

Nancy Astor : letters from TE Lawrence and GB Shaw

Special Collections featured item for March 2010 by
Rebecca Jennings, Library Assistant.

**Letters from the Papers of Nancy Astor (MS 1416) University of Reading Special
Collections Services.**



Lady Astor, by John Singer Sargent, 1909.

Nancy Astor (née Langhorne) was born in Virginia USA, in May 1879, and was one of eleven children. After humble beginnings for the family, her father, Chiswell Dabney Langhorne, made his fortune in railway construction, pushing the family into a higher sphere of society. As one of so many children, and not the most attractive of the girls, Nancy made sure she was noticed by her ready wit, which she later became famous for, both in and out of Parliament. After a disagreeable period at Miss Brown's Academy for Young Ladies, a finishing school in New York, Nancy met and married Robert Gould Shaw in 1897. The marriage was a disaster. Her husband's heavy drinking and sexual demands were distasteful to Nancy and the couple divorced in 1903.



In the following years Nancy made several trips to Europe, and particularly enjoyed the hunting season and society of England. It was on a trip to England that Nancy met Waldorf Astor, son of the eccentric millionaire William Waldorf Astor. They married in May 1906 and her new father-in-law gave them his property at Cliveden (*shown above*) as a wedding present. Situated on the Thames between Windsor and Maidenhead, Cliveden became the focal point of Nancy's new social life in England, as it was here that she and Waldorf entertained a vast array of people from politicians and royalty to famous actors and writers of the time. Nancy was keen to turn Cliveden into, "a house where the most interesting and the most important people in the country came."ⁱ However, Nancy was not merely a socialite, but developed her own career in politics, and in 1919 become the first female MP to sit in Parliament. With her wit and tendency to be outspoken Nancy made herself heard on many issues including World War II and various women's issues. Yet she continued to entertain a variety of people, no matter what their political beliefs.



The experience of her first marriage left Nancy a strict teetotaler, and caused her to shun physical relationships for the rest of her life. She even once told her own children that they were, "conceived without pleasure."ⁱⁱ Perhaps this is why Nancy instead developed several close platonic relationships with well-known male figures throughout her life. Two of the most notable of these were author TE Lawrence (*shown above*), known as 'Lawrence of Arabia' (1888-1935), and Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

338171 A/C Shaw.
R.A.F. Caterham
Plymouth

6. VI. 29

Dear Lady Astor

How often we write to one another! It is an affecting spectacle.

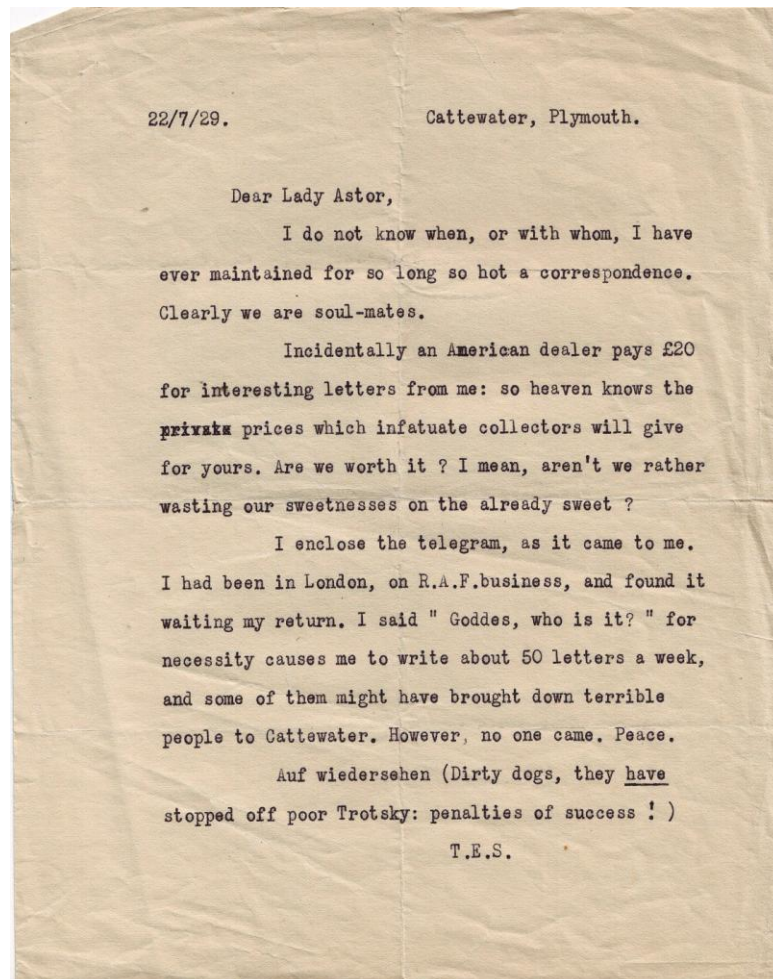
So there you are, M.P. for again a while. Not so long a while as usual, I fancy. However you'll have more fun while it lasts. My chief regret at the passing of the Government is ~~that~~ that Sir Philip Sassoon loses the U.S. of S. for Air! Winston will be happier in opposition, & may make friends with his party now. For the rest, I'd do the lot up in a bundle (the very splendid Prime Minister of course not included) and sell them for 2^d. if 2^d was bid. Winston & Ormsby Gore excluded from the sale catalogue, because I like them.

