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**Article:**

Gottlieb, J.V. (2016) Eleanor Rathbone, the Women Churchillians and Anti-Appeasement. *Women's History: The Journal of the Women's History Network*, 2 (6). pp. 15-18. ISSN 2059-0156

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# Eleanor Rathbone, the Women Churchillians and Anti-Appeasement

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*This article examines Eleanor Rathbone's transition from domestic, feminist and welfare issues to international affairs by the mid- to late-1930s. It explores her teamwork with other leading women politicians, each renegades in their own way, in opposition to Britain's foreign policy and especially appeasement. Rathbone worked closely with the MPs Ellen Wilkinson and the Duchess of Atholl. They demonstrated how women could work together, across party lines, when passionately united by a cause, and became known as the 'Glamour Girls', working in parallel to the Edenite and Churchillian appeasement dissidents. Rathbone became one of the public figures who redefined 'appeasement' from a positive to a pejorative term.*

Eleanor Rathbone covered the gamut of political causes in women's welfare and humanitarian politics but, by the second half of the 1930s, her career took a decisive international turn. The significance and complexity of this transformation has only come into focus in recent years, under the influence of the "international turn" in the scholarship. This is especially thanks to the multi-dimensional biography of Eleanor Rathbone by Susan Pedersen, which provides a highly nuanced account of her shift from feminist campaigning and domestic and imperial concerns to foreign policy, triggered by the Abyssinia Crisis in 1935. Henceforth, Rathbone 'would mount her own "foreign policy", defending states and peoples vulnerable to fascist aggression'.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that Rathbone had redefined the very term 'appeasement' from a desirable goal of diplomacy to a pejorative, like other pro- and anti-appeaser women, she has hitherto been largely neglected from the story of British foreign policy in the build-up to the Second World War.

The reasons for this neglect are not very mysterious and part of the answer for this lies in the general erasure of women from political history. With his usual sexist-elitist eloquence, Harold Nicolson's remarks about Rathbone in *The Spectator* illustrate all too well the marginalisation of women from the centres of power in foreign policy debate. As an Edenite National Labour MP, Nicolson delighted 'in the way Miss Rathbone rushes about taking up cudgels. Most people (even if they be ambidextrous) find one cudgel at a time as much as they can manage; Miss Rathbone is not only provided, as was Vishnu, with four arms, but she collects additional cudgels in her lap'. He imagined her to be the 'Britomart of 1939' as she tilted 'at windmills with her wholly altruistic fervour'.<sup>2</sup> It was Nicolson's main objective here, however, to isolate her from his own anti-appeasement cabal, defined at the time either as the Eden Group, the Glamour Boys or the Abstentionists. This treatment of Rathbone by Nicolson is all the more surprising, as they were billed as the only two speakers at a public meeting at Sevenoaks on the 'German Child Refugee Problem' on 8 February 1939, a little more than a fortnight after Nicolson's caricature of Rathbone appeared in *The Spectator*.

While women *qua* women were repeatedly represented as the best friends of Neville Chamberlain's policy, this notion

is contested by the mobilisation of women for anti-fascist campaigns and women's own searching confessions and expressions. It can also be attributed to the results of the Munich by-elections, which failed to make a clear case that the 'women's vote' was a bloc vote for Chamberlain.<sup>3</sup> For obvious reasons, these women cannot be subsumed within the Anthony Eden-led 'Glamour Boys'. They were explicitly excluded from events where the leading anti-Chamberlain figures congregated. This included the 'dinner-party for men only', made up of MPs, newspaper proprietors and prominent journalists who came together to commiserate the agreement reached at Munich in those last days of September 1938.<sup>4</sup> But the culture of male exclusivity in the Foreign Office milieu and male-domination within the concentric circles of foreign-policy 'dissentients', should not blind us from seeing the significant contributions women made to anti-appeasement politics. Women built up the anti-appeasement bloc as politicians and campaigners inside and outside parliament and as public intellectuals and journalists.

