early age Elizabeth felt outrage at thoughts or actions which violated her moral, religious or social values. She was an intense woman, and she viewed her commitment to medicine almost as a spiritual quest, entirely compatible with her family's crusade against evil and injustice.

Elizabeth's struggle to become the first woman doctor served another, very important function in her life: it provided an outlet for her passions which, she felt, would never be wholly fulfilled in intimate relationships with men. At 24 she wrote in her journal, 'I felt more determined than ever to become a physician, and thus place a strong barrier between me and all ordinary marriages. I must have something to engross my thoughts, some object in life to fill this vacuum and prevent this sad wearing away of the heart.' Recognising that there was slight chance of finding a mate who would tolerate, much less encourage her goals, she determined to subordinate her emotions to work. Suppressing her desire for social contact and frivolity in *any* form in order to pursue her aims, she formed few close friendships and paid a high price for the satisfaction of achievement.

Elizabeth Blackwell won many victories for herself and for other women in the face of fierce resistance. After completing her training in Paris and London, she decided to establish her practice in New York: she was not allowed to work in hospitals; no one would rent consulting rooms; and when she lectured on childbirth, sex and women's health, she was jeered at in the streets. Finally, with the help of her sister, Dr Emily Blackwell, and Dr Marie Zakrzewska, she founded the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. In the UK, she was the first woman to have her name entered on the Medical Register and she helped to found the National Health Society. She organised the first medical college for women, the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary, where she created opportunities for women to gain clinical experience. This college was also the first medical training facility to have a Chair of Hygiene, a post which Elizabeth Blackwell held until she was appointed to the Chair of Gynaecology at the New Hospital of the London School of Medicine for women in 1875.

In 1854, at 33, realising that she would never marry and feeling keenly the loneliness and isolation of her position, Elizabeth adopted a homeless 7-year-old waif, Katherine (Kitty) Barry, who became both step-daughter and helper. As she grew older, Kitty was her secretary, assistant and occasional travelling companion. Elizabeth's letters to Kitty suggest dutiful concern rather than emotional intimacy, whereas Kitty seemed to regard her step-mother as a paragon, deserving of devotion, admiration and respect. During Elizabeth's travels Kitty was looked after by the Blackwell clan, and Elizabeth wrote frequent newsy letters filled with practical and moral injunctions. However, she seems to have mellowed considerably as she grew older and in the excerpt below (from a thirty-page letter written when Elizabeth was 66 and Kitty was 40), it appears that their affection grew stronger over the years.

Elizabeth's relationship with her own mother, on the other hand, was always warm and loving, although she rarely took her mother into her confidence or told her about the real problems she faced. Her mother's letters were full of religious advice and Elizabeth was constantly reassuring her about the state of her soul. She often used humour as a way to avoid worrying her mother and the letters are in that sense evasive. They do, nonetheless, offer an unusual perspective on Elizabeth, who otherwise gives the impression of living an admirable but somewhat cheerless life.

These first two letters were written shortly after Elizabeth left home; she was teaching school at Henderson in Kentucky, a slave-owning state:

5 March 1844

Dear Mother,

. . . I dislike slavery more and more every day; I suppose I see it here in its mildest form, and since my residence here I have heard of no use being made of the whipping-post, nor any instance of downright cruelty . . . But to live in the midst of beings degraded to the utmost in body and mind, drudging on from earliest morning to latest night, cuffed about by everyone, scolded at all day long, blamed unjustly, and without spirit enough to reply, with no consideration in any way for their feelings, with no hope for the future . . . To live in their midst, utterly unable to help them, is to me dreadful . . . The mistresses pique themselves on the advantageous situation of their blacks; they positively think them very well off, and triumphantly compare their position with that of the poor in England and other countries. I endeavor, in reply, to slide in a little truth through the small apertures of their minds, for were I to come out broadly with my simple, honest opinion I should shut them up tight, arm all their prejudices, and do ten times more harm than good.

I do long to get hold of someone to whom I can talk frankly; this constant smiling and bowing and wearing a mask provokes me intolerably; it sends me internally to the other extreme, and I shall soon, I think, rush into the woods, vilify Henderson, curse the Whigs, and rail at the Orthodox, whose bells have been going in a fruitless effort at revivals ever since I have been here. Not mind, mother, that I really have such diabolical feelings against the poor Orthodox in general and particular, but I have an intense longing to scream, and everyone here speaks in a whisper . . .

