

The June 2018 adds thirty new articles (including one reference group article), containing thirty-six biographies, accompanied by fifteen portrait likenesses. Two themes represented in the update are lives of women who made professional careers in theatre and performance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, curated as advisory editor by Maggie B. Gale, professor of drama at the University of Manchester; and women who wrote for the periodical and newspaper press from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century.

## Introduction to the update by Maggie B. Gale

In recent years there has been a revived interest in the ways in which women have contributed to culture, and the manner in which these multi-faceted contributions often appear to have been erased from our traditional histories. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford DNB) has gone some way towards overturning such erasures here, by commissioning a significant body of entries from scholars and archive curators specifically focused on women's involvement with theatre, film, and performance from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth. As Advisory Editor it has given me great pleasure to be part of the team commissioning essays on women whose creative lives were crucial to the development of theatre and film, in what were highly competitive and commercial marketplaces. Theatre and performance histories have a tendency to focus on the modernist, on the avant-garde, or the independent movements of the day. Frequently, this means the working lives and creative output of those working in more popular contexts, most of whom would have been familiar household names, often get left behind despite their prolific output and the extraordinary breadth and range of their professional careers.

Most of the women featured in this current release would fit into such a category. Some like Cecilia Loftus, Hettie King, Lily Brayton, and Ada Reeve performed all over the world. Others' work in film took them to almost every major town or city where films were being shown to growing audiences for whom they became early screen stars – Chrissie White and Betty Balfour had relatively short careers, but were no less popular or prolific for that. Other figures in this launch had shorter careers – Maggie Albanesi died tragically young – and a number, like Elizabeth Baker, Alma Reville, or Gertrude Jennings worked much more 'behind the scenes' writing and editing key works over careers lasting many decades.

Constance Collier became a well-loved screen actress, but like Viola Tree or Inez Bensusan, had a successful career as writer and producer, as well as on stage. Whilst as a group these women may have had less in common politically or aesthetically than those who set up and ran the Actresses' Franchise League – which merits an extended essay in this release – they share a lifelong dedication to artistic productivity, at a time when gender difference made it harder to succeed professionally overall for women, and certainly harder to sustain a career through motherhood, war, economic downturn, and so on. I hope all of the entries give a strong sense of a shared vibrant and vital creativity amongst the women represented, and that this ODNB release goes some way towards re-placing these women and their art back into history.

--Maggie B. Gale

The lives of the women involved in theatre and film represent figures born within the space of a generation, between the early 1870s and the turn of the twentieth century. Born in Australia, **Inez Isabel Bensusan (1871–1967)** arrived in London in 1894 and appeared in the West End, wrote plays, and was a member of the Actresses' Franchise League, developing ideas for a Woman's Theatre on the eve of the First World War. Brought up in California, the dancer **Maud Allan (1873–1956)**, studied in Europe from 1895, and in 1906 created the dance with which she was most closely associated, *The Vision of Salome*, which she performed before Edward VII in 1907. Her performances in London, where she was resident for long periods, enjoyed royal and society patronage, her association with Margot Asquith, the wife of the prime minister, being the subject of a scandalous libel trial in 1918. The parents of the actress **Ada Reeve (1874–1966)**, who was born in London's East End, were both stage performers, and she made her debut in pantomime aged four, moving into musical comedy in 1894, and then went into management herself, touring internationally and later in her career making cameo appearances in films. The playwright **Elizabeth Baker (1876–1962)** began her working life in the drapery business run by her mother, and was employed in secretarial and journalistic work in London when her first full-length play was produced in 1909. Her plays explored questions of gender, citizenship, and class during the years of the women's suffrage campaign. The actress and theatrical producer, **Lily Brayton (1876–1953)**, born near Wigan, married the Australian Oscar Asche, forming a successful partnership as producers and actor-managers, managing London's Adelphi Theatre, and enjoying commercial success with their move into theatrical Orientalism, notably *Chu Chin Chow* (1916), the record-breaking musical pantomime which became a phenomenon in wartime London.

