

## Oxford DNB: October 2020

Welcome to the sixty-seventh update of the *Oxford DNB*, which comprises nine new articles, accompanied by six portrait likenesses. There are also three retrospective portrait likenesses accompanying earlier published articles. The new articles have a special focus on the lives of people of Black/African descent who have had an impact in and on the UK.

From October 2020, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*Oxford DNB*) offers biographies of 63,807 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 61,498 articles. 11,809 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](#).

### **October 2020: summary of newly-added content**

Since its publication in September 2004, the *Oxford DNB* has added new lives of people of Black/African descent, included for their significant impacts on the national life of the UK, more or less every September or October, to coincide with Black History Month UK. Many of these lives are featured in Anders Ingram's feature essay on 'Black Lives in the Oxford DNB', available [here](#).

One of two American-born individuals in this update, **Frederick Douglass (c1818-1895)** was of course a major figure in Black American history, and in the movement to abolish slavery in the United States. Born into slavery in Maryland, he escaped to the north in 1838 and became a leading abolitionist orator. In 1845 he published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and in the same year sailed to the UK, where he spent two crucial years drumming up support for the abolitionist cause, and in the process questioning the slavery links of the Free Church in Scotland and the Evangelical Alliance in England; his stay in the UK was also of personal significance for Douglass, in that his supporters (controversially, since it implied recognition of the institution of slavery) purchased his freedom, so that he was able to return to the United States a free man and no longer a fugitive.

**Christian Cole (1851/2-1885)** was born in the British

colony of Sierra Leone, the son of one of the first Africans to be ordained an Anglican priest. Educated at Fourah Bay College, he went on to the University of Oxford as a non-collegiate student, graduating with a BA in *literae humaniores* in 1876. He then studied law, and was called to the bar in 1883. He is thought to have been the first Black African student at Oxford, and at the Inns of Court. While in England he published several pamphlets, including one condemning the British military campaign against the Zulus; the second edition contained his poem, 'The Future of Africa', envisioning the liberation of the continent from European rule. Struggling to find work in England, he moved to Zanzibar but died there shortly after.

From a later generation, **Felix Hercules (1889-1943)** was born in Venezuela of West Indian parents. He arrived in England in 1916 to further his education, but his experience of racial discrimination radicalised him, and he was subsequently active in the African Progress Union and the Society of Peoples of African Descent, promoting pan-Africanist ideas and, *inter alia*, criticising the 'race riots' in British port cities in 1919, and the British government's failure to recognise the contribution of colonial troops during the First World War. Subsequently he embarked on a speaking tour of the Caribbean, where he was constantly harassed by the colonial authorities. He then moved to the United States, where he was ordained a Baptist minister,

deploying his considerable oratorical skills in the service of religion.

One of those colonial subjects who rallied to the British flag in the First World War was **George Roberts (1891-1970)**, from Trinidad, who served with the West Indies Regiment and the Middlesex Regiment on the Western Front, including the battles of Loos and the Somme. After demobilisation he remained in England, where he campaigned for the rights of ex-servicemen, first through the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers, and then the British Legion. During the Second World War he joined the National Fire Service, and was awarded the BEM for his work in leading discussion groups among fellow firemen.

**Lilian Bader (née Bailey) (1918-2005)**, born in Liverpool of part-Barbadian, part-Irish descent, felt the force of racial discrimination when trying to find employment in the 1930s, and during the early years of the Second World War was even dismissed from the NAAFI when her Barbadian heritage was discovered. Eventually the manpower shortage ensured she was able to enlist in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, with which she served as an instrument repairer until 1944; her elder brother, a seaman in the merchant navy, was killed in action in 1941. Later in life she made it her mission to highlight the contribution of colonial and Black British subjects to the war effort.

Four of the new biographies in this update are of men and women who contributed significantly to the musical and

artistic like of the UK. **Fela Sowande (1905-1987)** was a talented Nigerian musician and composer (also the son of an Anglican priest) who spent the years 1934 to 1953 in England, working as a jazz musician, accompanist to Adelaide Hall, and wartime musical director of the Colonial Film Unit. A rhythmic pattern from his 'Africana' was used as a call signal on the BBC's wartime overseas service.

Returning to Nigeria as musical director of the fledgling Nigerian Broadcasting Service, he later moved to the United States, where he was a recognised scholar of Yoruba culture and folklore.

**Berto Pasuka (1917-1963)** arrived in London from Jamaica in 1939, in search of further opportunities as a dancer and choreographer. Initially working as a model (Angus McBean's photographs of him are now at the National Portrait Gallery), his engagements as a dancer included the film *Men of Two Worlds* (1946). In 1946 he founded Les Ballets Nègres, Britain's first Black dance company, which attracted instant acclaim, leading to broadcasts on BBC Television in 1946 and 1949. For six years the company toured Britain and Europe, often performing Pasuka's own ballets; a rare setback was being rejected for the Festival of Britain, as insufficiently 'British'. Eventually the costs of touring with a large troupe forced the company's disbandment. Pasuka spent time in Paris before returning to London, turning to painting for a living until his early death.

Born in Florida but brought up in New Jersey and Los Angeles, **Dorris Henderson (1929-2005)** immersed herself in American folk music and sang with the performance artist 'Lord' Buckley in Los Angeles before moving to England in 1964. Described by John Renbourn as a 'hip, very modern woman', she made an immediate impact on the British folk scene, with a residency on BBC2's *Gadzooks! It's The In Crowd*, appearances at the Cambridge Folk Festival and Isle of Wight Festival, and albums with Renbourn and her own group, Eclecion. She remained in England, performing regularly into her seventies as one of the stalwarts of the London folk scene.

The latest-born of the new entrants to the dictionary is **Maud Sulter (1960-2008)**, born in Glasgow of part-Ghanaian, part-Scottish descent. In a short but significant career as an artist, curator, poet, and critic, she explored her dual heritages and the historical and contemporary challenges facing Black people in European societies, through a series of acclaimed photographs, collages, films, multimedia installations, exhibitions, poems, plays, and critical writings. Perhaps her most famous works were 'Zabat' (1989), a series of Cibachrome photographs featuring leading Black cultural figures posing as a theatre of ancient muses, and 'Les Bijoux' (2002), a series of self-portraits posing as Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's African muse.