“Matriarchal” or “Patriarchal”?
DUNDEE, WOMEN AND MUNICIPAL PARTY POLITICS
IN SCOTLAND C.1918-C.1939

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Introduction

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dundee has often been described as a “women’s town,” an idea which is still promoted within the city.1 While not all historians have agreed with this view, the work of others has undoubtedly added to this idea. Arthur McIvor argues that nineteenth and twentieth century Scotland was a “patriarchal” society, where the sexes were divided in a kind of “gender apartheid,” with the “public sphere” of work and politics being reserved almost exclusively for men. Yet, McIvor has suggested that the city of Dundee went somewhat against this trend and had a “more matriarchal environment” than most other parts of Scotland.2 Similarly, Tom Devine argues that by the start of the twentieth century Dundee “had a reputation as a ‘women’s town’” and John Kemp describes Dundee as a city which was “unusually female.”3

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Importantly, a few historians have suggested that there are limits as to how far Dundee can really be called a women’s town. Eleanor Gordon has demonstrated that there was considerable female involvement in the labour movement in Dundee in the years before 1914, but has also contended that “the yoke of patriarchal authority and control” nonetheless remained in the city, “defining the nature” of women’s “work, earnings, modes of supervision and codes of behaviour.” Deborah Simonton notes that while the high levels of female employment in Dundee’s textile industry gave its women benefits such as a degree of “economic independence” and “freedom from direct patriarchal control,” the city still had gendered labour divisions. Similarly, Annmarie Hughes notes that Dundee was “labelled a women’s town,” but also indicates that men remained a dominant force in the labour market, suggesting that this is a label that needs to be treated with caution.

Nonetheless, there is much to commend the idea that women were unusually active in the “public sphere” in Dundee. Of particular note are the unusually high levels of female employment in some sectors of the city’s economy, with Dundee’s textile industry, which dominated the city’s economy until the second half of the twentieth century, being famed for its large proportion of female workers. This was particularly true in the jute industry, Dundee’s staple trade, which in 1901 employed almost 25,000 women, who accounted for over 70% of its workforce. William Walker, without trying to claim Dundee was a “women’s town,” noted in his study of Dundee and its textile workers between 1885 and 1923 that there were aspects of women’s involvement in Dundee that were unusual for the time, and indeed which were seen by some as troubling and unnatural. These included high numbers of married women workers, the fairly quick unionisation of female jute workers and high female crime rates for offences including assault and disorderly conduct. Local historians
including Mary Henderson and Norman Watson have shed light upon a seemingly large contribution made by women to the history of Dundee in areas beyond the textile industry.8 Indeed Dundee was home to a number of pioneering women, including Fanny Wright (1795-1852), who, after leaving Dundee, became a leading social reformer in North America, and Mary Slessor (1848-1915) who went from the Dundee jute mills to become one of Scotland’s best known missionaries. In the field of higher education University College, Dundee (established in 1881, later evolving into the University of Dundee) was largely founded by a local woman, Mary Ann Baxter, who insisted it was to provide education for both sexes. Miss Baxter’s work was followed up in 1940 when Margaret Fairlie, based at Dundee Medical School, became Scotland’s first female Professor. Equally, as Leah Leneman’s works on the campaign for women’s suffrage in Scotland made clear, Dundee was a major centre of suffragette activity before the Great War, and Dundee women such as Agnes Husband were well known figures in the suffragette movement.9

Clearly, women have made a large contribution to Dundee’s history, and so it might be presumed that when women began to play a major role in Scottish party politics after the Great War that Dundee would be a location in which women would make a substantial impact in political life. Some evidence suggests that this was indeed the case, notably the fact that Dundee was the first Scottish city to return a woman to parliament.10 Yet, other evidence presents a different picture. Dundee was the last of Scotland’s four cities to have a female councillor, and had only elected two women councillors by 1939.11 If Dundee really was more “matriarchal” than other parts of Scotland it would be reasonable to expect its female citizens would play a significant role in its municipal affairs in the period when Scotland gained its first female city councillors. Thus it is important to examine carefully women’s involvement in Dundee’s council elections in
this period and to analyse and establish how it compares with other parts of Scotland. Moreover, if Dundee women made less of an impact in municipal elections than women elsewhere it needs to be asked why was this the case and how does it relate to Dundee’s image as a “woman’s town”?

