

Oxford DNB: April 2020

Welcome to the sixty-first update of the *Oxford DNB*, which adds fifteen new lives in thirteen new articles, accompanied by eight portrait likenesses. The new articles continue the theme of women's lives in the age of suffrage and after, and are introduced by Lyndsey Jenkins.

From April 2020, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*Oxford DNB*) offers biographies of 63,728 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,446 articles. 11,801 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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Introduction to the April update

This latest release of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* brings together accomplished women from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following recent updates which have recorded women's achievements in fields from politics, engineering, academia, social action, and law, this latest release highlights women who pushed the boundaries in a variety of different spheres, striving not only for individual achievement but also for wider social change. Several of these lives were commissioned by Kathryn Gleadle, Professor of Women's and Gender History at Mansfield College, Oxford, as part of a wider initiative by the Dictionary to increase representation of politically-active women from the nineteenth century.

These women span the social spectrum from Githa Sowerby and Janet Black, heiresses to manufacturing fortunes, to the domestic servant Kathlyn Oliver and factory worker Minnie Baldock. Inevitably, family circumstances played a significant role in shaping the courses of their lives. Several benefited from supportive fathers or husbands, who provided the financial resources and emotional encouragement which provided them with a secure platform. The more famous men, including Stanley Baldwin and Havelock Ellis, have also obscured the parallel lives of their wives Lucy Baldwin and Edith Ellis. Other women, like Constance Hoster and Jessie Kenney, found that that the separated or single life gave them the independence to pursue their own ambitions. Norah

Blaney and Gwen Farrar combined private and professional life, while Kathlyn Oliver and Edith Ellis both affirmed women's right to love other women and imagined new forms of human relationships.

These lives testify both to the diversity and intractability of the social challenges which women faced in this period. Margaret Punnett's efforts to improve women's education and Constance Hoster's programmes to support women's employment at the turn of the century reflected challenges that feminists had been grappling with for at least fifty years. Some found success in fields long perceived as acceptable to women, including philanthropy and education. Several, of course, including Jessie Kenney and Minnie Baldock, were involved in the suffrage campaign. At the same time, many of these women took advantage of legal, political, and social change which offered women new opportunities. The lives of Githa Sowerby, Norah Blaney and Gwen Farrar demonstrate the increasing possibilities for women to make a living in the creative and artistic industries. Sofia Stanley's work in the Metropolitan Police, Mary Gretton's service as a magistrate, and Ethel Watts's status as the first woman to qualify by examination as a chartered accountant all make them important pioneers, if unlikely heroines. Their accomplishments remind us that social change is not only brought about by politicians, campaigners, and activists, nor necessarily achieved with great fanfare. Simply getting on with the job – even if that job was very new – helps to stretch the boundaries of what might be possible for other women. Indeed,

many of these women – Stanley, Punnett, and Hoster among them – are recognized not only for their individual accomplishments, but for their efforts to improve the lives of other women. Ethel Watts used her professional skills to work for equal pay and support women’s organisations, including the Fawcett Society. Yet these are not heroic narratives of unequivocal success. They also testify to disappointments, constraints, and unfulfilled potential. Minnie Baldock’s political career was hampered by illness and Sofia Stanley’s home was marked by family tragedy. For women like Kathlyn Oliver and Minnie Baldock, paid work was more a question of daily survival than intellectual fulfilment. Lucy Baldwin’s life was shaped by adherence to social convention – and even the most radical women among this group, like Edith Ellis, were unable to fully share their ideas or live as they would have wished.

Recent important centenaries marking the ending of the First World War, partial enfranchisement, and the Sex Disqualification Act have brought renewed attention to women’s history. Yet women’s history – and women’s lives – cannot be mapped by political milestones alone. Nor should we only be interested in famous names and ‘women worthies’. The lives recounted here tell us how women grappled with the everyday challenges of living – of family, health, work, and the need to find meaning and purpose – in a transformative period for women and Britain. They also show how social class, economic status, educational opportunities, religious faith, and geographic location continued to shape women’s

lives in profoundly significant ways. Their publication adds depth and texture to our understanding of both continuity and change.

