Oxford DNB: October 2022

Welcome to the ninety-first update of the Oxford DNB, which adds three new articles and five new portrait likenesses, with a special focus on people of Black/African descent who were resident in and had an impact on the UK.

From October 2022, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB) offers biographies of 64,536 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 62,130 articles. 11,922 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Most public libraries across the UK subscribe to the Oxford DNB, which means that you can access the complete dictionary for free via your local library. Libraries offer ‘remote access’ that enables you to log in at any time at home (or anywhere you have internet access). Elsewhere, the Oxford DNB is available online in schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions worldwide. Full details of participating British public libraries, and how to gain access to the complete dictionary, are available here.
October 2022: introduction to the update by Howard Spencer

By birth, upbringing, and musical influences, Bob Marley was very much a Jamaican. His inclusion in the Oxford DNB might therefore come as something of a surprise, but his links to the UK – and specifically to London – were strong, and they had a critical impact on his career.

Marley was based in London for several spells during the 1970s. Two of these stand out: in 1971–2, he and the Wailers secured a £4000 advance from Island Records to make the album Catch a Fire (1973) which set them on their way as a global act.

Later there was a six-month sojourn in early 1977 when, after escaping an assassin’s bullet in Jamaica, Marley came to London with the band and recorded the album that many regard as their best, Exodus. In his downtime, he partied with The Clash, played football in Battersea Park, and complained about weather.

Marley’s time in London has already been celebrated with an English Heritage blue plaque of 2019, as well as two similar commemorative tablets put up by other bodies. The research to establish his London addresses – he had decent connections with more than half a dozen buildings, it emerged – helped to establish that his links with the United
Kingdom were significant enough to warrant his inclusion in the Oxford DNB.

As a musician born and raised elsewhere, but whose impact on Britain has led to his being given both a London blue plaque and an Oxford DNB entry, Marley joins quite an ensemble. One such is the Seattle-born guitarist Jimi Hendrix, who built his career in London and had a fairly settled life in the city. (Marley never quite had that, though he did tell one journalist that he regarded London as a second home.)

Another was the singer Elisabeth Welch, perhaps most famous for her version of ‘Stormy Weather’. A New Yorker – and like Hendrix, of mixed African-American and Native American heritage – she found more doors open to her in Britain than in America, and lived most of her long life in London.

A raft of foreign-born composers from earlier eras are also celebrated by the London blue plaque scheme and have articles in the Oxford DNB, starting with Hendrix’s almost-flatmate George Frideric Handel (they lived next door to each other in Brook Street, Mayfair, just over two centuries apart, and now share a house museum).

In the nineteenth century, Frédéric Chopin, Felix Mendelssohn, and Hector Berlioz each made such a considerable contribution to musical life in England that
they have also achieved the Oxford DNB and blue ceramic double (in Mendelssohn’s case his plaque went up as recently as 2013, though he had first been mooted for the honour over a century earlier).

Returning to Marley, his other link to Britain was familial: his father Norval – a shadowy, largely absent figure in Robert Nesta’s young life – came from a family originally from the south-east of England. This, however, is something of a footnote in his story – and culturally speaking, Marley’s influence on Britain was surely rather greater than Britain’s influence upon him.

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**English Heritage**

**October 2022: summary of newly added articles**

Born in Dominica, in the Windward Islands, **Asquith Camile Xavier (1920–1980)**, sailed to Southampton with his family in 1958 to work on Britain’s railways, at London Marylebone, where he was promoted to guard. The rejection of his application to transfer to a better-paid position at London Euston, in 1966, exposed a colour bar there, and led to an outcry. As a result, the Race Relations Act of 1968 extended protection against discrimination to employment. Latterly he lived at Chatham, Kent. The Jamaican musician **Robert Nesta [Bob] Marley (1945–1981)** grew up in
Kingston, where in the early 1960s he formed a harmony group, the Wailing Wailers. During 1971-2 he came to London on tour, signed a record contract in Britain, and embarked on a major UK tour in 1973. He was regularly in London, spending an extended period there in the first half of 1977, and is commemorated at some of the addresses where he lived in the capital. The Ghanaian journalist, Komla Afeke Dumor (1972-2014), born in Accra, was educated in the USA, Nigeria, and Ghana before embarking on a successful radio broadcasting career in Ghana. In 2007 he was recruited by BBC World Service and settled in Britain. In 2015 the BBC World News inaugurated the annual Komla Dumor award in his memory.

In this update, portrait likenesses are added to the articles on the poet, Phillis Wheatley [married name Peters] (c. 1753-1784), the slavery abolitionist and medical practitioner, Sarah Parker Remond (1826-1894), and the nurse, doctress, and businesswoman, Mary Jane Seacole [née Grant] (1805-1881) all of whom spent significant periods of time in London. Among the updated lives, new research on the boxer, Andrew Daries Jeptha [Jeptha] (1876-1931) has led to the discovery of his death date, and thereby added eleven years to the known chronology of his life.