I apologise for keeping the G. B. S. letter for so long. I wanted to offer it to Gabriel Wells (a book-seller) who would have given me the price of a Rolls Royce for it. The R.R. I should have driven to Cliveden & handed over to you, or to Michael, if you refused the bargain. It is a gem of a letter.

Also, I can't come to Cliveden. Nor will I see Elliot Tovey. Thank you all the same. The best way to be content

Nancy got to know Lawrence in the 1920s when he was serving in the RAF. They wrote many letters to one another (see examples above and below), and Lawrence also visited Cliveden where, to Waldorf's horror, he would take Nancy for rides on his motorcycle. The two characters were attracted to each other as they both appeared to be "romantic figures who could enjoy a close relationship without any demands being made on either side."ⁱⁱⁱ And this would certainly appear to be the case from Lawrence's letters. All his letters are very jovial and friendly, some would say flirtatious, even though the relationship was platonic. While in his early letters Lawrence addresses Nancy as 'Lady Astor', this later become more informal calling her mockingly 'Milady', 'Peeress', 'Viscountess' and even 'mi Vykowntess'. The beginning of the letter above begins "How often do we write to one another! It is an affecting spectacle". Another letter, shown below, states; "I do not know when or with whom I have ever maintained so long so hot a correspondence. Clearly we are soul mates!" This clearly testifies to the close friendship the pair enjoyed. Through

their letters they discussed numerous topics, including Nancy's political career and preceding her election Lawrence states "everyone says you are too certain a choice for the election: a dangerous attitude." Tragically their friendship was cut short when Lawrence was killed in a motorcycle accident in 1935.



22/7/29. Cattewater, Plymouth.

Dear Lady Astor,

I do not know when, or with whom, I have ever maintained for so long so hot a correspondence. Clearly we are soul-mates.

Incidentally an American dealer pays £20 for interesting letters from me: so heaven knows the ~~privak~~ prices which infatuate collectors will give for yours. Are we worth it ? I mean, aren't we rather wasting our sweetnesses on the already sweet ?

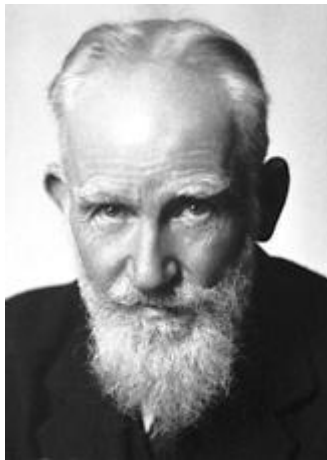
I enclose the telegram, as it came to me. I had been in London, on R.A.F.business, and found it waiting my return. I said " Goddes, who is it? " for necessity causes me to write about 50 letters a week, and some of them might have brought down terrible people to Cattewater. However, no one came. Peace.

Auf wiedersehen (Dirty dogs, they have stopped off poor Trotsky: penalties of success !)

T.E.S.

