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'AN UNCONVENTIONAL MP': NANCY ASTOR, PUBLIC WOMEN AND GENDERED POLITICAL CULTURE

'To Keep It in the Family': Spouses, Seat Inheritance and Parliamentary Elections in Post-Suffrage Britain 1918–1945

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This article analyses the parliamentary phenomenon that historians have referred to as the 'halo effect'. A model adopted by Nancy Astor, the 'halo effect' describes candidates fighting parliamentary seats that had previously been contested by their spouse and accounted for almost a third of the women elected to parliament between the wars. Instead of dismissing its presence as a lack of political progress for women post-suffrage, this article suggests that the 'halo effect' was part of the early attempts of political parties to accommodate gender in public life. It indicates the continued relevance of the family as a political organising unit within the era of mass democracy. Rather than understanding seat inheritance between spouses as simply nepotism, this article demonstrates that, for women, their status as wives provided excellent political training and a committed political partner to help them in their careers. Beyond 'male equivalence', their relationships helped them to present an identity that allayed some of the tensions surrounding women in public political life and partly accounts for the great success of the 'halo effect' in bringing women into parliament in this era.

The death of William Waldorf Astor was problematic for the political career of his son, Waldorf Astor. Waldorf had been elected as the MP for Plymouth Sutton and had proved himself as an active and politically ambitious member in the nine years he had served. The death of his father meant that he was elevated to the peerage as Viscount Astor, disqualifying him from sitting in the House of Commons. Legally, Waldorf had no choice. Although he investigated the possibility, he could not relinquish his peerage. But there was another option. His wife Nancy was well-known and well-liked within the constituency and in 1919 was now eligible to stand as an MP. Nancy maintained that it was Waldorf who first suggested the idea of her going into Parliament, with Nancy saying: 'So it seemed that it was best ... to keep it in the family, and for me to try for it, which I did' (Fort, 2012: 159).

Wives standing in seats previously held by their husbands became an incredibly successful route for women to enter parliament prior to 1945. Eleven women contested seats previously held by their husband, and ten of them were elected.¹ This meant that almost a third of all women MPs that were elected in this period won a seat previously held by their husband. This method has been subsequently called the 'halo effect' by historians.² The term seems to have been first used in this historical context by Elizabeth Vallance to describe women taking over a seat that their husband had vacated. Vallance (1979: 27) claimed the advantage was that women benefitted from this 'halo effect' of male acceptability that legitimized their political aspirations. 'Male equivalence' promoted women as substitutes in parliamentary seats that men were unable to take up (Harrison, 1986: 625). A wife became an electoral extension of her partner and could be trusted to embody the same values and bring the same qualities to the constituency that her husband had exemplified.

¹ A further three, Alice Lucas, Juliet Rhys Williams and Kitty Wintringham, stood in seats previously contested but not won by their spouses.

² See Vallance (1979), Harrison (1986) and Pugh (2000). The term 'halo effect' was used more widely in the disciplines of psychology and business studies; it refers to the idea that people tend to 'think of a person in general as rather good or rather inferior and to color the judgment of the qualities by this general feeling' (Thorndike, 1920: 25).

This article uses the presence, and undeniable success, of the 'halo effect' or 'seat inheritance' between husbands and wives to explore the wider gendered cultures of British politics after women's suffrage. It complicates the idea that the 'halo effect' was simply about legitimization for female candidates through their husbands. Instead, it asserts that the success of 'halo effect' candidates shows the enduring role that marriage, family and relationships played in political cultures – their importance did not diminish with the arrival of mass democracy and women's suffrage. As Susan Pedersen (2019: 300) has shown: 'The suffrage struggle didn't so much bring women into politics as change what it meant to be a political woman, and change, as well, how institutions accommodated gender in public life'. This article suggests that, through the 'halo effect', we see some of the early attempts of political parties to accommodate gender in public life. In these initial, tentative forays parties drew upon the methodology that had served political cultures for centuries – familial and social networks. Their status as wives helped by providing excellent political training and networks, an identity that allayed some of tensions surrounding women in public political life, and a supportive and committed political partner to help them in their careers.

This challenges some suggestions within the historiography, discussed below, of the 'halo effect' as indicative of women's failure to break onto the political stage post-suffrage. The presence and success of the 'halo effect' is not simply representative of unfair nepotism. Their position as wives meant that they could overcome many of the barriers that other women faced in reaching the Houses of Parliament. This is not to say that this route was fair to other women who did not share their class or social privileges, but by condemning them simply as 'halo effect' candidates, we ignore the enduring realities of political cultures in interwar Britain and remove much of the agency and ability that is credited to some of the better-known female politicians of this era.

The obstacles for women in being elected as MPs in this period were considerable. Krista Cowman (2010: 122) suggests that getting selected in a winnable constituency was difficult for women within all the political parties and the greatest factor in

explaining the low number of female MPs in this period. Although the Labour party in theory had a better commitment to sex equality, female candidates were often selected for unwinnable seats that the party had never held. They also faced masculine trade union cultures that made it difficult for women to be placed in coveted seats. The unmarried Labour MP Jean Mann (1962: 44–45) speaks in her autobiography of the difficulties that women faced in getting selected for winnable parliamentary seats. She recalls fighting seven 'hopeless seats' before being in the running for a safe seat, citing the problem that the 'Labour men, particularly in the unions, meet together often. Friendships are made, sometimes around the bar; introduction to those who have influence in the safe seats follow... [the] difficulty is to get into the inner circle of influential members in a safe constituency'. Cathy Hunt (2007: 425) argues that this difficulty facing women in navigating the selection processes of local parties was even more difficult for single women within the party. Looking at the career of local councillor Alice Arnold, Hunt shows that as an unmarried woman she could not access the informal, social networks in pubs and clubs after ward meetings that married women could attend with their husbands.

