

'So now tell me what you think!': Sylvia Lynd's collaborative reading and reviewing - the collaborative work of an interwar middlewoman

Article

Accepted Version

Accepted Version with Updates

Wilson, N. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4843-840X>
(2019) 'So now tell me what you think!': Sylvia Lynd's collaborative reading and reviewing - the collaborative work of an interwar middlewoman. *Literature & History*, 28 (1). pp. 49-65. ISSN 0306-1973 doi:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0306197319829362> Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/73208/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0306197319829362>

Publisher: SAGE

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Dr Nicola Wilson, English Literature, University of Reading. N.I.wilson@reading.ac.uk

This is the Green Open Access version of this article, the author final version after peer review corrections, in my own formatting (i.e. before editing and typesetting by the publisher). Required for REF.

It has been accepted for publication as part of a special issue co-edited by Alex Peat and Claire Battershill on 'Modernism and Collaboration' for the journal *Literature and History*.

Nicola Wilson

'So now tell me what you think!': Sylvia Lynd's reading and reviewing - the collaborative work of an interwar middlewoman

In a chapter on 'Rose Macaulay: And Others' in his *Reminiscences of Affection* (1968), Victor Gollancz recalls Friday night gatherings at Robert and Sylvia Lynds'. 'There was no one you might not meet there' he wrote, 'we looked forward eagerly to her Friday nights: these were almost weekly events when the season was right.'¹ In the late 1920s and '30s, Sylvia and Robert Lynd were at the centre of a literary circle in Hampstead that dominated contemporary letters. Part of the 'middlemen' critiqued by Q. D. Leavis, and tarred with the brush of the 'professional scribbler' according to Virginia Woolf, the Hampstead set were well-known writers and journalists, broadcasters, publishers, and reviewers.² Describing themselves as 'Broadbrows', in J. B. Priestley's irreverent terms, the artists and critics associated with the Lynds represented an alternative, though intersecting, set to the 'Bloomsberries'.³ That their work and influence has attracted less attention is, as Aaron Jaffe points out, part of a critical legacy largely interested in certain forms of modernism and the predominance of key 'imprimaturs in scenes of reading and promotion'.⁴ The spatial

hierarchy of interwar London's literary communities has been widely followed in subsequent patterns of scholarship; noticeably in the wealth of writing on Bloomsbury.⁵ What happens to ideas of modernist collaboration then, if we turn the gaze of a broadly-conceived print culture towards the Lynds and the Hampstead circle in the 1930s?

Seeking to reclaim the networks around the Lynds as important to, in Lawrence Rainey's influential terms, 'the social spaces and staging venues' where literary modernism happened, this article focuses on Sylvia Lynd (1888-1952) as an important interwar 'middlewoman'.⁶ Exploring Lynd's professional work as reviewer and judge for the Book Society (established 1928) – the first monthly book sales club in Britain, modelled on the American Book-of-the-Month Club – I discuss Lynd and the judges' reading and decision-making on manuscripts as a shared, collaborative practice. Textual critics and bibliographers have long sought to describe the making of the collaborative or socially produced text, but the role of the new book club judges of the interwar period as agents and intermediaries in this process is not well recognised.⁷ Drawing upon publisher's records and other archival sources – including Lynd's unpublished diaries and correspondence – this article argues for the significance of Sylvia Lynd's collaborative reviewing and editorial work to modernist letters. As book judge, editor, committee woman, wife, mother and literary hostess, Lynd helped shape the production and reception of British literature in the late 1920s and 1930s.

My methodology is grounded in feminist research and recoveries of twentieth-century women's diverse contributions to print culture. The influential work of Shari Benstock, Bonnie Kime Scott, and Jayne Marek is crucial here.⁸ Also important is Cathy Clay's mapping of feminist networks and friendship in her *British Women Writers 1914-45* (2006).⁹ As Clay points out in her study of the feminist journal *Time and Tide*, both public and private, urban and rural spaces 'are imbibed pleasurably with business in geographies of work and pleasure in which female friendship lies at the heart'.¹⁰ For Sylvia Lynd, collaboration in

the guise of professional work and friendships shaped her personal, domestic, and working lives. She grew up in a world of literary sociability and domestic productivity, shaped by early memories of her mother editing an Anarchist paper, *Freedom*, and ‘arrang[ing] the layout with a comrade who was the printer, on the dining-room table’.¹¹ Throughout her marriage and adult life, Lynd cultivated the role of hostess by throwing frequent parties at her home where she brought business and pleasure together, confirming her professional reputation as a usefully-connected judge and committee woman. Her networks were broad and expansive, and she used her turbulent marriage to Irish newspaper editor, Robert Lynd, to ground her own professional relationships.

The core of this article focuses on Lynd’s working relationship with the novelist Hugh Walpole, chair of the Book Society and president of the Society of Bookmen. In her paid work as reader and reviewer for the Book Society, Lynd cultivated with Walpole a form of sociable reading that shaped how both critics read and assessed incoming manuscripts. The gendered implications of this, muddied through the complex interplay of friendships in the Book Society and the long discursive framing of women’s editorial and publishing work as ‘literary midwifery’, are part of my remit.¹² Arguing that Lynd’s close reading relationship with Walpole provides a model for the negotiations of collaborative decision-making and the dialogic reading practices of interwar book club judges, I explore the textual implications of their collaboration and how Lynd’s work as editor/reader occasionally made a tangible, documented impact on the pre-publication history of texts. Lately there has been a rise of academic research on sociable and shared forms of reading practices in response to the popularity of mediated, celebrity book clubs.¹³ Work in the archives allows us to better appreciate the role of the first wave of book club judges as part of this long, complex history of collaborative reading and taste-making.