Born in Glasgow the daughter of variety performers, the actress **Cissie Loftus (1876–1943)**, followed her parents onto the stage, and made her name in music hall but sought recognition as an actress and took on leading lady roles. Her Nora Helmer in the Actresses' Franchise League production of *The Doll's House* (1911) was recalled as among her finest work. The playwright **Gertrude Jennings (1877–1958)**, whose mother was a New York actress and her father a journalist and MP, specialized in one-act plays ('curtain raisers'), often written for star performers. After the First World War they were widely performed by amateur theatre companies, whom she valued as keeping theatre alive in small towns in the face of competition from cinema, though she was protective of authors' royalties. The actress **Constance Collier (1878–1955)**, born in Windsor and brought up by her mother, who was from a family of Portuguese dancers, made her debut aged six, joined Beerbohm Tree's company in 1901, and regularly appeared in New York. After the First World War, she developed a successful writing partnership with Ivor Novello. The music hall performer and male impersonator **Hetty King (1883–1972)**, whose father had a minstrel troupe performing in the Manchester area, began her male impersonation act in 1904, and by 1910 incorporated the popular song 'Ship ahoy!' ('All the nice girls love a sailor') into her act. Over an eighty-year career, and extensive imperial travel, she became established as the leading male impersonator.

The actress and theatre producer, **Viola Tree (1884–1938)**, who was born into one of the most prominent theatrical families, appeared in some of her father's Shakespeare productions, moved into production after the First World War. Born in Willesden, **Isabel Jeans (1891–1985)** made her debut in 1909, married the actor and stage manager Claude Rains, and toured North America during the First World War. Between the world wars she became established as a leading lady and was known as a 'hard-working and versatile' performer, moving to Hollywood in the late 1930s. In the early 1940s she was back in London, where she was associated with productions of Oscar Wilde's plays. The actress **Chrissie White (1895–1989)**, born in Chiswick, began her film

career in 1907, and became associated with the Walton-on-Thames studios of the Hepworth Company, for whom she starred from 1910 alongside Alma Taylor in the 'Tilly comedies which, contemporary with the women's suffrage movement, 'captured the spirit of an increasingly liberated and confident post-Edwardian femininity'. By 1915 she was among the top stars of British cinema, but her career effectively ended with the bankruptcy of the Hepworth Company, and she made her last silent film in 1924. In the early 1920s she had played opposite her second husband, the actor and director **Henry Edwards (1883–1952)**. A memorial plaque unveiled at St Martin's Theatre in 1924 commemorated the brief career of the actress **Meggie Albanesi (1899–1923)**, who in 1915 abandoned music (her father's profession) for drama, and in 1919 joined the Pioneer Players and won acclaim in the immediate post-war years, becoming part of a theatrical social set whose members included her friend Noël Coward. She was survived by her mother, a prolific author of romantic novels under her first married name **Effie Adelaide Rowlands (1859–1936)**.

The film editor and script writer **Alma Reville (1899–1982)** began her film career aged sixteen making tea at Twickenham Studios, and worked her way up to cutter (film editor), script editor, and director's assistant, and by 1925 was highlighted a female role-model within the British studio system. From her marriage in 1927 to Alfred Hitchcock, she influenced his film career, and was his 'most trusted adviser even if her contribution to her husband's work was not always formally credited', though he paid public tribute to her in 1979. Another figure who made her career in film, **Betty Balfour (b. 1902?, d. 1977)** began her performing career in amateur pantomime, made 'show-stealing performances' in music hall and revue during 1914 to 1916. Spotted by a film producer, which led to collaboration with the director George Pearson, she achieved stardom in the role of her comic creation, Squibs, the 'vivacious flower-selling Cockney heroine' in a series of films made between 1921 and 1923. These included *Squibs MP*, about a woman elected to parliament and fighting for 'babies not battleships'. Some of the performers whose lives are included in this update were members of the **Actresses' Franchise League (act. 1908–1958)**, which is the subject of a reference group entry, tracing the membership of an organization founded in 1908 and open to women connected with the theatrical profession. It aimed to use educational methods, including plays, in support of its campaign to extend the suffrage to women on the same terms as men.

The second element of the update comprises biographies connected with the periodical and newspaper press. The update released in April included two significant figures in this area, John Browne Bell (1779-1855), who in 1843 launched the *News of the World*, and its later proprietor, who revitalized the title, Henry Lascelles Carr (1841-1902). Members of two family dynasties are represented in this update. The complex genealogy of the Baldwin family, London booksellers and publishers, is traced through the lives of **Richard Baldwin junior (1724–1770)**, who from 1747 published the *London Magazine*, whose contributors included James Boswell. On his death, Baldwin was succeeded as proprietor by his cousin **Robert Baldwin (1737–1810)**, who continued it until it folded in 1785, unable to compete with the revitalized *Gentleman's Magazine*. The latter's nephew, also **Robert Baldwin (1780–1858)**, became joint proprietor of a new *London Magazine* in 1820, but sold it a year later after the death of its editor John Scott in a duel. The Scottish newspaper editor and proprietor **Murdo Young (1790/91–1870)** started his career as a reporter in London before in 1825 become editor and part-owner of *The Sun*, taking full control of the paper in 1833. He transformed the paper politically into a supporter of reform, and revolutionized its news-gathering and distribution methods in the pre-railway age, as by special

