



Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

The December 2018 update adds 13 articles, containing 14 biographies, accompanied by 5 portrait likenesses, on people active from the seventeenth to the early twenty-first centuries.

From December 2018, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB) offers biographies of 60,756 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 63,025 articles. 11,617 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Introduction to the update by David Cannadine

Welcome to the forty-seventh update of the Oxford DNB. During 2018 ODNB has begun releasing updates monthly, starting with the biographies of 216 individuals who died in 2014. These included the lives of prominent figures in late twentieth-politics: Tony Benn, previously Anthony Wedgwood Benn, and sometime Viscount Stansgate, the voice of the Labour left; Ian Paisley, the hard-line Protestant and Ulster Unionist; Jeremy Thorpe, the charismatic leader of the Liberal Party, brought low by his personal life (the subject of a tv drama in 2018); and the Scottish Nationalist and founding member of the devolved Scottish parliament, Margo Macdonald. Among other biographies of those who died in 2014 were the crime novelist P.D. James, the planetary scientist Colin Pillinger, the research scientist Dame Julia Polak, and the cultural theorist Stuart Hall whose early life was spent in pre-independence Jamaica, but who became a post-colonial resident of Britain, where he made his home and career.

The global dimensions of national biography were explored in the second of my BBC World Service programmes on the DNB, broadcast in September. Transnational lives have been a notable feature of the monthly updates released this year. The themes of these updates have included the Jewish community in Britain, cartoonists and illustrators, women in theatre and performance, women in engineering and science, women and parliament, medieval and early modern lives, communist lives, and women in the legal profession.

The biographies with a global aspect have ranged from the sheriff of Gloucestershire, Sir Mathias Bezill, born in Touraine, France, who was besieged in Gloucester castle in 1263 during a wave of anti-alien feeling, but went on to establish a landed family in England; to the Dutch humanist scholar Hadriaan Beverland, who came to England in 1680; the Bristol mariner Henry Skillicorne, whose trading voyages to the Mediterranean and beyond are recorded on his remarkable memorial in Cheltenham minster; the Scottish-born governess Helen Macfarlane, who was in Vienna during the 1848 year of revolutions and in 1850 produced the first English translation of the Communist Manifesto; the Wimbledon writer Thomas Kirkup who (in one of

those unexpected connections to be found in the Dictionary) was accounted an influence by Mao Zedong; the peripatetic radio pioneer, Ernest Osborn, born in New Zealand, who in 1923 in Shanghai transmitted China's first commercial radio broadcast, before settling in London; and finally the African National Congress deputy president, Oliver Tambo, who fled apartheid South Africa in 1960 for London, where he had a home until he was able to return to South Africa in 1990.

The centenary of partial women's suffrage in the UK, and the approaching centenary of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, have provided the other major themes of this year's updates. Among over 100 newly-added women's lives are five of the first women to stand for parliament at the general election held in December 1918. In addition, eight of the women who subsequently became MPs in the twentieth century (including the American-born widow of an RAF pilot, Beatrice Wright, who became the first sitting MP to give birth) have been included; as have five women life peers who sat in the House of Lords in the sixty years after the 1958 statute which enabled them to do so. The opening of the legal profession to women after the 1919 Act, produced a succession of 'firsts', now recorded in the Dictionary: Madge Easton Anderson, the first to qualify as a solicitor in the UK (in Scotland); Fay Kyle the first to be called to the bar (in Dublin); and Ada Summers, the first to sit on a magistrates' bench (in Stalybridge). The early members of the Women's Engineering Society - founded in mid-1919 in response to pressures to exclude women from positions in engineering which they had occupied during the First World War - included Rachel Parsons, who had become a director of the Parsons works at Heaton in wartime, employing large numbers of women workers. Her life is now included in the Dictionary along with other women engineers of that period. The biographies of women involved in theatre and performance in the early twentieth century recover examples of professional careers of remarkable range and artistic productivity.

The updates for 2018 conclude with the addition of 14 new lives, including two brothers, John and William Catlyn, a schoolmaster and architect respectively, who were prominent figures in the town of Hull during the seventeenth century (and are a continuation of the Dictionary's update in connection with Hull as UK City of Culture); the MP Humphry Berkeley, whose erratic political trajectory ruled out high office, but whose legacies included the 1965 memorandum which set out the process for electing a Conservative leader by ballot of the party's MPs; and the Welsh actress Sybil Christopher, whose acting career largely ended after her marriage to Richard Burton, but who subsequently moved to the USA where her nightclub, Arthur, 'brought Swinging Sixties London style to New York'.

The next Dictionary update in January will comprise the lives of those who died in 2015.

David Cannadine, General Editor, Oxford DNB

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The Oxford DNB is updated regularly throughout the year, giving you access to the most up-to-date and accurate information available. Full access to all biographies is available by subscription.