5 Keats Grove, Hampstead, London NW3

In March 1924, Sylvia and Robert Lynd moved with their daughters, Sigle and Máire, to their long-term married home: the elegant Regency house of 5 Keats Grove, in the leafy suburb of Hampstead, north-west London. The house was bought by Lynd's maternal grandmother, Mary Ann Dryhurst, in the 1860s, and had been lived in by various members of the Dryhurst family.¹⁴ The open fields of Hampstead Heath were within spitting distance and Keats' manor house just across the road. Interwar Hampstead was a significant literary neighbourhood, known locally as a village.¹⁵ It is described in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) as 'an artistic and thoughtful little suburb of London'; its bookshop culture and literary clientele are treated more satirically in George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936).¹⁶ In the 1930s, Hampstead was, according to poet Geoffrey Grigson who edited the *New Verse* from his home next door to the Lynds, 'full of artists and writers' and 'not an expensive place to live'.¹⁷ Near to the Lynds at the bottom of Keats Grove lived A. R. Orage, former editor of *The New Age* (1907-24) and editor of *The New English Weekly* (1932-34); from 1936 the poet Louis MacNeice lived next door. Lady Margaret Rhondda (editor of *Time & Tide*) lived across the Heath in Bay Tree Lodge, Frogna. J. B. Priestley lived close to the Lynds in Well Walk before moving across the Heath to a four-storey house once lived in by Coleridge, and Hugh Walpole spent most Sundays with the Cheevers at their family home in Hampstead. Parties and evening engagements at the Lynds were a regular occurrence.

Sylvia Lynd lived in Hampstead for most of her life and she and Robert were known as 'Hampstead celebrities'.¹⁸ Robert Lynd - named representative of the 'newspaper crocus' and art of the journalist by Virginia Woolf - was a prolific author, literary editor of the *Daily News*, and one of the founders and weekly columnists for the *New Statesman*.¹⁹ Sylvia worked as an author and poet and was heavily involved in the paid, professional world of books as critic, reviewer, and publisher's reader. Her first novel, *The Chorus: A Tale of Love*

and Folly, was published by Constable in 1915 and she published several volumes of poetry, much inspired by birds and the countryside.²⁰ As journalist, critic, short story writer, and reviewer, she contributed from her early twenties to periodicals and newspapers including the *Nation*, *New Statesman*, *Time & Tide*, and the *Bystander*, and she promoted the work of other writers through critical introductions and editions.²¹ She was close friends with the publishers Victor Gollancz and Norman Collins and her roots in publishing ran deep. In the early 1920s, Lynd worked as literary advisor for Macmillan's in New York, looking to place work from London that hadn't found an American publisher, and by 1930 was also working as a publisher's reader for John Lane at the Bodley Head.²² Her eldest daughter Sigle (known as Sheila) worked for Gollancz in the early 1930s and was involved in the origins of the Left Book Club, while her younger daughter Máire (known as B. J., 'Baby Junior') had a long career with the publisher William Heinemann.²³ Describing an office party at Heinemann's in November 1935, Lynd recalls a conversation about her daughters' jobs with the publisher Peter Davies: 'I said that one of my regrets at not having a larger family was that I wouldn't have the fun of placing one of them in every publisher's in London.'²⁴ The Lynds were, as a family, a literary and publishing force to be reckoned with.

Lynd was also a significant figure in the new interwar world of book clubs and literary prizes. This was an important arena for professional women writers, critics, and those working in the publishing industry between the wars. Several important book prizes were established in Britain in the aftermath of the First World War including the Hawthornden Prize (for the best work of imaginative literature), the James Tait Black Memorial Prizes (best novel and biography), and the *Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais*.²⁵ Lynd contributed to the latter, a French initiative established in the spirit of rapprochement in June 1919, whereby an English committee of 25 literary women chose three titles for a French committee to decide upon a work that should be translated for a wider audience in France.²⁶ Lynd was

President of the *Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais* committee in 1929 and 1938-9 (and Vice President in 1935). Transcripts of committee meetings show her to be an independent and fair-minded judge, a woman who worked hard to achieve consensus but who didn't suffer fools – or last-minute changes to the list of recommendations – gladly. She was valued especially for the insight she gave the *Femina* committee into new and contemporary writing through her paid work on the Book Society. When for instance in November 1937 the question of vacancies on the *Femina* was raised, it was pointed out that 'We have only Mrs Lynd to keep us in touch with very recent books and we are inclined to miss things when Mrs Lynd is absent'.²⁷ It is one of the twists of archiving and cultural memory-making that we can now unpick Lynd's specific contributions to the anonymised, collective decision-making of the *Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais* committee thanks to preservation of detailed records of conversations that took place behind closed doors.

While the nuances of Lynd's work as literary committee woman occurred away from the public gaze, the frequent parties she held in Keats Grove proved memorable enough to enter public record. 'It was as a *salonnière* that Sylvia loomed largest in what were then our too crowded and emphatic lives', Gollancz writes in his memoirs: 'She was handsome, immensely energetic, ambitious, and a trifle ruthless and domineering. [...] There was something of the grande dame about her'.²⁸ Lynd grew up in a world of literary parties – Yeats, H. G. Wells, Rebecca West and Katherine Mansfield were early guests during her first years of married life – and her autobiography recalls 'countless parties' at 14 Downshire Hill, her home in the early 1920s, where they 'made friends with Jack Squire, Clifford Sharp, and Desmond MacCarthy of the "New Statesman"'.²⁹ Lynd was an adept organiser and gracious host – she describes in her diaries how she would 'play Puck' at these occasions – and her parties helped keep her and Robert at the centre of things.³⁰ The gatherings she arranged were elaborate affairs, often involving several rounds of guests (in a diary entry from October 1935

she records ordering from the carpenter two extra leaves for the dining room table so she can seat ten rather than eight at the initial part).³¹ In the opening pages of the diary she began keeping on 21 October 1935, Lynd describes at length the success of the previous night's party:

So then the evening at last. The headache better. The usual ringing up by men to know whether they should change or not. For supper smoked salmon, clear soup, stewed chicken, mashed potatoes, apricot tarts with meringue tops. Sherry, hocks brandy. Decent. Coffee v. weak. To eat it – the Max Beerbohms, Alan Herberts, Lionel Hale, Rose Macaulay ourselves. [...] After supper the children, Sheila looking her old self again in pale blue velvet, the David Davieses, Alan Thomas, Ruth Gollancz, Bryan Guinivere & after, Victor.³²

They talked rather than played games at this party, she records.³³ Conversation ranged from modernist decoration and the affectation of William Morris's prints and furniture, through fashion and conversational slang, to Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, and modern poetry.

