

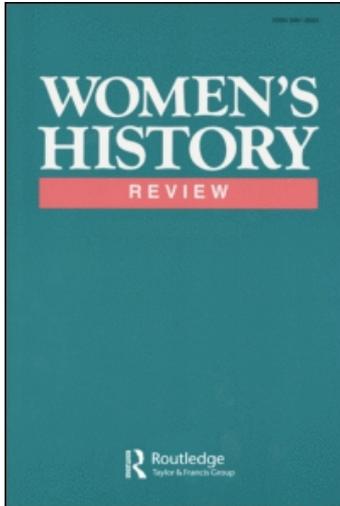
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Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the New World? The Spinster in Inter-war Feminist Discourses

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Today, there is a far worse crime than promiscuity: it is chastity. On all sides the unmarried woman today is surrounded by doubts cast not only upon her attractiveness or her common sense, but upon her decency, her normality, even her sanity. (Winifred Holtby, 1935)[1]

ABSTRACT Early twentieth-century sexology and psychology lent new weight to popular representations of the spinster as unfulfilled and sexually repressed and, it has been suggested, silenced a feminist politics of spinsterhood. In this article I argue against this interpretation and discuss the writings of individual feminists who were actively engaged in both rejecting and reworking this view of the spinster. Feminist doctors, in a group of books about the single woman, used psychological theories of sublimation in a feminist appropriation of psycho-sexual ideas to assert that spinsters could lead a complete and happy life through work and female friendships. The feminist preacher, Maude Royden, offered an incorporation of this counter-psychology within a religious discourse in her sermons and publications. Thirdly, the writer Winifred Holtby rejected psychological and sexological definitions of single women's fate in her fiction and political writing and identified its roots in anti-feminism and a reaction against rational thought. These arguments and ideas were complemented by continued feminist campaigning and organising on a variety of issues concerning single women in the inter-war years.

This paper engages with a debate concerning the positioning of the spinster within feminist politics in the inter-war period. Several writers have shown how the ideas of late nineteenth-century sex psychology gave a new edge to

the social disparagement of single women in the period up to the Second World War. This appears to parallel certain shifts within feminist politics. In the early 1900s an important strand of feminism upheld spinsterhood as a political position and lifestyle. In the inter-war period this seems to have disappeared and it has been suggested by some feminist historians that it was silenced by sexology. This interpretation, I will argue, is insufficient. There were feminist analyses of the hostility and attacks on spinsters, and resistance to it. A closer examination of the ideas of sexology and psychology in relation to three different groups of feminist writers shows that feminists were actively engaged in refuting and reworking these new psychological discourses of spinsterhood.

Sexology, Psychology and Hostility to Spinsters

Contempt for spinsters was no new development of the 1920s. In the mid-nineteenth century 'redundant old maids' were scorned as having failed in the main business of a woman's life, the marriage market.[2] While this traditional stereotype of the spinster continued, it gained an additional inflection after the First World War, through the pathologising of spinsters' sexuality. Negative representations of single women changed in tone as a consequence of the influence of sexology and the new psychology, as several studies have shown.[3] These new 'sciences' placed a premium upon marriage, motherhood and heterosexual fulfilment for women's psychological happiness, a condition spinsters were unable to attain. In the same period, eugenic concern about the quality and quantity of the nation's children reinforced the failure of spinsters to be mothers. Anxiety about the single woman was also fuelled by the belief that there were considerably more of them, not only as a result of the long standing demographic imbalance of the sexes, but also as a consequence of the First World War. In spite of this explanation, spinsterhood was still represented as a social and individual problem.

Sexology and psychology provided different understandings of the functions of the mind and body, but together they contributed to new ideas on marriage, sexuality and the family. In his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1910), the British sexologist Havelock Ellis put forward the radical argument that it was normal for women to experience sexual desire and pleasure. More conservatively, he recommended that this sexual instinct needed to be exercised in marriage and motherhood.[4] These ideas began to be discussed by progressive intellectuals and sex reformers before the First World War but found a wider constituency in the 1920s. Marriage manuals were a significant channel of popularisation; Marie Stopes's *Married Love*, published in 1918, took on Ellis's theories in detail in its formula for sexual happiness in marriage.[5]

The British 'new psychology' of the inter-war years was derived from the ideas of Freudian psycho-analysis which, it has been shown, were quite widely circulated among the educated public before 1920.[6] British psychologists preferred to dilute Freud's premise that the sexual drive was the organising principle of mental life. Nevertheless, they retained his theories of the unconscious and of the mechanisms of repression and sublimation, and together with ideas from other writers (such as Jung's more positive and creative view of the unconscious), created an eclectic 'new psychology'.[7] Despite the rejection of Freud's stress on sexuality, the biologicistic emphasis of the new psychology on 'instincts' and the importance of the 'normal family' for the healthy development of children and adults, also contributed to the problematising of the spinster. According to this model, if sexual and parental instincts could not be expressed, their consequent repression might lead to anxiety, neuroses and even mental illness. The cocktail of ideas that constituted the new psychology became immensely fashionable in the 1920s, and psycho-analytic concepts ranging from repression to dream interpretation became common cultural references among the educated public.[8]

Though premised somewhat differently, both sexology and the new psychology posited heterosexuality as desirable and indeed necessary for women's health and happiness: single women faced the dangers of sexual repression and frustration, leading to complexes and neuroses. Those who had tried but failed to find a husband were likely to face psychological problems; those who had deliberately avoided or rejected marriage could be further pathologised as frigid. As the idea of marriage as a psychological as well as a social necessity for women gained ground in the inter-war years, single and celibate women who lacked an outlet for their sexual and parental instincts were increasingly vulnerable to being seen as warped and unfulfilled.[9] Stella Browne, a feminist sex reformer who enthusiastically took on the ideas of sexology wrote:

I would even say that after twenty-five, the woman who has neither husband nor lover and is not under-vitalised and sexually deficient, is suffering mentally and bodily - often without knowing why she suffers; nervous, irritated, anaemic, always tired, or ruthlessly and feverishly fussing over trifles ...[10]