Lyndsey Jenkins

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April 2020: summary of new content

The legacy of Janet Black [*née* Coats] (1844–1918), who died shortly after the Armistice, but before the first general election after the partial enfranchisement of women, was to endow longest-running literary prize in UK. The James Tait Black Memorial Prizes, named for her late husband, the Edinburgh publisher James Tait Black, were awarded for the first time in 1920 for the best biography and the best novel published in the preceding year. Born into the Coats family of Paisley thread manufacturer, she lived at home until her marriage at the age of forty. In widowhood she settled in Cumberland where she embarked on a programme of philanthropy, inspired partly by the interests of her own family, who were Baptists. After a difficult childhood, exacerbated by her father's financial mismanagement, Edith Mary Oldham Ellis (*née* Lees) (1861-1916) moved to London where she ran a school, and

joined the Fellowship of the New Life, attracted by the potential for new ways of individual living and promoting social change, and was a driving force in its experiment in ethical and communal living. Through her own marriage to Havelock Ellis, in 1891, she developed the concept of semi—detached marriage, while she pursued relationships with women. These relationships in turn influenced Havelock Ellis's theories of sexual inversion, though her ideas developed in other directions as indicative of the ways in which 'inverts' might play a role in developing and perfecting society. Marital breakdown led **Constance Pauline Hoster [née Kalisch] (1864-1939)**, to embark in her late twenties on establishing a secretarial training college and bureau in London which became the basis for her highly successful career. She was inspired by the work of the Society for Promoting the Training of Women, and her college trained thousands of women for secretarial work, enabling them to be independent and self-supporting. She was active in committee work, through the International Council of Women, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, and the Union of Jewish Women. In 1928 she was admitted to the Freedom of the City of London. Born in Polar, in London's Docklands, **(Lucy) Minnie Baldock (née Rogers) (1864-1954)**, lived with her husband, a shipyard fitter, in West Ham, where both were active in the Independent Labour Party, and where she served on the Board of Poor Law Guardians from 1905. Her work with unemployed women led to an involvement with the women's suffrage cause, and militant action through the Women's Social and

Political Union (WSPU). She became an organizer, was twice imprisoned, and helped to organize the major demonstration in June 1909 known as Women's Sunday before ill-health ended her suffragette involvement in 1911. A scrapbook recording her activities is preserved in the Museum of London.

The daughter of a London businessman, **Margaret Punnett (1867-1946)** was among the first generation to benefit from the movement to promote higher education for women, attending South Hampstead High School shortly after its foundation by the Girls' Public Day School Company (later Trust), and then taking a London University BA in 1889, just over a decade after the university had opened its degrees to women, and went on to teacher training at Cambridge. Her career was spent as mistress of method at the London Day Training College set up by the London Country Council to provide qualified teachers for London schools, and where for many years she was the only female member of staff. She undertook the bulk of the lecturing there, and was responsible for personal and professional development of thousands of future teachers, though she is less well known than the two principals of the college during her time there, John Adams and Percy Nunn. The experience of bearing six children in a succession of lengthy and painful labours over a decade shaped the campaigning by **Lucy Baldwin [née Ridsdale], Countess Baldwin of Bewdley (1869–1945)**, for improved maternity care and in particular the provision of pain relief for poorer mothers. This was her most significant public role, which also involved carrying out the conventional duties of a prime

minister's wife, though behind the scenes she was an important personal influence at key moments in her husband Stanley Baldwin's political career, and privately likened her role to that of a boxer's trainer preparing 'Tiger Baldwin' (as she called him) for the arena. As a young woman she had a keen cricketer, playing for the pioneering women's team, the White Heather Club. Born into a Midlands Quaker family, **Mary Gertrude Sturge Gretton** [*née* Sturge; *first married name* Henderson] (1871-1961) had an extended formal education, including three years as a student at Mason College, Birmingham, though before the creation of Birmingham University with degree-awarding powers. She undertook university settlement work in London with the Mansfield College settlement, and in later life (1926) graduated with a research degree after Oxford University opened its degrees to women. By then she had become an established authority on rural problems, on which she had published histories, was a member of the county agricultural wages board, and was one of the first women JPs. She was twice married to Oxford historians: first, to George Cockburn Henderson, who went on to hold a chair in Australia; and secondly, to **Richard Henry Gretton** (1874-1936), a *Manchester Guardian* journalist and author of contemporary histories. Mary Gretton's youngest sister, **Edna Annie Crichton** (*née* Sturge) (1876-1970), also undertook settlement work, and moved to York with her husband, where she undertook a range of public and social welfare work, especially in relation to housing, was appointed a magistrate and became (in 1941) the first woman mayor of York. The leader of the first

