

May Sinclair

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A Modern Victorian

SUZANNE RAITT

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JACKSON LEGENDS

*For my father,
the first biographer I ever met*

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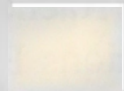
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6 is from Anthony C. Deane, *Time Remembered* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945); Plate 10 is from *Bookman* (London), 14 (Sept. 1898), 151; and Plate 13 is illustration no. 1, by Arthur I. Keller, from May Sinclair, *The Creators* (New York: Holt, 1910), also published with the first instalment of *The Creators*, *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, 79 (Nov. 1909), 100-16.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



TEXTS BY MAY SINCLAIR

I have used the first American edition of May Sinclair's texts for citations, apart from the early volumes of poetry, which never appeared in the USA.

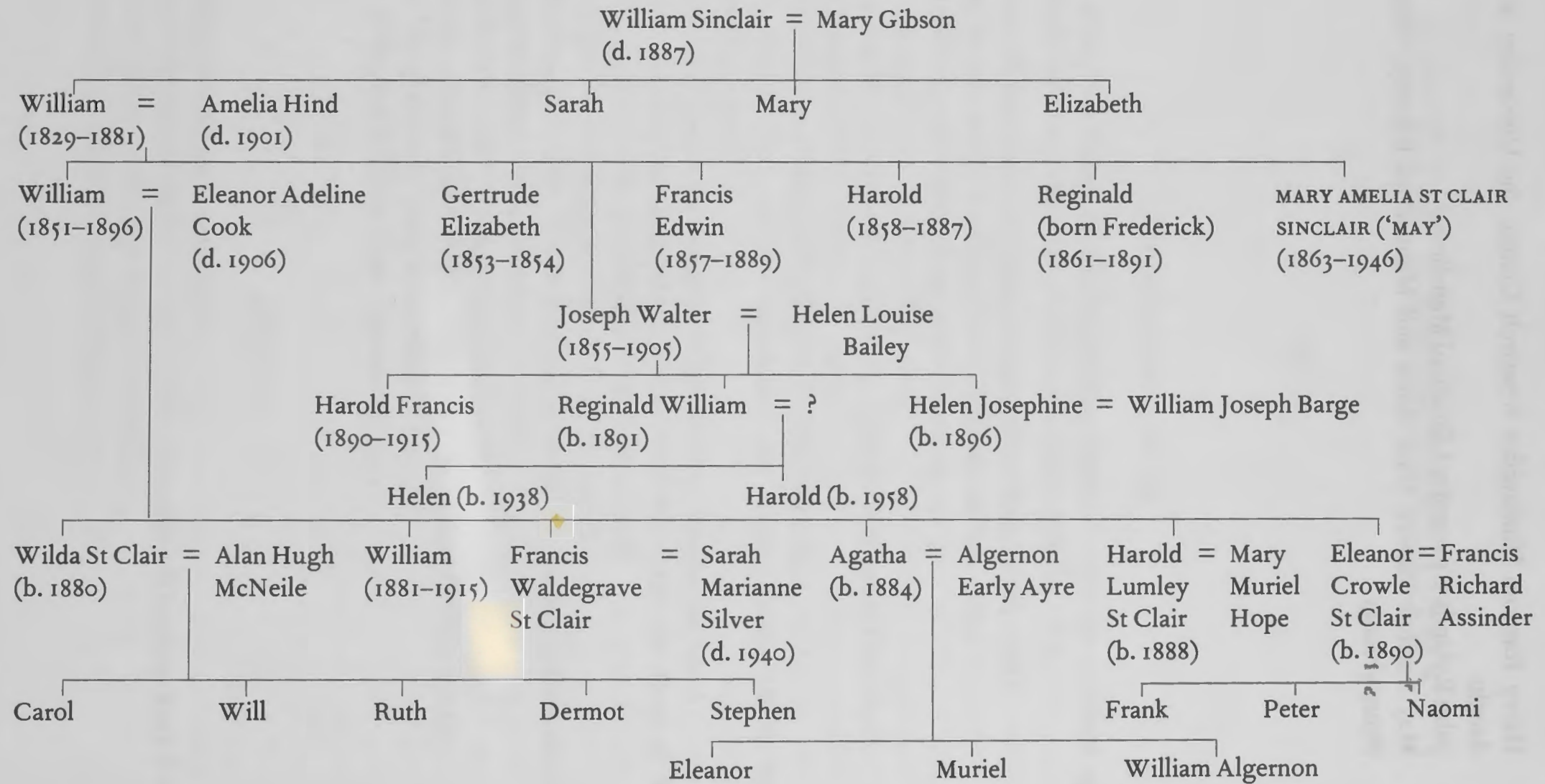
- AC *Audrey Craven* (1897; 1st American edn. New York: Holt, 1906)
AS *Anne Severn and the Fieldings* (New York: Macmillan, 1922)
C *The Creators: A Comedy* (New York: Century, 1910)
DF *The Divine Fire* (New York: Holt, 1904)
EV *Essays in Verse* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1891)
H *The Helpmate* (New York: Holt, 1907)
HF *Life and Death of Harriett Freaan* (New York: Macmillan, 1922)
I 'The Intercessor', in *The Intercessor and Other Stories* (New York: Macmillan, 1932)
JI *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (New York: Macmillan, 1915)
KT *Kitty Tailleur* [American title *The Immortal Moment: The Story of Kitty Tailleur*] (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1908)
MO *Mary Olivier: A Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1919)
N *Nakiketas, and Other Poems* [published under the name 'Julian Sinclair'] (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886)
R *The Romantic* (New York: Macmillan, 1920)
TB *The Three Brontës* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912)
TH *The Tree of Heaven* (New York: Macmillan, 1917)
TS *The Three Sisters* (New York: Macmillan, 1914)

