neighbors on the beach: "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" (50). The almost-invisible defects that Sarah manages to mask are nothing compared to the grotesque physicality of the mass of people enjoying the shore as her own

gaze exerts both authority and observational distance. Yet again, the slight disgust she registers against the working-class people in her presence (the phrase “narrowing sands” in the quotation below indicates an anxiety about proximity) is countered, as the scene continues, by a desire to join with the dirty poor:

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 effects 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 the final bathe...

It did not worry [Sarah] that the narrowing sands were dense with sweating, jotling, 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. (50)

Sarah’s discourse treats the working-class holiday-makers as an undifferentiated mass of poverty, sexuality, and vulgar, infantile orality. For them, the beach is a place unrefined and excessive in its opportunities for bodily satisfaction. In comparison, Sarah’s desire for a swim arises from her sudden “aware[ness] of the heat and grime of her long journey” (50) to the town and takes advantage of a sociological interpretation that, even in a swimsuit, “the female body could be seen as a reflection of health instead of purely as an object of sex” (Horwood 667). Furthermore, Sarah’s narrative perspective eroticizes the working-class public while any accusations of perversion on her part are softened by her assertion of the egalitarian, humanitarian purpose of her slumming.

This passage, like the scene narrated from atop the bus, illustrates the text’s ability to criticize subtly Sarah’s feelings of goodwill with its narration of her disgusted language, fear of proximity, and risky sexual thoughts. Because all of these scenes will culminate in Sarah’s realization of her problematic subjectivity, Holtby’s attribution to Sarah of negative language is most likely a deliberate method for undermining her protagonist’s claimed political intent. However, Holtby’s critical politics also depart from Leftist equalitarianism when she treats Sarah with a dignity not imparted to the

other figures on the beach. Although Sarah must be attired similarly to the unaware “Kingsport nymphs” being victimized by (gentlemanly) users of beach binoculars, Sarah, as the reporter of their grotesqueness and sexuality, and in her awareness of how she is viewed by others, sustains both her class superiority and the privacy of her own sexual feelings. By articulating a desire for healthy exercise and political solidarity, Sarah cleans up her own image and protects herself from being tainted by interpretations of dangerous sexuality leveled at her neighbors by her own narrative; the text deliberately acts to prevent the reader from viewing Sarah as a sexual threat, allowing Sarah to assert that she is nothing like those gentlemen with their beach binoculars. Once again, any attempt by the narrative to illustrate the false objectivity of Sarah’s class perspective is damaged by its simultaneous defense of her sexual privacy.

Holtby’s desire to criticize Sarah’s viewpoint is asserted more effectively in one scene in which her protagonist is challenged by the interruption of the mother of one of Sarah’s students:

On 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 jeweled 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. (67-68)

Sarah’s observation of female waist, thighs, breasts, and stomach mimic the catalogue of feminine parts that later appear in Huggins’s description of the same girls. From the vantage point of her class position, however, Sarah feels able to interpret the inappropriateness of both the girls’ gestures and the young men’s responses. In the context of Sarah’s South Riding community, such a performance and clear expression of the erotic effect felt by the audience is unforgivable: “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 had to offer to such delicious youth, such bold innocence” (66). Sarah slips into erotic language herself when she is enticed by the “delicious youth” of her girls, but there is no space for her recognition of the girls’ sexual beauty, or agency, to be explored.

It is at this moment that Holtby allows a working-class mother,

“the fat lady in the torn red cardigan,” to counter Sarah’s perspective with a point that causes the headmistress to question her own analysis of the performance. The woman 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” (68). Sarah reconsiders her own previous disapproval:

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...? 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 in a world besieged by poverty, ugliness, squalor and misfortune? (69)

Later, one of Sarah’s most destitute students, Lydia Holly, similarly sees the performances simply as an opportunity for fun, a chance to exercise and laugh with girls her own age that offers respite from the tedious domestic responsibilities of her home life. In chapters narrated from the perspective of Holtby’s working-class characters, such feelings are articulated, but they are not often expressed in the presence of members of the upper classes; Lily Sawdon’s mindless consumption of radio and movie romances, for example, is revealed to be her only relief from the painful cancer that has ruined her life. That salutary escape is not necessarily appreciated by Sarah and other upper- and professional-class characters who constantly register concern over the effects mass entertainments have on the local poor.