Sexology and psychology also categorised lesbian sexuality for the first time, but created an ambiguous overlap with spinsterhood. Ellis defined two types of lesbian, the congenital invert (the true lesbian), and the psuedo-invert, the woman who might have been heterosexual, but who became homosexual either through seduction by the true invert, or as a result of living in an all-female environment. He included non-sexual attachments in his definition of lesbianism and further suggested that women could be quite unaware of their inverted natures.[11] Although sexology did not necessarily condemn the 'true' invert, only her psuedo-companion, popular understanding did not

make such a distinction; the lesbian was stigmatised along with the celibate woman. Indeed now that the sexual instinct was identified in every woman, the deviant categories of spinster and lesbian could easily be confused, and female friendship increasingly came into question. It has been argued that during the inter-war period, close friendships between women or adolescent girls were likely to be regarded as suspicious and abnormal.[12]

The influence of these constructions of spinsterhood on different groups of women is difficult to assess, however, though they were certainly likely to be circulating among educated and middle-class women.[13] It has been suggested that the new images of the sexually unfulfilled spinster and the mannish lesbian were also increasingly common in popular cultural representations. Women's magazines in the twenties, for example, cited psychological theories to urge women to preserve their femininity and seek marriage, and warned readers against following the example of "the woman who tries to be a man ... those stiff-collared, short-haired, tailor-suited imitation males with which our clubs and streets are now abounding".[14]

It is also clear, as Sheila Jeffreys argues, that sexology and psychology were used to attack inter-war feminism. The conflation of spinsterhood, antagonism to men, and feminism was already a constant theme in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-feminist rhetoric. The combination of sexology and anti-feminism in a period when women were perceived as having made political and economic gains, and gender relations were in flux, created new targets. For example, a man attacking women teachers' campaign for equal pay quoted from a marriage manual to suggest that feminist spinster teachers were warped and bitter:

Those who can marry and do not are thus deliberately disregarding their biological duty to the race to which they belong. Those who would marry but cannot are supremely unfortunate. Both of them are a menace to the society in which they live ...[15]

But despite the case made here for the increasing disparagement of spinsters and a growing tendency to see female friendship as potentially suspect and deviant, it is important to stress that the sexological and psychological discourses about spinsters were not hegemonic. Even in the 1930s after the new psychology and sexology had been quite widely popularised (and after the prosecution for obscenity of the lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*), these ideas were partial and fragmented. It was still perfectly possible for respectable single women to live in couples without social disapprobation. The general effects of these new representations of spinsterhood upon women's lives are uncertain.

Feminist Politics and Spinsters

There is some consensus among feminist historians that a specific politics of spinsterhood existed in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century

suffrage feminism, which began to be sharply challenged by the ideas of sexology. The point at issue, however, is the subsequent *post-war* development of a spinster politics, or lack of it.

In the years before the First World War, an important strand of suffrage feminism put forward a strong critique of women's position in marriage together with the argument that remaining unmarried was a politically and personally important strategy for feminists.[16] The continuing 'surplus' of women (shown again in the 1911 Census) was not seen to constitute a problem. Indeed feminists argued that it would enable women to channel their energies into the public world of increasing employment and educational opportunities, avoid the ill-health incumbent on marriage and motherhood, and free them from slavery to the 'lower appetites' of men, and the sexual double standard.[17] Christabel Pankhurst stated categorically in 1913 that spinsterhood was a political decision:

There can be no mating between the spiritually developed woman of this new day and men who in thought and conduct in regard to sex matters are their inferiors.[18]

For the individual single woman, the freedom of a career or work within the women's movement was presented as a more rewarding life than the subordination of marriage. In her book *Marriage as a Trade*, published in 1909, the suffrage feminist Cicely Hamilton argued that if women remained unmarried, this would improve the position of the spinster and of all women, give women a real choice between marriage and spinsterhood and eventually improve the conditions of marriage for women.[19] Spinsterhood was thus seen by some as a political strategy.

During the same period, however, a different approach to sexual politics was beginning to develop among other feminists, which was to become more influential between the wars. These feminists were influenced by sexology, especially the writings of Havelock Ellis, and tended to be allied with the sex reform movement. They supported 'free unions', divorce law reform and the use of birth control to separate sex from reproduction. These women, including Stella Browne and later Dora Russell, demanded that women had a right to sexual pleasure in heterosexual sex. But along with the other sex reformers, they also condemned spinsters who remained outside heterosexuality, as the debate in the feminist journal *The Freewoman* in 1911-12 showed, with its fierce attacks upon and defence of celibacy.[20] Spinsterhood was beginning to come under criticism from within as well as outside the women's movement.

Post sexology, it appears that the parameters of the debate around spinsterhood and feminism had shifted, leaving feminists somewhat adrift. Thus far, the main events and issues for pre-war feminists are broadly agreed. However, in discussing feminist politics and spinsterhood after the First World War, I take issue with Sheila Jeffreys, and I shall briefly summarise her argument before developing my own.[21] In *The Spinster*

and her Enemies, Jeffreys argues that inter-war feminism was subverted and undermined by sexology. Feminists, she claims, were swept into adopting a sexological or sex reform approach; illustrated, for example, by the post-war feminist emphasis on birth control. In this way, she argues, feminists betrayed the interests of spinsters and independent women; indeed some of them attacked the previous generation of feminists for their prudery and spinsterhood. Jeffreys concludes that sexology blunted radical feminist campaigns around issues of sexuality and silenced a feminist politics of spinsterhood.[22]

My own reading of the evidence challenges some aspects of this argument. Certainly the politics of 'marriage refusal' as such did disappear from feminist debate between the wars. Some older feminists still espoused the pre-war ideas of rejecting men and marriage, but could only express this as an 'underground', individually held position.[23] It no longer had purchase in a public debate, in the context of sexology and the new psychology.