ARCHIVES

- EC Emmanuel College, Cambridge
HA Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
HL The Houghton Library, Harvard University

- HR Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, the University of Texas at Austin
- JR John Rylands University Library of Manchester
- UP May Sinclair Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania

SINCLAIR FAMILY TREE



Introduction

IN 1912, May Sinclair wrote of one of her favourite authors, Charlotte Brontë, that she had

an outer life where no great and moving event ever came, saving only death (Charlotte's marriage hardly counts beside it); an outer life of a strange and almost oppressive simplicity and silence; and an inner life, tumultuous and profound in suffering, a life to all appearances frustrate, where all nourishment of the emotions was reduced to the barest allowance a woman's heart can depend on and yet live. (TB, 192)

Sinclair's description of the meagreness of Brontë's life is full of a peculiarly imaginative sympathy. Although Sinclair was born in 1863, eight years after Brontë's death, there were many similarities between her life and that of her illustrious predecessor. Like Brontë, Sinclair became famous as a novelist relatively late in life; like Brontë, she wrote vividly about the frustrating and unfulfilling conditions of women's lives; and like Brontë's, her life was punctuated by a mournful series of deaths (both women outlived all their five siblings). As Sinclair's friend Janet Hogarth noted, 'there are aspects of Miss Sinclair's work which almost suggest a Brontë incarnation'.¹

But Sinclair's life was in some respects even lonelier. Instinctively a radical and a modernizer, she grew up fighting her mother for the right to think for herself. Amelia Sinclair wanted a daughter who was quiet and demure, and who did not presume to challenge the opinions of others. Torn between her own rebellious instincts and her desire to please her mother by keeping herself in check, Sinclair came to see intimacy as the enemy of freedom. Her isolation bore silent witness to the peculiar difficulties that faced intellectual women of her generation, as the world around them struggled to come to terms with challenges to religious, political, and literary orthodoxies, and widespread demands for equality between the sexes.

¹ Janet E. Courtney [née Hogarth], *The Women of My Time* (London: Lovat Dickson, 1934), 53. See Ch. 4 for a full discussion of the resemblances between Sinclair and Charlotte Brontë.