Recent academic work on networks and collaboration has foregrounded the role of the party as an important site in 'intellectual work and literary productivity'.³⁴ Robert and Sylvia Lynds' Friday night gatherings are not included in Kate McLoughlin's edited collection on *The Modernist Party* (2013), nor has Lynd, as *salonière*, attracted the critical attention given to other literary hostesses of the period.³⁵ But the conception of the party as 'a generative site in which intellectual and literary authority is defined and disseminated and in which cultural influence and intervention takes place' surely applies to the Friday night gatherings at 5 Keats Grove.³⁶ That Lynd opens the first entry of the diary she began keeping in October 1935 with a 20-page description of the previous night's party indicates the role of hostess as important to her own self-fashioning. Though such exhaustive diary-keeping was difficult to sustain,

she appears to have used sketches in the diary as composition for a projected autobiography.³⁷

The set described by Gollancz as the Lynds' Friday night 'hard core' were writers, journalists, publishers, and critics.³⁸ Several were early broadcasters; all were significant public tastemakers. A list of the regular guests must include Sylvia's closest female friend, the novelist Rose Macaulay (1881-1958), as well as the (comic) writers J. B. Priestley, Alan P. Herbert (1890-1971), Lionel Hale (1909-77) and caricaturist Max Beerbohm (1872-1956). The Lynds' wider circle drew in novelist Margaret Kennedy (1896-1967), poet Humbert Wolfe (1885-1940), artist Mark Gertler (1891-1939), historical novelist Margaret Irwin (1889-1967) (Mrs David Davies), and poet and critic W. J. Turner (1889-1946). If, as Aaron Jaffe wryly notes, it is customary to relate the importance of modernist networks to the iconic presence of literary imprimaturs, we must point out the presence of James Joyce.³⁹ Joyce and Nora Barnacle, as recorded by Gollancz and Priestley in their memoirs, enjoyed their wedding lunch at the Lynds' house after getting married at Hampstead Town Hall on 4 July, 1931.⁴⁰ A few days later, a grand party was held at 5 Keats Grove in their honour. According to Máire Gaster, the Lynds' youngest daughter, this was 'The high point of my mother's literary parties [...] Sometime after midnight...we all went into the drawing-room...and then Joyce went to the piano. He sang "Phil the Fluther's Ball" and I particularly remember the sad and beautiful "Shule Aroon"'.⁴¹ That Gaster calls attention to Joyce in her introduction to her mother's unpublished autobiography underlines Jaffe's argument on the promotional use of modernist celebrities.

The collaborations between those who attended the Lynds' parties were multiple and sprawling. Some of the elements of patronage can be traced in the biographical record: J. B. Priestley was given his first regular reviewing by Robert Lynd and met his agent, A. D. Peters, at a party at the Lynds'; Máire Gaster would go on to be his editor at Heinemann.⁴²

Journals and publications tie certain names together. Sylvia Lynd and Rose Macaulay contributed to *Time & Tide*; Lionel Hale and Alan P. Herbert worked for *Punch*. The more intangible fruits of intellectual companionship and sociability are recorded in dedications: Hugh Walpole's *All Souls Night* (1933) is dedicated 'For 2 wise women, Sylvia Lynd & Rose Macaulay' (a likely reference to Robert Lynd's pseudonym, YY (two wise) as well); Priestley's *Open House: a Book of Essays* (1927) is dedicated to 'Robert and Sylvia Lynd'. The title essay, 'Open House', surely references the 'spirit of generous hospitality' he found at their home.⁴³

The Book Society was firmly rooted in the Hampstead set. When Walpole was asked to form a panel of judges for the selection committee he approached the Lynds and their circle, inviting first Rose Macaulay and Priestley, then penning a long letter to Sylvia ('I am very anxious that you should join us').⁴⁴ Writing to Frere-Reeves – director at Heinemann and manager of the Book Society – in May 1928, Walpole declared that he hoped to 'get names on the committee that will reassure the public, people who are not cranks nor like to drive always in the direction of a special clique'.⁴⁵ To Walpole, the Lynds epitomised this sense of fair-minded reassurance, for what united the Lynds and the Hampstead set was a commitment to accessibility in prose, aesthetic entertainment, and textual pleasure. In Walpole's 1928 novel *Wintersmoon*, a character worries that his incomprehension of the modern arts 'seemed to him his own stupidity'.⁴⁶ This was precisely the reading public that the Book Society – with its monthly selections, reviews, and recommendations – was set up to assist.

'So now tell me what you think!'

Q. D. Leavis's oft-cited critique of the literary 'middlemen' of the interwar era – the book-reviewers, advertisers and book clubs that helped 'the majority [to have] its mind made up for it before buying or borrowing its reading' – relied upon the fantasy of a direct correspondence between author and reader and distrust of paid intermediaries.⁴⁷ The question of the collaborative nature of the Book Society's reading and literary judgements featured prominently in the attack on the club that raged through *Time & Tide* between February and March 1932. How was the Book Society financed and were judges paid for their services? How much influence did the club's financial directors and external publishers have over the decisions of the judges on the selection committee? In a personal slight to Lynd, the leading editorial of February 13 brought the networks of 5 Keats Grove directly into disrepute, questioning if Lynd's access to certain publishers was responsible for the predominance of Gollancz and Collins titles in the Book Society's early lists.⁴⁸ The mistrust of the commodification of reading interwar that the Book Society was caught up in reflected a wider suspicion of the collaborative role of book judge and reviewer in swaying a reader's decisions.⁴⁹