A group without a ready-made name, I have called them and claimed them as the 'women Churchillians'. Included here are those who worked closely with Winston Churchill in a number of campaigns and those who shared his outlook on foreign policy and likewise perceived the dire threat posed by Nazi Germany. They also identified him as the heroic alternative to Neville Chamberlain. During the Second World War, both Churchill's old enemy Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat as an MP, and Rathbone became alert champions of Churchill, that old anti-feminist bogey. In August 1945 Rathbone said:

my admiration for him is such, that I hate to differ from him on anything because I believe that he will go down in history as the man to whom not only this country, but the whole world, owes more than to any other British statesmen who ever lived.<sup>5</sup>

From across the political spectrum, these women represent Churchill's 'fellow travellers'. Even if we give them this name, we have to emphasise that they were not a homogenous group—their collaboration was inconsistent and they had nothing resembling an organisational base.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Churchill's own *The Gathering Storm* (1948), the keystone of anti-appeasement historiography and an exemplary work of 'great man' history writing, barely acknowledged women's presence. There is no mention of Eleanor Rathbone, the Duchess of Atholl, Violet Bonham Carter, Shiela Grant Duff or Ellen Wilkinson. Even his beloved wife Clemmie is only a minor figure in Churchill's grand narrative. Churchill was especially 'ashamed to see the great Conservative Party looking forward to an Election where they will exploit the psychosis of fear and hope that the old women of both sexes will give a renewal of the present incompetent regime'.<sup>6</sup> National defence was a man's business, to be spoken



Eleanor Rathbone (2nd left) with Katherine, Duchess of Atholl (5th) in Cluj, Romania, February 1937

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about in a diction of virility.<sup>7</sup>

Gradually, some women have been recognised as players in opposition to Chamberlain's appeasement politics. In an early classic in the scholarship, *The Anti-Appeasers*, Neville Thompson improves on Churchill's version by giving brief mention to Atholl, Wilkinson and Rathbone. Indeed, Rathbone is credited with transforming the meaning and the charge of the very term 'appeasement' when she defined it as: 'a clever plan of selling your friends in order to buy off your enemies—which has the danger that a time comes when you have no friends left, and then you find you need them, and then it is too late to buy them back'.<sup>8</sup> Largely ignored in the scholarship of appeasement, historians of women have been better at recognizing the achievements of women activists and the first women parliamentarians.

While Churchill was no feminist, a number of prominent women did side with him in his opposition to the National Government's foreign policy. A handful of high-profile women Churchillians made their influence felt, standing with women in direct contact and collaboration with Churchill. These were the Liberal Violet Bonham-Carter, with whom Churchill's personal and political relationship was already very well established by the 1930s; the Conservative Katherine, the Duchess of Atholl, with whom he carried on a regular and mutually respectful if not very intimate correspondence; Shiela Grant Duff, a young journalist related to his wife Clemmie, who was a press correspondent in Czechoslovakia in the lead up to the Crisis; and Eleanor Rathbone, who reached out to him on numerous occasions in search of a true leader. While these women did not join in any one political organisation, their paths often crossed and their similar views on foreign policy often transcended party divisions. They were the 'Glamour Girls'—although 'Glamour Women' would be more apt as most were well into middle-age and seasoned veterans of party, feminist and internationalist politics.

Presumably, Churchill set aside his objection to

women's presence in what he reckoned should have remained a man's chamber, the House of Commons, and he collaborated with the Duchess of Atholl (Conservative, Kinross) and Eleanor Rathbone (Independent, Combined Universities). Eleanor Rathbone's connection with Churchill was somewhat more distant than Atholl's. From 1936 she had regular contact with Churchill and had marked him out as the next prime minister. She wrote to him personally a number of times along these lines. For example, Churchill was impressed that she had adopted his figures on German air strength in one of her letters to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* and hoped she would stand to her guns. He warned this Cassandra that 'we are really in great danger'.<sup>9</sup> In August 1936, at an International Labour Party summer school, she was already coming to Churchill's public defence after he was attacked by Fenner Brockway. Brockway criticised Churchill's discovery of the 'League cause' as his new way of protecting the Empire from the imperialistic-minded Nazi Germany. In contrast, Rathbone credited Churchill with 'one of the most significant events of 1936' for expressing 'exactly the attitude of the whole pro-League left-wing bloc of Liberals and Labour, but coupled it with a demand for adequate armed forces for use in defence of collective security'. She urged her audience to 'watch that man carefully ... Dispel prejudice, and consider facts about him'.<sup>10</sup> In October 1936, she told an audience in Hull that the only possible remedy was a return to collective security, and acknowledged that 'some of the clearest sighted Conservatives were in favour of it, such as Mr Winston Churchill and the Duchess of Atholl, for those who were watching the trend of affairs in Europe were beginning to realise that we were face to face with a great danger'.<sup>11</sup> By September 1938, she was in no doubt that Churchill represented the great white hope and she begged him and Eden to rally opinion in the country because 'there is a great longing for leadership'.<sup>12</sup> She made the same plea in public for their inclusion in the Cabinet.<sup>13</sup>