Although Sinclair was a well-known and respected public figure in the early years of the twentieth century, she spent most of her time alone. She died childless and unmarried; she was reticent and withdrawn; she passed her days working diligently on novels that, even when they seemed to court scandal (like *The Helpmate* in 1907, which opened with a conversation between a honeymooning couple lying in their bed), extolled the virtues of sexual pleasure only when it was an expression of deep spiritual communion. She was a marginal figure in the lives of countless famous writers (Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ezra Pound, H.D., Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford) but she was central to no one's. Many people knew her slightly, or even fairly well, but very few responded strongly to her. From the outside she seemed to be living a life, like Brontë's, of 'a strange and almost oppressive simplicity and silence', a silence which nobody, apparently, cared to penetrate.

But no one's life is silent to themselves. Like Charlotte Brontë, Sinclair was preoccupied with the storms of the 'inner life'. Her memories of childhood and her adult reading fed her imagination as she wrote novel after novel about women's struggles with their sexual desires, the demands of creativity, and the friction of family relationships. When she discovered psychoanalysis in the years before the First World War, she embraced it immediately as a language for the busy intensity of even the most unassuming existence. From time to time the ferocity of her unexpressed emotions resulted in awkward intrusions into the public world: her foray with an ambulance unit out to the front lines during the first weeks of the war, for example. Episodes such as her adolescent refusal to give up philosophy, or her defence of imagism in the face of widespread critical opposition, revealed the existence of an intellectual integrity and stubbornness nourished by a strong and anguished sense of her self.

Her allegiances were complex and contradictory. We remember her now, if we remember her at all, as the author of the 1918 review of the first volumes of Dorothy Richardson's novel *Pilgrimage* in which the phrase 'stream of consciousness' was applied for the first time to literature.² She has often been included among the pioneers of literary modernism, both as a critic and as a novelist. In *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922) (both revived by Virago Press in 1980) she experimented with recreating the crowded interior of the mind in the same sort of fragmentary prose

² See May Sinclair, 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', *Egoist*, 5 (Apr. 1918), 57-9; repr. *Little Review*, 4 (Apr. 1918), 3-11, as 'Introduction' to Dorothy Richardson, *Pointed Roofs* (New York: Knopf, 1919), and in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990), 442-8 [the edn. I cite in this book].

that Richardson was using in *Pilgrimage*, Katherine Mansfield in short stories such as 'Prelude' (1918), or Virginia Woolf in *Jacob's Room* (1922).³ But, although Sinclair identified with what her radical contemporaries were trying to do, she was also something of an anomaly. Older by a generation than Dorothy Richardson, Ezra Pound, H.D., Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf, she was already a best-selling author when modernism began to gather force in the years during and after the First World War. The novel that made her famous, *The Divine Fire* (1904), was a lengthy exposé of the commercialization of the book trade along the lines of George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891). In order to be counted among the earliest proponents of literary modernism, Sinclair had to reconstruct herself and her aspirations as a novelist. She was acutely sensitive to cultural change, and eager to be regarded as one of the pioneers of literary innovation.

But Sinclair's intellectual adventurousness often had the awkwardly schematic abruptness of a new and frightened convert. After all, Sinclair's emotional and epistemological roots extended far back into the nineteenth century, and throughout her life she remained preoccupied with issues such as heredity and evolution, concerns that to many of her younger friends seemed outdated. People were struck by her 'primly virginal' demeanour and her adherence to the formal social customs of her childhood.⁴ When Dorothy Richardson and her husband Alan Odle attended a dinner party at Sinclair's, they were amused by Sinclair's discomfiture when her guests refused to leave the table and adjourn to another room for coffee.⁵ She was ill-suited to the informal lifestyles of her literary associates, even if intellectually and philosophically she was fully in sympathy with what they were trying to do. Caught in the contradictions of her historical moment, she found it hard to find a form of companionship that made both intellectual and psychological sense. She approached friendships with both enthusiasm and suspicion. For her they were awkward negotiations of the conflict between her need for reassurance and her desire to defend herself against misunderstanding, and unwanted demands.

Sinclair's anxiety to protect her own privacy meant that her few dealings with biographers were uncomfortable and antagonistic. Several months

³ Virago also published *The Three Sisters* in 1982. At the time of writing only *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* remains in print in the UK, and none of Sinclair's novels are in print in the USA (*The Three Brontës*, 1912, *Tales Told by Simpson*, 1930, and *The Intercessor and Other Stories*, UK 1931, USA 1932, are currently available through the reprint service).

