

**Oxford DNB: November 2019**

The November update adds twenty-three new articles, containing twenty-six biographies, accompanied by five portrait likenesses. The particular focus of this release – curated by Dr. Andrew Lamb and Christopher Webber – is on opera singers and recitalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From November 2019, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*Oxford DNB*) offers biographies of 63,449 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,172 articles. 11,720 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

**Introduction to the lives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera singers and recitalists, by Dr Andrew Lamb and Christopher Webber**

As advisory editors on this project, it has been our privilege – together with our fellow writers Raymond Holden, Roger Neill, and Tully Potter – to extend the range of the existing *Oxford DNB*, by introducing a wider and more representative selection of operatic singers. We are much indebted to our

editors at Oxford University Press for giving us the opportunity to do so.

It is a sad truth that performers often attract much less attention in death than they did in life. Unless they are elevated to the rare status of 'national treasure', many great singers outlive their fame and die forgotten. The usual indicators of national, historical importance – social utility, scientific progress, or creative legacy – tend to score them low. Dusty obituaries can make it hard for those who never heard them in their prime to understand what the fuss might have been about. Although many – such as the Wagnerians Florence Austral and Walter Widdop, or north-east England's 'local hero', Owen Brannigan – live on through celebrated recordings, others do not. The gramophone simply wasn't around to capture the vocal splendours of Henry Allen or Elizabeth Poole. Yet in their time these two, along with all the other women and men here, touched chords in the national consciousness, bringing pleasure, pride, and spiritual consolation to countless lives, while dissolving barriers of age, class, and locality.

The term 'opera singers' needs to be understood in a general sense. Although all these voices were, broadly speaking, classically trained, the range and scope of their work took many of them beyond the conventional confines of the opera house. For example, 'popular' is often equated with 'ephemeral', but as voices of their age it would be hard to

find a more representative pairing than Anne Ziegler and Webster Booth. This husband-and-wife duo's popularity was at its zenith for only a few years. Nevertheless, during the Second World War their influence across the generations was potent: both the dowager Queen Mary and the teenage Margaret Thatcher were amongst their most ardent fans. Adele Leigh's excellence in light operetta should not somehow explain her omission from the *Oxford DNB*, any more than singing Gilbert and Sullivan should lead such popular stars of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company as Durward Lely, Louie and Courtice Pounds, or Martyn Green to be overlooked.

As for more mainstream twentieth-century opera singers, it is notable how many first flexed their vocal muscles in the course of war (or post-war) service, at home or abroad. Had it not been for the increase of social mobility attendant on the Second World War, it is hard to see how working-class ex-servicemen such as Charles Craig, Michael Langdon, Forbes Robinson, or David Ward would have had the chance to excel at the Royal Opera, in what had previously been thought of as a career for the wealthy and well-connected. Similarly, the extended independence of young women in the late 1940s enabled Amy Shuard and Monica Sinclair to construct firm platforms at music college, from which to launch their eminent careers.

Taken together, the biographical narratives of these singers extend over two hundred years of national history, from the birth of Henry Allen, four years after the Battle of Trafalgar, to the death of Ian Wallace in 2009. They offer a fascinating cross-section, not only of the country's burgeoning operatic life, but also of growing educational, social, and artistic opportunities which the twenty-first century must seek to cherish and extend.

#### **November 2019: summary of newly-added lives**

Like many of the new subjects in this release, **Henry Allen (c1809-1876)** first discovered his talent for singing in a church choir. At eighteen he was singing at St Fin Barre's Cathedral in Cork, the prelude to a career which encompassed recitals, concerts, and opera, and which (despite his Irish birth) led him to be known as 'the English Rubini' for his mellifluous high tenor voice in the popular operas by Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti. He was also a noted composer of ballads, his setting of Byron's 'The Maid of Athens' (1861) remaining popular into the twentieth century. Another fixture of the early Victorian musical scene, **Elizabeth Poole (1820-1906)**, successfully managed the transition from child prodigy to adult star. She enjoyed a long and varied career on stage and in concert, which included an early success in the United States, her material

ranging from Handel to Mozart, and Mendelssohn to Rossini, though George Grove judged that 'in English songs and ballads she had no rival'. From a later generation, **Louise Kirkby Lunn (1872-1930)**, daughter of a Manchester iron moulder, progressed via local concerts and the Royal College of Music to a career which took her across North America and Australasia. She was particularly noted for her Wagnerian roles, but it was scenes from Hamish MacCunn's *Diarmid* that she sang for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle. In 1917 she had a wartime hit with Edward German's setting of Kipling's 'Have you news of my boy Jack?'

The Scottish singer **Durward Lely (1852-1944)** also began his career in a church choir; such was his talent that his father's employer paid for him to study in Italy, where he spent five years touring in productions of the great Italian operas before returning to Britain and making his mark with the first English-language Don José in Bizet's *Carmen*, and then, even more successfully, in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas at the Savoy. Leaving the company in 1887, he continued to perform for almost another forty years, including, with his wife Alice, in a series of concerts of 'Scottish Song and Story' which toured widely in English-speaking countries. Lely's successor at the Savoy, **Courtice Pounds (1861-1927)**, worked his way through the ranks at D'Oyly Carte before creating the roles of Colonel Fairfax in *The Yeomen of the Guard* and Marco Palmieri in *The Gondoliers*.