It is also the case that the changing politics of spinsterhood apparently echoed the post-war ascendancy of 'difference' feminism. Alternatively referred to as 'new feminism', and associated particularly with Eleanor Rathbone, president of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, this emphasised women's different needs from men, especially as mothers, and stressed welfare reforms such as family allowances. New feminism also took on some of the agenda of the sex reform feminists including birth control and women's sexual pleasure within marriage, and was generally directed towards the concerns of married women and mothers. Certainly inter-war feminists did criticise marriage, and demanded more rights for wives and divorce law reform, but they advocated ameliorating the conditions of marriage, rather than avoiding it altogether as earlier feminists had done. In the 1920s, the rights of mothers seemed to take precedence over those of spinsters in organised feminism.[24]

A further problem for inter-war feminists in formulating a politics of spinsterhood was the increased association of spinsterhood with lesbianism. Lesbianism was virtually a taboo subject for feminists. In 1921, a feminist Bill, which provided for tougher penalties against indecent assault on girls, was wrecked by the addition of an amendment attempting to criminalise lesbianism. Feminists were conspicuously silent on the reason for the Bill's failure, while deploring its effects.[25] Similarly, the publication and prosecution of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 drew forth only a review in *Time and Tide* and a very brief debate in the correspondence columns of the *Woman's Leader*. [26] Feminists were anxious to avoid associating themselves with sexual deviance, and lacked a sexual politics to deal with lesbianism as a feminist issue.

However, while the advocacy of spinsterhood as marriage refusal was difficult to make in the context of sexology, psychology and a feminist

politics constructed around sexual difference, inter-war feminism was certainly not silenced on the issue. The feminist response was complex, varied and very much stronger than it has been represented, and it did directly challenge and mediate the ideas of sexology and psychology. There are three important groups of feminists who wrote and spoke on spinsterhood between the wars, and whose strategies were variously to rework and refuse the new psychological discrediting of single women.

Feminist Doctors and Advice to Spinsters: reworking psychology

In the 1920s and 1930s, several feminist doctors and psychiatrists published 'advice books' for spinsters, or similar texts, which engaged in a sustained critique of the anti-spinster elements of the new psychology from within a psychological discourse. Taken together, these texts constitute a feminist re-working of the 'frustrated spinsters' model. The common argument behind them suggested that spinsters could avoid *repressing* their sexual and parental instincts, which might have harmful consequences such as 'nerves' and neuroses. Instead, through self-knowledge and awareness, single women could more healthily *sublimate* these drives and direct them to happier ends, via female friendship, and by working with children, for example. For some women, such as teachers and social workers, this process would even enhance their professional skills. In making this argument, feminist doctors utilised and developed ideas about the process of sublimation already suggested by the new psychology:

Sublimation is the process by which instinctive emotions are diverted from their original ends and redirected to purposes satisfying to the individual and of value to the community.[27]

It is important to note that the following discussion is of the writings of *individual* feminist psychologists in the 1920s and 1930s. This was not a feminist political position as such, nor an organised response; however, each writer created a positive image of the single woman, in particular the professional independent woman.

These women doctors challenged the idea of the lonely and warped spinster and suggested practical remedies for her social problems in these books addressed to a popular audience, and indeed to spinsters themselves. The three texts discussed below took somewhat different positions in defending spinsters. Mary Scharlieb, a feminist gynaecologist well known in the fight for women's entry into the medical profession, published her book on the subject, *The Bachelor Woman and her Problems*, in 1929, towards the end of her life. Despite its title, this book took a positive view of spinsterhood and indeed suggested a feminist critique of marriage. Scharlieb was less directly influenced by the new psychology; instead she offered a commonsense and moral approach to single women, based on a strongly Christian perspective. Esther Harding wrote her study of women, *The Way*

of *All Women: a psychological interpretation* (published in 1933), from quite a different perspective. Harding was trained at the London School of Medicine for Women, worked with Jung in 1922 and practised as a doctor in London and New York. The third book, *The Single Woman and her Emotional Problems*, written by Laura Hutton, and published in 1935, was more influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis. Hutton, who worked for a period as a clinical psychologist at the Tavistock Institute, a centre of the new psychology, took a more explicitly feminist approach to her work (and to Freudian psychoanalysis) than Harding.[28]

Each of these books defended the single woman's ability to live a happy and well-balanced life and provided a feminist critique of the traditions and stereotypes that stood in her way. Moreover they also stressed the social importance of women's friendships. The three writers came from different traditions of psychology, yet each managed to assert positive space for women within that tradition. Most importantly they individually affirmed the existence and worth of single women. Esther Harding suggested that single women were in a class of their own:

These women, far from being the weaklings, the stupid or unattractive members of their generation, may be the most vital and enterprising, the ones with greatest intelligence and initiative.[29]

She went on to observe that remaining single might be a positive and deliberate choice, and that while conventional opinion favoured marriage above female friendship, the latter could be more satisfying for particular individuals.[30] Laura Hutton also recognised the weight of social pressure to marry, and highly valued female friendship instead. She made reference to the "large body of active intelligent single women" in the cities, and made it clear - quoting from Virginia Woolf's feminist tract *A Room of One's Own* - that it was social attitudes that caused problems for single women, not their personal lack of worth.[31]

All three doctors acknowledged that single women had sexual drives and maternal instincts, but believed these could be sublimated in work, other activities and wider relationships. Hutton advocated work and friendships, each balancing the other.[32] Similarly Harding saw female friendships as the place for single women's emotions and sexual drives to be expressed, rather than being repressed.[33] All the books discussed female friendships at length. Mary Scharlieb was the most cautious about them, endorsing "wise and good friendships" between women, but warning against obsessive friendships.[34] Scharlieb's equivocal endorsement of female partnerships contrasted with the more positive and liberal attitudes of Doctors Harding and Hutton. Harding described female couples as family units comparable to marriage. Indeed she suggested that relationships between women could be superior to heterosexual relationships as they were free from ulterior motives and financial dependence:

The bond between such friends is one not of convenience but of mutual love and their life together is consequently likely to be very rich, attaining a permanence and stability equalled only in marriage.[35]