features such as the black-on-gold supplement published to mark Queen Victoria's coronation. The paper was something of a family enterprise, his daughters **Ann Young (1824–1911)**, who married her father's successor as editor, and **Catherine Young (bap. 1826, d. 1908)** contributing to its pages, the latter writing at least one leading article. Meanwhile the publisher **Robert Bright Marston (1853–1927)**, a keen angler born into the book trade, purchased the *Fishing Gazette* in 1878, and installed himself as editor, a post that he held until his death. Largely through his influence, the Fly-Fishers' Club was founded in 1884. The campaigning of another journalist whose life is included in this update contributed to the founding of a political party. Born in a Lancashire cotton town, **Joseph Burgess (1853–1934)** began work in an Oldham mill aged seven and, largely self-taught, began writing for newspapers in Oldham. Moving across the Pennines to Yorkshire, he became editor of the *Workman's Times*, originally based in Huddersfield, and in its columns made the case for Labour representation independent of existing parties. His campaign was significant in the foundation of the Independent Labour Party in January 1893.

This release includes examples of women who contributed to the press and made professional careers as journalists. The twice-widowed **Eliza Warren Francis (1810–1900)**, daughter of a bankrupted grocer from Wells, Somerset, was compelled to take up instruction in needlework and household management to support herself. She wrote a number of manuals on needlework and thrifty household management, and was editor of a long-running periodical for women, the *Ladies' Treasury*. **Matilda Pullan (1819–1862)** had a troubled relationship with her Irish military family, and became a governess before her marriage, but early widowhood obliged her to take in lodgers and she began writing a series of books on needlework and decorative crafts, and also advice manuals, while regularly contributing to periodicals. **Helen Black (1836–1906)**, born in India the daughter of an army officer, undertook charity work in Southampton during her marriage to a ship's captain. In widowhood, she became a successful journalist, contributing to periodicals in the last two decades of the nineteenth century articles aimed at women readers, and making a speciality of the celebrity interview. Of aristocratic birth, **Lady Violet Greville (1842–1932)**, became separated from her husband, an Irish landowner and MP, and initially wrote anonymously in periodicals, but from 1878 was a named writer. Her column in *The Graphic*, from 1890, aimed at women readers, secured her reputation. **Charlotte Humphry (1842/3–1925)**, born in Londonderry the daughter of a clergyman, became a schoolteacher in London and then worked in a publishing office before in the mid-1870s becoming the author of a gossip column in the society magazine, *Truth*, under the pseudonym 'Madge', whose popularity ensured her a significant salary. She was active in professional organizations for women journalists, and trained her daughter **Helen Pearl Adam (1882–1957)**, who also became a journalist.

**Sarah Tooley (1856–1946)**, took up writing in Dumfries as a result of the ill-health of her Baptist minister husband, contributed biographical sketches, and like Helen Black entered the field of celebrity interviewing, her first such interview being in 1893. He belonged to networks of professional women writers in London and was especially active in the Women Writers' Suffrage League. The daughter of a Methodist minister, **May Kendall (1861–1943)** had a university education, attending lectures at University College, Liverpool, and studying at Somerville College, Oxford. She contributed poetry to late-Victorian periodicals, and subsequently undertook social survey work for the social reforming Rowntree family in York, where she lived for most of her life. **Ethel Comyns Lewer (1861–1946)**, born in India the daughter of an army

officer, had begun work in a type-writing office in London following her father's bankruptcy, and joined the office of *Poultry* magazine. After her husband's early death she became proprietor and editor of the magazine she had helped him to establish, *The Feathered World*, which served the community of breeders and exhibitors, and was 'the only woman editor, owner and publisher outside the traditional 'woman's' magazine sphere'. The business failure of her merchant father forced **Frances Low (1862–1939)** along with her younger sister **Florence Low (1867–1957)**, to find means of supporting themselves, their two older brothers having taken up journalism. Florence became a schoolteacher and writer on girls' education. From 1888 Frances Low was a full-time writer, concentrating on the everyday lives of women and children, and undertook investigative work to expose the injustices faced by working women. She struggled to make a living from writing, and promoted networks for women journalists. She was nevertheless a prominent opponent of women's suffrage in the Edwardian period.

The Oxford DNB is updated regularly throughout the year, giving you access to the most up-to-date and accurate information available. Full access to all biographies is available by subscription.