⁴ See Arnold Bennett, *The Journal of Arnold Bennett* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1932), 410-11: 'I rather liked this prim virgin. Great sense.'

⁵ See Dorothy Richardson to Bryher, 4 Oct. 1936: 'I still see the face of her maid at the door—Am I to bring coffee in 'ere, Miss? And May's helpless "I suppose so"' (*Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*, ed. Glora Fromm, Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 320).

after the publication of *The Divine Fire*, an American journalist, Witter Bynner, wrote asking her for some biographical details for an article he was writing about her. At first Sinclair, newly famous, was flattered. She answered Bynner at length, listing the various places where she had lived, and telling him about her creative process and her past publications. But she also sounded a note of caution: 'you may make use of the few notes I am giving you for the article . . . I cannot give you anything more personal, because I object strongly to the personal note, & in any case it bores me to write about myself.'⁶ When she arrived in New York in the autumn of 1905 for a celebrity tour, she invited Bynner to tea and they had a pleasant and fairly intimate chat.⁷ But when Sinclair finally received a draft of his article in December in Boston, she was horrified, and sent him a telegram saying: 'Publication of paper impossible entire or in part am writing'.⁸ And write she did, telling him:

you promised me that you wd. write nothing of a personal nature, & what you have written is, if you will believe me, not only an insult to me, but an outrage on all the courtesies & decencies wh. make us acceptable to one another. You admit that you have repeated some things told you in confidence! I assure you that if you had intended deliberately to hurt me you cd. not have succeeded better.⁹

Bynner was taken aback and apologetic, or, as he put it, 'dismayed and disheartened'.¹⁰ Sinclair accused him of misleading her as to the nature of their teatime conversation in New York: 'I only met you either as yr. guest or as your fellow-guest; you assured me that your first call was not an interview', but Bynner countered: 'I am confident that I told you there was to be in your case no interview of which you would be conscious;—so that you might edit as you should choose what I might remember, and the general effect would be more natural and characteristic.'¹¹ Sinclair was genuinely hurt and puzzled by what she saw as, if not a deception, at least a betrayal, telling Bynner: 'You see, all of us, even the wisest, say foolish things in unguarded moments when we feel secure. These things do not matter in themselves, but it wd. be horrible if they were noted down & printed for the benefit of the public. Wh. is what you proposed to do with my conversational imbecilities!'¹² What really upset her in Bynner's article was that he had recorded her comments

⁶ Sinclair to Witter Bynner, 29 Aug. 1905, HL, bMS Am 1891 (766).

⁷ Sinclair to Bynner, 10 Nov. 1905, HL, bMS Am 1891 (766).

⁸ Sinclair to Bynner, 11 Dec. 1905, HL, bMS Am 1891 (766).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bynner to Sinclair, 1 [misdated for 11?] Dec. 1905, HL [copy], bMS Am 1891.1 (1119).

¹¹ Sinclair to Bynner, 11 Dec. 1905, HL, bMS Am 1891 (766); Bynner to Sinclair, 1 [misdated for 11?] Dec. 1905, HL, bMS Am 1891.1 (1119).

¹² Sinclair to Bynner, 21 Dec. 1905, HL, bMS Am 1891 (766).

about other people. If speaking indiscreetly about herself was unfortunate, speaking indiscreetly about others was simply immoral. Sinclair forbade Bynner to publish any article at all, and the piece was dropped.