Metropolitan Police Women's Patrols, instituted in 1918, **Sofia Annie Stanley [née Croll Dalgairns] (1873-1953)**, had run away from home when her widowed mother remarried, and she spent many years in India, where she was married to an engineer. Her interest in police work began in Portsmouth during the First World War, where she took part in the police patrols organized by the National Union of Women Workers. She resigned from her Metropolitan Police position in 1922 in the wake of budget cuts and hostility within areas of government and the police to her patrolwomen.

The playwright and children's author, **(Katherine) Githa Sowerby [married name: Kendall], (1876-1970)** was born into a North-East industrial dynasty, but her father was a failure at business and she was angered both by his financial irresponsibility and the limited opportunities for her own economic independence. She wrote children's books and undertook secretarial training to earn a living as speed typist. Her play *Rutherford and Son*, 1912, an attack on domestic tyranny, has enjoyed many revivals and is often interpreted as a suffrage play. The feminist and founder of a trade union for domestic servants, **Kathlyn Oliver (1884-1953)** turned to domestic service when left unsupported following her father's death, and became servant to the suffragist Mary Sheepshanks. In 1909 her attempts to organize domestic workers in a trade union drew her into controversies within the suffrage movement over the conflicting class interests of middle-class suffragists and the servants they employed. Her correspondence in 1915 with Edward

Carpenter revealed her self-discovery of her physical desire for other women – she described herself as a ‘woman bachelor’ – and she joined the British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology. The suffrage activist **Jessie Kenney (1887-1985)**, whose parents were cotton workers, continued her education at night school while working in a local factory, and was inspired by socialism as an ethical and moral practice, and went on to join her elder sister Annie Kenney in the Women’s Social and Political Union, becoming its youngest organizer. She played a leading part in orchestrating the suffragette pageants and processions, and was a member of the Young Hot Bloods who targeted the prime minister, Asquith. She was considered of great importance to the suffragette organization, and despite breaking with the Pankhursts after 1918, remained loyal to them, and was active in the Suffragette Fellowship, though her own role in the movement was obscured by Sylvia Pankhurst’s later hostile depiction of her. The daughter of a Metropolitan Police constable, **Ethel Watts [*married name: Watts-Tobin*] (1895-1963)**, was on the suffrage committee at Royal Holloway College, where she held a scholarship and graduated with a London University honours degree in history. In 1920 she signed up for accountancy articles, passing the final examinations in 1924 as the only woman among 400 candidates, and became the first woman chartered accountant to qualify by examination, observing that the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 had removed the bar to women doing so. She ran her own practice until retirement in 1961. She was also an original member of the London

and National Society of Women's Service, the precursor of the Fawcett Society, becoming chair of its executive committee, treasurer of the Equal Pay campaign, and a trustee of Fawcett Library.

The revue artists **Norah Blaney**, [*real name: Norah Mignon Cordwell*; *married names: Lyne; Durham; Hughes*] (1893-1983) and **Gwendoline [Gwen] Farrar** (1897-1944) met at Lena Ashwell's First World War concert parties and formed a successful stage partnership in the 1920s, as well as a romantic partnership, setting up home together in Chelsea in 1917. Blaney came from a musical family, won piano scholarships, and was mainly the accompanist (but also composer and arranger, dancer and singer) to Farrar, the daughter of a politician and mining magnate in South Africa, who had trained as a classical cellist, and was vocalist in their double-act which made them household names, their admirers including Radclyffe Hall. As well as appearing in West End revues, they recorded over 300 songs, and went to the USA where they appeared on Broadway and Palm Beach, Florida before breaking up in 1926. A brief reconciliation in 1930 ended in 1932, Blaney retiring from performance for a decade while Farrar, who predeceased her, remained in revue and appeared in three films. Blaney returned to performance in later life. Perhaps the first great English female musical comedy double act, Blaney and Farrar 'barely disguised the truth of their lesbian relationship in a manner that was ahead of its time'.