There was even greater uncertainty towards selecting women candidates in the Conservative party. Despite pressure from Nancy Astor and the hierarchy of the party, there was great prejudice against woman candidates in the constituencies and many refused to consider them (Lovenduski, Norris and Burness, 1994: 627). The cost of standing in elections was another inhibitor, particularly in the Conservative party where prospective MPs were expected to finance their own campaigns. As women already embedded in political worlds as wives, the 'halo effect' candidates were able to overcome many of these barriers more easily.

Jean Mann herself was sympathetic to the women who had entered parliament in seats left vacant by their husbands. She said that: 'Knowing these MPs, and having worked with them, I cannot agree that they did not have a place in the House on their own right' (1962: 44–45). This is not a view shared by all. Maguire (1998: 25) in her study of Conservative women deems that there was 'something rather pathetic' about women's methods of accessing political circles by their roles as hostesses and spouses, as they were dependent on men for their political power and involvement.

In her biography of 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, Laura Beers (2016: 2) praises her for being a 'self-made woman' in an 'era when several of her female parliamentary colleagues – including Lady Nancy Astor and Lady Cynthia Mosley – entered parliament on their husbands' coattails'. However, it is useful to consider that historians seeking to discover political agency for women before suffrage have often looked to the work of women within their wider families' political activities.³ We should not discard this method of analysis as regressive from the instant that women were able to stand as MPs themselves. As Amanda Vickery (2001: 52) argues: 'the feminist heroic mode has accustomed us to see female activists as unique, defiant outsiders rebelling against their crushing families, but ... many of them were nurtured in comparatively congenial familial and social networks'. To restore women's political activism into social and familial contexts, post-suffrage, is to reveal what difference the vote really did make.

The struggle for political parties to bring women into their structures has been well discussed elsewhere. But there were also considerations for how they incorporated women into party structures in their roles as wives. Women and men were not automatically brought into their spouses' political work; this was an active process within political cultures. In this period, political parties were often facing difficulties as spouses did not feel not sufficiently supported and involved in their husbands' work, and this incorporation was important to the parties. The Conservative party especially saw the role of the MP's wife as more codified than the Labour party. In the 1930s, the Conservative Training Centre developed a course for MPs' wives, training them in political issues, public speaking, party organisation, local government, and running bazaars, amongst other issues. Local newspaper reports on the new course commented that: 'It is a sign of the times that many MPs who were necessarily kept at Westminster during the Parliamentary Season rely on their wives to maintain that personal contact with voters which, to-day, is regarded as essential' (Berthezène and Gottlieb, 2017: 101) For the Labour party, although this was not its central goal, Margaret Bondfield did believe that the Women's Labour League had an

³ See, for example, Gleadle (2001: ch. 3), Lynch (1994), Chalus (2005), and Vickery (2001).

educative purpose for the wives of trade unionists and Labour men to take an interest in their wider work (Collette, 1989: 47). Beatrice Webb founded the 'Half-Circle Club' as she was concerned that the wives of Labour MPs and Trade Unionists were not sufficiently incorporated into their husbands' political work and wanted to promote friendships between the wives of Labour MPs, candidates and Trade Union officials. ⁴Political parties were recognising the changing role of spouses and introducing new structures and training to direct and mould their political development.

The 'halo effect' reconsidered

It is useful to further investigate the adopters of 'seat inheritance' and to move beyond monolithic considerations of this group of candidates. **Table 1** is an analysis of the candidacies where a spouse has previously contested the seat up to 1945. Nancy Astor was not the first candidate to stand in her husband's stead. In the 1918 election the first woman to stand as a Conservative candidate, Alice Lucas, was selected after her husband died suddenly – mid-campaign – in the Spanish influenza pandemic. She polled much more strongly than her husband was expected to and came a mere 832 votes away from being elected (Brookes, 1967: 14).

The analysis here has characterized the circumstances of the seat inheritance into three categories. Two of these circumstances are simple to group together – instances, like that of the Astors, where women succeeded their husbands when they were elevated to the House of Lords. After the death of a family member who held a hereditary title, men would have to, often begrudgingly, relinquish their seats in the Commons, and their wives stood in the subsequent by-elections. This method had a near total rate of success within this period. Only one woman who stood in a seat after her husband had been elevated to the Lords did not win her election.

⁵The second most common circumstance was a woman standing in her husband's

⁴ Half Circle Club, 'Prospectus and notice of first gatherings', 6 January 1921, LSE Archives, Passfield, 4/16.

⁵ The only 'elevation' candidate to not win their seat was Mary Emmott in standing in Oldham in 1922. Her husband Alfred was raised to the peerage in 1911, so her candidacy was not a directly successive attempt.

Table 1: Candidates standing in a seat previously contested by a spouse. Results taken from Craig (1977).

| Name | Year | Party | Outcome | Constituency | Circumstance for candidacy | Turnout % | Results | % |
|---|--------------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Alice Lucas | 1918 | Conservative | Unsuccessful | Lambeth, Kennington | Widowed | 29.7 | Co L | 42.4 |
| | | | | | | | Con | 32.2 |
| | | | | | | | Lab | 25.4 |
| Nancy Astor | 1919 (15/11) | Conservative | Successful | Plymouth Sutton | Husband elevated to the House of Lords | 72.5 | Co C | 51.9 |
| | | | | | | | Lab | 33.3 |
| | | | | | | | L | 14.8 |
| Margaret Wintringham | 1921 (22/9) | Liberal | Successful | Louth | Widowed | 72.1 | L | 42.2 |
| | | | | | | | C | 38.3 |
| | | | | | | | Lab | 19.5 |
| Mary Emmott | 1922 | Liberal | Unsuccessful | Oldham | Husband elevated to the House of Lords | 78.8 | NL | 28 |
| | | | | | | | Lab | 27.7 |
| | | | | | | | C | 26.2 |
| | | | | | | | L | 11.1 |
| | | | | | | | L | 7 |
| Katharine Stewart Murray (Duchess of Atholl) | 1923 | Conservative | Successful | Kinross and West Perthshire | Husband elevated to the House of Lords | 72.6 | C | 50.4 |
| | | | | | | | L | 49.6 |
| Mabel Philipson | 1923 (31/5) | Conservative (husband Liberal) | Successful | Berwick-Upon-Tweed | Husband barred from standing | 74.9 | C | 55 |
| | | | | | | | L | 26.8 |
| | | | | | | | Lab | 18.2 |

