

**Oxford DNB: December 2020**

Welcome to the sixty-ninth update of the *Oxford DNB*, which comprises thirteen new articles adding thirteen lives, accompanied by one portrait likeness. The new articles have a special focus on DNA researchers, musicologists, and women's lives in the fields of politics, diplomacy, authorship, and teaching.

From December 2020, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB)* offers biographies of 63,830 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,521 articles. 11,816 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 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](#).

### **Introduction to the update by David Cannadine**

This month's update completes another year of releases, which have added 363 lives to the Dictionary along with 90 further likenesses. The update opens with the biographies of two physicists who made major contributions to determining the structure of DNA, extending *ODNB's* coverage of one of the most significant advances in biology in the second half of the twentieth century. Not only do they document individual lives, but they connect them to an institution and a team within which their discoveries were made, in this case the Biophysics Research Unit at King's College, London. They are among some 3,500 lives of scientists in *ODNB* of whom some 300 can be defined as physicists.

This year's updates also included a selection of lives of astronomers (of whom there are over 250 in *ODNB*). They illustrated the transition from those who, with an education in

geometry, traced the movements of the stars and planets principally for the purposes of navigation, to astrophysicists in the late twentieth century whose work was generally concerned with the nature of celestial bodies. Meanwhile, the largest update of the year, released in January and surveying the lives of those who died in 2016, recorded, as always, significant numbers of scientific lives, notably the Nobel prize-winning chemist, Sir Harry Kroto.

Women's lives continue to be a special focus of *ODNB's* updates. In addition to the lives which have been included as a result of the centenaries of women's suffrage and admission to the professions, a release was dedicated to new research on the lives of women in the early-modern period. These included women in the Tudor court, and involved in business. Two, active at the end of the fifteenth century, were vowesses, laywomen who had taken vows of chastity after their husbands' deaths. Other lives in this, and in releases from later periods, have recovered women's identities from those of their husbands or other male relatives, whether in the worlds of arts or politics.

Among two releases of global lives was the postmistress of Gibraltar, who succeeded and overshadowed her father in the role. The global lives documented British connections with the Ottoman empire and the near East, but also ranged from Japan and Australasia to India and the Indian Ocean, Africa, and North America. The earliest life to be added this year was that of a French-born abbot who died in about 1264, whose acts included a mutual grant of confraternity by his abbey at Pershore and the Norman abbey of Fécamp, with each house undertaking to celebrate masses for the souls of the abbots and monks of the other.

Since the *ODNB* was first published in 2004, additions of Black lives have been regular features of the updates. The extent of the coverage is set out in a feature article, *Black Lives in the Oxford DNB*, which offers a finding guide. This year's additions of lives of people of Black/African descent have included abolitionists, Pan-Africanists, and particularly individuals who contributed to British musical and artistic life.

2020 was designated the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife, and in partnership with the Royal College of Nursing the *ODNB* released a selection of biographies of nurses, mainly

covering the century of a registered profession, but also including examples from the pre-registration period. The additional lives included the hospital matrons who formed the founding generation of the Royal College of Nursing, as well as those whose work involved wartime nursing, mental health nursing, workhouses, local community district nursing, nurse education, and research. In a virtual event, 'Hidden Lives, Untold Stories', contributors reflected on the biographies of the nurses whom they had researched.

In 2020 two anniversaries were marked which had a special impact on the *ODNB*: the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day. Roughly 16,000 people whose biographies are recorded in the *ODNB* (representing about a quarter of the total) were alive in 1945, so their lives were likely to have been shaped in some degree by those events. This is likely to have been the case for most of the people included in our next update – featuring over 200 lives of people who died in 2017 – which will be released in January.

**David Cannadine, General Editor, *Oxford DNB***

**December 2020: summary of newly-added lives**

This update includes the lives of two physicists, **Alexander Stokes (1919-2003)** and **Herbert Rees Wilson (1929-2008)**, who helped to revolutionise our understanding of molecular biology, through their contributions to the determination of the double-helical structure of DNA. Stokes had been recruited to King's College, London, on the strength of his expertise in X-ray crystallography, and it was he who in 1950 first recognised the helical structure of DNA, famously deriving the formula for the diffraction pattern to be expected from a helical structure on the train home to Welwyn Garden City. He was modest about his own contribution, and spent the rest of his career at King's, working contentedly on the scattering of electromagnetic radiation by inhomogeneous materials. Wilson joined King's in 1952, working closely with Maurice Wilkins to establish whether any structure determined for DNA in vitro could be relevant to its function in vivo, and the extent to which the structure in DNA from calf thymus (the focus of studies hitherto) was universal throughout living organisms, reaching positive conclusions in both cases. He moved from King's to Dundee then Stirling, where he continued his work on X-ray diffraction, particularly in determining the structure of nucleic acids and viruses.