But despite their political compatibility, as Pedersen

emphasises, no place was made for either Rathbone or Atholl in the anti-appeasement cabal.<sup>14</sup> The two women had been disapprovingly dubbed the 'feminine United Front' by William Waldorf Astor (Conservative) during a debate on the importance of propaganda in Spain and the Little Entente countries. Their sex also continued to remain a significant liability.<sup>15</sup> Unswerving and unclubbable, both Rathbone and Atholl lacked the easy access to Churchill and his fellow sceptics in the autumn of 1938 and both were excluded from meetings where these men conspired. Just as before, Rathbone and Atholl were left to voice their dissent on public platforms, at open meetings and through the press. Nonetheless, as political figures, Rathbone and Churchill were recognised to hold the same views on foreign policy and to be strategically linked. This is demonstrated, for example, by a telegram sent specifically to Churchill and Rathbone by the union societies of British Universities on the new situation in central Europe at the end of March 1939, expressing 'concern for the fate of thousands of Czech patriots, refugees from Germany now in Czechoslovakia and Jews, whose lives are in the greatest danger and demand immediate action for their safety'.<sup>16</sup> Further, Rathbone seems to have impressed Churchill and, even more, his wife Clementine: the Churchills 'actually liked her'.<sup>17</sup>

As we can see, in this phase of their lives, Atholl and Rathbone's political careers were closely intertwined. Both were high-profile and admired (rather than popular) women MPs. Rathbone's demeanour was that of 'the headmistress of an expensive and prosperous girls' college. Furiously angry with Mussolini; Haile Selassie is her hero. When members shout "Order!" in response to her innumerable supplementary questions on Abyssinia, she beams'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Atholl was depicted as a 'frail-looking lady' who 'can develop astonishing energy when her conscience is aroused, as it has been on Spain. She has a technique of gathering people around her, of always speaking for a group rather than as a lone fighter.' Wilkinson supposed this was 'the hostess instinct of a great lady, and it is amazing how effective it has been among her own Party'.<sup>19</sup> Both Rathbone and Atholl began from a position of support for collective security through the League of Nations, both were critics of the strong pacifist tendency, and both eventually gave up on the League and the League of Nations Union (LNU) by the time of the Munich Crisis in 1938. Rathbone worked closely with the LNU and wrote *War Can Be Averted* (1937) under its auspices. Atholl addressed the LNU's Women's Advisory Council on the European Crisis on 8 April 1938, differentiating herself from so many other women by confessing these:

seem to me days in which the policy of all peace-loving nations should stand together, not merely talking and passing resolutions, but looking to their arms and showing that they are ready to use their arms in defence of any country that is the victim of unprovoked aggression, anyhow in Europe.<sup>20</sup>

The two women were also acknowledged to be the 'most embarrassing to the Government'.<sup>21</sup>

They were two of a trio at the core of the 'Glamour Girls'. Atholl, Rathbone and Ellen Wilkinson shared numerous platforms, experienced transformative fascist encounters together and embarked on relief and fact-finding missions. With Dorothea Layton, wife of *The Economist* editor and *News Chronicle* proprietor Walter Layton, Atholl and Rathbone took