Sarah’s language at the show coincidentally also typifies the tendency of middle-class, Mass Observation writers to offer formal, anthropological interpretations of music hall performances intended simply as light, ironic entertainments (Gurney 270). In this way, Sarah’s manner of commenting on what she witnesses is characteristic of documentary reportage in the same decade—such as Stephen Spender’s view that the left wing writer ought to “realise by every means at his disposal the nature of what is happening, and clarify this realisation for his audience” (219)—and shares with reportage the tendency to apply objective language as an explanation of the cultural purpose of all that time spent watching and thinking about working-class sexuality.³ Sarah interprets the problems of observed working-class behaviors, and at times recognizes her own subjective errors, but she does not explore the ramifications of her own erotic reactions. That language is left unchallenged by the text, and thus echoes the tendency of

documentary reportage to register anxiety about working-class sexual life without awareness of the observer's own focus on sex or propensity for voyeurism.

Holtby, as a writer sensitive to the class politics of documentary cinema, does toy throughout the novel with Sarah's clean, professional self-image by countering Sarah's firm criticisms of working-class sexuality with her own failing romance, though without bringing Sarah to a full understanding of her own hypocritical subjectivity. As a final example of a spectacular, cinematic scene, Sarah watches from her attic window an unidentified young couple (again, she is positioned high above the objects of her gaze) as they disappear into a tent on the field below for privacy:

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. (256)

Sarah—possibly erotically "entranced" by what she witnesses from her safe voyeur's position—quickly speaks as one with the pair's best interests at heart, fully aware as she is of the difficulties pregnancy would cause for the young couple below her. However, Sarah's role as dispenser of discipline is interrupted by the thoughts of Robert Carne inspired by the young couple. He is married, yet she fantasizes about having his child. Despite the potential scandal that public knowledge of their affair could create, Sarah's own sexual activity would not imply the tragedy she foresees for the couple below her.⁴ This is because of her financial independence, her self-proclaimed progressive views on sexuality, and perhaps a working knowledge of contraception. But it is also partly because Sarah's sexuality is, in this scene and throughout the book, kept safe and private. No one sees her going into the hotel room with Carne, as she had witnessed the sneaking couple on the field: Sarah and her aristocratic lover take their liaison to another town.

The concluding maxim of *South Riding*, "we are members one of another," is expressed once Sarah has fully realized that she is neither better nor wiser than the working-class neighbors she has critically and voyeuristically observed throughout the novel. Though she repeatedly claims to feel that the characters of *South Riding* "were her people," it is not until she is crushed by the unsuccessful love affair with Carne, and by his death, that she experiences enough of life to have the right to comment on the difficulties of her fellow citizens. She comes to this conclusion after she speaks of her love for Carne to the conservative Alderman, Mrs. Beddows—a married older woman who had also been in love with Carne. Mrs. Beddows lectures

Sarah in her private shame, telling Sarah that it is only now that she has made such a nearly tragic error in her private life that she is fit to act as a teacher of, and example for, others. This lesson draws together the similarities developed throughout the text between Sarah's troubled story and those of its troubled working-class characters. But despite this learned connection to others, and Sarah's final symbolic humbling in the plane crash that brings her forever down to earth after taking one final look at her community from above, Holtby's undoing of Sarah's comfortable sense of moral superiority is undermined by the fact that Sarah's sexual behaviors and interior moral wranglings are never subjected to public scrutiny. Sarah's only confession is to Mrs. Beddows, who, being secretly in love with Carne herself, is equally concerned to keep all references to Carne private. Upper-class problems are thus kept largely behind closed doors; the constant invasion and policing of working-class privacy that the novel relies upon to create Sarah's spectacular visions is never balanced by an equal revelation of upper-class indiscretions. In this way, a troublesome aspect of the social status quo is maintained throughout the novel, despite its intentions of egalitarianism and its claims, at the end, that proper communal feeling results from Sarah's private ordeals.

