

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

What can the *Oxford DNB* bring to teaching?

1 History (national and international)

The *Oxford DNB* provides concise and authoritative essays on the men and women who have shaped all aspects of the British past. All of the biographies have been specially written and are the work of experts who provide up-to-date information on the people who fashioned British life and culture from the fourth century BC to the year 2002.

Individually articles give rounded and comprehensive accounts of almost 56,000 people who left their mark on national life, in the British Isles, the former empire, and in the rest of world. Collectively the articles chart the history of Britain through its people. And because of the dictionary's size the biographies cover not just well-known figures but also many less familiar subjects whose contributions have either been neglected or are best appreciated in a local context.

As an online publication the *Oxford DNB* provides this information in an accessible format relevant both to teachers and to students from 11 to 18 years of age. Online the dictionary provides five key routes to the past:

- **quick access by name:** look up a person in history to check facts or to learn more about his or her involvement in an event, or about your subject's changing reputation over time.
- **group searching:** discover sets of people who share common backgrounds—medieval surgeons; engineers working in nineteenth-century Manchester; Roman Catholics in the reign of Elizabeth I; people who lived in my town or street.
- **event searching:** find out who was involved in landmark historical events—for example the great fire of London or the general strike—and see how these people reacted to and shaped events.
- **thematic searching:** in addition to 55,800 biographies the *Oxford DNB* provides an online companion guide to British history. Here the dictionary looks at how historical figures came together to shape Britain's past: for example by holding office (prime ministers to Nobel prizewinners); as members of well-known groups or movements (from the enforcers of Magna Carta to the British pioneers of atomic energy), or through their involvement in key historical events or topics (among others the gunpowder plotters, shapers of the industrial revolution, overseas visitors to Britain, or members of the 1906 Liberal government).
- **online links:** the *Oxford DNB* also acts as a starting point for further historical research, providing connections to trustworthy external resources: for example links between *Oxford DNB* biographies and the relevant webpages of the National Portrait Gallery, the Royal Historical Society bibliography, and the National Archives.

The *Oxford DNB* online has many classroom applications:

- **people in the past:** a comprehensive and expert resource for learning more about the people who shaped history in the British Isles and overseas.
- **ICT and historical research:** as a fast and efficient historical database the *Oxford DNB* allows pupils to develop skills in ICT and in the interpretation of the material encountered through searching. Sample lesson plans for KS3 and KS4 are provided in our Online Learning Resources area.
- **evidence-based history:** all dictionary articles are fully referenced and offer opportunities to discuss the use of historical evidence by practising historians. *Oxford DNB* biographies can also serve as historical sources in their own right, with evidence being questioned or defended in class or coursework.
- **history in the round:** the dictionary's focus on the diversity of British life makes it relevant to a range of topics: among many others, histories of medicine, science and technology, entertainment, religious diversity, women, education, agriculture and industry, empire, or migration and immigration.
- **history in long-term perspective:** covering more than 2400 years of the British past, the dictionary allows students to identify and study sets of people over time: for example how did the background, training, and experience of physicians change between the medieval and early modern periods?
- **history in depth:** individual biographies cover subjects' lives in detail; entries on major figures also include a section on legacy and changing reputation.
- **history of multicultural Britain:** as a national dictionary the *Oxford DNB* includes biographies of those who shaped the histories of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, as well as the English regions. The dictionary also considers British imperial life in detail, with essays on the Britons who forged the empire, those who resisted imperialism, and the migrants who have shaped Britain's multicultural society from the middle ages onwards.
- **histories of women:** nearly 6000 of the *Oxford DNB*'s subjects are women; entries explain women's contribution to national life from the medieval to the modern period. Online searches reveal how women's roles in society have changed over time, with particular emphasis on the history of trade, education, social reform, politics, literature, music, and the arts. Authoritative articles on well-known figures are combined with many first-time essays on women previously overlooked by historians.
- **picturing the past:** the *Oxford DNB* includes nearly 10,300 portrait images, making it the largest collection of national portraiture ever published. Images range from Roman emperors to late twentieth-century sportspeople and include examples of many different media: portraits, busts, seals, effigies, coins, photographs. The *Oxford DNB*'s gallery offers an excellent resource for exploring how historical figures were depicted in portraiture, and how image-making has changed over time. Portraits also offer insight into the history of dress and material culture. In addition the dictionary provides over 10,000 online links to the National Portrait Gallery's own collection for further research.
- **historical context:** biographies help to explain why historical actions took place: Why was a person motivated to act as he or she did? What was his or her background and beliefs? Who were his or her associates at the time? In addition the dictionary's online companion guide includes essays on well-known groups, topics, and events in history, providing background on the networks and associations that shaped history and motivated individuals. All essays link back to the relevant subjects in the *Oxford DNB* for further reading and research.