**Dundee, women candidates and council elections**

Despite the existence of a decent amount of literature on the activities of suffragettes in Dundee, until recently very little had been written on women’s involvement in party politics after 1918. Moreover, some of what had been written contained inaccuracies. For example, Watson claimed that Mrs Lily Miller was the first woman to stand for the Town Council in Dundee when in fact she was the third.\(^\text{12}\) General histories of Dundee have tended to say almost nothing about women’s political involvement after 1918 other than making token mentions of a few figures. The one female political figure who has tended to be mentioned in such works is the Communist, Mary Brooksbank. However, this is more a reflection of her later fame as a writer of folk songs and poetry, as her involvement in party politics was less significant than many of her female contemporaries.\(^\text{13}\)

The lack of writing on women in Dundee politics after 1918 is surprising as the city did have one very important female politician. She was Florence Horsbrugh, the Unionist MP for Dundee between 1931 and 1945. A well-known speaker for the Unionist Party who had previously addressed political meetings in Dundee, Horsbrugh was the first woman MP to be elected in a Scottish city. This achievement was made all the more remarkable by the fact that she is to date both the only woman and the only Unionist (or Conservative) to be returned to Westminster by the voters of Dundee. During her time as an MP for Dundee, Horsbrugh became one of the most well known female political figures in Britain and from 1939 until 1945 served as a junior minister in
the Chamberlain and Churchill governments. Thus, to some extent, her success could be said to support the idea that Dundee was indeed a women’s town.14

However, Horsbrugh’s election was in some senses ironic, as in 1931 Dundee was the only city in Scotland not to have a female town councillor. Indeed, relatively few women had even tried to seek election to Dundee Council by this point. In 1913 Margaret Steel had sought election as an independent candidate, but had polled very poorly, which, along with the four year suspension of municipal elections after 1914, may have dissuaded other women from seeking election to the council. This might explain why it took until 1924, when Miss Annie Lamont contested Ward III for the Labour Party, for a woman to again fight a council seat in the city.15 By now, as in many other parts of Scotland, municipal elections in Dundee were dominated by battles between the Labour Party and a locally-run centre-right group made up of independents, Liberals and Unionists. In Dundee the latter group was known as the Municipal Electors Association (MEA) and its candidates were usually referred to as Moderates. On paper, Miss Lamont had apparently been selected for a winnable ward, for it was centred on Lochee, which had a high working-class Roman Catholic population and so seemed fertile territory for Labour, who already held the other two seats in the ward.16 However, her MEA-backed opponent, David Neave, was a popular and long-serving councillor and despite Lamont mounting a strong campaign he managed to defeat her by 217 votes. This was no disgrace. The election was a fairly poor one for Labour in Dundee and Lamont did achieve the highest percentage of the poll of any Labour candidate in the city.17 Nonetheless, she would never contest another election in Dundee. Labour contested only the wards it held in 1925, and by the time of the 1926 municipal elections Lamont was dead, having taken her own life earlier that year. The death of Lamont was widely seen as a tragedy
with even newspapers, which were normally hostile to the Labour Party and its members, paying tribute to this “estimable and gifted” woman.\textsuperscript{18}

The year 1926 was undoubtedly crucial in women’s struggles to gain a place on Dundee Corporation. Lamont’s death arguably removed from the field the woman most likely to make a breakthrough in a municipal election, but the year was also significant in that it marked the debut of Lily Miller as a council candidate. Miller, a former parish councillor, was a leading light in the local Labour Party, and was chosen to be its candidate for Ward II (which had never returned a Labour councillor). Miller did not come close to victory, but this proved to be the start of a determined bid to become a councillor. In the next eight years she made another seven attempts to gain election; all in wards that were Moderate strongholds. While no more successful on these occasions than she had been in 1926, she at least made a name for herself. Very few other women sought election at this time. Mary Brooksbank fought in the elections of November 1930 and 1931 and a by-election in 1931 as a Communist, but never came remotely near to success. Between 1931 and 1934 three other women, all from the left of the political spectrum, made bids to become councillor, but all polled poorly in contests that they had little realistic chance of winning.\textsuperscript{19}

Finally, in 1935 Lily Miller’s perseverance paid off. Chosen as one of the Labour Party’s three candidates for the newly created Ward XII (based around the solidly working-class Hilltown), she topped the poll to become Dundee’s first female councillor.\textsuperscript{20} Her success was undoubtedly partly the result of the fact that she had built up a high profile from her previous election attempts and various roles she had held in the local Labour Party, including that of parliamentary election agent to the two Labour candidates at the 1935 general election.\textsuperscript{21} However, it can also be attributed to the fact that Miller was an able politician as can be seen from her later
career during which she held a number of important positions on the council, including two spells as Convener of the Education Committee and a year as senior Bailie (which in effect meant she was the second most senior councillor in Dundee after the lord provost). Miller’s abilities as a politician are further confirmed by the fact that she also held offices within the Labour Party at a Scottish level, being elected to the Executive of its Scottish Council in 1935 and eventually rising to be its president.

