

Oxford DNB: March 2019

From March 2019, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*Oxford DNB*) offers biographies of 63,277 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,010 articles. 11,685 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

The March 2019 update adds 16 articles, containing 16 biographies, accompanied by 4 portrait likenesses. The particular focus is on women's lives in the nineteenth century and on twentieth-century women historians. These newly-added lives are introduced by Professor Rosemary Mitchell of Leeds Trinity University and by Dr Laura Carter of the University of Cambridge.

**Introduction to the women's lives in the nineteenth century,
by Professor Rosemary Mitchell**

The nineteenth-century women's lives in this release are extraordinarily varied, and allow us to see the social reality which underlay the hegemonic culture of the separate spheres. While nineteenth-century women never found establishing themselves in a range of social, political, cultural, and economic fields a straightforward matter, they nevertheless did so – and what facilitated their careers is sometimes unexpected.

Mary Seton Watts's emergence as a designer was undoubtedly aided by her marriage to the much older and highly celebrated artist, George Frederic Watts – a classic example of the male mentor or gate-keeper supporting a woman's access to opportunity – but we might be rather more surprised to see Evangelical Protestantism playing a facilitating role for some of our subjects. It was, after all, identified by Catherine Hall and

Leonora Davidoff, in their pioneering volume *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987), as a key force in the development of domestic ideology – leading scholars to underplay, perhaps, the potentially liberating character of nineteenth-century Christianity. Mary Ann Stodart may have maintained largely traditional views on gender roles, but her robust Evangelical faith allowed her to become a promoter of a more challenging education for women, and gave her access to publishing connections which furthered her own career as a writer. Martha Greatorex's life as a women organist and composer (less uncommon than we might suspect) was also underpinned by her Evangelical connections, as too, probably, was Catherine Vale Whitwell's career as an educationalist. Whitwell not only promoted scientific education for women, but developed new pedagogical techniques utilised in the radical context of Robert Owen's New Lanark community.

If these nineteenth-century lives make clear to us the extent of women's role in the development of education, they also highlight their success as business women in the apparently more inaccessible economic sphere. Sarah Macready may have begun her career as an actress whose professional success owed much to her marriage to William Macready, the theatre manager, but after his death she flourished as a theatre manager in her own right in the difficult contexts of Bristol, Bath, and Cardiff. Elma Stuart, best known as a close friend of George Eliot, had a late-flowering business career as a nutritional consultant, growing out of her attempts to cure her own health problems by dietary means. Meanwhile, Mary Harris Smith's brave decision to set up her own accountancy firm in the 1880s not only allowed her to act as the accountant for a range of societies supporting women's rights, but also – after a long campaign – to secure permanent recognition of women in her profession when she gained membership of the two accountancy professional bodies which had long found excuses for excluding her. What this historical hinterland to the

later nineteenth-century and twentieth-century campaigns for women's rights shows is the extent to which they were already active in an astonishing range of careers, exercising a limited but effective, creative, and highly adaptive agency within the patriarchal structures of British society.

Rosemary Mitchell

Introduction to the lives of twentieth-century women historians, by Dr Laura Carter

Two years ago, in March 2017, myself and colleagues at King's College London collaborated with the Institute of Historical Research (IHR) to launch an exhibition of women historians who had contributed to popular and academic history throughout the twentieth century. The exhibition was a sorely needed intervention at the IHR, whose staircase had hitherto been lined with a parade of former Directors who were, coincidentally, all male. Our idea was to supplement these portraits with an array of women whose professional lives were rarely as vaunted as their male colleagues, but whose presence would tell a story about the uneven development of women's entry into the historical profession. The exhibition, associated event, and conversations that followed have generated much new research into women historians and heritage workers, and it is from this context that this new release of *Oxford DNB* lives arises.

By the 1920s, when history was established as a 'proper' discipline in university departments in Britain, women made up about 16.5 per cent of the total community of academic historians. This figure was higher in London, where women historians were disproportionately, but understandably, concentrated at Bedford, Royal Holloway, and Westfield Colleges, which remained single-sex institutions for teaching women students until the 1960s. Our

exhibition featured several women whose careers were characterised by decades of teaching history at these institutions, but who had little chance to carry out much formal research. But, because of these imbalances, we were also keen to reach beyond the community of academic historians, and include women ‘doing history’ in other places and spaces.