As well as asserting the immense value of women's friendships, Harding discussed at length the problems of managing such relationships, stressing the particular need for honest awareness of the emotional state of the friendship and the maintenance of sufficient privacy and separateness.[36] Hutton similarly examined the emotional and sexual significance of women's friendships very closely. Because they often carried the whole charge of the emotional life of the women concerned, such friendships might become over-heated and unstable, she observed, but if they were built on an adult pattern, and the friends had work and other interests to absorb them, then they would be very rewarding. She pointed out that it would be helpful if society regarded such friendships with greater respect and sympathy:

When two women decide to set up house together, they lack all social support, and their proposal is of significance only to the friends themselves ... Such partnerships in living, then, get nothing comparable with the hopeful start of every normal marriage, although they may, and often do, represent what has been called the 'major relationship' of two women's lives.[37]

Hutton suggested that sexuality was bound to play a part in any intense emotional relationship, although this was not necessarily recognised by those concerned. She discussed such problems as possessiveness, anxiety, jealousy and impermanence, with reference to a psycho-analytic mother-daughter model.[38] Hutton went further than the other writers in freely justifying sexual relationships between women friends under certain circumstances. In her view, sexual friendships were only likely to be actively engaged in by women who were to some extent homosexually inclined. She quite vigorously defended such relationships, so long as they were entered into by mature women who regarded sex as an expression of their love for each other:

As to the emotional aspect of this physical expression of love, one may be perhaps allowed even to suggest that nothing but good need come from such a relationship, providing guilt, anxiety and conflict are absent, and the only desire is to give pleasure and relief from tension, as an expression of love and tenderness.[39]

Although she placed stricter limits, Harding too endorsed sexual love between women friends. "Love between women friends may find its expression in a more specifically sexual fashion which, however, cannot be considered perverted if their actions are motivated by love".[40] In supporting lesbianism as a natural progression of friendship in some cases, Harding and Hutton were not only re-working psychological discourses of

spinsterhood, but challenging sexualogical ideas of lesbianism.[41] Laura Hutton in particular was critical of current theories of sexual inversion; they were all too tentative, she wrote.[42]

Sexual affairs with men were considered less desirable than a friendship with another woman by these writers, partly because sex outside marriage was seen as socially unacceptable, and partly because it was assumed these relationships were likely to be with married men. Hutton, for example, acknowledged that heterosexual affairs were more common in the 1930s than 20 years previously, but pointed to the potential difficulties of deceit and secrecy, the risk of pregnancy and the impossibility of finding real companionship by living together.[43]

These three doctors provided a strong counter-position, backed up by their medical expertise, to the popularisation of the new psychology which was becoming widespread by the 1930s. Hutton and Harding's writing was more truly a re-working of psychology than Scharlieb's, since they were operating from within these schools of thought. But all three texts constituted a feminist appropriation of psycho-sexual ideas about spinsters, directly challenging the notion of single women's incomplete sexuality.

Harding and Scharlieb went further, however, than simply validating spinsters as individuals, and provided a world vision of the spinster's function. Scharlieb suggested that spinsters could have a wider role to play than the ordinary wife and mother: the motive of the mother was the welfare of her offspring; the motive of the unmarried woman must be the welfare of the race. "The bachelor woman is the one person to whom we all appeal in the tight corner and in the moment of emergency ...", since she had learnt how to meet troubles. Single women were not simply universal aunts but, "they are individuals who by position and training, by their very freedom and their independence, are essential to the welfare of the nation".[44] In essence, this view of the single woman's place was little different from the nineteenth-century feminist argument that the femininity of independent single women was utilised in their work as 'public mothers'.[45] What was being defended had changed, however. Formerly it was the public role of women which needed to be justified; in the 1930s it was the sanity and personal value of single women.

Esther Harding went furthest in transforming the new psychology from a male medical discourse to one that emphasised female qualities and values. She suggested that single women had a crucial role to play in the development of twentieth-century civilisation. Women's cultural task (to be achieved through female friendship) was to bring feminine values to the world of reality.[46]

In the last few decades friendships between women have come ... to hold a place of unprecedented importance in the community. This change in the emotional life of women is significant not only for the individual but also for our whole civilisation, for we are passing today through a

distinct phase of culture ... One cause of this phase is the weakness and lack of development of the specifically feminine values, inevitable while women were exclusively occupied with men; the outcome promises an increased solidarity among women, resulting in an entirely new development of those values which have to do with feeling and relationship.[47]

Thus women's friendships had far-reaching cultural and social importance. While the increase in unmarried women and in female friendships may be regarded biologically as a regression, wrote Harding, psychologically it had a progressive significance and "may fore-shadow the development of the woman of the future".[48] With such a role to play in the progress of civilisation, what spinster could hanker after marriage?

Maude Royden: religion and psychology

A further variation of the reworking of the psychological model of spinsters was that offered by the feminist preacher Maude Royden, who presented a psycho-religious interpretation from a feminist perspective.[49] By the early 1920s Royden had made an important reputation as a preacher and speaker on moral issues. Several of her sermons were published as pamphlets; these and her book *Sex and Commonsense*, published in 1921, discussed similar themes of morality, marriage and spinsterhood. Maude Royden took a strong and angry position against social attitudes towards spinsters, rejecting society's view of them as old maids.