an unofficial but well publicised tour of the Little Entente countries—Yugoslavia, Roumania and Czechoslovakia—in February 1937. Rathbone and Atholl framed this tour as a means of studying the economic conditions of women in East-Central Europe. In Prague, they were warmly welcomed by Madame Zeminova, a woman deputy, who declared 'that the women and mothers of Great Britain and Czechoslovakia were united in desiring peace and the right to existence of all nations' and 'expressed the gratitude of the people of Czechoslovakia for the moral support given to their country by Great Britain in recent months'.<sup>22</sup> This was especially poignant, considering what was coming a little over a year later. Building on the success of that visit, together with Wilkinson and Dame Rachel Crowdy, Atholl and Rathbone embarked on an eminent fact-finding and relief mission to Spain in the spring of 1937. This was described as a 'mixed mission' the task of which was to inspect refugee camps of the belligerents. But Rathbone and Wilkinson, both already on Franco's blacklist, were to refrain from inspecting camps in insurgent territory. The mission had to be passed off as strictly non-political and 'Mr Eden has extracted from each member of it an undertaking to refrain from any form of political propaganda'.<sup>23</sup> Rathbone was nevertheless exposed to fascist aggression much nearer to home after a stink bomb was broken when she was speaking on behalf of the LNU at a 'Back to the League' conference. At the close of the meeting she was also 'tackled by a group of youthful Fascists who asked innumerable questions, mostly rather naïve, on the subject of Czechoslovakia', which she answered very fully.<sup>24</sup> In mid-September 1938, Wilkinson and Rathbone were key speakers at a Trafalgar Square rally in support of the Czech people, an assembly that included a large proportion of women and finished with a march to the Czechoslovakian Legation to deliver a resolution.<sup>25</sup> The only reason Atholl was not there was because she was on a tour of Canada and the USA campaigning on behalf of the Spanish government.<sup>26</sup> After the crisis Rathbone went again to Czechoslovakia to organise relief and rescue for refugees. The cause of the victims of Nazism thereon becoming the focus of her political work.<sup>27</sup>

On the one hand, the humanitarian aspects of these women's engagement with foreign affairs was very much in keeping with the pervasive constructions of gender-based citizenship and women's place in civic life as social mothers. On the other, when these same women became identified with war, their political problems became acute. A persuasive illustration of this is Atholl's failed anti-Chamberlain by-election campaign, where she was represented as a war-monger and disconnected with the mothers of her constituency. In some respects, her defeat by a National Conservative in this by-election was a personal defeat and embarrassment, but it was also a very high-profile contest that amplified opposition to Chamberlain's appeasement policy at the national level and even more specifically within his own party. Atholl's defeat notwithstanding, the band of women Churchillians continued to grow and, in May 1939, *Time and Tide* declared 'We Need Churchill' and reported that 'everywhere—in the clubs, in the pubs, in the cafes and in the streets, people are talking about Mr Churchill. In the press, too, the demand grows apace'.<sup>28</sup>

With Atholl out of Parliament, Rathbone carried on the struggle and entertained the idea of joining forces with Cripps' Popular Front. From the vantage point of the beginning of 1939, she declared that the past year 'has been the worst year I have ever lived through. One disaster has followed another,

and I think we all feel that in each disaster our country has played a part of which, whatever the excuses you can make for it, none of us can feel proud.<sup>29</sup> Further, as an independent, she was free of any party whip. Rathbone did need to consider the same dilemmas faced by Ellen Wilkinson, for example, when it came to forging strategic alliances with Popular Fronters in the fraught and highly divisive atmosphere of pre-war Labour politics. For her part, Atholl, who was not yet convinced that her political career was at an end, and Duncan Sandys, Churchill's son-in-law, co-founded the dissenting Hundred Thousand Crusade in January 1939. At its inaugural private meeting of 300 people at the Caxton Hall, one third were women.<sup>30</sup> Within a few weeks, Sandys dropped out and Atholl assumed the leadership of the ginger group, supported in her endeavours by Rathbone.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, it is clear how central and all-consuming the international crisis, from a political, diplomatic and humanitarian perspective, had become for Rathbone from the mid-1930s. That is certainly how the rather unsympathetic journalist Rom Landau constructed it when he interviewed her about what she considered the necessary long-view policies. Rathbone's reply was: "How can we think of such policies while all these horrors go on in Germany, China, and Spain! We must first concentrate on helping the victims." He appreciated how 'her entire work is overshadowed by the horror of modern barbarism', and believed that this meant she now showed 'disregard for the less tangible, purely feminine issues'.<sup>32</sup> In short, he was suggesting that her feminism had been displaced by her internationalism. However, we can also see that it is important not to downplay gender in assessing this phase of Rathbone's career. Indeed, she frequently correlated women's emancipation with internationalist humanitarianism. Furthermore, no matter how focused she had become on the notionally 'unfeminine' matters of international affairs, she was severely restricted in her action and influence by her gender and by the cultures of male-exclusivity that dominated high politics and diplomacy. She could only ever be, in this sense, a *woman* Churchillian.