Whatever the case, Miller’s success did not usher in a new wave of female candidates. Indeed, in the 1936 municipal elections no woman contested a seat in Dundee (the first time this had happened since 1928). However, in 1937 the former Glasgow councillor Christina Muir was chosen as a Labour candidate for Ward IX, which her party had (somewhat surprisingly) won the previous year. Muir ran a fairly effective campaign and although unsuccessful she did enough to be selected to fight the ward again the following year. This time she emerged victorious and with the popular Miller being returned unopposed Dundee finally had two female councillors. Muir would leave the council during the Second World War, but her departure was offset by the co-option of veteran suffragette and Labour activist Lila Clunas as a councillor for Ward III. In 1945 Clunas was returned to the council along with her Labour colleague Agnes Holway and Marjorie Meredith, Dundee’s first female Moderate councillor. Moreover, in the same year Lily Miller became Dundee’s first woman councillor to be elected to the office of Bailie (magistrate) and in 1946 the number of women on the council increased to five.

However, this apparent new dawn was short lived. In 1947 Holway lost her council seat and Dundee Town Council would never again have as many as five female members (out of thirty-six) prior to its abolition in 1975. In fact after the election of Mrs. Jean Saggar in 1954 no new female councillor would emerge in Dundee
until 1971, and between May 1970 and May 1971 every councillor in Dundee was male. Furthermore, after Meredith’s retirement in 1956, no women from the right of the political spectrum would win an election in Dundee again until the first elections for the new Dundee District Council in 1974. When Dundee Town Council met for the last time in 1975 a total of just eight women had sat as councillors despite the fact that women had been eligible to seek election to it for almost seventy years.26

The above makes it possible to claim that in quantitative terms women did not make much of an impact in municipal politics in Dundee, a proposition that is strengthened when Dundee is compared with Scotland’s other three “counties of cities.” The first Scottish city to elect a female councillor was Edinburgh, where Mrs Ella Millar was returned for Morningside Ward in January 1919. By 1930 six of Edinburgh’s sixty-nine councillors were female and by the eve of the Second World War 14.5% of Edinburgh’s councillors were female (compared with 5.6% in Dundee). Glasgow’s example was similar, having female councillor from 1920. By the end of 1935 7.9% of councillors in Glasgow were women and a total of eighteen women had been elected to its council. Aberdeen took until 1930 to elect a female councillor and prior to the Second World War never had more than two women councillors at any one time. However, unlike Dundee (to which it had a similar size of council) it had elected a total of four women councillors by 1939.27

Equally, there were significant differences between Dundee and the other Scottish cities in terms of the percentage of council candidates who were female in the twenty annual council elections between the wars. In Dundee only 4% of candidacies were occupied by women, which compares poorly with the figures for Edinburgh (where 9.6% of candidacies were taken up by women) and Glasgow (6.9%). Even Aberdeen, with 4.3% of candidacies being made by women, bettered Dundee
in this respect. Women also seemed to have less chance of election in these annual contests in Dundee (and Aberdeen) than in Edinburgh or Glasgow. Between 1919 and 1938 in both Dundee and Aberdeen only 16.7% of female candidacies resulted in a woman being returned to the council. These percentages were far lower than the figures for Edinburgh (40.7%) and Glasgow (38.2%), and much lower than the percentage of male candidates who won election in Dundee in this period (52.4%).

Explaining the Trend
Clearly women’s involvement in municipal elections in interwar Dundee was weak for the standards of the time. Obviously this sits poorly with the idea of Dundee as a women’s town and with the general trend of Dundee’s women playing a very prominent part in the life of their city. So why did Dundee apparently shed its matriarchal image when it came to municipal party politics?

At a meeting of the National Council of Women in Dundee in 1929 the lack of female councillors in the city was remarked upon, a point *The Scotsman* emphasised in its reporting of the event. Participants at this meeting did offer some opinions as to why Dundee had yet to elect a female councillor, Mrs. Mudie of the local Women Citizen’s Association (WCA) suggested that there was a problem in finding women who were willing to seek election and that this was connected to the fact that the role of a councillor took up a considerable amount of time. As she noted, this was a difficulty as most women had home duties that they were expected to attend to. Mudie undoubtedly had a point, as councillors did indeed have a heavy workload in this period. When Lily Miller was elected to the council in 1935 she had to attend ninety-six meetings of the Council and its committees in her first six months as a councillor as well as finding time for campaigning. Most councillors were also appointed to at least one or two outside bodies such as the Board of Directors of Dundee High School.
High levels of female employment in Dundee would have meant the issue of having time for political and civic activity was particularly acute. As noted, the jute industry employed a high percentage of female workers and the levels of employment for married women were significantly higher in Dundee than most other parts of Scotland. Indeed, in 1921 24% of married women in Dundee worked compared with just 6% in Glasgow and 5.6% in Edinburgh. This undoubtedly meant that many working-class women in the city would have had little time for political activity, if they were expected to find time to work and their homes, husbands and children. Also election and other political meetings for women were often held in the afternoon, which would have been completely unsuitable for working women. Yet, this does not really explain the lack of right-of-centre female candidates in Dundee, and all over Scotland even women who did not work were expected to fill their days with activities such as housework and childcare, limiting their time for formal political activity. Thus, while undoubtedly having some influence, the high proportion of female workers in Dundee does not by itself explain the low numbers of female council candidates.