Leavis and other critics were right to suggest that the decision-making on the Book Society was inherently collaborative and the relationships between individual reviewers, authors, and publishers important. Publishers were involved significantly (if not in the way *Time & Tide* suggested) as the first round of decision-making was made in publishing houses: it was the publisher who decided which of their forthcoming works were most likely to be chosen by the Book Society and organised five sets of proofs for the selection committee to read in advance of publication. In-person meetings were held between the five judges each month to decide upon choices and make up the list of recommended titles for review in the *Book Society News* (between twelve and fifteen).⁵⁰ Reading was divided between those responsible for assessing new works of fiction (Lynd, Walpole, Priestley) and non-fiction

(George Gordon, Edmund Blunden), and alliances formed accordingly. Where the first readers felt a choice or recommendation was clearly warranted, the book was passed to the rest of the committee.⁵¹ Walpole's initial letter of invitation to Lynd stated that the judges were to be paid £200 annually for their services.⁵² In a diary entry for 28 November 1935, Lynd records receiving a cheque for £5.10, adding that 'Jack Priestley always says that the money he used to get from Reeves for reviewing books, which was always paid, individually, in new pound notes, was the pleasantest money he ever received – "money for nothing"'.⁵³ According to the descriptions of work in her diaries, Lynd was a relatively organised reviewer who fitted reading for the Book Society in around domestic and familial duties. The well-remunerated work was important to her professional identity and clearly carried over into her wider public role as literary committee woman and tastemaker.

While most of the judges' discussions about monthly choices took place on the telephone, during meetings, and in private discourse, there is nevertheless an extensive correspondence between Lynd and Walpole that outlines their initial assessments, shared pleasures, and modification of opinions on the new works of fiction they received. This correspondence, preserved between the King's School Canterbury and the Harry Ransom Center, covers the first decade of the club's existence. Building rapidly in affection and trust and with a corresponding loss of formality, the relationship between Lynd and Walpole was aided by their literary and familial connections, their enthusiasm for reading and commenting on each other's creative work, and a shared passion for promoting new authors. Reading new writing together in a rush of proofs and monthly deadlines was exhilarating as well as daunting, and the letters are full of hope for shared aesthetic experience, the search for reading fulfilment, and eager anticipation of each other's tastes and dislikes. 'I do hope it will move you as it has me', Walpole wrote to Lynd after reading R. C. Hutchinson's *The*

Unforgotten Prisoner; ‘I was charmed too by Forster’s ‘Dickension’. I wonder you didn’t like it more’.⁵⁴

Epistolary theorists have described letter-writing as a textual form akin to conversation in which relationships are crafted and created and ‘multiple selves [...] are uniquely fashioned in relation to the addressees and recipient’.⁵⁵ For Lynd and Walpole – simultaneously reading and appraising the same manuscripts while anticipating the views of each other in correspondence – their written discourse is evidence of a shared reading practice and community where, as DeNel Rehberg Sedo writes, a reading community ‘is comprised of relationships’ and ‘can be conceptualized as emotional, psychological and/or social’.⁵⁶ The dialogic decision-making traced in the letters about Book Society nominations between Lynd and Walpole is comparable to the nuanced, highly charged, and collective decisions about book selection made by reading groups today.⁵⁷ A lively letter from Walpole to Lynd on 4 April 1933 for instance, outlines his own thoughts on that month’s manuscripts before anticipating Lynds’ reading and reaction with the affirmative exclamation: ‘So now tell me what you think!’.⁵⁸

The correspondence between Lynd and Walpole also reveals their alliance before the other judges in committee meetings, and the amount of networking and negotiation that occurred preceding the in-person meetings each month. As with the *Femina* transcripts, reading Lynd and Walpole’s correspondence underlines the complexities of collaboration by committee, always subject to and formed by individual interactions. In June 1934 for instance, Walpole writes to Lynd: ‘I must say that I think the Fleming a perfect August Choice. I knew you’d hate the Houghton. I don’t. But I’ll see that nothing decisive is done about it this afternoon.’⁵⁹ Similar alliances existed between other members of the selection committee, including for instance between Professor George Gordon (President of Magdalen College Oxford during much of his time on the Book Society) and Edmund Blunden (tutor at

Merton). Lynd – whom Walpole describes in a letter to the novelist George Blake as being ‘all modern and high-brow’ – acted as a cautionary restraint on Walpole’s ebullience, and their friendship was founded upon lively disagreement.⁶⁰ Her diary suggests that her opinions in Book Society discussions carried significant weight, much as she often took the final decision in *Femina* meetings (‘Alarming how they all defer to my opinion – most depreciatingly advanced’).⁶¹ She missed the meeting where the judges made one of their more questionable choices in J. M. Denwood and S. Fowler Wright’s *Red Ike: A Novel of Cumberland* (1931) – a local author to Walpole, whom he had publicly championed. An apologetic letter from Walpole to Lynd duly ensued.

Walpole’s portrait of Lynd as being ‘all modern and high-brow’ is part of his own caricature as an old-fashioned romantic (a continual theme in his diaries and letters), for Lynd’s modernity was eclectic and savvy, and her loyalties to her personal networks fierce. We know from correspondence that she fought hard for the work of her best friend, Rose Macaulay, on the Book Society selection committee, and she insisted that they ‘mustn’t miss’ recommending more challenging works by iconic, celebrity modernists like Woolf.⁶² Her published reviews for the Book Society are diverse. Between 1936 and 1940, Lynd reviewed fiction by a variety of writers including Winifred Holtby (*South Riding*: Book Soc. Choice March 1936); Joyce Cary (*The African Witch*: Choice May 1936); Rosamond Lehmann (*The Weather in the Streets*: Choice July 1936); Stuart Cloette (*The Turning Wheels*. Choice Oct. 1937); and Mazo de la Roche (*Whiteoak Heritage*. Choice Nov. 1940). Often her reviews draw attention to literary style and skill. The keynote however is the Book Society’s collective commitment, as Lynd affirms in her review of Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (Choice, Aug. 1938), to the ‘art of story-telling’.⁶³ As a renowned hostess and games-maker, Lynd was well-qualified to celebrate life-affirming stories that entertained.