## Notes

1. Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 283. There are a number of biographies of Rathbone, focusing on various parts of her career, but Pedersen's is the most compelling and comprehensive. See also Laura Beers, 'A Model MP? Ellen Wilkinson, Gender, Politics and Celebrity Culture in Interwar Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 10: 2 (June, 2013), 231-50; and Matt Perry, *'Red Ellen' Wilkinson: Her Ideas, Movements and World* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014).
2. H. Nicolson, *The Spectator*, 20 Jan. 1939.
3. See Julie V. Gottlieb, 'Guilty Women', *Foreign Policy and Appeasement in Inter-war Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).
4. Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London, Faber and Faber, 1953), 241.
5. Quoted in Brian Harrison, 'Women in a Men's House: The Women MPs, 1919-1945', *Historical Journal*, 29: 3 (September, 1986), 632-54.
6. Letter from Winston Churchill to Charlie, Lord Londonderry, 18 Nov 1938, CHAR 2/333.
7. It is interesting to note that the historical telefilm *The Gathering Storm* (2002), starring Albert Finney and Vanessa

Redgrave, is all about the overlapping of private and political life. See also Mary Soames, ed., *Speaking for Themselves: The Personal Letters of Winston and Clementine Churchill* (London, Black Swan, 1999).

8. *Manchester Guardian*, 25 February 1939. Quoted in Neville Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971), 27.
9. Letter from Winston Churchill to Eleanor Rathbone, 13 April 1936, Eleanor Rathbone Papers, University of Liverpool, RP XIV.4.1-8.
10. 'Mr Winston Churchill: Attacked and Defended by Socialist M.P.s', *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 3 August 1936.
11. 'Rotary Club Ladies' Day', *Hull Daily Mail*, 24 Oct 1936.
12. Letter from E. Rathbone to Winston Churchill, Sep 1938, RP XIV.4.1-8.
13. 'A Reconstructed Government', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Jun 1939.
14. Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience*, 292-93.
15. 321, Hansard HC Deb, 25 Mar 1937, col.3136.
16. 'Bristol Students' Plea', *Bristol Evening Post*, 20 Mar 1939.
17. Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience*, 333.
18. 'Our 9 Women MPs are Good Champions of their Sex', *Daily Mirror*, 18 May 1936.
19. 'Session 1937', by Ellen Wilkinson, *Time and Tide*, 31 Jul 1937.
20. 'The European Crisis: Address by the Duchess of Atholl to the Women's Advisory Council, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1938', 12.5.38, LNU-5/7.
21. 'Feminine Critics', *Gloucestershire Echo*, 30 Jun 1938.
22. 'Woman MP Welcomes Duchess of Atholl', *Dundee Courier*, 19 Feb 1937.
23. 'A Mixed Mission', *Lancashire Evening Post*, 14 Apr 1937.
24. 'Friendly Understanding for League without Sentimentalism', *Northampton Mercury*, 3 Jun 1938.
25. 'Our London Correspondence', *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Sep 1938.
26. 'Fund Given for Spain at Dinner to Duchess: Farwell for Atholl's Wife Aids Loyalist Relief', *New York Times*, 18 Oct 1938.
27. See 'Notes on Visit to Prague: 14<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> January, 1939', Eleanor Rathbone Papers, XIV.2.15(12). See also S. Cohen, *Rescue the Perishing: Eleanor Rathbone and the Refugees* (London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2010).
28. 'We Need Churchill', *Time and Tide*, 6 May 1939.
29. 'Miss Eleanor Rathbone: A Common Front', *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Feb 1939.
30. 'Critics of the Government', *The Times*, 5 Jan 1939.
31. 'Duchess to Lead Ginger Group', *Daily Mirror*, 8 Mar 1939.
32. Rom Landau, *Love for a Country* (London, Nicholson, 1939), 308-9.

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