Oxford DNB: September 2021

Welcome to the seventy-eighth update of the Oxford DNB, which adds twelve new articles, comprising twelve new lives, accompanied by five portrait likenesses. The newly-added lives feature women active in the arts, philanthropy, and public life between the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth century.

From September 2021, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB) offers biographies of 64,150 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,819 articles. 11,810 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

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British public libraries, and how to gain access to the complete dictionary, are available here.

**September 2021: Introduction to the update by Zoe Thomas**

The women who are the subject of this *Oxford DNB* update range from aristocratic pottery designers active in the eighteenth century to twentieth-century philanthropists and trade unionists. Collectively, these twelve figures embody the diversity of ways middle-class and elite women historically contributed to skilled work cultures; these entries help to trace their impact on, and place within, British society and culture.

Traditionally, histories of work have offered broad brushstroke accounts which prioritise quantitative data over qualitative analysis and are framed around the development of singular fields, privileging paid employment outside of the home, and foregrounding men’s experiences. In recent years there have been nascent attempts to capture more effectively the diversity of historic work cultures, and in particular the impact of gender upon them. My colleague Heidi Egginton and I, along with ten fellow contributors, have made this our central focus in our forthcoming open-access edited volume *Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in*
Modern Britain. The articles in this update on these twelve women productively sit alongside this scholarly reconsideration. Indeed, these examples force a reconceptualization of what it has historically meant to ‘work’. What ‘work’ meant to these twelve women encompassed the paid and the unpaid; the ‘amateur’ and the ‘professional’; ‘trade’, ‘business’, and ‘philanthropy’.

These profiles are useful in moving the lens of enquiry beyond more traditionally recognised fields in which middle-class women are well-known to have been active, namely nursing and teaching. Instead, many of the women considered here worked in the arts, as designers and as illustrators, singers, potters, goldsmiths, and photographers, as well as within the realm of philanthropy, through engagement with charitable organisations and local councils. Together, their activities enrich understanding of the persistent attempts made by women to carve out names for themselves and contribute to society within fields of work which tended to have been less regulated than traditional ‘professional’ fields, and therefore held greater potential for them to succeed. Both the photographer Kate Pragnell and the goldsmith Charlotte Newman, for instance, established independent businesses as a more effective site for the establishment of their artistic reputations – and to make a regular income.
Such examples attest to the strategies women had to persistently utilize in order to construct opportunities to work in a world riven with formal and informal gendered hierarchies. Georgina Bowers made use of the women-focused Society of Female Artists to exhibit her art, Alice Gordon and her husband innovatively used their own home as a ‘showcase’ for their work in the field of domestic electricity, whilst philanthropist Ada Lewis, amongst other donations, left the legacy of the Ada Lewis Women’s Lodging House to enable women of the lower middle classes a place to live whilst constructing their own working lives. Rapidly-developing forms of media played a central role in enabling women to market their work to diverse audiences: Bowers’ reputation was made through illustrations for *Punch*, Charlotte Newman benefited from shaping her public persona through interviews in newly-established artistic and women’s journals, whilst, in the twentieth century, Dora Billington used television to introduce new sections of the British public to pottery work.