Sinclair's experience with Witter Bynner confirmed all her worst fears about biographical writing. From then on, she saw it as a dangerously invasive form which could easily elude its subject's—and even its writer's—control. When in 1920 her close friend Catherine Dawson Scott drafted an essay about her, she was once again indignant, telling Arthur Adcock, editor of the *Bookman*, the magazine for which the article was intended: 'I'm afraid I do object, strongly, to much of the personal part of it, & I must beg of you to omit the passages I've erased.'¹³ In a short story written in the same year about a biographer's search for his subject's lost letters, and the subsequent publication of an indiscreet 'unofficial' biography by another author, the original biographer regrets ever starting his research: 'The awful thing, he said, was that if only we had left Chamberlin to his obscurity we should never have known these things about him. And now everybody knew them. Nobody would forget them until *he* was forgotten.'¹⁴ Even when Sinclair was asked to write her autobiography she refused, and the only autobiographical writing she ever published, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915), was carefully edited to remove all compromising material.¹⁵ Biography, for Sinclair, was a way of overwhelming people with the evidence of their own indiscretions. She had no difficulty discussing her intellectual development as a philosopher and as a novelist. *Mary Olivier*, as she freely acknowledged, is the story of her own mental development, and she happily gave interviews in which she discussed her books and her creative processes.¹⁶ But throughout her life Sinclair was remarkably reserved about every aspect of her early years except for her intellectual experiences, and she never spoke in public about her private life or her feelings for people.

Sinclair was also very careful about the records she left behind her. We know from her book *The Three Brontës* (1912) that Sinclair was opposed not only to the publication of private letters but even, in certain cases, to their

¹³ Sinclair to Arthur Adcock, 9 Aug. 1920, UP, Box 1, fo. 1.

¹⁴ Sinclair, 'Fame', *Pictorial Review*, 21 (May 1920), 10; repr. as a limited edn. (London: Elkin Matthews and Marrot, 1929), 40.

¹⁵ She wrote to Adcock on 7 Sept. 1925 that she was sorry she was unable to write the article he suggested: 'I'm no good at that sort of autobiographical stunt' (UP, Box 1, fo. 1).

¹⁶ Sinclair wrote to Marc Logé, translator of *Mary Olivier*: 'all this description of the *inner life* is autobiographically as accurate as I can make it' (quoted in Theophilus E. M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist: A Biographical and Critical Introduction*, Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1973, 244). Her interviews include 'People in the Foreground', *Current Literature*, 38 (Mar. 1905), 223; Willis Steell, 'Miss Sinclair Tells Why She Isn't a Poet', *Literary Digest International Book Review*, 2 (June 1924), 513, 559, and the citations in n. 18, below.

preservation.¹⁷ The personal papers that were found in her house after her death had clearly been meticulously sorted, presumably by her, since she had no children to worry about her reputation. She left no diary or journal, and the earliest surviving letter to her dates from 1893, when she was already 30 years old. Some of the extant letters actually have small sections carefully cut out of them, as if whoever was preparing her correspondence for posterity was on the lookout for references to events or feelings which needed to be excised. I have been unable to locate any letters written by her earlier than 1897, when she was 34. Even Sinclair's personal demeanour was calculated to conceal her emotions: more than one journalist commented in the 1920s on her inscrutability and the 'impersonal' scrutiny of her black eyes.¹⁸ She was determined to give nothing away.

It might be tempting to speculate that she was especially concerned to cover her tracks because she had something significant to hide. After all, in *Mary Olivier*, Mary, who is committed, like Sinclair, to the care of her ageing mother, has an affair with a celebrated London novelist, and Sinclair wrote sympathetically in novels such as *Anne Severn and the Fieldings* (1922) and *The Allinghams* (1927) about women who have lovers—and even babies—outside marriage. Her contemporaries certainly gossiped about her, and there were vague rumours in Sinclair's family that she might have given birth to an illegitimate baby at some point (perhaps after she went into seclusion with her mother and brother in Salcombe Regis in 1890).¹⁹ The erotic intensity of Sinclair's interest in babies and breastfeeding in many of

¹⁷ In *The Three Brontës* Sinclair writes of letters written by Branwell about his love for a married woman: 'It is inconceivable that such letters should have been kept' (TB, 44).

¹⁸ See e.g. Burton Rascoe, 'Contemporary Reminiscences: Two Important English Visitors—May Sinclair and Bertrand Russell', *Arts and Decoration*, 21 (July 1924), 25–6: at 26: 'She dominates any gathering less heterogeneous than a noisy banquet, by her Buddha-like calm and inscrutable charm.' See also Walter Tittle, 'Personal Portraits—May Sinclair', *Illustrated London News*, 166 (27 June 1925), 1280: 'my greeting was met with a scrutiny from her black eyes that was at once so intense and impersonal that it kindled curiosity within me as to its possible meaning'.