Reprising a theme of previous updates, this month we include entries on two German Jewish refugees from Nazism, each of whom left his mark on musical life in this country. **Ernst Meyer (1905-1988)** had already completed a PhD in musicology and become active in the German Communist Party before he fled the country in 1933. In England he composed chamber music and a Symphony for Strings, film scores for the GPO Film Unit and Halas and Batchelor, and radical songs for choral groups, including the popular 'Labour's Marching Song' (1936); taught for the WEA and TUC evening classes; and wrote an acclaimed study of *English Chamber Music* (1946). Allowed to return to East Germany in 1948, he became the most influential figure in East German music, and a leading apologist for the Communist régime. **Peter Gellhorn (1912-2004)** had similarly already begun to establish his reputation as a pianist, conductor, and composer in Germany before being forced to flee in 1935. Interned at the beginning of the Second World War (and released on the intervention of Ralph Vaughan Williams), he nevertheless chose to make the UK his home, working as a répétiteur, coach, chorus master, and conductor at Covent Garden and Glyndebourne, and director of the BBC Chorus at a time when the BBC under William Glock was recording and broadcasting many experimental and contemporary works. Ethnomusicologist **John Anthony Storm Roberts (1936-2009)**,

who had studied modern languages and developed an interest in folk music, first encountered African music in London in 1960 on the Swahili section of the BBC African Service before becoming a journalist in East Africa, where he became fluent in Swahili, later becoming a radio producer on the BBC's African Service. He moved to the USA where he founded a mail-order record label to bring 'world' music to a wider audience.

Two lives are from the world of entertainment. The theatrical speculator **Joseph Glossop (1793–1850)** became in 1817, with his father, the proprietor of the Royal Coburg Theatre in Lambeth (which later became the Old Vic). He sought to promote the career of his opera singer wife by taking on the two largest opera houses in Italy, the San Carlo and La Scala, but made vast losses. Back in London, he resumed the management of the Royal Victoria Theatre (as the Coburg had become), but was again bankrupted, and died in Florence. His legacy is the Old Vic, the home of Britain's National Theatre company from 1963 to 1976. **Percy Dickins (1921-2002)** had a background in entertainment—his father, a factory stoker, moonlighted as a knife-thrower under the stage name Pedro—but it was his experience in advertising which led Maurice Kinn to hire him to help launch the *New Musical Express* in 1952.

The new publication quickly became central to popular musical culture in the UK, with sales peaking at over 300,000 a week in the early 1960s. Key to its success were the first recorded music charts, which Dickins devised, and promotional efforts including the *NME* awards for the pop music industry and the *NME* poll winners' concerts. He retired to Eastbourne, where he played in a dance band.

The lives of three political or diplomatic wives are now added.

The daughter of an army officer, **Elizabeth Anne Russell** [*known as Lady William Russell*] (1793–1874) was brought up mainly in mainland Europe where she received a remarkably wide-ranging education including in classical languages.

Married to the army officer and diplomat, Lord William Russell, she directed the education of their sons, but was latterly separated from her husband. After his death, she established a notable salon in Mayfair, where her guests were literary and scholarly men, and members of the diplomatic corps. Brought up in a Tory household, **Katharine Villiers, countess of Clarendon** (1810–1874), married a West Indian slave-owner, and after his death she married the fourth earl of Clarendon, a union arranged by letter by Clarendon's sister, but a happy and successful one. She was her husband's hostess, political

confidante, and correspondent, assuming a vice-regal role when he was lord lieutenant of Ireland. Her journal, kept during her husband's official career, which included the foreign secretaryship, recorded her observations as she moved among international makers of history. The daughter of a judge, **Georgina Caroline Gascoyne-Cecil, marchioness of Salisbury (1826–1899)**, married the future prime minister, Robert Cecil, later third marquess of Salisbury, against the wishes of his parents. She worked as her husband's amanuensis during his years as a journalist, contributing to his writings, and supported his political career, both by acting as hostess, on one occasion playing a role in international diplomacy, and by her own involvement in Conservative organizations.

Finally there are three lives of women whose work lay in the fields of textual editing, historical research and teaching, and historical biography and novels. Born in Edinburgh, **Grace Harriet Warrack (1855–1932)**, whose father was a merchant, shipowner, and elder of the Free Church of Scotland, made her home in the city, though also travelled widely. Her edition of the *Revelations of Divine Love Recorded by Julian, anchoress at Norwich*, based on the manuscript in the British Museum, brought Julian to the attention of early twentieth-century readers and was the standard edition for fifty years. Its commentary drew on Warrack's own wide reading in the late

medieval tradition of mystical writing. Her visits to the Apennines inspired her exploration of the Tuscan folk tradition. After the First World War she promoted French poetry in Scotland. From a Scottish Presbyterian family, who settled in London, **Rachel Robertson Reid (1876–1952)** studied English at Bedford College and took a London University degree and became a history teacher, and began research on the king's council in the north, winning the Royal Historical Society's Alexander prize in 1905. In 1906 she was one of the founders of the Historical Association. As a London County Council schools inspector, she promoted school atlases and new media such as radio and film in classroom teaching. After reading modern history at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford (where she was among the first women to graduate when Oxford opened its degrees to women in 1920), **Hilda Frances Margaret Prescott (1896–1972)** became a teacher in private schools but then turned to writing. Her first three books were historical novels set in medieval France, followed by a biography of Mary I which in 1940 won the James Tait Black prize. Her outstanding work was her 1952 historical novel, *The Man on a Donkey*, which has been described as the *War and Peace* of the English Reformation. A devout Anglican, she worked for Christian unity.