Lynd's reviewing of works in proof for the Book Society was clearly valued by the wider group of literary women whom she read and worked with for the *Prix Femina Vie Heureuse Anglais*. The *Femina* transcripts reveal some of Lynd's reflections on, and sometimes resentment towards, Book Society choices and recommendations, as well as her sustained literary commitments. She keenly supported the careers of new and unknown women writers (something both organisations were set up to do, and the *raison d'être* of the *Femina*). In discussions between the *Femina* judges on the latter, Lynd was a firm champion of F. M. Mayor's *The Squire's Daughter* (1929); Stella Benson's *Tobit Transplanted* (Book Soc. Choice Feb. 1931 and winner of the *Femina* for 1930-31); Kate O'Brien's *Without my Cloak* (Book Soc. Choice Dec. 1931); and the early works of Rosamond Lehmann, Margaret Irwin, and Hilda Vaughan. She was less enamoured of the more politically engaged, so-called proletarian writing of the 1930s – seeing off support for Walter Greenwood's bestselling *Love on the Dole* (1933) and Ralph Bates' *Lean Men* (1934), for example.⁶⁴ The textual implications of her aesthetic tastes can be seen in more detail by uncovering the editorial suggestions she made to authors and publishers as judge for the Book Society.

'Don't know what upset Sylvia'⁶⁵

Academic work in modernist print cultures has long focussed on the role of editors and publishers as textual collaborators. As George Bornstein wrote in an early example: 'Any text is an edited text, [...] A full textual inquiry will necessarily remind us of the many social and historical forces besides the author that contribute to the constitution of a text.'⁶⁶ The editorial impact of the interwar book-of-the-month clubs who were reading new works in proof form, pre-publication (unlike the judges of literary prizes like the *Femina*, or cheap reprint series including the Book Guild or Foyle's Book Club) is however not well known. This is hardly surprising. The book of the month club selection committees on both sides of the Atlantic

styled themselves as reviewers and tastemakers, not editors nor censors. A letter in the American Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC) archives regarding John Steinbeck's agreement to 'clean up' some of the judges' suggestions for 'toning down' the 'general overemphasis of sex' in *The Wayward Bus* (BOMC March 1947) makes this clear. Writing to long-standing BOMC judge, Dorothy Canfield Fisher in December 1946, Meredith Wood explained:

I also had an explicit understanding with Guinzberg that he would make it unmistakably clear to Steinbeck that (1) the book had been chosen unconditionally by our Judges, and (2) the suggestions for deletion were presented merely as illustrations [...]. The point of this was to make sure that there can be no subsequent charge by Steinbeck or Viking Press that the club is engaged in censorship.⁶⁷

Unsurprisingly, it is largely in the archives and surviving letters between the judges of the new book of the month clubs that this form of textual collaboration and intervention can be found.

We know from Lynd and Walpole's early correspondence that Lynd was mindful of what she perceived to be the conservative literary standards of the Book Society's subscribers. Much like Canfield Fisher in the States, Lynd was a cautious book club judge. Reining in Walpole's enthusiasm for Joan Lowell's *The Cradle of the Deep* (1929) as first Book Society Choice, for example, Lynd spoke in favour of Helen Beauclerk's whimsical *The Love of the Foolish Angel* (Book Soc. Choice April 1929), declaring that Lowell would shock their subscribers and that the author 'of *The Cradle* is a victim of the Ethel M. Dell complex. That's why I particularly shudder at her'.⁶⁸ Recording in her diary a conversation between the judges about literary censorship and Julian Huxley's amusing retelling of the obscenity trial at which he gave evidence in support of Edward Charles's *The Sexual Impulse* (1935), Lynd notes the committees' general concurrence with Huxley's more liberal views.⁶⁹

After discussion turns to the absurdity of some censored versions and the contemporary publishing practice of using asterisks to indicate omissions, Lynd confides to her diary: ‘All the same’, I prefer asterisks, I think, like Rose’s lady who when the man said he would not mince matters, said that she preferred them minced’.⁷⁰

Lynd’s role as cautious censor on the selection committee was profound. Correspondence with Walpole shows that she regularly made editorial suggestions to texts likely to be chosen by the Book Society which were then rung through to the author and publisher concerned. Lynd’s suggestions ranged from minor emendations to substantial revisions, incorporating requests to modify certain characters or passages, to reorder material or revise sections of the plot. A pleading letter from Walpole on 7 April 1930, for instance, shows Lynd had to be persuaded to accept Vita Sackville-West’s *The Edwardians* as Book Society Choice; a surprising reluctance given *The Edwardians* subsequent success:

I’m so glad to hear from you because I think we’re in a rather a mess. I wrote to Mrs Nicholson and she replied that all the bits about Edward were now modified. I don’t think we can well ask her to do more. [...] Mrs Nic: is known widely through her Broadcasting and I think ‘The Es’ will be popular. I wouldn’t dream of urging that as a reason were it not that I do think the book has much beauty and life. Also there is really no decent alternative. Do think it over now that she has modified Edward.⁷¹