¹⁹ Brigit Patmore wrote to Sinclair's friend, the poet H.D. in 1923: 'I met Violet Hunt round about here. Says V. "I'm just going round to tea at the Heads (a noted brain specialist) to hear five points in May Sinclair's book which prove she is a virgin." We almost sank onto the pavement with laughter—as Cole says. "Nobody gives the poor woman the credit of anything" . . . Lunching with Florian I told him the little gem & he said: "That's amusing for Violet, since in 1884 she surprised May Sinclair in bed with Oswald Crawford in their (V's and O's) private little flat."' (Patmore to H.D., 9 Dec. 1923, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale Collection of American Literature 24, Box 13, fo. 446.) However, the details of this story do not add up: although Violet Hunt and Oswald Crawford did have a long affair, they did not meet until 1890, and there is no mention of any incident with May Sinclair in Hunt's diaries of her relationship with Crawford, or in their correspondence. Hunt found out in 1898–9 that Crawford had been writing passionate letters to a friend of hers, May Bateman: it may be this episode that was distorted into Patmore's story (see Barbara Belford, *Violet: The Story of the Irrepressible Violet Hunt and Her Circle of Lovers and Friends—Ford Madox Ford, H. G. Wells, Somerset Maugham, and Henry James*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990, for further discussion of the Hunt–Crawford affair). I am grateful to Helen Carr for this reference.

the novels could imply that Sinclair had a tantalizing taste of the pleasures of motherhood before her baby was abruptly taken away. Other scraps of evidence here and there suggest that there may have been some romantic interest or scandal, quickly hushed up: the letter from Gwendoline Keats at the time of Sinclair's mother's death, for example (I discuss this in Chapter 3), or Alida Monro's contention that Charlotte Mew was obliged to end her friendship with Sinclair because of something Mew 'heard about' her.²⁰

But none of these tiny clues *necessarily* point to an affair or a baby. Keats's letter and Mew's alienation could be interpreted in a number of different ways, and Sinclair could have had an intense imaginative connection to children without ever having given birth to one of her own. Perhaps at the end of the twentieth century we find it difficult to believe in the existence of a woman like Sinclair who lived so fiercely the life of the mind, and who could empathize so passionately with romantic or sexual love without ever having experienced it herself, but of course she was by no means the only woman of her time to turn her back on sexual intimacy and family life. In 1908 she told Louis N. Parker, a professor at Columbia University: 'I have done all my work in an almost incredible isolation, & ideas simply refuse to visit me unless they find me alone.'²¹ Sinclair was often uncomfortable in the company of others, she hated being interrupted while she was working, she had a strong sense of privacy, and she had an aversion to drawing attention to herself. An affair would simply have been too risky, and her experience of family life had made her wary of the blandishments of men.

Given the amount of biographical and critical attention that has been lavished on other inhabitants of Sinclair's world (Pound, Woolf, Mansfield, H.D.), surprisingly little has been written about May Sinclair herself.²² When she died in 1946 she was the author of twenty-one novels, a novel in verse, scores of short stories, two books on idealist philosophy, a book on the Brontës, and a personal account of her time in Belgium during the first months of the First World War. But she wrote and published nothing after 1927, living out her last two decades in a village in the Buckinghamshire countryside, crippled by Parkinson's disease and with only her housekeeper for company. Most of her friends assumed that she was dead. This extended

²⁰ See Gwendoline Keats to Sinclair, 23 Aug. 1900, UP, Box 2, fos. 50-5, and Alida Monro, 'Charlotte Mew—A Memoir', in *Collected Poems of Charlotte Mew*, ed. Alida Monro (London: Duckworth, 1953), pp. vii-xx: at p. xv.