Enid Porter and Agnes Willoughby Hodgson, who feature in this release, are examples of such women. Their lives ask us to widen and recalibrate the identity of ‘historian’ in twentieth-century British history. Hodgson made her name, and an independent living, writing commercially about antiques and collecting, tapping into expanding middle-class tastes for historical aesthetics in the early twentieth century. Porter, who trained as a school teacher before the Second World War like so many women graduates of her generation, spent the rest of her career running the Cambridge Folk Museum and collecting the everyday objects and stories of ordinary local people.

The inclusion of Elsa Goveia in the *Oxford DNB* likewise points to a loosening of assumptions about what a ‘historian’ looks like. The recent outpouring of new work in black British history has shown how crucial the writing of history was to articulations of citizenship and black radical thinking in Britain, and especially London, as decolonization gathered pace. Goveia came to study in London in 1945 from British Guiana (now Guyana), and quickly encountered resistance to her desire to work on Caribbean history from her superiors. Her work on British imperial slave societies combined rigorous research and creative methodological thinking, which ultimately helped to underpin sophisticated and challenging postcolonial critiques of the British Empire. Goveia’s inclusion reminds us how hybrid ‘activist-historian’ identities were forged across colonial and postcolonial networks in the twentieth-century. Indeed, I hope that this new set of biographies as a whole contribute to a more catholic way of

thinking about what it meant to be a historian in the British world in the twentieth-century.

Laura Carter

March 2019: summary of newly-added lives

Aged thirteen, **Martha Greateorex (c. 1759–1829)** succeeded her father as organist of St Martin's church, Leicester; a post that she held until 1800, among the often-ignored category of women organists employed by the churches of Georgian England. In the 1820s she published three of her musical compositions, aimed at 'an overwhelmingly female market of domestic keyboardists'. **Catherine Vale Whitwell (1789–1873)**, born into a nonconformist family originally from Coventry, read widely and had artistic talent. In her mid-twenties she opened a school for girls in Bloomsbury, London, whose curriculum included astronomy, and whose prospectus argued for the importance of women gaining knowledge of science and mathematics. She went on to teach in Robert Owen's schools in New Lanark. The actress and theatre manager **Sarah Macready (1790–1853)** began her career in the touring company of her future husband. After his death in 1829, she became lessee and manager of the Theatre Royal, Bristol along with, later, those at Cardiff and Bath. She displayed notable management skill, achieving an air of respectability for the venues as well as enabling the proprietors to receive significant returns on their investments.

Like her two unmarried sisters, **Mary Anne Stodart (bap. 1808, d. 1866)**, the daughter of a Carlisle businessman who seems to have got into financial difficulties, set up a school for girls. Settling in Hampstead, she also wrote advice books addressed to 'a Young Lady', which have been studied for their prescriptions of gender roles (her own writing ceased on her marriage), and staunchly advocated female education, though with a restricted curriculum. She also wrote patriotic verse to promote Evangelical Protestant nationalism. Her didactic children's poem, 'One Thing

at a Time', cited in 1900 by Theodore Roosevelt, continues to be included in self-help and devotional anthologies. Of independent means, **Sarah Frances [Fanny] Trevor (1818–1904)**, had no formal education, but she had experience of voluntary management of Church schools. In 1872 she was appointed 'lady principal' of the Bishop Otter Memorial College, Chichester, which had reopened as a training college to prepare 'gentlewomen' for teaching in Church elementary schools. During Trevor's principalship, which she took as an honorary position, the college acquired a leading place as a training institution, and she represented the college in dealings with government bodies, as well as giving extensive evidence to a royal commission. However, her authority and status were uncertain as the (male) chaplain oversaw important aspects of the running of the college.

2019 is the bicentenary of the birth of George Eliot, and the update includes the life of **Elma Stuart (1836/7–1903)**, the Scottish-born widow of an army officer who, while living in France where she worked as woodcarver to support her son, began a correspondence with Eliot and was admitted to her circle. Invalided by 'rheumatic gout', Stuart found relief in a diet-based system of cure, based on the consumption of cooked mince beef and warm water. Her self-help book on her cure, attracted influential endorsements and its sales brought her wealth. Her correspondence with Eliot was posthumously donated to the British Museum. The artist, designer, and architect **Mary Seton Watts (1849–1938)** studied at the South Kensington Art Training Schools and the Slade School of Art before meeting G. F. Watts, whom she married in 1886 after a long courtship. They settled at Compton, Surrey, where she worked as an artist, designed a mortuary chapel, and ran classes which aimed to teach disappearing crafts to rural communities. After her husband's death, she managed the Watts Gallery in Compton and was guardian of his legacy.