Examples of Lynd’s propensity towards ‘mincing’ the texts chosen by the Book Society surface in the archives. On 6 January 1931, the publisher Jonathan Cape sent a telegram to Eric Linklater announcing that the latter’s third novel, *Juan in America*, was to be Book Society Choice for March, entailing a large initial order from the Book Society of 13,000 copies.⁷² All of the judges, wrote Cape, were ‘unanimously of the view that it would be a good plan if you could in some way separate part one from the rest of the book, as they

are afraid that the length of it may perhaps deter some readers from getting into the body of the book'.⁷³ As Priestley's review for the *Book Society News* was likely to address this, and as this would make useful copy on the jacket, Cape advised Linklater to make the change. This was swiftly executed, with Part 1 becoming the 'Prologue', and Linklater supplying a note for the reader 'to the effect that this Prologue is not really part of the book' and might be read afterwards, with readers advised to begin, mock seriously, 'at page 63, where the account of JUAN IN AMERICA really opens'.⁷⁴ The second editorial suggestion from the Book Society came directly from Lynd who thought 'with all deference, that the bottom paragraph on page 76 might perhaps upset some readers'.⁷⁵ A comic exchange between author and publisher followed as to which particular passage Lynd objected to in the name of the 'delicate mind of the General Reader' – 'was it a word or a thought?' mused Linklater, 'It's difficult to decide which can be more shocking' – following on from the author's misplacing of the second set of proofs so that, as he wrote in a telegram to Cape: 'Don't know what upset Sylvia'. The passage in question turned out to refer to the 'Himalayan consummation' of two yaks in Central Park, a 'remarkable sight' on Juan's first day in New York that characterises the text's comically irreverent views on sex, the absurdity of American experience, and the picaresque human condition.⁷⁶ Cape suggested that the wording in the paragraph might be altered slightly and, with a first printing of twenty thousand copies promised, Linklater agreed.

The revisions Lynd suggested to George Blake's *The Shipbuilders* (Book Soc. Choice March 1935) were more extensive. Blake, a journalist, editor and director of Faber and Faber, was a close friend of Walpole, so Walpole was keen to make clear that the selection committee's decision had been agreed upon *en masse*. Walpole wrote to Blake on 11 January 1935:

To show you that this is not only my loving enthusiasm, I'll tell you a secret, – namely that after I had read the typescript, it was sent post haste to Sylvia Lynd, who hates things in typescript, is all modern and high-brow, and is sharply Irish against Scotch. She sent the next day a message to the Book Society saying that this was first class work and an inevitable choice for any month of the year.⁷⁷

Lynd felt compelled nevertheless to suggest some revisions. Blake confided to Walpole that he had received 'a deliciously Sylvia letter! Wants some things out or cut out, notably the literary party.'⁷⁸ She also suggested changes to the language of the Glaswegian working-class characters in the novel to which Blake offered a conciliatory reply:

These people do speak a foul idiom, and I suppose I just slipped into it. No desire on my part, I assure you, to be the shocking young man; in fact, I'm really with you when ugly words stick out and I'll gladly abate much of the luridness – though I'll have to let some get through in the football and pub scenes.⁷⁹

The concessions to language and idiom are revealing. *The Shipbuilders* was an unusual choice for the Book Society for it was not just 'scotch', as Walpole pointed out, but engaged directly, if in a paternalistic, conservative way, with the contemporary depression and crisis of mass unemployment. The Book Society eschewed the more topical, proletarian writing of the period and we know from *Femina* transcripts that Lynd was reluctant to embrace such work. In the debate on whether the *Femina* should consider adding Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* to the lists of recommendations, for example, Lynd put aside her friend Rebecca West's pleading for a book that wasn't to her personal tastes.⁸⁰ Reading George Blake's *The Shipbuilders* in typescript for the Book Society, however, gave Lynd the chance to shape the text's published form and to reduce its linguistic 'luridness'.

Direct evidence of editorial revisions prompted by book club judges are rarely preserved in publisher's or other archives but they provide important, revealing intimations of how the range of titles chosen by the Book Society may have undergone some form of pre-publication revision in response to the suggestions of the selection committee and its judges. The implications of shared reading practices between professional reviewers and cultural authorities that influence the publication history of a text are a fascinating addition to our understandings of literary texts as socially produced, mediated cultural forms.

Like other writers in the modernist period, Sylvia Lynd played numerous roles in the book world: as reviewer, distributor, critic and editor, book club judge, publisher's reader, and literary prize-giver. That she is now best known for her parties demonstrates the continued need for recovering the professional, collaborative work of women writers and critics. The point here is not necessarily to re-canonise the work of Sylvia Lynd (though this is tempting, particularly now her diaries and autobiographical writings are in the public domain) but to recognise her wide-ranging, collaborative contributions to the formation and circulation of modernist print culture. Reclaiming this work allows us to appreciate better the middlewomen of literary modernism and their influence upon texts, readers, and the cultures of print.

Author's note. I would like to thank Alex Peat and Claire Battershill for their comments on a draft of this essay, and Sarah LeFanu, Andrew Nash, and Guy Baxter for enabling further archival research on Sylvia Lynd. For permission to quote from materials held in the archives of British Publishing and Printing at UoR I thank Penguin Random House UK.

¹ V. Gollancz, *Reminiscences of Affection* (London: Gollancz, 1968), p. 86. Place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.

² Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 31. Woolf makes this remark about Máire (B. J.) Lynd, Sylvia's youngest daughter. V. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf. Vol. 4 1931-35*, ed. A. O. Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 30 October 1935, p. 349.

³ J. B. Priestley, 'High, Low, Broad', *Saturday Review*, 20 February 1926, 222; reprinted in *Open House: A Book of Essays* (Heinemann, 1930), p. 162. 'Bloomsberries' is associated with Molly MacCarthy. See 'Clive Bell: Bloomsbury' in S. P. Rosenbaum (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Group. A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 114-23 (p. 117).

⁴ A. Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 17.

⁵ See the 'UCL Bloomsbury Project' for a broader account of the importance of Bloomsbury. For scholarship on 'Global Bloomsbury' see for instance *Leonard & Virginia Woolf. The Hogarth Press and the Networks of Modernism*, ed. H. Southworth (Edinburgh: EUP, 2010), pp. 103-75.

⁶ L. Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), p. 5. For a feminist use of the term 'bookwomen' see T. Travis, 'The Women in Print Movement': History and Implications', *Book History*, 11 (2008), 275-300 (276).

⁷ For an early example see J. Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: OUP, 1991). For a useful overview of this work, rooted in the scholarship of D. F. McKenzie and J. McGann, see F. Hammill and M. Hussey, *Modernism's Print Cultures* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 89.

⁸ S. Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank. Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); B. Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); B. Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism. Vol. I, The Women of 1928* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995); J. E. Marek, *Women Editing Modernism: 'Little' Magazines and Literary History* (Kentucky: Kentucky UP, 1995).