Through Sarah's *bildungsroman*, *South Riding* ponders a point that Holtby raised early in her literary career when she discussed the "highly difficult, delicate, and controversial duty" of policing sexual morality; in her 1928 article "Sex and the Policeman," Holtby was aware of the class politics that could besmirch caring intervention with an effect of, at best, unwanted nosiness and, at worst, perversion on the part of the committee or advocate who polices (*Testament* 155-59). Holtby offers Sarah Burton as a negative example of such moral policing, repeatedly using Sarah's inner desires and struggles as examples of both the hypocrisy of moral superiority and the notion that political activists do not need to be, nor can they be, perfect themselves.

Unwittingly, however, the erotic language and spectacular, cinematic framing of the novel's policing scenes locate the text among other documentary writings of the period that take sexuality as the interpretative focus of working-class life. Mass Observation reporters from seaside resorts, Storm Jameson in "A Day Off" (her urban tale of a working-class woman's slide into homelessness details the woman's filthy domestic habits and promiscuity), John Sommerfield in *May Day*, and others utilized a documentary approach to record the smallest details of working-class life as a way to raise awareness of social problems and to indicate where revolutionary thought was needed. But several of these writings leaned heavily on sexual details and erotic interpretations, a tendency that Peter Gurney argues revealed "more about middle-class observers and the dissemination of modern sex theory than about the ideas of the working-class observed"

(287). Like other documentary writings of her age, Holtby's political novel failed to confront its own interest in the erotics of working-class life, and its desire to allow policing characters (and perhaps sympathetic readers) a safe outlet for sexual thought at the expense of the privacy, dignity, and narrative authority of working-class characters who served as the objects of her protagonist's subjective gaze. And *South Riding*, written only two years before the organization of Mass Observation, turned to cinematic framing and documentary detailing to describe the social problems of a fictional community, like many texts that shared its cinematic tropes, socialist intent, and erotic subtexts.

Notes

1. In 1937, Jameson, a friend of Holtby's, argued that middle-class writers needed to leave off expressive fiction and record only the facts and details of working-class life if they were ever to achieve a British socialist literature. She believed the first half of Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) to be the best example to date of documentary writing, although Orwell's personal reflections in the second half of the text undermined its objectivity. See "New Documents."
2. Such tropes were not uncommon among documentary writers and researchers of the interwar period. Keith Williams describes how, in the 1930s, photographic montage and other "cinematic effects became almost automatic, a stylistic cliché of the period itself" (125). He mentions the modernist montages of Woolf and Joyce, but particularly notes the cinematic techniques of more ideologically-driven texts including John Sommerfield's *May Day* (1936), Jameson's "A Day Off" (1933) and *Here Comes a Candle* (1938), and Graham Greene's *It's a Battlefield* (1934), all published within a few years of *South Riding* (129-33).
3. Peter Gurney describes the work of Mass Observation in the seaside resort of Blackpool, a site of "sin and illicit sex" with "naughty and vulgar allure" (269). Gurney claims that MO "systematised voyeurism and legitimated it as scientific 'observation'" (275); Catherine Horwood also discusses the interest that conservative leaders took in the potential eroticism of mixed swimming areas in English resort towns, indicating that working-class sexual spectacles were also repeatedly the object of official discourse in the 1930s.
4. Sarah and Carne do meet in an out-of-town hotel, but Carne's suffers a mild heart attack so that *coitus interruptus* prevents the actual consummation of their relationship.

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