[Your daughter,
Elizabeth]

[c. 1845]

My Dear Mother,

I'm afraid from the sad tone of your letter that you think you're going to die very shortly, but such I assure you is not the case, as I can prove to you if necessary from scripture and common sense; on the contrary I can prophesy many a long and much brighter year in which

Oberlin College in Ohio – although when she graduated at the top of her class in 1847, she was forced to sit in the audience while a male student read her valedictorian speech.

Like many American suffragists, Lucy Stone began her career working for the abolition of slavery; after slavery was abolished she continued to work for the rights of women until her death at 75. She travelled and lectured throughout the east coast of America and helped found and edit the *Women's Journal*, an influential suffrage newspaper which was published for almost forty years.

Lucy's carefully considered decision to marry Henry Blackwell, brother of Elizabeth Blackwell, America's first woman doctor,* was based on his agreement to devote himself to her work for women's rights (which he faithfully did). Their marriage also set another precedent: she decided to keep her own name after she married. They had one daughter, Alice Stone Blackwell (1857–1950), who worked with her parents on the *Journal* and became a poet and political activist in her own right.†

In 1869 the American suffrage movement was divided when Lucy Stone and Susan B. Anthony** had a major policy disagreement over whether or not to support the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which would give black men the vote but still exclude women. Lucy Stone favoured supporting the Amendment, while Susan B. Anthony's faction argued that this would drastically delay the progress of the women's struggle. They also disagreed about the liberalisation of the divorce laws, which Lucy did not want included in the suffrage campaign. Three years before Lucy Stone died, Alice Stone Blackwell was instrumental in re-uniting the factions.

In this letter, written in her last year at Oberlin College, Lucy defends her intention to become a public speaker for the Anti-Slavery Society:

1846

. . . I know, Mother, you feel badly about the plans I have proposed to myself, and that you would prefer to have me take some other course, if I could in conscience. Yet, Mother, I know you too well to suppose that you would wish me to turn away from what I think is my

*See pp. 91–7.

†Alice Stone Blackwell edited the *Women's Journal* for thirty-five years. In 1887 she also began editing the 'Woman's Column', a collection of items about suffrage which was syndicated to newspapers around the country. After her mother's death she became more radical and involved herself in numerous causes which went far beyond the sphere of suffrage. An avowed socialist radical, she deplored the suppression of free speech, repressive measures under the Espionage Act and the deportation of radicals, and she worked tirelessly in political campaigns. She helped found the League of Women Voters in Massachussetts on the premise that women should remain an autonomous political force and not rely on the two-party system to accomplish their aims. In 1930 she published a biography of her mother. During the next decade she went blind and she died in 1950 at the age of 93.

**See pp. 116–18.

duty, and go all my days in opposition to my convictions of right, lashed by a reproaching conscience.

I surely would not be a public speaker if I sought a life of ease, for it will be a most laborious one; nor would I do it for the sake of honor, for I know that I will be disesteemed, nay, even hated, by some who are now my friends, or who profess to be. Nor would I do it if I sought wealth, because I could secure it with far more ease and worldly honor by being a teacher. But, Mother, the gold that perishes in the using, the honor that comes from men, the ease or indolence which eats out the energy of the soul, are not the objects at which I aim. If I would be true to myself, true to my Heavenly Father, I must be actuated by high and holy principles, and pursue that course of conduct which, to me, appears best calculated to promote the highest good of the world. Because I know that I shall suffer, shall I for this, like Lot's wife, turn back? No, Mother, if in this hour of the world's need I should refuse to lend my aid, however small it may be, I should have no right to think myself a Christian, and I should forever despise Lucy Stone. If, while I hear the wild shriek of the slave mother robbed of her little ones, or the muffled groan of the daughter spoiled of her virtue, I do not open my mouth for the dumb, am I not guilty? Or should I go, as you said, from house to house to do it, when I could tell so many more in less time, if they should be gathered in one place? You would not object, or think it wrong, for a man to plead the cause of the suffering and the outcast; and surely the moral character of the act is not changed because it is done by a woman.

. . . But, Mother, there are no trials so great as they suffer who neglect or refuse to do what they believe is their duty. I expect to plead not for the slave only, but for suffering humanity everywhere. ESPECIALLY DO I MEAN TO LABOR FOR THE ELEVATION OF MY SEX . . . But I will not speak further upon this subject at this time, only to ask that you will not withold your consent from my doing anything that I think is my duty to do. You will not, will you, Mother? . . .

Florence Nightingale and her mother Fanny, 1851–62

My present life is suicide; in my thirty-first year I see nothing desirable but death. What am I that their life is not good enough for me? O God, what am I? . . . Why, Oh my God, cannot I be satisfied with the life that satisfies so many people?