Mrs. Mudie also suggested that women who wanted to stand for office needed a little private income. While this would have been a problem for most working-class women it is difficult to see why this would have affected women in Dundee more than in Glasgow or Edinburgh. This also fails to explain why the MEA did not advance female candidates, as women with private income would be more likely to lend support to that body than a socialist group. In fact, the lack of time argument also is somewhat problematic when it comes the lack of Moderate female candidates. It would seem reasonable to assume that the women who were most likely to have free time to actively pursue a council career would have come from the kind of socioeconomic
background that enabled them to employ people to help with childcare and housework. It seems equally reasonable to assume that the majority of women from such a background would be more likely to belong to the Moderate ranks than those of the Labour Party. However Mudie’s arguments were at least plausible, unlike the views of another individual present at the NCW meeting. While many factors may have played a part in the lack of female councillors and council candidates in Dundee, the theory mooted by Frances Warrack (a councillor in St. Andrews), that Dundonian women were either “cowards” or were too “selfish” to seek election, was simply not a credible explanation.\textsuperscript{33}

A seemingly more promising factor in explaining these trends is the unusual position of the Scottish Co-operative Women’s Guild (SCWG) in Dundee. Founded in the 1890s, the SCWG had 201 branches and some 17,385 members by 1918 and it greatly expanded during the interwar period. However, it was conspicuously unsuccessful in Dundee, where there was no branch until the early 1920s and never more than a tiny membership.\textsuperscript{34} Dundee’s female employment patterns may partly explain this, as the SCWG arguably would have appealed more to housewives than female workers. As Gordon observes, while the SCWG encouraged women to participate in political activity, it “defined women’s province as the home.” Gordon also notes that during the Glasgow Rent Strikes in 1915 the Guild held meetings in the afternoon as it was thought that that would be a suitable time for housewives to attend.\textsuperscript{35} It is unclear when the Guild held its meetings in Dundee, but if they were in the afternoon they would have been awkward for working women to attend. On the other hand the SCWG did interest itself in women workers, for example joining with the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Scottish Socialist Party in 1933 to form a joint committee, the aims of which included helping “working women.”\textsuperscript{36} Equally, meetings could presumably have been rescheduled if the
demand was there and large numbers of working-class housewives in Dundee were not in employment. Consequently the local Guild’s very low membership figures cannot be explained by female working patterns alone. In all probability, the crucial reason for the SCWG’s failure in Dundee was the fact that the Dundee Eastern Co-operative Society (Dundee’s main co-operative society) was non-political and so had no motive for encouraging women to join an overtly political body which openly supported the Labour Party.37

The Guild’s weakness in Dundee was unfortunate. While not formally tied to the Labour Party, the SCWG did become involved in Labour’s election campaigns and provided its members with a political education. Thus it was an obvious way into party politics. Indeed several councillors and council candidates in other parts of Scotland were prominent figures in the SCWG including Edinburgh’s Janet Swan Brunton. The SCWG was also known to campaign actively for Labour candidates and raise money for their campaigns, so local Labour parties would have had some motive to offer at least one or two of its members the chance to fight municipal contests.38 Consequently, the virtual absence of this body from the scene in Dundee undoubtedly weakened the number of politically active socialist women.

This idea is partially reinforced by the fact that there were some signs that the Labour Party did not have as much success in organising or gaining female members in Dundee as it did in other parts of Scotland. It was noted in 1937 by Labour’s Scottish Woman’s organiser Agnes Lauder that Dundee had “only” two Labour Party Women’s Sections and it can be inferred that this total was seen by Lauder as disappointing.39 Moreover, while Dundee did produce an outstanding female party activist in the shape of Lily Miller, few other Dundee women could be said to have achieved a national profile in the Labour Party in the interwar period. Thus, it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that the scarcity of
Labour women who ran for the council was at least in part caused by the nature of the organisation of socialist women in Dundee.