(Contd.)

| Name | Year | Party | Outcome | Constituency | Circumstance for candidacy | Turnout % | Results | % |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|--|-----------|---------------|-------------|
| Gwendolen Guinness (Countess of Iveagh) | 1927 (19/11) | Conservative | Successful | Southend-On-Sea | Husband elevated to the House of Lords | 73.2 | C | 54.6 |
| | | | | | | | L | 30.7 |
| Walter Runciman | 1929 | Liberal | Successful | St Ives | Political Tactics | | IndC | 12.3 |
| | | | | | | 76.5 | L (NL) | 42.6 |
| Hugh Dalton | 1929 | Labour | Successful | Bishop Auckland | Political Tactics | 76.5 | Lab | 55.8 |
| | | | | | | | L | 30.1 |
| Lucy Noel-Buxton | 1930 (9/7) | Labour | Successful | North Norfolk | Husband elevated to the House of Lords | 75 | Lab | 50.3 |
| | | | | | | | C | 49.7 |
| Oswald Mosley | 1931 | New Party | Unsuccessful | Stoke | Political Tactics | 75.9 | C | 45.6 |
| | | | | | | | Lab | 30.3 |
| Joan Davidson | 1937 (22/6) | Conservative | Successful | Hemel Hempstead | Husband elevated to the House of Lords | 55 | C | 57.7 |
| | | | | | | | L | 28.3 |
| Agnes Hardie | 1937 | Labour | Successful | Glasgow Springburn | Widowed | 50.9 | Lab | 62.6 |
| | | | | | | | C | 37.4 |
| Juliet Rhys Williams | 1938 (11/2) | Liberal | Unsuccessful | Pontypridd | Political Tactics | 78.3 | Lab | 59.9 |
| | | | | | | | NL | 40.1 |

(Contd.)

constituency after his death in office. This again was a successful route to election for women. Every woman who stood in the by-election called as a result of their husband's death won.

The third has been characterised here as 'political tactics', where couples used seat inheritance for politically motivated reasons. While wives succeeded husbands in all the examples above, there were three instances of men standing in seats previously held by their wives. Walter Runciman and Hugh Dalton employed what was known at the time and in the historiography as the 'warming-pan' strategy. They both were already elected as MPs but wished to change their parliamentary seats. In both cases, to avoid triggering two simultaneous by-elections, their wives stood in their desired seat and resigned once their husbands were available to take over. These circumstances did indeed mean that the Runcimans and Daltons were the first married couples to sit concurrently in the house. Both couples were very frank with the electorate about this scheme. The Runcimans saw this as a boon for the constituency and suggested that the voters were flattered by the suggestions that electing Hilda meant they would gain two Liberal members representing them in parliament rather than one (*Times*, 1928: 21). Speaking at a lunch after the by-election, Hilda said that she had not won the election because she was a woman:

I am afraid I was only a wife, which is not quite the same thing. It was not so much on my merits that I was invited to contest the seat but because they thought any wife could be relied on to vacate the seat for her husband when the time came. (*Times*, 1928: 21)

The Daltons had similar logic in their representation of Bishop Auckland for the Labour party. The sitting MP for Bishop Auckland, Ben Spoor, died before the planned retirement of his seat at the next general election. He had been due to be replaced by Hugh Dalton as the candidate for Bishop Auckland, moving from his marginal Peckham seat. In order to keep the seat 'in the family' Ruth Dalton was nominated in the ensuing by-election. Though she did not attend the selection meeting, she was unanimously selected to be the by-election candidate. She had two main credentials

in her favour: she was a well-respected LCC councillor and, most importantly for the constituency who wanted Hugh Dalton as their MP, she could be relied to stand down as soon as Parliament was dissolved. The idea of Ruth as a 'warming pan' was widely acknowledged, as Hugh said in his diaries: 'They say they don't want any other warming-pan ... they want to get people into the habit of voting Dalton' (Pimlott, 1986: 173). To this purpose, Ruth stood on the ballot paper under the name Mrs Hugh Dalton (*Times*, 1929: 9). However, Ruth did not covet a parliamentary career for herself. As she said when asked by Ramsay MacDonald to consider continuing her political career, she told him that she had never wished to become an MP and preferred her work on the LCC: 'There we do things. Here it all seems to be talk' (Dalton, 1953: 210).

The other man to stand in a seat that had previously been contested by his wife was Oswald Mosely. In 1931 he stood in Stoke-on-Trent for his fledgling New Party, a seat previously held for Labour by his wife Cynthia Mosely. Although her constituency party wanted her to continue, Cynthia did not fight for reelection due to health considerations and political disillusionment. Cynthia's connections in Stoke did not pull Oswald through and he finished in last place. This use of seat inheritance for political tactics was not as successful as the circumstances of elevation or widowhood. There were others who used the 'halo effect' as a form of political tactic. Along with the 'warming-pan' candidates and Oswald Mosley, two women – Juliet Rhys-Williams and Kitty Wintringham – stood in seats that had been previously contested by their husbands in the pursuit of some political advantage. These instances will be discussed later in the article.

Beverley Stobaugh (1978: 54) has suggested that there were cross-party differences in levels of enthusiasm about adopting the 'halo effect', and that the Conservative party were the most enthusiastic proponents of seat inheritance. It is true that it was not until the Conservative domination of the 1931 general election that the Tories had a female MP who had not won in a seat that her husband had previously held. Yet it is wrong to understand this as simply a tactic from a socially conservative party negotiating the role that women should play in parliamentary

politics. Of the full number of interwar 'halo effect' candidates, three were Labour, four Liberal, eight Conservative and one Independent.