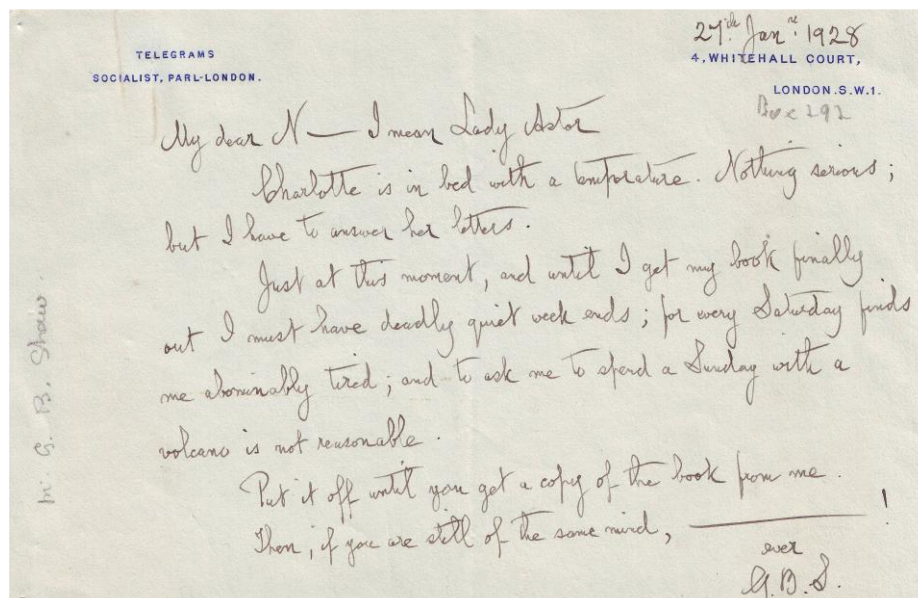
Nancy and Lawrence had a mutual friendship with George Bernard Shaw and his wife Charlotte; Lawrence even went by the surname Shaw for a number of years and in the first letter shown above Lawrence mentions a correspondence from Shaw. That Nancy's friendship with Shaw was purely platonic is not in question. Nancy and Waldorf were both friends with Shaw and his wife, and Nancy was a great support to Shaw through all of Charlotte Shaw's illnesses and after her death. Shaw described Nancy as, "a unique and amusing phenomenon" and said that their friendship began almost instantly upon meeting; "in ten minutes we were as thick as thieves"^{iv}. By the time the pair met the best of Shaw's work was already behind

him, but he continued to work and wrote 'The Apple Cart' whilst on one of his visits to Cliveden in 1928^v.



Above left: Portrait of G.B. Shaw in 1925, when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.
Above right: Photograph of Nancy Astor and G.B. Shaw on a visit to Russia (from MS 1416 Papers of Nancy Astor).

Lady Astor's friendship with Shaw is all the more poignant for their differing political beliefs. While Nancy represented the Conservative Party in Parliament, Shaw was a staunch communist. Despite these differences the pair, along with Waldorf, visited Russia in 1931 (*see image above right*), and were even granted a rare interview with Stalin. In her usual manner Nancy did not mince her words and treated Stalin to her usual abruptness and sharp questions!



Like Lawrence's, Shaw's letters are very friendly and often playful which illustrates the familiarity of their friendship. He addressed her usually as 'dearest Nancy', but sometimes more jovially as 'Fancynancy' or as in the letter above: 'My dear N - I mean Lady Astor'. The letters often mention his wife Charlotte as in the letter above, or discuss his travels abroad. Shaw would also send Nancy postcards and photographs during their correspondence.

AYOT ST LAWRENCE, WELWYN, HERTS. STATION: WHEATHAMPSTEAD, L.A.N.E.R. 2 1/2 MILES. TELEGRAMS: BERNARD SHAW, CODICOTE. TELEPHONE: CODICOTE 18.

From Bernard Shaw. 4, WHITEHALL COURT (130) LONDON, S.W.1. PHONE: WHITEHALL 3160. TELEGRAMS: SOCIALIST, PARL-LONDON.

28th September 1939

My ^{dearest} Nancy

I think it is time for you, as a sensible woman trying to keep your political household of dunderheads and lunatics out of mischief, to get up in the House and point out the cruelty of keeping up the pretence of a three years war when everyone who can see three moves in front of his or her nose knows that the war is over. The pretence is ruining people in all directions at home and slaughtering them abroad.

The thoughtlessness of our guarantee to Poland has left us without a leg to stand on. Most unfortunately we pledged ourselves to go to her aid WITH ALL OUR RESOURCES; and when it came to the point we dared not use the only resource that could help her (our air bombers); for we had not a soldier within hundreds of miles of her frontiers nor a sailor in the Baltic; and a single bomb from us on the Rhine cities or Berlin would have started a retaliation match which would have left all the cities of the west in the same condition as Madrid and Warsaw. We should have warned the Poles that we could do nothing to stop the German steamroller, and that they must take it lying down as Chekoslovakia had to, until we had brought Hitler to his senses.

Fortunately our old pal Stalin stepped in at the right moment and took Hitler by the scruff of the neck: a masterstroke of foreign policy with six million red soldiers at its back.