²¹ Sinclair to Louis N. Parker, 3 Oct. [1908?], Louis Napoleon Parker Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²² See Theophilus E. M. Boll, 'On the May Sinclair Collection', *Library Chronicle of the University of Pennsylvania*, 27 (Winter 1961), 1-15: at 1-3; and Corrine Yvonne Taylor, 'A Study of May Sinclair—Woman and Writer, 1863-1946—with an Annotated Bibliography', Ph.D. thesis (Washington State University, 1969), 1-3, for lists of the brief and scattered references to May Sinclair in criticism before 1970.

period in limbo may well have contributed to the waning of public interest in her work. There was an awkwardness about commemorating her as one of the great writers of the past while she was still alive, and yet the public was no longer reminded of her by the regular publication of novel after novel. She also damaged her reputation by overextending herself in the mid-1920s when she was already ill and running out of energy. As her reviewers pointed out, her last six novels—all published between 1924 and 1927—are thin and repetitive, showing little of the gift for poignant understatement that was so apparent in her last major novel, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*.²³

Her solitude also contributed to her neglect. As well as the fact that she destroyed so much (she left no multi-volume diary like Virginia Woolf's, for example, and she did not keep carbon copies of her letters), she wrote far fewer letters than she might have done. She had no intimate companion to whom she sent daily news and reflections, as Katherine Mansfield and Vita Sackville-West did. She had no widower preparing edition after edition of posthumous works, as Middleton Murry had done for Katherine Mansfield, and no children to gather her scattered papers, as Sara Coleridge did for her father. Many of her correspondents (or their descendants) apparently threw her letters away. Presumably by the 1940s she was so thoroughly forgotten that there seemed no point in keeping them. She was in danger of sinking virtually without trace.

But there was one person who mourned Sinclair bitterly and cherished the carefully sorted collection of letters and manuscripts she had left behind her: her companion in her final years, Florence Bartrop. When in 1959 Theophilus E. M. Boll, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, stumbled across Sinclair's novels and went to England to explore the possibilities for a biography, he was directed first to Sinclair's nephew Harold, and then, by him, to Bartrop and her trunk full of papers.²⁴ Harold Sinclair agreed to let Boll take the papers back to Philadelphia with him, and they were later deposited in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Pennsylvania, together with all Boll's related correspondence. Boll's biography, a diligent compilation of all the sources he found at Bartrop's house, appeared in 1973, and was followed in 1976 by Hrisey D. Zegger's

²³ Naomi Royde-Smith noted that with *The Allingham*s (1927) 'for the first time in her accomplished work [MS] has produced a book which it will be almost easy to forget' ('New Novels', *New Statesman*, 24, 23 Apr. 1927, 44-5: at 44); the *Booklist* called *Far End* (1926) 'disappointing' (23 Nov. 1926, 84); and the anonymous reviewer of *A Cure of Souls* (1924) in the *Dial* described Sinclair as 'an excellent example of a really good writer whose very brilliant facility causes her on more than one occasion to write too much and hence to write herself down' ('Briefer Mention', *Dial*, 76, June 1924, 560).

²⁴ See Boll, 'On the May Sinclair Collection', for an account of the genesis of his biography.

May Sinclair, a critical assessment of her major prose works. To date these are the only book-length studies of Sinclair's life and career.

Writing a biography of someone who was determined to protect herself against exactly that eventuality presents a peculiar kind of challenge. Without Boll's determined research in the 1960s, it would have been impossible. Anyone working on May Sinclair is enormously in his debt. I have relied on the archive he put together, and on other collections of letters and other materials, both in the USA and the UK, that have come to light in the years since Boll published his book. My focus is on Sinclair's intellectual development, the one aspect of her life that she was willing to discuss—and to have discussed—freely. Her resistance to biography did not mean that she did not care whether or not she was forgotten: quite the reverse. Her anxiety was that if too much was known about her private life, however uneventful it was, she would be remembered not as a writer, but as a woman. She was indignant that critics devoted so much time to the question of whether or not Charlotte Brontë was in love with Paul Héger, the teacher with whom she worked in Brussels. Sinclair declared in *The Three Brontës* that 'when a woman's talent baffles you, your course is plain, *cherchez l'homme*' (TB, 82). In Sinclair's view, this strategy was a subtle way of suggesting that Brontë's 'genius was, after all, only a superior kind of talent' (TB, 82). Sinclair was determined that her own creative gift should not be similarly belittled. When she went through her papers in an attempt to control the terms in which she was remembered, it was her intimate life that was excised: she kept letters from other writers and public figures.