Maude Royden's starting point was the large number of women who had been left spinsters as a result of the First World War. Although she recognised that some women had no vocation for marriage, she believed that most desired marriage and motherhood, and suffered because this had been denied them.[50] Royden was heavily influenced by the new psychology, and although she was not uncritical of the psycho-analytic emphasis on sexuality, she agreed that women often had strong sexual passions, which could be damaging if repressed:

The sex impulse is one of the most powerful in our natures ... But psychology has taught us that the repression of any power or impulse is a dangerous matter ... [it] sets up a dangerous unrest and nervous tension throughout the whole personality.[51]

Celibacy was as hard for women as for men, she said, and from a feminist perspective criticised the double standard of morality.[52] Her religious beliefs also stressed that all were equal in the sight of God; thus to believe that single women had missed out because they were not wives or mothers was unchristian. People had human value, she argued; they were not simply sexual creatures.[53]

For Royden, sex was not just a physical function, but a spiritual one. She spoke of sex as a sacrament, and of the mystical significance of sexual union in a true marriage. However, sexual passion ran through life itself, “it is part of the great rhythm of life ... it is the instinct to create”, rather than being confined to a single act, which meant it could be acknowledged by all, including spinsters.[54]

Instead of the miseries of repression, Maude Royden offered single women a positive way forward by their own human agency; what might be labelled the ‘sublimation as social work’ solution. They could direct and control their sexual and maternal feelings, transforming them into creative love for humanity, for example as teachers and social workers, by adopting children, or promoting the cause of peace:

[T]here are already more children in the world than there is mother-love to care for them, and that hunger of yours should find expression in caring for all children, in the love of all who are little and helpless and oppressed.[55]

Royden’s ideal of sublimation – “the transformation of the sex side of our nature” – was a firmly religious one. She pointed to Christ’s “agony of longing” as the example to follow. Speaking directly to spinsters she said: “It is not easy ... but it is possible. It is possible and it is glorious”.[56]

What was supremely achieved by Christ can be achieved by us also in our degree. We too can transmute the power of sex and ‘create’ in other ways. He did it supremely for the world. You and I can do it for our village, our city, for England, for the world, for anything you like. I tell you what I know when I say that the power of sex can be transmuted into a power that will make your lives as rich, as fruitful, as creative as that of any father or mother in the world ... The power that is stored up in you can become a great force for the regeneration of the world, and those of you who have never borne a child may some day bear the new world, and the future generation of young men and women will rise up and call you blessed.[57]

Maude Royden was a renowned speaker and drew many women to her London services, who no doubt were encouraged by her words. She was particularly concerned in her ministry with the single woman; apart from the published work already cited, she preached a sermon in 1927 entitled ‘Unmarried people’, and in her last service at the Guildhouse in 1936 included a thought for the single: “of all the people I have tried to serve ... it is you whom I have most carried in my heart”.[58] Maude Royden was well known to feminist circles, and to the general public in the inter-war years. To single women she offered understanding and a feminist justification of professional women’s work both as honourable service and duty in the nineteenth-century mode, and as a positive field for their creative and sexual energies.

Winifred Holtby: resistance and refusal

A different type of feminist analysis came from the writer Winifred Holtby, who in the 1920s and 1930s established a name for herself as a journalist and reviewer for publications such as *The Yorkshire Post* and *Good Housekeeping* and as a contributor to the feminist journal *Time and Tide*. Both in her journalism and in her successful fiction Holtby condemned the attacks on spinsters and addressed herself to the problem of many spinsters' 'wasted lives' from a feminist perspective. She simply refused to accept the validity of the psychological writing on spinsterhood, though she recognised its power, observing that: "The legend of the Frustrated Spinster is one of the most formidable social influences of the modern world.[59] In her book *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, published in 1934, she criticised the new psychology at length in a section entitled 'Are Spinsters Frustrated?' She wrote:

The twentieth century having dethroned human reason set up the nerves and memory in their place. Freudian psychology has sanctioned the extreme veneration of sex. The followers of D. H. Lawrence have taught us to venerate instinct, emotion and the intuitive vitality of the senses and to pity virgins for being unacquainted with a wide, deep and fundamentally important range of intuitive and sensual experience. They are taught to pity themselves. From their childhood they learn to dread the fate of 'an old maid'. In more sophisticated circles they anticipate a nemesis of 'complexes'. [60]

She went on to comment: "Society ... continues to track down those who do not marry ... and who do not have children, persuading them that their happiness is not happiness, their satisfaction not satisfaction, their preoccupations and interests a struggling and not too healthy sublimation". [61] In a period when the ideas of sexology and new psychology were fashionable and widely disseminated, Holtby's criticism was courageous and direct. The importance of her analysis is that it identified the lonely and frustrated spinster as the social construction of a society that allowed only a narrow pathway to happiness for women.

However, Holtby recognised that as a consequence of this image many single women did lead restricted and frustrated lives, and traced the components of this to the middle-class 'leisured lady' tradition as well as the idea that women could only escape the fate of a spinster by finding the right man. Pointing out that "there are as many wasted and frustrated lives among the married as among the unmarried", Holtby saw the remedy as "putting sex in its proper place" and enabling women to find their own work and meaning in life, a life in which marriage would be just one possibility among others. [62]

Holtby countered her criticism of the new psychology with her belief that spinsters could be happy and well-balanced, and drew positive feminist images of spinsterhood that echoed her own experience:

Teachers, doctors, political organisers, artists and explorers may deliberately choose to remain unmarried in order not to be hampered in their work. In some cases this means that they remain celibate; since the spread of contraceptive knowledge it generally means that they avoid motherhood. But it is impossible, with any regard for the meaning of words whatsoever, to call such women frustrated; most of them live lives as full, satisfied and happy as any human lives can be ... They have contributed something to the world and known the satisfaction of creative achievement.[63]

As well as validating single women in her feminist political writing, Holtby provided fictional re-workings of spinsterhood. Sarah Burton, the spinster headmistress of *South Riding* (1936) is an energetic and competent heroine whose life is rich in political and emotional incident. Holtby engages with the issue of women's sexual 'instincts' when Sarah Burton falls in love with the landowner Carne, a man of completely opposite political and social values. As Carol Dyhouse has pointed out, Holtby avoids resolving the consequences of this situation through the device of Carne's heart attack at the bedroom door and his later disappearance.[64] For the successful spinster, love and marriage would mean relinquishing her independence. Like the feminist doctors, Holtby wrestles with the sexual choices open to the single woman. She might be happily celibate, engage in heterosexual affairs, or set up house with another woman. "We still are greatly ignorant of our own natures ... We do not even know - though we theorise and penalise with ferocious confidence - whether the 'normal' sexual relationship is homo- or bi- or hetero-sexual".[65]

