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Psychiatry in literature

Winifred Holtby (1898–1935): a mental hospital visit, early 1930s

Andrew J. Lerner 

In her novel *South Riding*, set in the early 1930s and published posthumously in 1936, Winifred Holtby used the responsibilities of local government to structure her portrayal of a community of individuals – her fictional location based around Yorkshire’s East Riding, from whence Holtby herself originated. Her mother was the first woman Alderman in the East Riding and provided the model for the character of Mrs Beddows.

Mental health is one of the themes woven into the narrative. Consistent with the remit of local government, one of the eight books comprising the novel is titled ‘Mental Deficiency’, one chapter of which sees Alderman Mrs Beddows pay a statutory visit to the ‘South Riding Mental Hospital near Yarrol’, which is described as:

... a colony of stark red buildings. Some had tall chimneys like factories; some were like Nonconformist chapels with gables and small high windows; some were like warehouses. Between them lay cinder paths and asphalt yards. To the west a large kitchen garden displayed draggled greens and wintry apple-trees as offerings to beauty.

To the refined residents on the outskirts of Yarrol, these structures were an eyesore.

Mrs Beddows, however, has a different point of view:

Her judgments were not aesthetic; they were social, and they informed her that this place was good. She had known homes desolated by the ugliness of one helpless, beloved, unbiddable idiot child. She had seen the agony of spirit in men and women doomed to watch the slow dwindling of reason in those they loved. ...

And her gratitude for the relief of these afflictions steeled her to make her statutory visits. She could look without flinching at the padded rooms where frenzied creatures tore wildly at the leather which at once imprisoned and protected them. She could pass from bed to bed where bodies lay, like houses tenanted, bereft of all but a strange physical survival. She could even face the more harrowing experience of refusing the pleas of the intermittently sane.

A number of the patients are familiar to her, presumably based on previous visits:

She knew now the eccentricities of the patients. ... She paid the requisite compliments to the farmer’s wife, who tied up her hair with artificial flowers and thought that all the doctors were in love with her. She comforted Miss Tremaine, the saintly deaconess, who wept all day at the thought of Mortal Sin. She stroked the ‘cheek’ of the baby held by Mother Maisie, who had killed her own child eighteen years ago in the basement scullery where it was born, and who ever since had crooned and hungered over a roll of towels cuddled in her arms.

The view of Mrs Beddows, and presumably of Winifred Holtby, is summed up thus:

‘Maybe all that we do here isn’t very splendid. As I see it, when you come to the bottom, all this local government, it’s just working together – us ordinary people, against the troubles that afflict all of us – poverty, ignorance, sickness, isolation – madness.’

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