The ODNB’s focus on individual biographical accounts which trace the whole lifecycle is useful when seeking to consider women’s experiences holistically. It is only by honing in on specific figures (rather than giving general overviews of specific fields) that we can fully recognise the complex
trajectories and fragmented paths that women in particular routinely encountered across their lifetimes. This was perhaps especially the case for suffragette and trade unionist Leonora Cohen who, over the course of her life, worked in the field of millinery, as a member of Emmeline Pankhurst’s bodyguard, as a lathe operator at a munitions factory, and as a trade union member, as well as presiding over various councils and sub-committee meetings for local government. Considered together, these profiles emphasise the persistency with which class status and social wealth has continued to mediate women’s opportunities to engage in skilled and creative work. Although for Cohen, and others such as Newman, constrained circumstances ensured they had to pursue paid work from an early age, the majority were comfortably off, and those who engaged in philanthropic and charitable pursuits – Helen Novar, Victoria Plunket, and Lewis - were unsurprisingly extremely wealthy. This has shaped how their ‘work’ was understood by contemporaries, and how they personally sought to portray their endeavours. There is no evidence that Wedgwood ever paid wealthy ‘amateur’ artists Emma Crewe or Elizabeth Upton for their designs, even though these were so popular that they continued to appear in various guises for over two hundred years. Indeed, their social position was key to them being offered these opportunities: Wedgwood felt their femininity and taste, which was viewed as innately linked to heightened class status, would have an inspiring effect on those of lower
social orders. Across this period, it was viewed as distasteful for elite women to accept money for their art. For all women engaged in creative pursuits there was a need to painstakingly navigate commercial and creative arenas so as to preserve their cultural reputation.

The social positions of these different women also shaped how they were visually represented during their lives, which has had important consequences for how they have - and have not - been memorialised. Of the twelve women, five have likenesses attached to their ODNB profiles. With the exception of Cohen, the other four women are all those of the highest social status. This speaks to the greater potential for wealthy women to carefully self-fashion and market themselves as figures of societal significance. Both Crewe and Lewis sat for well-known artists, seeking to capitalise on portraiture’s established reputation to venerate the activities of wealthy individuals: Crewe appeared in a mezzotint engraving by John Dixon in 1766 whilst Ada Lewis sat for the Irish portrait painter Henry Jones Thaddeus in 1890. The other three images are photographs. Cohen’s offers a quintessential example of the growing trend during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for working and middle-class figures to acquire studio images of themselves, and attests to the democratising power of photography in
enabling an increasing range of people to begin to visually represent themselves.

Most strikingly, all five images depict their female participants as far removed from the world of work. They are portrayed reclining in seats, or standing in a relaxed manner, wearing highly feminised outfits, with intricate lace collars and flowing skirts, and with perfectly coiffed hair (Lewis and Plunket are even wearing tiaras). Such images of women were common, bolstering the dominant perception in the cultural imagination of middle-class and elite women as detached from the world of work during this era. This is heightened even further by the absence of images for the other women considered in this ODNB update. It is important to recognise that this effacement in itself appears to have been a deliberate strategy. ‘Artistic’ metalworker Charlotte Newman always refused interviewers to enter her workshops where ‘dirty’ manual work was taking place and instead focused on showing off her beautiful jewels as finished products in her meticulously curated showroom. By considering these images alongside the accompanying articles which reveal the industrious, frenetic activities of these twelve women’s work in their respective fields of interest, we gain a much better sense of the great care with which women had to continually navigate their participation in work cultures between the eighteenth and the twentieth
centuries. Such a consideration also emphasises the need for modern day audiences to ‘read against the grain’, so as to fully understand the extent of women’s contributions as workers, and as drivers of social and cultural change.

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September 2021: summary of newly-added content