A unifying factor of this cohort of candidates was also their class. All would be considered upper-middle or upper-class, except for Agnes Hardie who was drawn into the Labour movement as an organizer for the National Union of Shop Assistants (Knox, 2004). This does place them in contrast to pioneering Labour women such as Margaret Bondfield and Ellen Wilkinson, who like Hardie, found their way into politics through the Trade Union movement. The 'halo effect' was a larger part of the continuation of class privileges that served political dynastic ambitions for men and women, but it does not deprive us from seeing political agency and ambition in the women who benefitted from it.

Families and constituencies after suffrage

The peak of the 'halo effect' was before 1939. Twelve women contested seats previously held by their husband, and ten of them were successful. This meant that almost a third of women MPs elected between the two world wars held a seat that their husband had previously won. During the Second World War, two women, Violet Bathurst (Lady Apsley) and Beatrice Rathbone, won uncontested by-election seats after their MP husbands were killed in action. Yet by 1945, when the largest number of female candidates stood and won seats, the 'halo effect' had all but disappeared. Only one candidacy could tentatively be classed as an attempt to capitalize on a seat previously contested by a spouse. From this time until 1970, only two women stood in seats previously held by their partners – in both instances standing in by-elections when they had been unexpectedly widowed.⁶ Elizabeth Vallance (1979) has argued that this change occurred because the 'legitimation process' had become less significant. In other words, the idea of 'male equivalence' that some have considered important immediately post-suffrage had waned in potency (Harrison, 1986: 225–226).

⁶ Lena Jeger (Labour, St Pancras, 1953) and Muriel Gammans (Conservative, Hornsey, 1957) succeeded their husbands on being widowed. A handful of more recent examples do exist, including a candidacy at the 2019 general election where Natasha Elphicke stood for the seat of Dover in place of her husband. Charlie Elphicke was unable to stand as he had been suspended from the Conservative party on charges of sexual assault.

This lessening of the power and adoption of the 'halo effect' is useful in considering how political parties and cultures were changing during the early twentieth century. The era of mass democracy did not necessarily result in MPs and their families feeling any less personal ownership over their constituencies, but the fact that wives could now be incorporated into keeping a seat raises interesting questions about gendered political cultures. Due to the changing nature of politics, with an increased emphasis on an active role in the constituency, administering welfare and civic presence, women were now eligible to be considered as political successors, just as brothers, sons and nephews had been for the preceding centuries.

The seat of Southend-on-Sea and its association with the Guinness family is a useful example of changing attitudes to familial politics as the twentieth century progressed. Rupert Guinness had first won Southend in 1912 for the Conservative party. His wife, Gwendolen, took over the seat in a 1927 by-election when Rupert was elevated to the peerage as Lord Iveagh. Lady Iveagh was reported as saying that she was seeking election for the borough 'partly because she and her husband had been associated with it for so long that she felt loath to allow circumstances over which they had no control to sever that connexion' (*Times*, 1927: 16). The familial connection with the seat was felt just as keenly by Lord Iveagh. He featured on Lady Iveagh's election address with an imploring 'Message from your old member':

It is with the keenest regret that, after fifteen years I am retiring from that position, but my regrets are lessened by the hope that you may return my wife as your Member, placing that confidence in her which you have never failed to give me throughout the years during which we have been so happily associated. Should this come to pass I shall rejoice that my connection with Southend will still remain.⁷

The tendrils of the Guinness family did not retreat when Lady Iveagh retired. In 1935 the son-in-law of Rupert and Gwendolen Guinness and future political diarist, Sir Henry 'Chips' Channon, took over Southend-on-Sea (which became Southend West

⁷ Countess of Iveagh's 1927 Election Address, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford, PUB 229/1/3.

when the constituencies' boundaries were redrawn in 1950). Henry Channon stayed in office until his death in 1958. Although only 23 and still an undergraduate at Oxford, Henry's son Paul wanted to represent the Southend constituency in the by-election triggered by his father's death. Although the local constituency party ultimately backed Paul over 129 other candidates, his selection was not plain sailing. Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* took great umbrage to his selection campaign. The *Express* described Paul Channon as a 'hotly indignant controversial candidate' and reported that the public houses were full of anger at this 'hereditary principle' (Gale, 1959: 2). The night before the selection poll the paper ran a large feature on this 'nasty business, a discredit to the party', heavily criticizing Channon's age and inexperience. When charged with these accusations of nepotism, Channon replied that: 'All I can say is that my selection was done scrupulously fairly. You must ask those who selected me; I don't think it is reasonable for me to comment on the reasons of those who selected me'. His ex-MP grandmother, Lady Iveagh, saw the reasons for his selection as simple. The voters had instinctively done their duty by 'backing a colt when you know the stable he was trained in' (Gale, 1959: 8).

This change over time can also be contextualized within a wider cultural turn against the value of familial political dynasties. Familial ties to constituencies did not die away with the abolition of pocket boroughs in the Reform Acts.⁸ But as the twentieth century progressed, there was increased criticism of nepotism. Beatrice Rathbone also found this to her cost when she contested the Bodmin seat in 1941. Her local newspaper decried:

the idea that when a member dies his widow should succeed him is bad, not good at all. It establishes an hereditary principle in the Lower Chamber ... we must for the future seek out those who have greater claims upon our suffrage than the simple one of family connection. (*The Cornish Times*, 1941: 3)

⁸ For historiography on parliamentary familial ties after reform see Jalland (1988), Reynolds (1998), Cannandine (1990), Spychal (2017), and van Coppenolle (2017), among others.

As the seat was uncontested, the criticism had no effect, but Rathbone was not to be a long serving MP and stood down at the next General Election. This growing turn against the idea of seat inheritance and the longstanding relationships of families to certain constituencies is a topic ripe for further investigation. But although there were voices of dissent, for male and female candidates alike, the endorsement of a family member could be the tipping point for selection in a winnable seat. Participation in familial political networks was both a stepping stone to consideration for selection and a vital training ground for the skills required for an electoral career. The remainder of this article will examine in more detail the types of training that female candidates in particular benefited from. It examines how beyond simply legitimizing them, their experiences as wives gave them political experience and access to established networks that helped them surmount the barriers in place for other women seeking to enter public political life.