Florence Nightingale (1850)

Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), the founder of modern nursing, spent the bulk of her life not as a practising nurse but writing thousands of bureaucratic letters and numerous reports on medical reform. At the age of 34 she worked as a nurse for eighteen months during the Crimean War. Her chief contribution to the suffering soldiers who kissed her shadow was as a hospital administrator, arguing about open windows, toothbrushes, endless red tape

and distress. Alice Holtby was a powerful figure in both her family and her community. A long-standing member of the local county council, she was the first woman to be appointed Alderman in her county, and Winifred greatly admired her mother's competence. Because she was so accustomed to viewing women as capable and active, Winifred admitted to being shocked to discover upon her arrival at Oxford that women there saw a need for a feminist movement.

When she was 18, Winifred worked for a year as a volunteer nurses' aid and then, in 1917, began studying for a degree in Modern History at Oxford. She left Oxford after a year and enlisted in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) against the wishes of her teachers and parents. She then served in France for a year until the Armistice. She returned to Oxford to complete her degree course and there met Vera Brittain who became her closest friend.* From 1920, she and Vera (and, later, Vera's husband and two children) shared a home in London.

Although Winifred's greatest desire was to write novels, she had a relentless sense of family duty and a strong political conscience, so her literary efforts were constantly interrupted. In addition to being summoned frequently to Yorkshire to nurse sick relatives, run errands and, in general, play the role of dutiful daughter, she often worked more than full-time to promote the causes of pacifism, feminism and racial equality. In an obituary of her, Rebecca West said that Winifred Holtby 'belonged to the elect of the War generation, who were deepened and dignified by their experience, but not perturbed. There was no trace of hysteria or self-pity in her hearty loathing of war.' Winifred travelled extensively in Europe and South Africa lecturing for the League of Nations Union, and after a six-month trip to South Africa in 1926 she began working to promote trades unions for black South African workers and to focus the attention of the British public on the horrifying effects of racism. Vera Brittain wrote in *Testament of Friendship*: 'her months in South Africa struck a more formidable blow against the artist in her than any other adventure, for they provided the social reformer with an overwhelming programme of wrongs to protest.'

Winifred Holtby was considered by many of her contemporaries to be the finest journalist in London. She contributed regularly to the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Yorkshire Post*, the *News Chronicle*, *Daily Herald* and *Good Housekeeping*. When she was only 28, she became a director of the popular weekly, *Time & Tide*, and for the rest of her life she was also a regular contributor to that prestigious journal.

In between her services to family and friends, her political activities and her career in journalism, Winifred Holtby wrote six novels, two plays, a collection of short stories, a critical study of Virginia Woolf, and a history of the women's liberation struggle in the twentieth century. Her last two novels,

*See pp. 159-165.

Mandoa, Mandoa! (a satire on imperialist attempts to bring 'civilisation' to Africa) and *South Riding* (a complex and loving portrait of her native Yorkshire), were both great critical successes and *South Riding* has never been out of print.* *South Riding*, which was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize as the best novel of 1936, was written in the last two years of her life when she was in almost constant pain and under heavy medication for high blood pressure. She completed this classic novel only a few weeks before she died at the age of 37.

This letter is a fragment found in Winifred Holtby's files after her death. The salutation was missing, but it was almost certainly addressed to her mother. At the time, Winifred was campaigning in the general election for a Liberal Party candidate in Bethnal Green who strongly supported the League of Nations Union:

1923

. . . I do want you to believe that however impulsive, tactless, weak and conceited I may be, I am trying to live up to the light which I see, and because I would not have you think that the light is all darkness, I want to try and explain a very little. I do not know quite wherein you think I am losing my soul, but I rather gather it is probably about these things.

The Church, for instance, because I don't go any more. This is the result of a long process of thought which began when I was in France. At Oxford I read a good deal of the history of the Church, of the way in which creeds were built up by men – generally of no great education or enlightenment – at times of hot controversy . . . I learned how year by year the original teaching of Christ became more and more set about with interpretations and symbols until the real meaning over and over was lost, and instead of His universal spiritual kingdom of God arose exclusive sects, at first one, then three, then hundreds, each claiming to be the receptacle of the true faith without which man cannot be saved.

So I said, 'I have loved the Church. Its services are beautiful. I loved its symbolism. Its historical association with martyrs and saints inspired me. But it is bloodstained, not only with the blood of martyrs but of heretics. It is darkened by superstition and fear. It stands between the world and the thing I long for most, the coming of the Universal Kingdom of God. So I will not take its sacraments nor support its organisation.'

*Three of Winifred Holtby's novels have been reprinted in the Virago Modern Classics series: *The Land of Green Ginger*, *Anderby Wold* and *The Crowded Street*. *South Riding* is published by Penguin.