This update adds the lives of two women amateur artists, from aristocratic families, who produced designs which were used by the master potter, Josiah Wedgwood, who had them modelled in low relief on his popular jasperware products. He appreciated the women’s ability to appeal to the changing tastes of the wider purchasing public, acknowledging their contributions in the 1787 catalogue of his ornamental ware. Motifs derived from the two women, among others, continued to appear on Wedgwood artefacts until the early twenty-first century. Elizabeth Upton [née Boughton], Lady Templetown (1745–1823), who was for a time in
royal service as a woman of the bedchamber to King George II’s daughter, Princess Amelia, was married to a courtier and member of whig political circles, who had a family home near Belfast. She was known as a talented practitioner in several arts and crafts, skilled in ‘cut-paper work’. Her early designs featured neo-classical motifs and were used by Wedgwood in various small decorative products, especially jasperware medallions, brooches, clasps, and other bibelots. She was also respected as a landscapist and a sculptor who produced busts of her grandchildren and of her son-in-law. Lady Templetown’s collaborator, Emma Crewe (b. 1741, d. in or after 1795) had an independent income settled on her by her father, a landowner and MP. Her elder brother was raised to the peerage and her sister-in-law was a whig political hostess, who were customers of Wedgwood whose Etruria works was near the family seat. She and Lady Templetown collaborated on drawings of scenes of domestic life used as bas-reliefs, on the jasperware series illustrating Childhood, Maternity, and Domestic Employment. Emma Crewe also belonged to a progressive milieu in the midlands, whose members included Erasmus Darwin, and provided the illustration of Flora and Cupid used as the frontispiece in the second edition (1790) of Darwin’s poem, The Loves of the Plants, an image whose sensuousness was reproofed by the Cornish clergyman Richard Polwhele in his verse critique The Unsex’d Females (1798).
Five of the women whose lives are included in this update had a formal education in art (or in one case, music) as a preliminary to supporting themselves financially. The cartoonist and illustrator Georgina Harriett Bowers (1835–1912), the daughter of a clergyman, studied at Manchester School of Art, and began her career as an illustrator for Punch in 1866 for which she drew nearly 100 cartoons up to 1874. She went on to contribute to London Society. A keen rider to hounds in Hertfordshire, where she settled, she made a specialty of hunting scenes, and illustrated a number of books on country sports. She was a member of the Society of Female Artists, and contributed to their exhibitions. Charlotte Isabella Newman [née Gibbs], (1836–1920), who had been a student at the Government School of Design at Somerset House was encouraged by Sir Henry Cole to create designs for carpets, china, paper hangings, and textile fabrics. She then became a designer for the manufacturing jeweller John Brogden, who valued her ability to design unique items that were attractive to high-status customers. After Brogden’s death she went into business on her own account, producing artistic jewellery, exhibiting internationally and receiving prestigious commissions. Considered the leading ‘lady goldsmith’ in London, she was committed to raising the status of metalwork to that of the fine arts. An album containing designs of her jewellery and goldsmith’s work is preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The same high society
clientele whom Newman attracted constituted many of the sitters for another London business owner, the portrait photographer, **Kate Pragnell (1853–1905)**. Pragnell attended Bristol School of Art, but took up photography and went on to invest in a fashionable studio in Kensington. Her portraits of women regularly accompanied society announcements, and particularly weddings, in publications for ladies. She only employed women, and promoted photography as a career for educated women, speaking alongside Newman at the International Congress of Women in London in 1899. After her early death, the business continued under her name. Recently widowed, and with daughters to support, **Alice Mary Gordon [née Brandreth; other married name Butcher], Lady Danesfort (1854–1929)**, wrote in 1894 in favour of creating a school of design for women in London, as a route to careers. Her first husband was a Cambridge-educated electrical engineer, and she had assisted in his experiments and commercial contracts, deputized for him for three months in 1885-6 during the installation of a new electrical power and lighting system at Paddington Station, and together they electrified their own Kensington home, which became a showcase for domestic electricity. She promoted the aesthetics of domestic electric lighting, and wrote a book, *Decorative Electricity* (1891), aimed at female householders, recommending different types of electric light for each part of the house. The potter **Dora May Billington (1890–1968)**, whose father was in the
earthenware business, at first regarded pottery as simply a trade, and went to Tunstall School of Art and Hanley Art School, followed by the Royal College of Art, intending to be a sculptor or painter. In London, though, she developed an interest in ceramic decoration, and taught a class at the Royal College before, in 1919, teaching pottery at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, where she encouraged connections between the craft of pottery and industrial production of ceramics. Her lectures on ceramic history became the basis of her pioneering book, *The Art of the Potter* (1937). Her career reached its peak after the war, when she was in control of the Central School of Arts and Crafts course, and brought pottery to a wide audience through television programmes. **Muriel Lucy Brunskill (1899–1980)**, who came from a musical family, was an enthusiastic singer from childhood, and went on to receive tuition in Liverpool and London where, after being turned down for a scholarship at the Guildhall School of Music, she was a pupil of Blanche Marchesi. She made her debut in 1920 and immediately received a stream of bookings. In 1922 she joined the British National Opera Company, and went on to tour in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, and the Netherlands, where she was especially popular. After further study in Germany, she became a successful recitalist, accompanied by her husband on the piano, appearing with the leading British orchestras and conductors and sang at the major British
festivals. Her last operatic appearance was made at Covent Garden in 1949.