It was in her second most successful novel, *The Crowded Street* (1924) that Holtby made her most sustained critique of the social mores which oppressed the lives of middle-class, single women. This novel constructed in fiction the situation she described elsewhere as that "where girls today are rotting away their youth, hag-ridden by the fear of middle age, of futility, of frustration".[66] Prevented from undertaking any real education or work, the lives of unmarried daughters were constrained by the petty politics of social climbing in pursuit of their only aim, a husband. Holtby relentlessly depicted the despair and frustration of her heroine, Muriel, as she discovered at the tennis club, dances, tea parties and outings of middle-class Marshington that: "everywhere life was regulated upon the partner system".[67] Even the First World War, which saved other women, passed her by, and Holtby has her heroine learn slowly and painfully that her life has value only if she lives it for herself. After deliberately grasping the opportunity for work and friendship, Muriel rejects an eventual offer from the most eligible man in Marshington because it would mean subsuming her

newly valued and developing personality in the middle-class conventions of wifely duty. In a neat reversal of a conventional romantic ending, the heroine Muriel explains to Godfrey why she is refusing marriage:

If it hadn't been for Delia, I should have died - not with my body but with my mind ... She let me see, not that the thing I had sought was not worth seeking, but simply that there were other things in life ... I've actually got tastes and inclinations and a personality ... Some day perhaps, I may marry, but it won't be you ... I think I've always had in my head somewhere [an] idea of service - not just vague and sentimental, but translated into quite practical things. Maybe I'll do nothing with it, but I do know this, that if I married you I'd have to give up every new thing that has made me a person.[68]

Feminist Spinster Politics

Not all the resistance to and reworking of the new ideas about spinsters was carried on at the level of discourse alone. It is also possible to demonstrate a considerable amount of political activism by and for spinsters in this period; most, if not all of it, associated with inter-war feminism. Although a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, it is easy to find examples of practical campaigns to improve single women's access to employment, pensions, housing and social support.

Perhaps the most remarkable spinster lobbying group was the National Spinsters' Pensions Association (NSPA), which was set up in 1935 by women textile workers in Bradford to demand contributory state pensions for single women at the age of 55. By 1938 the NSPA had acquired 125,000 members in 97 branches, published a monthly journal, collected one million signatures on a petition demanding pensions at 55, and successfully obtained the setting up of a Parliamentary Committee on Pensions for Unmarried Women.[69] Rather than seeing themselves as social failures, NSPA members deliberately campaigned under the label of 'spinsters' and believed themselves to be a special group, their potential husbands having been sacrificed for the nation in the First World War. They compared their financial position to the more favourable one of widows of insured men who were entitled to a pension whatever their age, and claimed a similar status to them as 'war spinsters'.[70]

Other groups, though rather smaller, had broader aims and stronger feminist connections. In an attempt to appropriate the more positive masculine associations of independence and freedom, a group of London feminists used the term 'bachelor girl' when planning a Bachelor Girls Exhibition in 1930.[71] The Over-30 Association (set up in 1935 by a group of single working women) ran a London club for women, a cheap canteen, work training and an employment agency.[72] The Association was especially concerned with the problems of housing and unemployment

among older single women and in 1937 organised a deputation to the government calling for provision to be made under the Housing Acts for one-person families, "a matter of great importance to single women".[73] A few housing projects, designed to alleviate the domestic problems of both single and married professional women were designed in the inter-war years, and though such utopian schemes for co-operative living proved to be difficult to finance, the idea was popular with single professional women.[74] The Women's Pioneer Housing Company converted old houses into self-contained flats, and other groups also tried to address the housing problems of single working women and those who had retired:

At Malvern, a company of enterprising women known as 'Workers Limited' are trying in a very real way to meet this need, and have built two groups of Bungalow Flats ... for such workers ... situated in a most ideal spot facing lovely fields and the Malvern Hills. Each house has a gay little garden, the whole group presenting the appearance of a miniature garden city ... Here a life of independence is possible ... and those living in homes like these need not look forward to a depressing old age.[75]

Although it is unrealistic to deny the real problems of housing, loneliness and social image associated with the inter-war spinster, she did have access to various types of community life and support, especially if she was a feminist or willing to identify herself with other lone women. Women's clubs, feminist groups, women's trade unions and professional associations, and bodies such as the Soroptimists and the British Federation of Business and Professional Women provided forums for networking and friendship. These organisations acted as a defence against the social stigmatising of the spinster, but they could also create a strong communal identity for single women.[76]

In conclusion, there was no direct advocacy of marriage refusal as had existed within suffrage feminism, but nevertheless inter-war feminists were far from silent on the subject of spinsterhood. Single women and feminists were not simply victims of the psychological stigmatising of spinsters, but were actively engaged in resisting and redefining these meanings, at a time when these were not fixed but shifting and often confused. Prominent feminist writers used different types of texts to both reject the pessimism of the psychologists and sexologists, and also to create alternative readings of spinsterhood, from within the various schools of psychology. This was more defensive than the pre-war politics of celibacy, in that contented spinsterhood was asserted as a viable option for individual women, rather than as a policy for groups of feminists to adopt. But while some feminists were constrained by the linking of female friendships and lesbianism, the question of single women's sexuality and lifestyle was opened up for discussion in a way that had not been possible before the First World War. Winifred Holtby and the feminist doctors suggested a variety of radical

possibilities. It remains for others to investigate how widely these re-workings of spinsterness were utilised by other feminists, spinsters or women generally. It is clear, however, that despite its real power, the negative psychological view of spinsters was not hegemonic and was continuously and strongly contested by feminists.

Notes

I would like to thank Penny Summerfield, Penny Tinkler and Jan Lambertz for their comments on this paper.