What we have to do now is at once to give the order Cease fire and light up the streets: in short, call off the war and urge on Hitler that Poland will be a greater trouble to him than half a dozen Irelands if he oppresses it unbearably. But we must ^{remember} that as far as Poland's business is anybody's business but Poland's, it is more Russia's business and Germany's than ours. Also that we cannot fight Germany a ^{struggle} ~~struggle~~ with ruining both ourselves and Germany, and that we cannot fight Russia at all (neither can Hitler). The diehards who are still dreaming of a restoration of the Romanoffs and Bourbons and even the Stuarts, to say nothing of the Habsburgs, must be booted out of politics.

We should, I think, at once announce our intention of lodging a complaint with the International court against Hitler as being unfitted for State control, as he is obsessed by a Jewish complex: that of the Chosen Race, which has led him into wholesale persecution and robbery. Nothing should be said about concentration camps, because it was we who invented them.

I write this at Frinton in Essex; but we return to Ayot to-morrow and shall perhaps see you soon. Charlotte has had a terrible time here, but is much better this last week.

Waldorf might wave the red flag a bit in the House of Lords. Chamberlainism is no use on earth to him; and he might incidentally give America a lead. Geoffrey has heroically inserted two letters of mine in The Times, and has a third in his locker. I am deeply obliged to him.

Proletarians of all lands, unite!
The Labor Party is making the damndest fool of itself.
Our best love to you both.

In haste - packing
B.S.

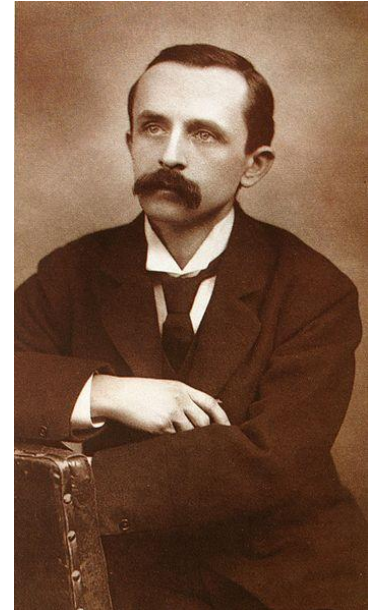
Not all of the pair's communication was light-hearted. They also considered more serious matters, such as the beginning of World War II as discussed in the letter above. Both liked challenging each other's opinions, and given Nancy's position in Parliament the pair had a good deal to discuss. Although Nancy's political career reached its peak in the 1920s she still had some influence and in 1939 joined the

Conservative rebels in forcing Neville Chamberlain from office^{vi}. During the war itself Nancy and Waldorf showed unwavering patriotism, and were especially active in keeping up morale in her constituency of Plymouth. Shaw's letter indicates that Nancy was happy to debate politics and her replies must have held some very interesting opinions. Shaw himself shows his own political leaning quite clearly by finishing off the above letter with 'Proletarians of all lands unite!'



Photograph of Nancy Astor (second from the right) and G.B. Shaw (far right), with Amy Johnson, the pioneering English aviatrix, and the comic actor Charlie Chaplin, at Cliveden (photograph from MS 1416 Papers of Nancy Astor).

Nancy and Shaw continued to correspond regularly until Shaw's death in 1950. Nancy was very prominent at the playwright's funeral and continued her connection with his family by corresponding with Shaw's cousin until Nancy's own death in May 1964.



Shaw and Lawrence were by no means Lady Astor's only correspondents. She also corresponded closely with the likes of J.M. Barrie (*see portrait above right*), Philip Kerr, the politician and diplomat (*see portrait above centre*), and the writer and poet, Hilaire Belloc (*shown above left*). Nancy Astor was a most unusual personality, with many conflicting aspects to her character, which is reflected in her choice of visitors to Cliveden. But it is through her more intimate friendships, such as those demonstrated in these marvellous letters, that we can begin to gain a deeper insight into Nancy's personality and learn about the person behind the title and the political opinions. Although she is sometimes seen as a fairly cold character, these letters would suggest otherwise. They show that Nancy was not only a politician and wife, but also a good friend, capable of commanding the loyalty and kindness of those lucky enough to be admitted to her inner circle.

ⁱ Masters, A., *Nancy Astor: A Life*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1981, p49.

ⁱⁱ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>, biography of Nancy Astor.

ⁱⁱⁱ Grigg, J., *Nancy Astor: Portrait of a Pioneer*, Sidgewick & Jackson: London, 1980, p114.

^{iv} Wearing, J.P. (ed.), *Bernard Shaw and Nancy Astor*, University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2005.

^v Grigg, J., *Nancy Astor: Portrait of a Pioneer*, Sidgewick & Jackson: London, 1980, p118.

^{vi} Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>, biography of Nancy Astor.