⁹ C. Clay, *British Women Writers 1914-1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 15.

¹⁰ Clay, *British Women Writers*, p. 25. Lynd was an early contributor to *Time & Tide*.

¹¹ University of Reading Special Collections, Reading (hereafter UoR), Diaries and Autobiography of Sylvia Lynd, MS 5585, box 2/A2. TS, first three chapters of an undated autobiography, Ch 1.

¹² Benstock, pp. 20-24.

¹³ For an important collection see D. Rehberg Sedo (ed.), *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁴ UoR, MS 5585, box 2/A2. TS, first three chapters of an undated autobiography, Ch 1.

¹⁵ See I. Norrie (ed.), *Writers and Hampstead. Observations on the Place and the People. 101 commentators from Domesday to Drabble* (Hampstead: High Hill Press, 1987). Clay includes a map of north west London (including Hampstead) in *British Women Writers*, p. 21.

¹⁶ E. M. Forster, *Passage to India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 246. Orwell worked at Francis and Myfanwy Westrope's second-hand bookshop in South End Drive from 1933-35. D. J. Taylor, *Orwell. The Life* (Vintage, 2003), pp. 147-50.

¹⁷ G. Grigson, *Recollections: Mainly of Writers and Artists* (Chatto & Windus, 1984) qtd in Norrie (ed.), *Writers and Hampstead*, p. 91.

¹⁸ Sylvia uses this term in her diary, reporting the unexpected arrival of a young artist, Miss Lind (a protégé of Thomas Sturge Moore). UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 21 October 1935, p. 4.

¹⁹ V. Woolf, 'The Patron and the Crocus' (1924) in *The Common Reader. Volume I*, ed. A. McNeillie (Vintage, 2003), p. 208.

²⁰ I am not aware of bibliographic work on Lynd. Her *Collected Poems of Sylvia Lynd* (Macmillan, 1945) lists the following works: *The Thrush and the Jay: A Miscellany of Verse and Prose* (Constable, 1916); *The Goldfinches* (Cobden-Sanderson, 1920); *The Swallowdive: A Novel* ([n.d.]); *The Mulberry Bush, and other stories* (Macmillan, 1925); *The Yellow Placard: Poems* (Gollancz, 1931); *The Enemies: Poems* (Dent, 1934); *English Children: A Very Short History* (Collins, 1942).

²¹ See S. Lynd, 'Introduction' to T. Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (Macmillan, 1935), pp. vii-xix; S. Lynd (ed.), *The Christmas Omnibus* (Gollancz, 1932).

²² There are letters from Lynd to the Hogarth Press in 1924 describing her work for Macmillan's in New York, and some of her readers reports from 1930 for John Lane have survived. It is likely that she worked for other publishing firms. UoR, Hogarth Press, MS 2750/277. S. Lynd to L. Woolf, 4 August 1924; UoR, John Lane Papers, JLRR 1/01/45.

²³ Sheila's involvement with Gollancz is discussed in R. D. Edwards, *Victor Gollancz. A Biography* (Gollancz, 1987), pp. 199-200, 232, 302-4.

²⁴ UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 1 November 1935.

²⁵ C. E. Murray, *Famous Literary Prizes* (Jamaica, N.Y.: Queen's Borough Public Library, 1934).

²⁶ A French committee of literary women did likewise for the English committee. This prize for the best work of French letters was awarded as the Northcliffe Prize. See Murray, pp. 25, 7-8, 10-11.

²⁷ Cambridge University Library, Femina Vie Heureuse Prize, English Committee (hereafter Cambridge, Femina), MS8900, box 1, 1/2/45. Minutes, 17 November 1937.

²⁸ Gollancz, *Reminiscences*, pp. 85-6.

²⁹ UoR, MS 5585, box 2/A1 (1 of 4).

³⁰ UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 21 October 1935, p. 19.

³¹ UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 23 October 1935.

³² UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 21 October 1935, p. 5.

³³ Gollancz discusses games played at the Lynds, *Reminiscences*, pp. 87-9. On game-playing and literary hostesses of the period see F. Hammill, 'Noel Coward, Rebecca West, and the Modernist Scene', *Modernist Cultures*, 11:3 (2016), 351-69, 358-9.

³⁴ J. Winning, "'Ezra through the open door": The Parties of Natalie Barney, Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach as Lesbian Modernist Cultural Production', in K. McLoughlin (ed.), *The Modernist Party* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2013), pp. 127-46 (p. 127).

³⁵ See P. C. Metcalf, *Syrie Maugham: Staging Glamourous Interiors* (NY: Acanthus Press, 2010); and K. McLeod, *A Passion for Friendship: Sybil Colefax and her Circle* (Michael Joseph, 1991). Hammill, 'Noel Coward, Rebecca West' offers an excellent precis of the role of London and New York's interwar hostesses.

³⁶ Winning, "'Ezra through the open door", p. 128.

³⁷ This long entry from 21 October 1935 is included in typescript among Lynd's autobiographical papers, with 'Intro' penned at the top. UoR, MS 5585, box 2. MS 5585/A1 (4 of 4). The textual and editorial history of Lynd's autobiographical writings is complex. Lynd continuously recast the material and Máire Gaster made further changes when she sought to prepare her mother's autobiography for publication. I am grateful to Sarah LeFanu for alerting me to their preservation in her *Rose Macaulay: A Biography* (Virago, 2003). They have recently been acquired by the UoR and are now in the public domain.

³⁸ Gollancz, *Reminiscences*, p. 86.

³⁹ Jaffe, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Gollancz, *Reminiscences*, p. 90. J. B. Priestley, *Margin Released. A Writer's Reminiscences and Reflections* (Heinemann, 1962), p. 158.

⁴¹ See I. Norrie (ed.), *Writers and Hampstead*, p. *.???