2019 is also the centenary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, and this release includes the lives of two women involved in removing the formal barriers to admission to the accountancy profession. The long career of **Mary Harris Smith (1844–1934)** began with her attending the pioneering bookkeeping classes run by the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, and she went on to establish her own accounting firm in Westminster, where her clients included women's organizations. From 1887 her attempts to gain admission to the professional accounting bodies were thwarted until, in 1920, aged seventy-five, she became the first woman chartered accountant. **Ethel Ayres Purdie (1874–1923)** began her working life as a clerk in the telegraph department of the Post Office, but after attending accounting classes at the Society of Arts, and taking the examinations of the London Chamber of Commerce, she set up in practice in Islington. Her applications for admission to the main accountancy organizations were rejected, though the newly-formed London Association of Accountants admitted her in 1909. She provided accounting services to women's suffrage organizations, became a leading figure in the Women's Tax Resistance League, and developed an expertise in personal taxation, especially of married women. A critic of the elite of the accountancy profession, she found no cause for celebration at the eventual admission of woman after the First World War.

While only in her early twenties, and under her unmarried name (Dorothy Gladish), **Dorothy May Meads (1891–1958)** published her first book, on the Tudor Privy Council. After an extension education at schools for girls founded in the late nineteenth century, and then study at University College, Nottingham, she took a London history degree and became a teacher. Widowed in the First World War, she taught at Dudley Teacher Training College, and then undertook doctoral research at King's College, London on early modern women's education, producing a major edition of the diary of Lady Margaret Hoby. Her later career as

principal of Bishop Otter College, Chichester, of which she was principal from 1936, and to which she brought ambitious plans, so overshadowed her early historical work that they were not always recognized as the achievements of the same individual.

Mary Doreen [Roddy] Lobel (1900–1993) grew up in a suffragist household in Bristol, went up to St Hugh's College, Oxford in 1919 to read history, and after a stint as a teacher, undertook research at Girton College, Cambridge, on the early history of Bury St Edmunds. For twenty years she edited the Victoria County History of Oxford and Oxfordshire, overseeing five volumes in ten years, but her crowning achievement was as general editor of the British Historic Towns atlas series. The New York-born alumna of Barnard College, Columbia University, **Beatrice Lamberton Becker Warde (1900–1969)** moved to London in 1925 and lived in Britain until her death. Best known as an authority on typography, she was a promoter of good typographic practice and taste. Her 'Inscription for a Printing Office', reproduced on a bronze plaque in the Government Publishing Office in Washington DC, upheld the importance of printing to the freedom of ideas. She cemented her reputation as a typographic scholar, instrumental in the development of typography as both an historical subject and a practical activity, through her research on the origins of Garamond types, published in 1926. Significantly, in the male-dominated world of printing, she found it necessary to publish under a masculine *nom de plume*. Born in Georgetown, Guyana, **Elsa Vesta Goveia (1925–1980)** came to London in 1945, where she studied history at University College and went on to research slave society in the Leeward Islands at the Institute of Historical research, gaining her Ph.D. Her aim was to analyse how the society functioned and to give a central place to the lives and agency of black and mixed-race people in the history of the colonial Caribbean. In 1961 she became the first professor of West Indian history and the first female professor at the University College of the West Indies.

Finally, three lives illustrate the involvement of women in the fields of heritage and material culture in historical contexts. Married to a medical practitioner in Exmouth, Devon, **Agnes Willoughby Hodgson (1860–1949)** established her reputation as an authority on china collecting, wrote popular guides for amateurs, and contributed newspaper and journal articles aimed at collectors in the early twentieth century, and gave public lectures on the history of decorative arts. Honorary secretary of the Society of Women Journalists from 1909 to 1912, she continued to publish on object histories between the wars, when she was an early proponent of Victorian material culture. The historian and museum curator **Enid Mary Porter (1908–1984)**, the daughter of schoolteachers, herself became a teacher after graduating in modern languages from University College, London. From 1950 to 1976 she was curator of the Cambridge and County Folk Museum, where her curatorial activity reflected the broader movement to open up museums in Britain to wider audiences and her unusual position as a female local museum curator enabled her to connect disciplines – folklore, social history, oral history, and community life – often separated in universities. Regretting that she had been deprived of educational opportunities in her childhood, and unfulfilled by home-making in Buckinghamshire, **(Ann) Patricia Fay (1933–1979)** began reading books about antiques, and went on to found the Chiltern Decorative and Fine Arts Society, and with support from the Victoria and Albert Museum, launched the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS) in June 1968. It was a runaway success though Fay became ambivalent about the demands of running a national charity (now The Arts Society).

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