Marriage and gender in public life

There is no question that the barriers facing women seeking election between the world wars were very great. All parties experienced significant tensions in accommodating gender within political party structures. Martin Francis (2000: 214) has shown that the Labour party's conception of 'acceptable womanhood ultimately proved to be relatively narrow' and evoked very traditional images of domestic femininity. David Jarvis (1994: 142) argues that the Conservative party was even more socially conservative, and that marriage and motherhood were integral to Conservative femininity. This led to the tension that although the party's ideology consigned women to domestic or private roles, they also depended on women undertaking public duties (Lovenduski, Norris and Burness, 1994: 611). But as Lisa Berry-Waite (2020: 65) has shown, particularly for the very first women standing as MPs, they drew upon their domestic experience and 'special knowledge' of issues on home and social reform to counter hostility to the ideas of women's candidature. Through the 'halo effect' women were able to align their feminine images as wives and mothers with that of a credible politician.

Juliet Rhys-Williams encountered these tensions when she first stood for the seat of Pontypridd in a 1938 by-election. Juliet had met her husband, Rhys Rhys-Williams, when she worked in his office during his time as a junior transport minister and Liberal MP. Rhys had initially held the seat of Banbury in Oxfordshire but then set his aspirations on representing the seat of Pontypridd where his family home, Miskin Manor, was located. He unsuccessfully stood here in 1922 and lost by over 6,000 votes. When a by-election was called in 1938 for Pontypridd Rhys did not stand again, presumably as he was now in his seventies, but Juliet Rhys-Williams decided to try for the seat. The press noted Juliet's candidature for the by-election for the fact she accepted the invitation to stand only eight days after giving birth to her youngest daughter, Elspeth. The reporter requested Juliet respond to comments made by the Conservative MP Sir Paul Latham, who had said that he was not going to stand for parliament when his term ended because his parliamentary duties 'did not allow him to see as much of his four-year-old son as was proper for a father to see of his child.' (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1938: 8). The reporter presented her as being confident that fighting the election and possible parliamentary duties would not interfere with bringing up her daughter, saying: 'I think I should be able to combine family life and parliament.' Juliet used this as a moment to spin this in favour of her strong local credentials for the seat and replied: 'It is very different in my case, for my interests are in Pontypridd. When my husband was a member for Banbury we used to find things a strain, but you don't feel that when you belong to the place you are to stand for' (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 1938: 8). Here, Juliet presents herself as having particular expertise on how she could combine family life and serving as an MP. She has experienced the 'strain' once before in her role supporting her husband and is using this knowledge to ensure that she can overcome these problems as an MP herself. However, Juliet lost the seat by over 7,000 votes to the Labour candidate. Although they suffer another substantial loss, the Rhys-Williams family still did not give up on Pontypridd. Their son Brandon contested the seat in 1959, this time losing by nearly 16,000 votes.⁹

⁹ A message from Lady Rhys-Williams, 1959, LSE Archives, RHYSWILLIAMS/J/21/10/1.

Widowhood similarly presented an opportunity for women to embody the identity of a loyal wife whilst being able to allay concerns that she would not be able to perform her duties and role in the domestic sphere. This was certainly portrayed as a benefit in the case of Margaret Wintringham when *The Times* (1921: 11) reported that:

There are not many men in the House of Commons with so fine a record of service outside. Mrs Wintringham has had to do a considerable amount of speech-making in the discharge of these multifarious duties during the past 20 years ... She has no children, and this absence of home ties affords her all the necessary leisure to devote herself to the business of the House.

These women could thus still be considered as appropriately and safely feminine without concern that they were neglecting any of their traditional duties in the domestic sphere. The theme of mourning was present in Beatrice Rathbone's election after her husband was killed in the Battle of Britain. On being sworn into the House she was described as 'deep mourning, and her only ornament was a silver brooch of the Royal Air Force' (*Yorkshire Evening Post*, 1941: 4). The special circumstances for those deep in mourning similarly benefitted Margaret Wintringham:

Mrs Wintringham was known during the contest at Louth as the silent candidate. That was not because [she] has not the gift of speech-making. She is on the contrary, an experienced and fluent public speaker. But having regard to her recent bereavement – the sudden death of her husband in the smoking-room of the House of Commons – she naturally thought it more fitting not to take a prominent part in the election. She was, however, to be seen, in deep mourning, on the platform at Liberal meetings. (*Times*, 1921: 11)

Four women in the interwar period came to the House in by-elections triggered by their husband's death and this was a key part of their public identity during the campaign. Like those women who gained their seats after their husband's elevation to the peerage, it is wrong to imagine that these women's forays into the political

scene came only after their husband was deceased. These women had been highly active within the political sphere, not just as an appendage to their husband but as activists in their own right. Margaret Wintringham and Lady Apsley both served as presidents of the local women's associations for their respective parties in their husband's constituencies. Agnes Hardie had been a Labour party organiser and served on the Board of Education even before her marriage to George Hardie (incidentally the younger brother of Keir Hardie) (Knox, 2004). They met through the Labour movement and worked together in politics a great deal before their marriage. *The Times* (1951: 5) described how she accepted 'pressing invitations' to become the Labour candidate upon her husband's death.

The narratives of the success of the women candidates were constructed differently at the time of their reporting. Taking Agnes Hardie for example, her pronouncement on her victory with a majority of 5,978 (2,449 votes fewer than her husband George received at the last poll) she felt showed: "The magnificent result ... indicates that Springburn had remained loyal to its Labour allegiances and has given entire support to the Labour Party's programme of reconstruction at home for the benefit of all people' (*Glasgow Herald*, 1937: 13). However, her Unionist opponent Colonel McInnes Shaw 'hoped that Mrs Hardie would regard the result as a token of the esteem in which her husband had been held'. In her comments on her election, Agnes Hardie positioned herself as an independent actor who was representing the Labour party before she was representing herself or her husband. She is describing the result only in terms of what it meant for the Labour party, rather than for herself as an individual or in her identity as the wife of George Hardie. It was not just their esteem and regard of the constituents that was being transmitted through their candidature in the place of their husbands, but there was often an understanding that the women would embody the same political views as their spouse had also held. Yet this was not always a positive factor for women following on from their husbands. Margaret Wintringham faced difficulties in her election as her husband's radical views were cited against her by the Conservative candidate in the local press (Harrison, 2011).