2 Local history

As a work of national history the dictionary includes men and women from all parts of the British Isles. The online dictionary allows students to find those who came from, moved to, or lived in a particular region of the country, and so contributed to the local history of a designated place: be this a county, a city or town, a village, or even a street.

Place searching can be combined with other categories (dates, gender, profession, religious affiliation) to identify sets of people worth studying, both through the *Oxford DNB* and other resources. The results are a wide range of possible topics for local history projects and course work. For example:

- women active in social reform in north London between 1880 and 1930
- Roman Catholics in my area during the reign of Elizabeth I
- engineers at work in nineteenth-century Manchester
- the changing biographical character of a well-known street over time: for example London's Harley Street or Princes Street in Edinburgh

Oxford DNB biographies also provide listings of an individual's personal archive for further local research. Online you can find people whose papers are held in local libraries and archive centres. You can also search by the type of document: for example politically active women whose manuscript diaries or correspondence are held near you.

The breadth of the *Oxford DNB* means that it's more than a resource for students and teachers of history. With information on men and women from all walks of life the dictionary can also be used in the teaching of other subjects.

3 English literature

- authoritative biographies provide excellent introductions to the life and work of authors from the fifth to the late twentieth century. Articles provide valuable biographical context for understanding individual texts; entries on major figures include a section on reputation in which literary scholars assess individuals' contribution to English literature.
- literary coverage extends beyond writers to include patrons, publishers, editors, booksellers, and critics—allowing students to set works in historical context.
- online grouping allows teachers and students to make connections between writers active at the same time or place. For example, aside from Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, which poets took part in and wrote about the First World War?
- the dictionary's companion guide also provides expert essays on more formal literary groups. Essays offer introductions to literary associations with links to individual biographies for further reading: group essays to appear in 2006-7 include the metaphysical poets, the Scriblerians, Johnson's Literary Club, the Lake poets, and Bloomsbury.
- as a collection of biographies the dictionary also offers valuable insight into the practice of life writing. What makes a good biography? Why do biographers change their opinion about a subject? Can a biography be definitive or impartial? What is the relationship between biography and autobiography or between a literary biography and a portrait of a subject? (one in five *Oxford DNB* subjects is illustrated with a portrait image, giving scope for many comparisons).

4 History of art and fine art

- as with literature, authoritative biographies introduce readers to the life and work of artists and architects—from the eleventh to the late twentieth century. Entries provide biographical context for understanding individual art works; entries on major figures include a reputation section in which art historians assess individuals' contribution to art, architecture, and design. Biographies of patrons, critics, and sitters place the production and reception of art in a broader historical context.
- the *Oxford DNB* currently includes almost 10,300 portrait images, illustrating one in five dictionary subjects. The images, selected by curators at the National Portrait Gallery, London, make up the largest selection of national portraiture ever published. Independent of its literary biographies, the dictionary's portrait collection provides a valuable resource for art historians and fine artists: for example, you can compare the work of an individual artist by searching for images reproduced in the *Oxford DNB*; consider changing depictions of women in portraiture from the medieval to the modern period; or assess the impact of photography on portraiture.
- online searching provides quick access to art-related groups in history: for instance artists who worked at a particular time or in a designated town. You can also find all of the dictionary subjects whose portraits were painted by a single artist and are reproduced in the *Oxford DNB*. In addition each biography provides a listing of known images of a subject; you can search for this information by artist and/or by gallery. More than 10,000 biographies are linked to the relevant pages of the NPG website, where further portrait images may be viewed.
- as for literature, the dictionary's companion guide offers expert essays on more formal art groups. Essays provide introductions to groups and associations with links to individual biographies for further reading: examples include founders of the Royal Academy, women artists of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, the Vorticists, and the Camden Town group.

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