In turn, this may have made Labour’s opponents in Dundee feel there was no need to nominate female candidates. However, the complete absence of Moderate women from council elections before 1945 is puzzling. Although Moderate Parties in other parts of Scotland generally fielded fewer women candidates than Labour in this period, all the other cities had some women candidates and councillors from the right of the political spectrum. Moreover, given that the local Unionist Party, whose membership contained many prominent members of the MEA, selected a female parliamentary candidate, it seems odd that the MEA should not run women. Indeed the Dundee Unionists would apparently had many active women members and it is surprising that some of them at least did not seek election to the council. It has been suggested that Moderate groups were less likely to run female candidates because their candidates and leadership were mostly made up of notable local business owners and professionals, and, as few women fitted this profile, women had less of an involvement in such groups. However in Glasgow in 1920 the Good Government League, which ran Moderate candidates in that city, was founded with input from that city’s Women Citizens’ Association (WCA), which perhaps explains why Glasgow had four female Moderate councillors by 1921. Elsewhere, most notably in Edinburgh, the local WCA sometimes ran candidates of its own, including Mrs Euphemia Somerville, who served on Edinburgh Council from 1919 until her death in 1935, and was closely associated with its Moderate councillors.

Why did the Dundee WCA not do likewise? It did have some involvement in backing candidates for elections to Dundee Parish Council and Dundee Education Authority, but the electoral politics of these were very
different from the those of Dundee Town Council, with candidates endorsed by religious bodies being involved and, by and large, being less party political than the town council elections. The WCA's leadership was politically diverse and included the Unionist Lady Edith Baxter and Agnes Husband of the Independent Labour Party. Moreover, at its establishment the WCA defined itself as a non-party and non-political association. Thus partisan participation in council elections risked damaging the unity of the Association. Experience elsewhere had shown that this could easily happen: Edinburgh WCA's endorsement of the female Liberal Candidate for Edinburgh South at the 1922 General Election, alienated its Unionist members and led to it limiting its involvement in party politics. Dundee’s Moderates also had reason to be wary of deals with the WCA. In 1922 the MEA had endorsed several WCA parish council candidates including Lily Miller, who, once on the parish council, regularly voted with its sole Labour member against MEA positions.

However, perhaps the crucial point is that it was not just at municipal level that women made a limited impact in Dundee’s party politics. Despite Dundee’s reputation as a women’s town there is a long-term trend of women struggling to make an impact in formal politics in Dundee in comparison to other parts of Scotland. Dundee was considerably slower than Edinburgh in electing women to the first public bodies women could run for election to. While Edinburgh School Board had a female membership from the time of its creation in 1872, Dundee School Board had to wait until 1891 for a female member. Edinburgh Parish Council had two women sitting among its elected members by 1889, but Dundee did not elect a female parish councillor until 1904. Moreover, Dundee seemed reluctant to give its female representatives promoted positions. It was the last of the cities to appoint one of its women councillors to the office of Bailie and it was not until 1999 that a female
councillor in Dundee would be elected Lord Provost.\textsuperscript{15}

Equally, Dundee’s record of running women for parliament in the twentieth century was unimpressive. Horsbrugh remains the city’s only ever female representative at Westminster, and Dundee was the last of the four cities to have a female parliamentary candidate, with Horsbrugh’s 1931 candidacy being the first time a woman contested a seat in the city. In contrast all the other Scottish cities had had at least one female candidate by 1924. Comparison between Aberdeen and Dundee is particularly revealing. In Aberdeen, which like Dundee returned two MPs to Westminster, 17.6\% of all candidates in parliamentary elections between 1918 and 1970 were female, compared with only 4.5\% in Dundee.\textsuperscript{46}

There were early signs that women wishing to represent Dundee in parliament might face difficulties. Edith Baxter was chosen by the Dundee Unionist Association as one of its two candidates to fight the two-member Dundee seat at the 1923 General Election, but she stood down following a hostile media reaction to her selection. Ostensibly this was based on the fact that the local press wished the Unionists and Liberals to run one candidate each and present a united ‘moderate’ front against the incumbent socialist MPs (Labour’s E. D. Morel and the Prohibitionist Edwin Scrymgeour).\textsuperscript{47} However, it seems that Lady Baxter’s sex also played a part in the opposition she faced. The Unionist supporting morning newspaper \textit{The Courier} claimed in an editorial that “a large majority of Dundee electors will undoubtedly consider that the city ought to be represented by a man.”\textsuperscript{48} This suggests that there was discomfort in the city at the idea of a woman standing for parliament more than five years after women had been granted the right to do so. Interestingly, the Unionists themselves seemed to be wary about selecting a woman. When planning to advance a candidate for what would eventually be the 1922 general election they had approached Lady Baxter,
but on this occasion she declined and instead proposed Dame Helen Gwynne Vaughn. However, the selection committee rejected her idea on the curious grounds that “it would be injudicious to put forward any lady candidate other than Lady Baxter or some other local lady.”49 However, it seems unlikely that the Unionists would have taken this stance with a male candidate from outside the city. Indeed, previous Unionist candidates such as Ernest Shackleton had no connection with Dundee, and in 1918 and 1922 the Dundee Unionist Association tacitly supported the Liberal Winston Churchill who, as well as being English, was frequently criticised for his lack of attention to Dundee while MP for the city. Thus, while the Dundee Unionists were prepared to support a woman they knew well - she was a senior member of the Dundee Unionist Association and her husband had twice contested Dundee - they were not completely comfortable with the idea of women standing for parliament. Even when Horsbrugh was selected as the Unionist candidate for Dundee in 1930, it seems not everyone was happy with the choice as at least one member of the Association initially indicated they would have liked the selection committee to have offered the Association’s General Council a local candidate.50