Later he worked more widely in musical theatre, including a five-year stint in the comic musical *Chu Chin Chow*; he was 'a performer whose character roles could steal the show from the nominal stars'. He is joined in this release by his sister **Louie Pounds (1872-1970)**, who also made her name in the D'Oyly Carte company, and later appeared alongside her brother in other comic operas.

Bradford-born **John Coates (1865-1941)** was taught by his choirmaster uncle before embarking on a career which took him, via a seminal period with D'Oyly Carte, to international success, combining Bizet and Wagner in equal measure but including a constant thread of English music. Notable highlights included the first performance of Kipling's patriotic song *The Absent-Minded Beggar* in 1899, and, later, touring North America with the pianist Gerald Moore, who described him as 'the finest and most imaginative of tenors, the Peter Pears of his day'. **Martyn Green (1899-1975)** endured the horrors of the Western Front and studied at the Royal College of Music before finding his vocation as 'the essential Gilbert and Sullivan comedian', spending almost thirty years with the D'Oyly Carte company and later appearing as George Grossmith (the original 'patter' comedian) in Sidney Gilliat's *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* (1953).

The indefatigable **Frederic Austin (1872-1952)** studied music at the University of Durham, taught singing and

composition at the Liverpool College of Music (where a young Thomas Beecham was among his first pupils), composed at least seventy works in a wide variety of genres (including an arrangement of 'The Twelve Days of Christmas', still used), launched an important court case in 1922 over copyright, and composed film scores for Ealing films; all in parallel with a distinguished career as a concert and opera singer, and for six years as artistic director of the British National Opera Company (BNOC), dedicated to performing opera in English. Among the artists he worked with there was **Miriam Licette (1885-1969)**, Cheshire-born and Italian-trained, who had previously enjoyed a long association with Beecham, including the leading role in the British premiere of Bizet's *La jolie fille de Perth*, and who later toured the Middle East with ENSA.

Another BNOC alumna was **Florence Austral (1892-1968)**, who took her stage name from the land of her birth, and carved out a career as one of the leading Wagnerian interpreters of her generation, reckoned by Neville Cardus to be a 'Brünnhilde of a lifetime' (though she was less successful in Germany, where her heavily-accented German led to the early cancellation of a contract). She was particularly noted for her appearances with **Walter Widdop (1892-1949)**, another BNOC star, the pair being described as 'a Wagnerian leading couple to match any in the world'. Widdop himself had worked his way from the woollen mills of Yorkshire to

become one of the most feted and popular singers of his generation, performing regularly at the Proms (and making his last Proms appearance, singing Lohengrin's Farewell, just twenty hours before his death).

From a later generation, the Scottish bass **David Ward (1922-1983)** became a leading fixture of Sadler's Wells and then of Alexander Gibson's nascent Scottish Opera. He too was best known for his Wagnerian roles (which included two seasons at Bayreuth itself), notably as the Wanderer-Wotan in *Siegfried*, though by fellow professionals he was remembered for his unstinting generosity. His contemporary, **Charles Craig (1919-1997)**, one of fifteen children of a Shoreditch labourer, discovered his vocation while serving in the army during the Second World War, progressing via *Stars in Battledress*, the Covent Garden chorus, and tuition paid for by Beecham himself, to a global career as 'the most internationally renowned of all British lyric-dramatic tenors', equally memorable in Verdi, Wagner, and Shostakovich. At the Royal Opera House he was long remembered for his Turiddu in Franco Zeffirelli's opulent *Cavalleria rusticana* (1959), alongside **Amy Shuard (1924-1975)** as Santuzza. She also was a Londoner, from Southwark, the daughter of a bookseller's assistant, taught by the legendary Eva Turner; among her many acclaimed performances were the title role in the British premiere of Janáček's *Káťa Kabanová* in 1951, and as the first English-born singer to sing Brünnhilde in a

complete Covent Garden *Ring* cycle in 1964, though even a strong international career found her 'stating passionately that her role as a doctor's wife ... was more important than that of any singer'.

Somerset-born **Monica Sinclair (1925-2002)** came from a musical family – her father was an organist, pianist, and music teacher – and despite having six children herself forged a stellar career on stage, radio, and disc. Among the many highlights were numerous British premieres (including Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Walton's *Troilus and Cressida*, Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*, and Berg's *Wozzeck*), four renditions of 'Rule, Britannia!' at the Last Night of the Proms, and recordings with Beecham of Delius's *Mass of Life*, Mozart's *Requiem*, and Handel's *Messiah*. She performed frequently alongside Joan Sutherland, and in 1965 accompanied Sutherland and her husband Richard Bonyngé on a tour of Australia. Ten years earlier, **Marie Collier (1927-1971)**, from Ballarat, had travelled in the opposite direction, thanks to a grant from Hawthorn City Council; and in an all-too-brief career based in London she took the operatic world by storm. She was equally acclaimed for her performances in 'difficult' modern roles – including Hecuba in the premiere of Tippett's *King Priam* at Coventry Cathedral and the title role in the first Western production of Shostakovich's *Katerina Ismailova* – and in lighter, comedy parts, such as Concepción in Ravel's *L'heure espagnole*. Above

all she was a superlative Tosca, the critic Harold Rosenthal declaring that she had out-performed Maria Callas in that much-loved opera. Several of the singers included in this release worked closely with Benjamin Britten.