This biography is first and foremost a reconstruction of Sinclair as a writer and an intellectual. But in order fully to explore the context and the significance of what she wrote, I have made many decisions of which she would not have approved. I deal as fully as possible, for example, with her father's bankruptcy and alcoholism, events which she was at pains to conceal throughout her life, but which played a definitive role in shaping her attitude to the world and to her self. I have also allowed myself to speculate about her romantic life. In the late 1990s a biography which simply drew a veil over feelings or occurrences which to a contemporary sensibility no longer seem shameful or humiliating would not do justice to its subject. It is crucial to our understanding of our culture's transition into modernity that we acknowledge the emotional cost of such significant changes to women like May Sinclair who were courageous enough to confront them head on. But in order to explain, it is necessary to reveal and discuss.

Although this volume traces Sinclair's evolution as a writer and as a thinker, it is not an exhaustive survey of every piece of writing she produced.

I concentrate on Sinclair's literary output, rather than her philosophical work, since, remarkable as it was in its time, it has limited significance for philosophers nowadays. I have sought to draw attention to novels and stories which have been unjustly neglected and which—if they were better known—would continue to grip and move readers today. Sinclair still has her devotees (like journalist Katha Pollitt, who in a recent issue of the *Nation* mentions 'the once-celebrated, now totally forgotten novels of May Sinclair, which I love'), but they have to rummage in second-hand bookshops and the recesses of libraries in order to indulge their passion.²⁵ I have commented on almost all of Sinclair's publications somewhere in this book, but I have focused on those which represented a crucial moment of progress in her thinking, which attracted significant attention in her time, or which were important commentaries on controversial issues of the day. Some of her novels, especially the later ones, but also a few of the earlier ones, do not stand up well to rereading. It was as if on occasion she wrote simply to mark time, or, more prosaically, to make money. Those who are interested in finding out more about the texts I do not discuss in detail should refer to Boll's *Miss May Sinclair*, which summarizes everything Sinclair wrote.

In some ways, then, this May Sinclair biography is more selective than its predecessor, even though I have had access to archival materials that neither Boll nor Zegger ever saw. But I have also broadened the contexts in which Sinclair's work has been discussed. Boll makes little attempt to move beyond the scope of Sinclair's own life and preoccupations to consider her role in remaking British culture in the early twentieth century. Sinclair's few scholarly critics have by and large identified her with high modernism and the work of her later years. But her writing career confounds many of our standard categorizations (we cannot, for example, unproblematically call her a 'modernist'), and exposes both the continuities and the ruptures between late Victorian and high modernist art. Many of the crucial issues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were played out in the various episodes of Sinclair's life: her agonized questioning of the Christian faith, her turn to Kantian and then to Hegelian idealism, her transition to experimental literary techniques during the First World War, her lifelong fear of the constraints of heredity. She was an active participant in many of the most significant movements and events of her day: the 'commercialization' of the book trade, as one eminent publisher called it, the suffrage movement, the

²⁵ Katha Pollitt, 'Masterpiece Theatre: Subject to Debate', *Nation*, 267 (24/31 Aug. 1998), 9. I am grateful to P. A. Skantze for this reference.

coming of psychoanalysis to Britain, the First World War.²⁶ I believe that her biography still has much to tell us about the emotional fate of women of her generation who came of age in the late Victorian period but instinctively identified with the rebellious mores and artistic aspirations of their much younger counterparts. We may have known her until now as a helpful footnote to the lives of her more famous friends but, of course, it is often out of footnotes that the most complex and revealing stories emerge. This book moves Sinclair from the bottom to the centre of the page.

²⁶ The term 'commercialization' is used by American publisher Henry Holt, in 'The Commercialization of Literature: A Summing Up', *Putnam's Monthly* (Feb. 1907), 563-75.