It also should be noted that Horsbrugh’s election was surprising. As mentioned, other than Horsbrugh no Conservative or Unionist has ever won a parliamentary election in Dundee since the passing of the Great Reform Act. When Horsbrugh was selected in 1930 there was little reason to suppose that this record was about to change as even when the Conservatives and Unionist had scored a landslide victory nationally in the 1924 general election the Unionist candidate in Dundee had not come close to victory. Those who selected Horsbrugh therefore would have thought it unlikely that she would be elected. Her ultimate success partly reflects her exceptional campaigning skills, but was also due to an economic crisis and the unforeseen national shift of
political momentum towards Ramsay McDonald’s National Government, which she supported. However, the important point is that when selected Horsbrugh was not really being chosen as prospective MP, but as candidate for an unwinnable seat. The possibility that the Unionists might have selected a male candidate if they had known they had a good chance of victory in Dundee cannot easily be dismissed.

After Horsbrugh’s defeat in 1945 there were only two occasions when a female parliamentary candidate sought election in the city prior to 1983, and both of these attempts were made by Conservatives who had no serious prospect of success. In the same period the Labour Party, which always had a strong chance of victory in the city, only once selected a woman candidate, the Glasgow councillor Jean Mann. Mann’s selection followed the 1935 election when Horsbrugh and the Liberal Dingle Foot had inflicted a second defeat on the party when it had been fairly confident of victory. It seems possible that Labour turned to Mann, because they thought that as a well-known female figure she was well placed to beat Horsbrugh. Ultimately, Mann resigned the nomination and after Horsbrugh’s defeat in 1945 Labour did not select another female candidate to fight Dundee in the twentieth century.\(^{51}\)

Perhaps Dundee’s male political leaders were wary of women playing a major role in their city’s politics and governance. Despite the prominent parts played by women in other aspects of Dundee’s development, such a notion cannot be dismissed out of hand, particularly given The Courier’s statement on Lady Baxter’s candidature. Another apparent instance of Dundee politicians demonstrating bias against women came in 1928 when elements within the local Labour Party organisation tried to remove the Labour Party women’s sections’ right to nominate possible candidates for elected office.\(^{52}\) The previous year the Vice President of Dundee Unionist Association opposed moves to appoint
a woman’s organiser on the grounds that this would be an unnecessary expense; suggesting that he did not think women’s participation in politics was particularly important. Even Lily Miller faced gender-based prejudice, for, according to the Moderate Lord Provost Garnet Wilson, she was the victim of an unsuccessful de-selection attempt by colleagues who were jealous of her occupying a safe seat. Additionally, the poor success rate for female candidates in Dundee strongly suggests that women were either being mostly chosen to fight seats their party was likely to lose (as Miller’s experience before 1935 would suggest) or were finding less favour with the voters than male candidates. The latter option however seems unlikely for, with the partial exception of Lamont’s defeat, there was no occasion when a woman in interwar Dundee lost a seat that her party would have been expected to win.

The idea that women’s political activity in Scotland (and elsewhere) was hampered by a feeling that women should not be participating in the world of party politics is not a new one. However, at face value it would seem odd that this could be a particular problem in a city where women made up a large proportion of the workforce and which owed its main centre of learning to a woman. Yet, perhaps it was the very fact that women played such a prominent role in other aspects of working and public life in Dundee that caused this limited female impact in municipal (and, to an extent, parliamentary) politics in the city. Catriona Beaumont has claimed that after the social upheaval of the Great War there was a “desire to return to normality,” and, consequently, British women were encouraged to focus on their traditional domestic roles as wives and mothers. Other historians have argued that the Great War actually reinforced the difference between men and women and prepared the way for a period of reaffirmation of “traditional ‘feminine’ values” and a “postwar misogynistic backlash.” Possibly the (temporary) movement of
mass numbers of women into the workplace combined with the granting of the parliamentary franchise to some women had led to unease that gender roles were changing. This ties in with the idea advanced by some historians, including Hughes, that the period after 1918 saw a crisis in masculinity, with men feeling threatened by the fact that women appeared to be moving into areas that were traditionally masculine and usurping men. Hughes argues that on Clydeside this contributed to a process whereby men subordinated women and restricted their political activity.57