-
- ⁴² V. Brome, *J. B. Priestley* (Hamish Hamilton, 1988), p. 95.
- ⁴³ J. B. Priestley, *Open House. A Book of Essays* (Heinemann, 1930), p. 194.
- ⁴⁴ Hugh Walpole Collection at the King's School Canterbury (hereafter Canterbury), Hugh Walpole (hereafter HW) to Sylvia Lynd (hereafter SL), 1 November 1928. Rose Macaulay was replaced by Clemence Dane before the Book Society launched in April 1929.
- ⁴⁵ HW to A. S. Frere, May 1928, qtd in Rupert Hart-Davis, *Hugh Walpole* (1952; Stroud: Sutton, 1997), p. 299.
- ⁴⁶ HW, *Wintersmoon* (Macmillan, 1928), p. 96.
- ⁴⁷ Leavis, p. 33.
- ⁴⁸ Anon., 'The Book Society', *Time & Tide*, 13 February 1932, pp. 166-7.
- ⁴⁹ This critique echoes current work on book clubs and intermediaries. See D. Fuller, D. Rehberg Sedo and C. Squires, 'Marionettes and Puppeteers? The Relationship between Book Club Readers and Publishers' in D. Rehberg Sedo (ed.), *Reading Communities*, pp. 181-99.
- ⁵⁰ Attendance at any one time was patchy, with George Gordon and Clemence regularly absent. An editorial and publisher's representative was also invited to meetings: either Alan Bott, Arthur Frere-Reeves, or Colin de la Mare. UoR, Macmillan archive 193/29. Memo by Alan Bott (confidential), 'The Book Society: Some explanatory points', April 1938.
- ⁵¹ According to the confidential memo by Bott (see note 50), office readers sent a book clearly worthy of a choice to all judges simultaneously, without waiting for initial opinions. Records of the Book Society have been lost so we cannot trace the impact of this first layer of readers.
- ⁵² Canterbury, HW to SL, 1 November 1928.
- ⁵³ UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 28 November 1935.
- ⁵⁴ Canterbury, HW to SL, 27 September 1933; 10 March 1934.
- ⁵⁵ Clay, pp. 30-31, drawing on the work of M. Jolly (ed.), *Dear Laughing Motorbyke: Letters from Women Welders of the Second World War* (Scarlet Press, 1997).
- ⁵⁶ D. Rehberg Sedo, 'An Introduction to Reading Communities: Processes and Formations', in D. Rehberg Sedo (ed.), *Reading Communities*, pp. 1-24 (p. 11).
- ⁵⁷ E. Long discusses this process in *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 114-16.
- ⁵⁸ Canterbury, HW to SL, 4 April 1933.
- ⁵⁹ Canterbury, HW to SL, 5 June 1934.
- ⁶⁰ HRC, Walpole, H. MS Letters. Blake, George. HW to George Blake, 11 January 1935.
- ⁶¹ UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 5 March 1937.
- ⁶² HRC, Walpole, H. Lynd, Sylvia (Dryhurst) MS Recip. SL to HW, 14 October 1931.
- ⁶³ SL, 'Rebecca', *Book Society News*, August (1938), 5-6.
- ⁶⁴ Cambridge, Femina. MS8900, box 1, 1/2/23 and 1/2/28. Minutes, 14 November 1933 and 14 November 1934.
- ⁶⁵ UoR, Cape, A27. Linklater to Howard, 9 January 1931. Telegram Linklater to Howard, 9 January 1931.
- ⁶⁶ G. Bornstein, 'Introduction', in G. Bornstein (ed.), *Representing Modernist Texts. Editing as Interpretation* (Ann Arbor: Uni. Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 1-16 (p. 9).
- ⁶⁷ Washington, Library of Congress, Book-of-the-Month Club records 153835. Box 57. Meredith Wood to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, 3 December 1946.
- ⁶⁸ HRC, Walpole, H. Lynd, Sylvia (Dryhurst) MS Recip. SL to HW, 16 March 1929. Lynd's intuition proved useful. On the controversy that *Cradle of the Deep* caused the American BOMC see C. Lee, *The Hidden Public. The Story of the Book-of-the-Month Club* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 45-9.
- ⁶⁹ Julian Huxley was on the Book Society selection committee between 1935-37. In 1925, on a four-figure salary as Professor of Zoology at King's College London, he bought a house in

Highgate, 'conveniently close to Hampstead Heath'. J. Huxley, *Memories I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 141.

⁷⁰ UoR, MS 5585, box 1. Diary, 30 November 1935. On publishers' excisions see A. Nash, 'Literary Culture and Literary Publishing in Inter-War Britain: A View from Chatto and Windus,' in S. Eliot, A. Nash and I. Willison (eds.), *Literary Cultures and the Material Book* (British Library, 2007), pp. 323-42 (pp. 328-31).

⁷¹ Canterbury, HW to SL, 7 April 1930.

⁷² Additional orders of this scale were influential when average sales in hardback were between 3-5000 copies. See N. Wilson, 'Libraries, Reading Patterns and Censorship', in P. Parrinder and A. Gasiorek (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Vol. 4. The Reinvention of the British and Irish Novel 1880-1940* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp. 36-51 (p. 50).

⁷³ UoR, Jonathan Cape archive (hereafter Cape), A27. G. Wren Howard to Eric Linklater, 6 January 1931.

⁷⁴ UoR, Cape, A27. Howard to Linklater, 6 January 1931. E. Linklater, *Juan in America* (Cape, 1953), p. 13.

⁷⁵ UoR, Cape, A27. Howard to Linklater, 6 January 1931.

⁷⁶ Linklater, *Juan in America*, pp. 77, 76.

⁷⁷ HRC, Walpole, H. MS Letters. Blake, George. HW to George Blake, 11 January 1935.

⁷⁸ HRC, Walpole, H. MS Recip. Blake, George. Blake to Walpole, Sunday [n.d.] [1935].

⁷⁹ Richard Ford catalogue. MS. George Blake to SL, 12 January 1935.

⁸⁰ Cambridge, Femina. MS8900, box 1, 1/2/23. Minutes, 14 November 1933.