Then there is selfishness. Dear heart, when I say that I want 'to get on', do you really think I just want fame? Don't you know that when I am in Bethnal Green I have a strong temptation to throw aside this climbing and to do what I always used to think I would do – just work in the slums among the poor people? But I believe that would be a coward's way of service. I believe that service lies in this – that each of us should use in the highest way, to the very widest possible extent, the abilities or powers they have been given. I believe that to be content with humbler service, when one is able to stand greater responsibility, is only cowardice.

Some must lead, and by their abilities are they chosen, and to ladle soup in a slum kitchen when one should be defending Justice as a King's Counsel, or Truth as a writer or philosopher, is blind sacrifice, which may even be deliberate cowardice and fighting away from the light.

I do not know what path I shall take. I do not know whither I am being called. I may do many things that seem to you selfish, heartless or blind. But here at the beginning of my journey I want you to know this, because I love and honour you and count upon your love more than you will ever know. I may not go the way that you would have me go. I may say and do foolish things, I may even in the end get nowhere, teach nothing, have helped nobody and have failed myself. But this you *must* believe, or you may be hurt and disappointed a thousand times, and I shall not always be able to explain.

As I see the light, so will I act, if I have strength and courage. I look each day for further light to see problems more clearly, to try my best to deal with them. By preaching Peace I am trying to find that Kingdom of God which Christ taught. By writing I am trying to put down something of the truth as I see it. And remember that in my very first book I said that with the seeing of new light, much that was beautiful and good in the old has to suffer – that the truth is not all good, that it is taught most often by unworthy prophets, that it comes with cruelty and often with injustice. And yet, 'there shall be no contentment but proceeding'.

My second book is to be this – That each of us must act by the light as we see it, choosing deliberately our path and accepting full responsibility for our own actions, looking for neither reward nor praise, nor even recognition. For by acting alone with his face to the light, the spirit of man expands towards his God, and seeing the light and yet refusing it – that is what Christ called 'the sin against the Holy Ghost'. What my third book will be, I do not know. Whether I am right to write these things, I do not know. Whether I shall ever teach the things I see, whether I am seeing them aright, I do not know. I only know that I have seen a vision of pure beauty on the earth, of universal love, and of a spiritual kingdom, and though I am a thousand times unfit to seek it, though I know myself to be a coward, often to lie, always to shrink from unpleasantness, to dread unpopularity, to hate effort, yet I must go along the road I see. And if I hurt you on the road, if I act impulsively on wrong assumptions, my dear, you must know I do not want to hurt you, that I love you, that if in seeking for the light I do wrong, it is not because the light is wrong, but because my eyes are too weak not to be dazzled.

Darling, this may seem to you off the point. It does hardly touch the present sore place – and yet it does, for it just shows where I fail. I am a coward. I hate saying anything unpleasant to people's faces, especially when I love them. I find it difficult to be straight. So when I try, I work myself up to a false courage, am rude and defiant and say not what I meant to say, and often half defeat my own ends. But to try to be straight, to try to be honest, that I believe is to keep faith.

Forgive this long letter. I know it may not sound quite clear, but I do not believe that you will fail to understand. Always you have understood, and just because you do, I shall make still bigger demands upon your understanding, and do and say things that you may think wrong even, if not just foolish. You may think me selfish or inconsiderate. I may hurt you again. But still I count on your love, and love you. And if the methods I see are different from the ones you would have me choose, it is because my qualifications and abilities are different.

Unless you want anything explaining, I will not write again about this. I have tried to make it clear, but sometimes it is not even very clear to myself. Only I know that I have seen 'upon the road a light', and I would not have you think that it was only darkness.

Amelia Earhart to her mother Amy, 1928

Before she chose her legendary career as an aviator, Amelia Earhart (1897–1937) had considered devoting her life either to medicine or to social work. She grew up in Missouri and Iowa, the eldest of two daughters of Edwin and Amy Earhart. After she graduated from high school in 1917 she joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) and worked as a nurses' aide until the Armistice. Unlike her friends, who were preoccupied with their hopes of good marriages, Amelia showed no sign of wanting to marry; instead, she kept a notebook of news items about women's achievements as they began to take over jobs previously reserved for men.

In 1919, Amelia attended Columbia University as a pre-medical student; but after a year she decided that she would not make a good doctor because she was more interested in the experimental than the practical side of medicine. She had been taking flying lessons during the war and, after leaving Columbia, took numerous jobs to pay for additional lessons. Despite the low ebb of her family's finances (her father had lost her mother's inheritance in a mining venture), her parents and sister bought her a small yellow