Political training and networks

There has been greater consideration of the tensions between marriage and parliamentary careers for women in the Labour party. Historians have often characterized Conservative and Liberal party women as typically married, whilst Labour women are presented as spinsters, the single 'battleaxe' who was 'married to the party' (Pugh, 2000: 163, Harrison: 1979: 626). June Hannam (2008: 323) has argued that Labour women MPs sought to legitimate their activism in mixed-sex politics by presenting their dedication to the Labour party as an all-consuming passion which substituted for the emotional fulfilment usually associated with marriage. Ellen Wilkinson grappled extensively with these questions of how women could negotiate both marriage and a political career. Wilkinson's novel *Clash* (1929) explores the dilemma of a young trade union organiser as she weighs up whether a woman can both pursue a dream of becoming an MP and find true love.¹⁰ Wilkinson is one of the most iconic examples of the spinster MP, who claimed that:

if a woman is to marry and have children, her peak period is between eighteen and twenty-five. But if her ambition is to be ... a politician, she inevitably kicks her colt-feet around till well in the thirties, as a man does, suffering and learning from her mistakes, building the personality that can do things in the forties. (Beers, 2016: 105)

This article takes a different view, arguing that through marriage to a politically active man we do see these women 'building a personality'. In fact, it was one of the best forms of political training, and this may attest to why comparatively so many women found their route to parliament in this way. The 'halo effect' MPs were not plucked from the domestic hearth, adorned with a rosette and thrust clueless onto the hustings stage; they often had long political experience both before and throughout

¹⁰ The resolution of *Clash* is that the protagonist Joan Cragie discovers that she can combine love and a political career by choosing a partner who was equally steeped in the Labour movement and agrees to work together for her political advancement. See also Beers (2011).

their marriages. Lucy Noel-Buxton met her husband Noel on a campaign trail in North Norfolk in 1914. They had become acquainted as Lucy (then a Conservative in her formative political years) was speaking on a platform against his then Liberal politics under the slogan 'No Noel for North Norfolk'. They later joined the Labour party together and Lucy was very active within the 'Half-Circle Club' of Beatrice Webb.

Mary Emmott, who unsuccessfully fought the Oldham seat some years after her husband Alfred was elevated to the peerage, had served on the Oldham Board of Guardians since 1898, and had been the vice-chair of the national Women's Liberal Federation and numerous other political organisation and societies (Law, 2000: 58-59). Hilda Runciman was considered the archetypical 'warming-pan' candidate but had a considerable political life before her husband. In 1897 she was the first woman to be elected to the Newcastle school board. Later, in the 1920s, she extended her public role and served as a Justice of the Peace and as president of the Women's National Liberal Federation in 1919–21 as well as other housing associations and on the executive of the League of Nations Union. It is important to recognise that most of these women had a considerable amount of political interest and ability independent of their relationships with their husbands. What their marriage often enabled them to achieve was different opportunities and modes of engagement.

Regardless of their levels of experience, the political connections and networks of these women was often considerable. Although taking over the Southend-on-Sea seat directly after her husband's elevation to the House of Lords, the Countess of Iveagh was the 22nd member of her own family to enter parliament, including three former speakers of the Commons (*The Times*, 1927: 16). Katharine Stewart-Murray, the Duchess of Atholl, also enjoyed a wide circle of personal political connections that helped her in her selection. The networks that she and the Duke of Atholl jointly possessed made it far more achievable to stand for and win election. Katharine describes how the suggestion that she should stand for parliament came from Lloyd-George himself:

I therefore began to think over his proposal seriously, and of course discussed it with Bardie [the Duke of Atholl]. He raised no difficulties, and

shortly after the Prime Minister and Dame Margaret had left us, we had a talk about it with Sir George Younger, Chief Unionist Whip ... The King was our guest at luncheon one day, on his way south from Balmoral at the end of the shooting season. I told His Majesty of the proposal the Prime Minister had made to me. He was evidently doubtful how I should be able to combine the duties of hostess at Blair with parliamentary work, but I knew I could rely on Bardie, with his wonderful domestic gifts, to make good the deficiencies such work might force on me. (Stewart-Murray, 1958: 127)

It is not enough to decry the advantages that these women had because of their relationships with their husbands without considering the other, and often more important, social and cultural capital that they possessed in their lives. And indeed, the prominence of these connections was no less important for men when seeking candidature for parliament. In the case of the Plymouth Sutton seat, if Nancy hadn't accepted the role it would have still been an Astor on the ballot paper: the committee would have asked Waldorf's brother John Jacob Astor to fight the seat in the event of her refusal (Fort, 2012: 160).

Being married to and fighting a seat after their husbands did give some of the women a significant advantage for their political career in another, more direct, way. In addition to any political connections they possessed or developed, it was often through their husbands' campaigns that they discovered and then honed their political talents and abilities. For the Duchess of Atholl, whilst her parents had been politically inclined, she was not active in party politics until her husband was adopted as the Unionist candidate. Katharine took up canvassing and campaigning to support the Duke of Atholl enthusiastically, but it also gave her the opportunity to engage politically in a public forum herself. As is reflected throughout her autobiography, she presents herself as the altogether more politically interested of the pair, as for example she says on campaigning: 'He was not, I think, as interested in political speaking as I was, for I enjoyed trying to explain things ... In the election which came a few weeks later, I spoke in public every night for the last week or two' (Stewart-Murray, 1958: 55-57). Similarly, although family and friends close to Lady Astor

noted her rhetorical talents, it wasn't until she was supporting Waldorf's campaigns in 1910 and 1918 that she was able to share these abilities in a public forum (Musolf, 1999: 24).