If this was happening in Glasgow it was surely also happening in Dundee, where men would have had strong motivation to be worried about the possibility of changing gender roles. It has been argued that at this time many Scotsmen used their status as breadwinners and their hard and dangerous work in the mines and heavy industries to define their masculine identity.58 Yet in Dundee there was already a widespread (if not entirely accurate) image in Scotland of Dundee men staying at home as “kettle boilers” while their wives worked.59

Equally, while Dundee had heavy industries it was jute spinning, marmalade production and journalism that were the city’s best-known activities. None would be perceived as particularly masculine occupations and indeed could all be seen to have ties to the domestic world. Thus the almost feminine image of the city could have caused many of Dundee’s men to feel their masculinity was being usurped and resent women’s visible participation in public life. It has been suggested that psychology plays a part in forming patriarchal cultures with male fears of women causing men to create social institutions that boost their self-confidence and self-worth.60 Politics was clearly seen as masculine area and Dundee’s male leaders, even on a subconscious level, must have feared women taking a leading role in one area that men clearly dominated – the representation and governance of their city. This undoubtedly would
have prejudiced many men against female politicians and given them a desire to limit female involvement in local government. Thus, Dundee’s reputation as a “women’s town” may have actually hindered women from becoming councillors in the city, and ensured that Dundee would, in terms of governance, be patriarchal rather than matriarchal.

**Conclusion**

Women’s impact in municipal party politics in Dundee in the interwar period was much less obvious than it was in Scotland’s other cities. In quantitative terms, Dundee had the lowest percentage of candidates who were female and had the fewest women councillors. Dundee also took substantially longer than the other cities to elect a woman to its council and never gained a substantial group of female councillors.

A number of factors influenced this course of events, with the failure of the SCWG to make a substantial impact in the city and the high numbers of married women in Dundee who worked both undoubtedly having a significant impact. However, the lack of female councillors in interwar Dundee was part of a wider pattern. The election of Horsbrugh aside, there was a clear trend of women making a slower and more limited quantitative impact as candidates and elected representatives in electoral party politics in nineteenth and twentieth century Dundee when compared with other parts of Scotland. This wider problem suggests that there was something in the nature of the city’s population, or at least in its political and civic leaders, that made it difficult for women to pursue a political career. Women in Dundee did, on occasion, face open hostility to their political ambitions and the poor win ratio for female candidates suggests that Dundee’s political parties were reluctant to select women for winnable council seats. If Dundee’s male municipal leaders were more reluctant to give women a prominent place in the governance
of their city, it does seem reasonable to suggest that this might have been a reaction to the fact women were already perceived to have an unusually high involvement in the public sphere in the city. At a time when gender roles seemed to be in flux it seems highly probable that some of Dundee’s leading political figures feared women becoming too powerful and wished to limit their political roles.

Thus, when it came to party politics, Dundee was not a “women’s town,” and its female politicians were certainly not operating in a “matriarchal” environment. Of course, this does not in itself come close to completely invalidating the idea that women played an unusually high profile role in the life of Dundee, for in other areas women undoubtedly did make more of an impact in Dundee than they did in most of the rest of Scotland. However, to simply label Dundee as a “woman’s town” is an over-simplification, which masks a more complicated relationship between gender and power in the city.
Notes

1 For example a variation of this claim is used on a University of Dundee webpage. http://www.dundee.ac.uk/wcs/whydundee Accessed 18 August 2010.


6 Based on figures quoted in Mary Lily Walker et al., *Report On Housing and Industrial Conditions and Medical Inspection Of School Children by the Social Enquiry Committee of the Dundee Social Union* (Dundee: Dundee Social Union, 1905), 48.


8 See particularly Norman Watson, *Daughters of Dundee* (Dundee: Linda McGill, 1997); and Mary Henderson, *Dundee Women’s Trail: Twenty Five Footsteps Over Four Centuries* (Dundee: Dundee Women’s Trail, 2008).


11 Baxter, “‘Estimable and Gifted’?,” 132.


13 The fact Brooksbank wrote a volume of memoirs and recorded an oral testimony describing her life has also undoubtedly contributed to her greater prominence.

14 Baxter, “‘Estimable and Gifted’?,” 205-207 & passim. Note that until 1965 the Conservative Party in Scotland was officially known as the Unionist Party.

15 At least two local newspapers had forgotten Steel’s candidacy as they described Lamont as the first woman to seek election to Dundee Council. See The Dundee Advertiser, 29 Sep. 1924, and The [Dundee] Evening Telegraph and Post, 3 Nov. 1924.

