

Oxford DNB: October 2019

The October update adds 18 new articles featuring 24 lives and 6 portrait likenesses drawn from Black British history. The focus of this release – curated by Dr Miranda Kaufmann and Dr Anders Ingram – is early Black British history (notably the sixteenth century) and represents a very substantial expansion of this area. The release also includes a group article – **Black Lives in the ODNB** – by Dr Anders Ingram listing all 296 subjects of African heritage included in the Oxford DNB for their significance to British history (i.e. not including commonwealth figures) and giving a summary narrative of their historical context. This is intended as a finding guide for researchers, teachers, and those with an interest in black British history.

From October 2019, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB) offers biographies of 63,423 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,149 articles. 11,715 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Black Lives

The early modern lives included in this release draw upon recent decades of scholarship to reflect some of the wide spectrum of the lived experiences of historical black people in the British Isles. As the group article **Africans in England and Scotland (1485-1625)** shows, sixteenth century England had no formal legal code of slavery, and people of African origin living in Britain came here for a variety of reasons (or were born here), were dispersed geographically, and engaged in occupations as different as servants to visiting diplomats. The lives discussed include the **More taubronar** (fl. 1504–1506), or drummer, one of several people of African origin who appear in early Scottish court records, along with the royal servant **Petir the Moryen** (fl. 1501–1504), and two ‘More lasses’, **Margaret** and **Elene (Helenor)** (1504–1527), one of whom may have participated in the pageant of an opulent jousting tournament held by king James IV, inspiring a doggerel by the poet William Dunbar.

Other Africans touched upon by this group article include **Dederi Jaquoah** (b. 1591?), son of Caddi-biah, king of the River Cestos —south-east of Monrovia in Liberia— who travelled to London and was christened at St Mildred Poultry, London; **Coree the Saldanian** (d. 1627) one of the Khoikhoi people who was seized in 1613 from an area around the Cape of Good Hope by an English merchant from the East India

Company and taken against his will to London; and **Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed** (fl.1599–1600), an early Moroccan ambassador to Elizabeth I, who arrived with his entourage in 1600 to discuss trade and a diplomatic alliance against the Spanish and stayed in London for six months.

The release also includes a number of individual sixteenth century black lives which reflect the global connections that often brought Africans to British shores in the early modern period, as well as the range of social positions they occupied once here. **Jacques Francis** (b. 1527?), was a specialist diver who was employed on the salvage of the wreck of Henry VIII's warship the Mary Rose. **Catalina of Motril** (fl. 1501–1531) was a Moorish maidservant to Catherine of Aragon, who witnessed both her mistress's wedding nights, a fact which became relevant to Henry VIII divorce proceedings. **Diego** (d.1579) was an African enslaved in Nombre de Dios, in Panama, who joined Francis Drake and brokered an alliance between him and the local Maroons, which led to the capture of the Spanish silver train that made Drake's first fortune. He returned to Plymouth with Drake and later joined him on his famous circumnavigation voyage. **Henry Jetto** (1569/70–1627) is the earliest black person to leave an extant will in England, from which we know he was a yeoman and thus had the right to vote in local elections. In the seventeenth century **Juan de Bolas** (d. 1663) was the

leader of a free African community in Jamaica – which may have been a precursor to the later Maroon communities – who played a key role in the English victory over the Spanish and has both a mountain and a river named after him in modern Jamaica.

Though the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are often thought of as the age of the struggle for the abolition of slavery – a theme represented by **Mary Hylas** (fl. 1728–1783), subject of a law suit which came to the attention of Granville Sharp – it is as true in this period as others that Black people in Britain had a wide range of life experiences. **John Ystumllyn** (d. 1786), was taken from Africa as a child and became a gardener living and working at Plas Ystumllyn near Criccieth in north Wales. He went on to marry a housemaid named Margaret Gruffydd; and in the nineteenth century Robert Isaac Jones ('Alltud Eifion') wrote a short biography of his life. Jamaican **Catherine Despard** (1765?–1815) married British army colonel Edward Marcus Despard during either his posting in Jamaica or the Mosquito Coast. After Edward became involved in radical politics and was arrested at the outbreak of the Irish Rebellion she campaigned on his behalf. When he was subsequently arrested for high treason, she approached Lord Nelson who agreed to appear as a character witness at Edward's trial, despite which he was executed. **George John Scipio Africanus** (1762/3–1834) was probably from Sierra Leone in

West Africa. Sold into slavery as a child he was raised in Britain and went on to become a successful businessman in Nottingham, where he set up an employment agency. A former sailor forced to turn to begging and street performance by the loss of a leg, **Billy Waters** (1778?–1823), the ‘King of the Beggars’, was made famous by Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* (1821). Waters himself featured in its later theatrical adaptation. Known as the ‘New King of the Beggars’, Waters’ contemporary **Jo Johnson** (b. 1796/7), had also been a sailor before turning to begging and street performance. He was immortalised by an engraving in John Thomas Smith’s *Vagabondiana* (1817), featuring his ingenious trademark prop of a model ship fixed to his hat.

The release includes two lives which add to the substantial number of African American visitors and immigrants to Britain in the Victorian period included in the Oxford DNB. After seventeen years of itinerant preaching in the United States, **Zilpha Elaw** (1793?–1873) sailed to England where she preached a highly successful ministry and published the *Memoirs of Life, Religious Experience, and Ministerial Travels of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour* (1846), later settling in London. Inspired by the example of Ira Aldridge, **Samuel Morgan Smith** (1832–1882) sold his Philadelphia barber shop and sailed to England where he made a name for himself as an actor, particularly in provincial theatres. The life of **Ida Audain** (1854?–1932) is one of several in the

Oxford DNB which illustrate the ways in which class and education could cut across racial boundaries in late nineteenth century Britain. Daughter of a merchant and member of the Executive and Legislative Councils of St Vincent, Ida studied harp at the Royal Academy of Music having been recommended by John Thomas, harpist to Queen Victoria. She went on to a successful career as a performer and music teacher.

The chronological range of this release extends into the twentieth century with the radical lives of seafarers' organiser, Pan-Africanist and socialist **Chris Braithwaite** (1885-1944) and Pan-Africanist and actor **Rufus E. Fennell** (1887–1974) who played a significant role as a community organiser in the 1919 Cardiff race riots. Our final life is the tragic story of the first black British boxing champion, **Andrew Jephtha** (1879–1920), who continued to box though blinded by his injuries from the sport, and later died in poverty in Cape Town, South Africa.

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