Two of the newly-added lives reflect activity in the fields of philanthropy and public service for working women. After her wealthy husband’s death, Ada Hannah Lewis [née Davis; later married name Lewis-Hill], (1844–1906), was left in charge of his considerable fortune, much of which he intended for charitable purposes. On her own death, only five years later, leaving an estate valued for probate at over £1.1 million, she left bequests to various charities and institutions that she and her husband had identified, as well as endowing the Royal Academy of Music with fifteen scholarships. Her principal legacy, was the Ada Lewis Women’s Lodging House on the New Kent Road, which opened in 1913. It was the culmination of a campaign to establish lodgings for single working women of the lower middle classes in London, to fill a need created by the wave of working women who came to London and other cities in the Edwardian period to work in new roles as clerks, secretaries, telephone operators, as well as nurses, students, milliners, and shop assistants. The Ada Lewis Women’s Lodging House accommodated 220 women, making it the largest building of this type for women in London. Her bequest funded further eponymous hostels in Barons Court, Holloway, and other London sites in the inter-war and post-Second World War periods. The experiences of working
women were a lifelong concern of the Leeds suffragette and trade unionist, Leonora Cohen [née Throp], (1873-1978), whose widowed mother had struggled as a low-pa
seamstress to support her and her two younger brothers. She herself became a milliner. Her involvement in suffragette militancy between 1909 and 1914, was followed by war work in a munitions factory and election as the Leeds district organizer for the General and Municipal Workers’ Union. She was co-opted onto government bodies, both nationally and locally, and (despite imprisonment during the suffragette campaigns) was made one of the first women JPs in Leeds, in 1922, and was appointed OBE in 1928. By 1974 she was billed as the oldest living suffragette.

The final two lives are of sisters who combined aristocratic philanthropy with imperial service. Helen Hermione Munro Ferguson [née Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood], Viscountess Novar (1865-1941), and Victoria Alexandrina Muriel May Plunket [née Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood; other married name Braithwaite], Lady Plunket (1873-1968), were daughters of a viceroy and vicereine of India and both grew up with the philanthropic expectations placed upon women in their position. Lady Helen Blackwood, who inherited her father’s talents as a public orator and speech-writer, married a Liberal politician whose career she assisted, while undertaking work for nursing organizations to promote state registration of nurses
and in promoting the Red Cross. As the wife of the governor-
genral, between 1914 and 1920, she was president of the
Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society which
became both a flourishing wartime patriotic organization
and was hugely popular with Australian women as an
organization run by women and enabling them to participate
in the war effort. She was appointed GBE in 1918 for her
work, and on her return to Scotland was appointed a justice
of the peace in 1920. Her sister, Lady Victoria Blackwood
married an Irish peer and landowner who in 1904 was
appointed governor of New Zealand, where a focus on
children and infant welfare and early childhood public
health measures became a hallmark of her philanthropy. She
promoted the theories and methodologies around infant and
maternal public health measures of the New Zealand medical
doctor Truby King, which underlay her scheme for a ‘guild of
district nurses’, known as the Plunket nurses, who worked
specifically in caring for babies and helping mothers to look
after their young children. These nurses would be placed
across New Zealand, funded by a mix of government moneys,
private donations, and subscriptions. Plunket nurses became
household names for generations of New Zealand children.