16 The Dundee Advertiser, Sep.-Nov. 1924, passim. Dundee’s council wards had no names.

17 The Dundee Advertiser, 5 Nov. 1924. Neave’s obituary gives some idea of his popularity and stature: see Dundee Central Library, Dundee Public Library Obituary Book No.2 1910-1935, 118.

18 People’s Journal, 7 Aug. 1926. See also The [Dundee] Courier and Advertiser, July-Aug. 1926.


20 The Courier and Advertiser, 6 Nov. 1935.

21 The Courier and Advertiser, 28 Oct. 1935; and The Dundee Directory, Various Volumes (Dundee: Burns & Harris, Ltd, various).

22 See Baxter, “Radical Toun or Conservative City?,” passim.

23 See Glasgow City Archives TD 1384/1/1-2, Labour Party Collection. Scottish Executive Committee Minutes,1935-1939 & 1939-1945, passim.
24 The Courier and Advertiser, 3 Nov. 1937 & 2 Nov. 1938
25 Ibid., 1942-1946 passim. Why Muir left the council was not made clear in contemporary press reports or in the council minutes.
26 Baxter, “Radical Toun or Conservative City?,” 26-31.
27 Baxter, “‘Estimable and Gifted’?,” Chapter 2, passim.
28 Figures calculated from election results as reported in the minutes of the stated councils and The Scotsman, The Glasgow Herald, The Aberdeen Press and Journal, The Dundee Advertiser, and The Courier and Advertiser.
29 The Scotsman, 9 March 1929
32 The Scotsman, 9 March 1929
33 Ibid. Warrack’s sentiments probably stem from traditional rivalry between Dundee and the North East of Fife and would likely have been taken in this context by Dundonians. It is however tempting to speculate that Warrack deliberately made this provocative claim in an attempt to spur Dundee’s women on to prove her wrong.
34 Glasgow City Archives, CWS 1/39/6/24-51 Scottish Co-operative Womens’ Guild. Annual Reports and Balance Sheets 1918-1945, passim.
35 Gordon, Women in the Labour Movement in Scotland, 269
36 The Scotsman, 29 Nov. 1933
37 University of Dundee Archives Services, MS 165, “Co-operation in Dundee” by William M. Duncan. Unpublished manuscript (c. 1942), 61-62. Presumably for the same reason the Co-operative Party (the political organisation the SCWG was most closely connected to) was not a force in Dundee politics
38 For example in 1955 Burntisland Co-operative Women’s Guild raised money for Labour candidates in that year’s burgh council elections. See The Fife Free Press, 16 April 1955.
39 The Labour Woman, Dec. 1937
40 Baxter, “‘Estimable and Gifted’?,” Chapter 2, passim
41 Ibid. 107 & 163; and James J Smyth, “Resisting Labour: Unionists, Liberals, and Moderates in Glasgow between the Wars,” The Historical Journal, 46 No. 2 (2003), 381-382. Edinburgh’s Moderates (later Progressives) were a very loose group, particularly before the late 1920s. Most evidence suggests that while Somerville usually supported the Moderates, she was an Independent.

42 Dundee City Archives. Dundee Women Citizens’ Association Minute Book 1, 29 April 1918.


44 The Dundee Advertiser Oct-Nov. 1922 passim; and Dundee Combination Parish Council Minutes of Council and Committees 1922-1925 passim.

45 The Dundee Directory, passim; Edinburgh Parish Council: Minutes of Council and Committees Feb. 1888-Jan 1889, passim; and Leneman, A Guid Cause, 271


47 The Courier, 20-23 Nov. 1923; and The Dundee Advertiser, 21-23 Nov. 1923. This system of one Liberal and one Unionist fighting the two member seat continued until the division of Dundee into two constituencies in 1950.

48 The Courier, 20 Nov. 1923.

49 University of Dundee Archive Services, MS 270/1/1/1 Dundee Unionist Association Collection. Dundee Unionist Association Minute Book 1909-1935, 20 Feb. 1921.

50 Ibid. 16 Sep. 1930.

52 The Dundee Free Press, 13 Jan. 1928.

53 University of Dundee Archive Services, MS 270/1/1/1 30 Dec. 1927. Ultimately a motion to appoint a woman’s organiser was carried 23-2 with one abstention.

54 Dundee Central Library Local History Unit. Special Articles Cuttings Book, 10th May 1969-3rd August 1971, 52. Wilson implies that this attempt took place prior to 1945, but he is otherwise vague on the details. However, he may be referring to an incident in c1944 that resulted in Miller briefly being suspended from the Labour Party for her alleged mishandling of a circular on school meals. See Glasgow City Archives TD 1384/1/2 28 Oct. 1944 & 6 Jan. 1945.