The work that women had undertaken in the constituencies was also essential in helping their selection and election. Many had built up significant experience of serving alongside their husbands in their constituencies. This was very clear in the case of the Duchess of Atholl. When an election was called in 1923, the local association felt that they needed a strong local candidate so unanimously voted for her as the wife of the former MP and current President of the local association (Ball, 1990: 51-52). Stuart Ball (2013: 327) claims that she was actually more popular than her husband within the constituency.

Having such a prominent role in the constituencies also allowed women to build upon the persona of 'Lady Bountiful': the image of the women doing good deeds for the poor and needy in society. For Nancy Astor, this grounding in the local community of the constituency, and the ability to cite the works she had done in the areas of maternity work and child welfare, enhanced her political credibility and public image (Musolf, 1999: 22). The Countess of Iveagh similarly had attracted this reputation, being described in the press as 'given to good works, she is the "lady bountiful," helping where help is needed, and seeking, in every way possible, to make happier and brighter the lives of fellow citizens' (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 1931: 7).

Particularly within the Conservative party, selection of a male candidate for a seat would also involve his wife, as they would attend the selection meetings with their husband. Viscountess Davidson had played an important role from the early days of her husband's Hemel Hempstead seat, feeling that at her husband's selection for the seat, it was not just he who was being selected but also her:

We were met by the agent ... he having talked to us, decided at once – I think I am right in saying – that we were the couple he would like to have work for the constituency and with him; we were young and active and keen, and my husband had very high recommendations from Bonar Law and other leading people in the Party. (Davidson and Rhodes James, 1969: 89)

Joan Davidson refers to the Hemel Hempstead constituency repeatedly as 'our seat' in her writing even before she was elected as an MP (Davidson and Rhodes James, 1969: 101). There was the growing importance of the role of the MP in the local constituency in the model of social worker and civic figure, and these women were often instrumental in helping the formation and functioning of these constituency systems. During the 1922 election campaign Joan worked extensively out of the local campaign headquarters, sending instructions and orders to John Campbell Colin Davidson's many other personal assistants and secretaries.¹¹ Her main political astuteness came from her local knowledge – she was the best placed to know which issues had the most local salience and which of the constituents needed to be replied to with the greatest haste and care. Joan Davidson had effectively run the Hemel Hempstead constituency for nearly 20 years before becoming the MP herself in 1937. In doing so much constituency work she saw herself as 'releasing her husband for his work in parliament and government' (Elliot, 2004). When J.C.C. Davidson left parliament it seemed natural for her to take over the seat. The local press reported that: 'Lady Davidson brings to the House an intimate knowledge of politics behind the scenes over a long period. Her husband 'J.C.C' was 'keeper of the Premier's secrets' in two regimes and he found in his wife a colleague whom he could consult with benefit to himself and safety to the realm' (*Buckinghamshire Examiner*, 1937a: 3). The by-election was deemed by the electorate to be a foregone conclusion and political apathy was high. At the declaration of the poll, Lady Davidson said she would try to represent the men as well as her husband had tried to represent the women' (*Buckinghamshire Examiner*, 1937b: 7). This sense of interchangeability between the Davidsons made them a formidable political force. At the victory dinner given six months after Viscountess Davidson's victory, the local constituency party proposed a toast, saying: 'Lady Davidson used to be Lord Davidson's right-hand, and now Lord Davidson is her left hand, but the combination is just the same as before' (*Buckinghamshire Examiner*, 1937c: 8).

¹¹ For example, see Joan Davidson to Col. Storr, 28 November 1923, Parliamentary Archives London, DAV 164.

Political partnerships

The idea of the 'political wife' was not one constructed just for public image; it also reflected the demands of modern political representation. The independent, and unmarried, MP Eleanor Rathbone experienced the problem when she was elected in 1929, that 'representing a constituency was really a two-person job' (Pederson, 2004: 169). Although wives had been working with their husbands politically for centuries, a distinctive feature of this period is the shift in the dynamics of marriage that allowed wives greater opportunity to have public profiles themselves and stand for elected office. Many historians have noted the prevalence of husbands and wives working together in political partnerships in this period. Although usually considered a more common Labour party occurrence for their shared views and outlook, within these candidates we see couples from all political parties who worked together in political partnerships.

'Halo effect' candidates experienced a bonus to their candidature by having the support and experience of their husbands. In her study of the election of Nancy Astor's 1919 election campaign, Karen Musolf characterises Waldorf Astor as 'keeping control over the overall operation' (Musolf, 1999: 67). She explains that Waldorf's role involved being the connecting link between the local party organisation and the home circle, soliciting speakers on her behalf, speaking at her meetings and elaborating, explaining and justifying her positions (Musolf, 1999: 62). Brookes (1967: 18) similarly describes Waldorf as her campaign manager who wrote all of her speeches.

Yet, there is little in this list of duties and roles that these women had not performed themselves in their husbands' election campaigns. They all canvassed enthusiastically, explained their husbands' positions, spoke on platforms and provided logistical support. However, there is a gendered element to how this political work is characterised. Whilst in their roles of wives, women's work is characterised in the mode of supportive wives and hostesses. Once their husbands were the ones in the back seat, so to speak, the men were viewed as 'organisers' and 'strategists', even if there was little difference in the actual work that they performed. This may be a useful consideration of historians in their reading of wives' political work for their husbands.

Katharine's characterisation of her life with the Duke of Atholl is perhaps more of a 'Working Partnership' (as is the title of her autobiography) than it is any kind of romantic marriage. The numerous affairs that her husband engaged in were no secret, and whilst not referred to in her autobiography, there is a certain distance that comes through in her writing. A quote from the Duchess in Sheila Hetherington's (1989: 15) biography perhaps sheds some light on this incongruity:

My husband and I made a success of our marriage, largely because we tried to devote ourselves to causes in which we believed. We took immense interest in each other's activities, but sometimes our paths diverted. One of us would be fighting in one cause while the other was battling in aid of another.