**Edith Coates (1905-1983)** began her career as an actress with Lilian Baylis's Old Vic Shakespeare Company – as did her husband, **Powell Lloyd (1900-1987)**, who later combined opera singing with set design and radio and television production – but soon progressed to singing roles with the Old Vic, Sadler's Wells, and Covent Garden.

Although her repertoire ranged widely (her skills as an actress complementing her fine voice), she may perhaps best be remembered for creating the role of Auntie in *Peter Grimes*.

Northumbrian **Owen Brannigan (1908-1973)** – plucked from the chorus of ghosts in *Ruddigore*'s picture gallery by Sir Landon Ronald with the memorable instruction, 'I want to hear the third portrait from the left' – enjoyed an even longer association with Britten, creating the roles of Swallow in *Peter Grimes*, Police Superintendent Budd in *Albert Herring*, Noye in *Noye's Fludde*, and Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as the solo bass part in *Cantata Academica*.

Nevertheless he was perhaps best known as a performer of Northumbrian folk songs, reaching a wide audience in advertisements for Newcastle Brown Ale, and being voted the north-east's most popular entertainer (ahead of Bryan Ferry and Sting) some twenty-five years after his death.

**Michael Langdon (1920-1991)**, from Wolverhampton, was another who discovered his talent for singing while entertaining fellow wartime servicemen, enabling him to swap his life as a building society clerk for that of an internationally-acclaimed singer. He garnered ecstatic reviews for his Baron Ochs in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, a role he made his own, though among many other successes were his Lieutenant Ratcliffe in the premiere of Britten's *Billy Budd* and, almost two decades later, his Master-at-Arms Claggart in the television and disc versions of the same work. Another notable Claggart was **Forbes**

**Robinson (1926-1987)**, son of a Macclesfield grocer, whose 'port-wine resonance' was praised by Andrew Porter, and whom Robin Stapleton described as 'one of the finest bass-baritones this country has produced'. Again his work ranged widely and included over sixty roles at Covent Garden and some 900 radio broadcasts, besides concert work and recordings, notably a collection of Handel arias in 1967.

**Adele Leigh (1928-2004)** ended her career with an appearance in Sondheim's *Follies*, and throughout she balanced opera with concert, radio, film, and television work (notably appearing with Harry Secombe in the last Ealing comedy, *Davy*, and in the London Palladium revue *Large as Life*). Amongst aficionados, however, she was best remembered for her work with Britten's English Opera Group; at Covent Garden, including the premiere of Britten's *Gloriana*; and, for nine years, with the Vienna Volksoper,

where she won plaudits for her roles in the operettas of Johann Strauss, Franz Lehár, and Emmerich Kálmán.

Uniquely among the new entrants to the dictionary, **Ian Wallace (1919-2009)** – the son of a Liberal MP and industrialist – was educated at a public school and the University of Cambridge, but his interests in theatre and opera eclipsed his enthusiasm for a career in the law, and after war service with the Royal Artillery he embarked on a similarly wide-ranging career. Making his *début* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1948, he sang with the English Opera Group, Glyndebourne, Sadler's Wells, Scottish Opera, and Welsh National Opera; made thousands of radio and television broadcasts, ranging from Rameau and Haydn to Henze and Hoddinott; appeared in pantomime, Gilbert and Sullivan, and West End musicals; reduced audiences to tears with his renditions of 'The Hippopotamus Song', written for him by Michael Flanders and Donald Swann; toured with a one-man show of Scottish material; and for almost thirty years was a regular fixture of the radio and television panel game, *My Music*. Equally able to bridge the divide between grand opera and popular entertainment were **Webster Booth (1902-1984)** and his wife **Anne Ziegler (1910-2003)**, who first met when cast together in *Faust Fantasy* (1935), a colour film based loosely on Gounod's opera. By that time both had already embarked on successful careers in opera, oratorio, and musicals – and Ziegler was to forsake a

promising career in Hollywood to be with her husband – but they achieved their greatest professional success with a variety act mixing operetta solos and duets with songs from popular musicals, ‘a sophisticated package compounded of conjugal elegance and romantic, musical magic’ which made them enormously successful during and immediately after the Second World War. Changing popular tastes meant that their success did not last, and eventually they were reduced to living in a small bungalow in north Wales, courtesy of an old friend, though they lived long enough to enjoy an Indian summer of interest and acclaim.

The new subjects in this release bring to 485 the total number of singers included in the dictionary. Most public libraries across the UK subscribe to the *Oxford DNB*, which means 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](#).