- [1] W. Holtby (1935) King George V Jubilee Celebrations, *Time and Tide*, 4 May, reprinted in P. Berry & A. Bishop (1985) *Testament of a Generation: the journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, p. 91 (London: Virago).
- [2] See, for example, William Greg (1862) Why are women redundant? in J. Murray (Ed.) (1984) *Strong-minded Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- [3] The following discussion draws on the work of various historians, as well as on my own research: L. Bland (1983) Purity, motherhood, pleasure or threat? Definitions of female sexuality, 1900-1970s in S. Cartledge & J. Ryan (Eds) *Sex and Love: new thoughts on old contradictions*, pp. 8-29 (London: Women's Press); S. Jeffreys (1985) *The Spinster and her Enemies* (London: Pandora); J. Weeks (1981) *Sex, Politics and Society: the regulation of sexuality since 1800* (Harlow: Longman).
- [4] For detailed discussion of Ellis's work see Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies*, pp. 128-138. M. Jackson (1984) Sexology and the social construction of male sexuality (Havelock Ellis), in L. Coveney et al (Eds) *The Sexuality Papers: male sexuality and the social control of women* (London: Hutchinson). Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 146-152.
- [5] Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 184. C. Dyhouse (1989) *Feminism and the Family in England, 1880-1939*, p. 179 (Oxford: Blackwell).
- [6] D. Rapp (1990) The early discovery of Freud by the British general educated public, 1912-1919, *Social History of Medicine*, 3(2).
- [7] N. Rose (1985) *The Psychological Complex: psychology, politics and society in England, 1869-1939*, pp. 181-188 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul); L. Hearnshaw (1964) *A Short History of British Psychology, 1840-1940*, pp. 166-167, 238-239 (London: Methuen); Rapp, The early discovery of Freud. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 155. In the general texts of the new psychology it is very clear that while Freud's theories of sexuality were repudiated, Ellis's more specific and biologicistic idea of sexual instincts was heavily drawn upon. See, for example, J. A. Hadfield (1924) *Psychology and Morals: an analysis of character*, pp. 162-164 (London: Methuen). I would like to thank Mick Worboys for his suggestions for sources on the new psychology.
- [8] Rapp, The early discovery of Freud, pp. 235, 242-243. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology*, p. 167. For a typical exposition of the new psychology see Hadfield, *Psychology and Morals*.

[9] Bland, Purity, motherhood, pleasure or threat? Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies*, Ch. 5. S. Jeffreys (1983) Sex reform and anti-feminism in the 1920s, in London Feminist History Group (Eds) *The Sexual Dynamics of History* (London: Pluto)

[10] S. Browne (1917) The sexual variety and variability among women, reprinted in S. Rowbotham (1977) *A New World for Women: Stella Browne – socialist feminist*, pp. 101-102 (London: Pluto).

[11] C. Smith-Rosenburg (1985) The new woman as androgyne: social disorder and gender crisis, 1870-1936, in *Disorderly Conduct: visions of gender in Victorian America*, pp. 275-280 (New York: Knopf). L. Faderman (1984) *Surpassing the Love of Men*, pp. 241-248 (London: Junction Books). Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies*, pp. 106-107.

[12] R. Auchmuty (1989) You're a dyke, Angela! Elsie J. Oxenham and the rise and fall of the schoolgirl story; P. Johnson (1989) 'The best friend whom life has given me': does Winifred Holtby have a place in lesbian history?, both in Lesbian History Group (Eds) *Not a Passing Phase: reclaiming lesbians in history, 1840-1985* (London: Women's Press). A Faraday (1989) Lessoning lesbians: girls' schools, coeducation and anti-lesbianism between the wars, in C. Jones & P. Mahoney (Eds) *Learning Our Lines: sexuality and social control in education* (London: Women's Press). Liz Stanley has recently contested the claim made by some feminist historians that the 'mannish' lesbian was a stereotype invented by Ellis and used to morbidify women's romantic friendships previously seen as innocent. She argues that the idea of inversion, as developed by Edward Carpenter and other gay men before Ellis, was actively taken up by women to describe their already existing feelings of lesbian desire. L. Stanley (1992) *The auto/biographical I*, Ch. 8 (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

[13] See note 7 above. The general ideas of psychology were disseminated among professional groups including educationalists, doctors and social workers in the 1920s and through novels and middle-brow journals and magazines.

[14] *Woman's Life*. 10 January 1921, quoted in Cynthia White (1970) *Women's Magazines, 1693-1968*, p. 99, also see p. 109 (London: Michael Joseph). D. Beddoe (1989) *Back to Home and Duty: women between the wars, 1918-1939*, pp. 26-31 (London: Pandora).

[15] *The Woman Teacher*, 2 January 1920, p. 114. For further discussion of feminist spinster teachers see A. Oram (1989) 'Embittered, sexless or homosexual': attacks on spinster teachers, 1918-1939, in Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase*.

[16] L. Bland (1986) Marriage laid bare: middle-class women and marital sex, c.1880-1914, in J. Lewis (Ed.) *Labour and Love: women's experience of home and family, 1850-1940*, pp. 138-139 (Oxford: Blackwell). Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 88-93. Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, pp. 38, 145-157.

[17] Bland, Purity, motherhood, pleasure or threat?, pp. 13-14.

[18] C. Pankhurst (1913) *The Great Scourge and How to End It*, quoted in Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 89.

[19] C. Hamilton (1909; reprinted 1981) *Marriage as a Trade* (London: Women's Press); Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 76-77, 89. Margaret Wynne Nevinson and Lucy Re-Bartlett are other examples of anti-marriage suffragists.

[20] Bland, Purity, motherhood, pleasure or threat?, pp. 12-17. Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 93-101, 115-21, 158-9. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 182.

[21] Neither Bland nor Weeks discuss feminism and spinsters after the First World War.

[22] Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, especially Ch. 5 and 8.

[23] See, for example, Oram, Embittered, sexless or homosexual, pp. 115-117.

[24] Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 102-106. H. Smith (Ed.) (1990) *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Brighton: Edward Elgar).

[25] See, for example, *The Woman Teacher*, 9 September 1921, p. 349.