As discussed above, Juliet and Rhys Rhys-Williams were another example of a political partnership who were both politically active and engaged throughout their lives. Although in the early stages of marriage we see Juliet in traditional 'political wife' mode, she was deeply interested in a range of political interests and causes. There was a large age gap between the two, with Rhys thirty-three years Juliet's senior. This gap allowed for her political career to ascend while his was waning, and in him she had a deeply experienced and, most importantly, loyal and trustworthy political partner. We see evidence of Rhys acting as Juliet's secretary and assistant during her career. When she was away he would open and organise her post for her and only send on anything that *he* deemed to be important. This horrified their daughter, who wrote to warn Juliet: 'He toils over your letters for hours but I simply can't persuade him not to. I hope the ones he is keeping back are not anything you want, but he says they are of no interest and he has answered them, and filed them.'¹²

Politics and activism were often shared passions between these spouses. We have already seen how George and Agnes Hardie met through the ILP, Lucy and Noel Noel-Buxton on the North Norfolk campaign trail, and the Rhys Williams in a parliamentary office. Tom and Kitty Wintringham were another couple for whom politics and activism were an integral part of their relationship. When fighting in Spain as part

¹² Susan Davson to Juliet Rhys-Williams, 13 August 1949, LSE Archives, RHYSWILLIAMS/J/21/9/1.

of the International Brigades, Tom Wintringham met American journalist Kitty Bowler and they married back in Britain in 1941. Tom had a turbulent relationship with the Communist party and in 1942 he and Kitty were founding members of the new Common Wealth party. Tom stood in the 1943 by-election for Midlothian and Peebles under the Common Wealth banner. Although ultimately unsuccessful, he polled an impressive 48% of the vote, missing out on victory by a few hundred votes. For the 1945 general election, the couple decided that Kitty would try her luck in the same seat. She had come to know the constituency when campaigning for Tom and they hoped that the Wintringham name and previous success of her husband may help to carry a decent poll. Kitty's election material reflected this theme. Her election leaflet carried a large endorsement in the centrespread from her husband Tom, proclaiming:

Kitty Wintringham does five jobs well: wife, politician, secretary, housekeeper and journalist. She is particularly good at the first two of these, and I am all in favour of her concentrating on them. Working with me as my secretary she has often completed things I left unfinished: pamphlets for training the Army and Home Guard, choosing instructors for the Osterley Home Guard School, and articles for the papers. In Midlothian I left something not quite finished. The Tory majority came down from over 10,000 to under 900. You can see that she finishes that up neatly.¹³

Unfortunately, this was not a job that Kitty could finish up neatly. She finished in last place with a paltry 6.4% of the vote. Correspondence between Tom and Kitty reveals the rationale for Kitty contesting the Midlothian seat; they had built up connections in the area during Tom's campaign that they felt that Kitty could capitalise on. They were both simultaneously contesting seats in the 1945 election and with Kitty in Scotland and Tom in Aldershot, their contact was limited to frequent letters. However,

¹³ Kitty Wintringham North Midlothian Campaign Leaflet, 1945, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, WINTRINGHAM Tom 3/2/5.

from Tom's experience he was able to suggest possible supporters and endorsers for Kitty. Yet the election leaflet reveals the importance that the Wintringhams felt was attached to the name after Tom's success. The belief in this name ignored the other circumstances that had led to Tom's impressive share of the vote in 1943; this was a by-election held during WWII when the parties in the coalition governments had agreed not to stand against the incumbent party. Once Kitty stood in the 1945 general election, she came a distant third to the Unionist and Labour party candidates, who fought a close contest.

Political activism and public office was a peculiar path, demanding intense sacrifice and commitment. Both men and women were aided with the support of a spouse to navigate these waters. The 1930s and 40s were noted for the move towards more companionate forms of marriage. By the post-war period marriage was being redefined as a relationship in which the partners negotiated their roles in accordance with personal preferences rather than externally imposed expectations.¹⁴ Particularly in the Labour party, 'love, passion and politics' all came together to inspire many of the men and women who were active together in the movement.¹⁵

Conclusion

Historians seeking to document political agency for women before suffrage have often looked to the work of women within the political activities of their families. We should not discard this method of analysis from the point at which women were able stand as MPs themselves. Simply the theoretical ability to be added to a ballot paper did not mean that the obstacles for women had been removed. The presence and success of the 'halo effect' indicates the continued relevance of the family as a political organising unit within the era of mass democracy. Enduring links of family, kinship and personal relationships were as crucial to political activism as has been seen in the centuries before. The fact that many successful political women benefited

¹⁴ See Szreter and Fisher (2009: 133) and Summerfield (1997).

¹⁵ For more on the importance of relationships in the Labour party see Hannam (2009) and Stephanie Ward (2019). Some work has been conducted on political partnerships, particularly within the suffrage movement. See Harrison (1987) and Balshaw (1998).

from the knowledge, political experience and connections of their husbands should not be seen in a negative light. Their relationships with their husbands provided them with attributes that were necessary to forge a parliamentary career when many were still so resistant to lady members. They had experienced an excellent training in political organisation, platform speaking and canvassing, they had built up the trust and loyalty of local constituencies and they had a supportive and politically experienced spouse to help them navigate their route.

For men as well as women, the position of MP was often suffused with family and dynastic ambitions.¹⁶ We shouldn't see the presence of the 'halo effect' as a marker of women's failure to break onto the political scene. As Amanda Vickery has suggested: 'feminist hagiography has accustomed us to see female activists as heroic outsiders rising *sui generis* from a hostile environment' (Vickery, 2001: 3). Understanding the political role of women post-suffrage as still remaining embedded in networks of power and privilege from their marriage and family may seem counter-intuitive in the story and success of suffrage, but it is also a pragmatic response to the challenges for women in accessing political worlds in the twentieth century. The structures and modes for incorporating women into existing, and new, political party structures were still developing. It is not surprising that women who already had access to political life through marriage were some of the first women to transform this experience into elected representation.

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¹⁶ Although referring to the current parliament, a research paper by Priddy (2020) gives an interesting insight into the deep familial connections between MPs that still remain.

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