[26] V. Brittain (1968) *Radclyffe Hall: a case of obscenity?*, p. 48 (London: Femina Books). *Woman's Leader*, 21 December 1928, p. 354; 11 January 1929, p. 383.

[27] Hadfield, *Psychology and Morals*, p. 152.

[28] Mary Scharlieb (1929) *The Bachelor Woman and her Problems* (London: Unwin). M. Esther Harding (1933) *The Way of All Women: a psychological interpretation* (London: Longman). Laura Hutton (1935) *The Single Woman and her Emotional Problems* (London: Bailliere, Tindall & Cox). Hutton's book was reprinted several times during the 1930s. Career details for the three doctors were obtained from the annual *Medical Directory*. Harding and Hutton's work is also discussed in a different context by Johnson, The best friend whom life has given me, pp. 151-153 and by Sheila Jeffreys (1990) *Anticlimax*, pp. 39-50 (London: Women's Press). Jeffreys makes the point that these two books affirmed the spinster and female friendship though this contradicts her previous argument in *The Spinster and Her Enemies*.

[29] Harding, *Way of all Women*, p. 87.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 106.

[31] Hutton, *Single Woman*, pp. 1, 6.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 52, 136.

[33] Harding, *Way of all Women*, pp. 96-98.

[34] Scharlieb, *The Bachelor Woman*, pp. 49, 53-54.

[35] Harding, *Way of all Women*, pp. 92, 87.

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 96-109.

[37] Hutton, *Single Woman*, pp. 13-14, 40-41 (quote), 134.

[38] *Ibid.*, Ch. 2.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 102; also see pp. 84-104.

[40] Harding, *Way of all Women*, p. 97.

[41] This was quite a different type of challenge than Radclyffe Hall's defence of lesbianism using Ellis's definition of the congenital invert. Harding and Hutton instead suggested a much more fluid relationship between female friendship and lesbianism.

[42] Hutton, *Single Woman*, p. 106.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[44] Scharlieb, *The Bachelor Woman*, pp. 71, 76, 77.

[45] See Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 91-97.

[46] Harding, *Way of all Women*, p. 87.

[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90, also see pp. 93-94.

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

[49] Mary Scharlieb might also be said to offer this approach, but as has been shown, she was less steeped in the new psychology.

[50] M. Royden (1922) *The Moral Standards of the Rising Generation*, pp. 4-5 (London: League of the Church Militant). M. Royden (1925) *The Moral Standards of the New Age*, p. 2 (London: League of the Church Militant). M. Royden (1921) *Sex and Commonsense*, pp. 3, 11 (London: Hurst & Blackett). S. Fletcher (1989) *Maude Royden: a life*, pp. 230, 233 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell). Royden also published a series of articles on the same themes in *Time and Tide* between 15 July 1921 and 4 November 1921.

[51] Royden, *New age*, p. 3.

[52] Royden, *New age*, pp. 3-5, 7; *Sex and Commonsense*, pp. 4-9, 21-22, 27, 34, 116-120; *Rising generation*, p. 7.

[53] Royden, *Sex and Commonsense*, pp. 29-30.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[55] Royden (1918) *The future*, quoted in S. Fletcher (1990) *Single women between the wars*, *The New Zealand Journal of Women's Studies*.

[56] Royden, *Sex and Commonsense*, p. 39, also see p. 36-41, 130.

[57] Royden, *Rising generation*, p. 13; see also p. 12; *New age*, pp. 9-11.

[58] Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, pp. 233-234.

[59] W. Holtby (1934) *Women and a Changing Civilisation*, p. 125 (London: John Lane The Bodley Head).

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[61] *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

[62] W. Holtby (1932) *For services rendered*, *Time and Tide*, 19 November, reprinted in Berry & Bishop, *Testament of a Generation*, p. 78. Also see p. 88, reprint of a review in *Good Housekeeping*, May 1935.

[63] Holtby, *Women*, pp. 128-129. Cicely Hamilton, too, was still defending the spinster and pointing out the limitations of marriage and motherhood in her inter-war journalism. In a response to Maude Royden,

whom she believed to have misrepresented spinsters in a recent lecture, she noted that attacks on spinsters were created in masculine club-rooms. The tone of her article was rather scathing about the idea of maternal instincts and also of the sublimation argument as a defence of spinsters. *Time and Tide*, 14 October 1927.

[64] C. Dyhouse (1981) *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, pp. 37-38 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul). Thanks also to Penny Summerfield for her comments on South Riding and Holtby's views of single women's sexuality.

[65] Holtby, *Women*, p. 192.

[66] Holtby, For services rendered, pp. 77-78.

[67] W. Holtby (1924, reprinted 1981) *The Crowded Street*, p. 130 (London: Virago).

[68] *Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.

[69] The Committee reported in 1939. D. Groves (1986) Women and occupational pensions, 1870-1983, unpublished PhD thesis, King's College, University of London, pp. 87-88, 105. Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 155. It should be noted that feminist organisations concerned with women's employment opposed the idea of pensions at 55, believing it would lead to even greater restrictions on women's work and contribute to the image that women were worn out and worthless by middle age.

[70] Groves, Women and occupational pensions, pp. 94-95.

[71] *The Vote*, 25 July 1930.

[72] National Union of Women Teachers Archive, box 70, File 50. Institute of Education Library, London (various reports of Over-30 Association activities). Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 155.

[73] One feminist group which took part was the mainly spinster National Union of Women Teachers: NUWT (1956) *A Short History of the Union to 1956*, p. 7 (London: NUWT); NUWT (1937) *Annual Report*, p. 13.

[74] Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family*, pp. 118-120.

[75] Malvern's flats for women workers, report in *The Woman Teacher*, 5 July 1935, p. 339. Also see Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 98.

[76] See R. Auchmuty (1989) By their friends we shall know them: the lives and networks of some women in North Lambeth, 1880-1940, Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase*. G. Holmes (1944) *In Love with Life: a pioneer career woman's story* (London: Hollis & Carter). This argument is elaborated in respect of women teachers in a chapter of my forthcoming book (1993) *Women Teachers and Twentieth Century Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).