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## Feminine wills

John Gross  
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A literary tour through the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

There are 7,453 entries in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography listed under the heading "Literature, Journalism and Publishing". The story doesn't stop there, however. "Literature" is a fluid term, and there are hundreds, probably thousands of men and women in the Dictionary who have been assigned to other categories but who also have some claim to be considered literary figures. You won't find Lancelot Andrewes listed under "Literature", for instance, or William Cobbett, or David Hume, or T. H. Huxley, but you will of course find substantial articles about them. To review such a mass of material is beyond the power of an individual. It is a job which, if it were ever seriously undertaken, would call for a committee. But one can dip, one can reconnoitre, one can browse - and one can form a broad judgement.

Having sampled its literary entries over several weeks, I am in no doubt that the Dictionary is a great achievement - a worthy successor to the DNB of Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, and in many respects an improvement. Its scholarly virtues are matched by its breadth of spirit and its liveliness.

The principles and policies underlying it are set out in a long introduction, but to grasp its full character these pages ought to be supplemented by the excellent entry for Colin Matthew, written by Ross McKibbin. As editor from 1992 until his death in 1999, Matthew was the prime architect of the Dictionary: it bears the stamp of his openness, warmth and good sense. He was also an innovator, determined to broaden the Dictionary's scope and to modernize its assumptions, and eager for contributors to stress the changing historical reputations of the figures with whom they were dealing. At the same time, while he was a man of the Left, his convictions were tempered by a certain cultural conservatism. One of his most significant decisions as editor was to retain all the entries in the old DNB all of them revised or rewritten, but all of them still there.

The result, as McKibbin says, is that the new dictionary is "a collective account of the attitudes of two centuries: the nineteenth as well as the twentieth, the one developing organically from the other". And along with this sense of continuity, Matthew sought to preserve the civilized, conversational, unpedantic tone which Stephen had tried to foster. Like the DNB (and its supplementary volumes), the ODNB is more than a work of reference. It is designed to be read, not just consulted.

Another respect in which Matthew followed Stephen was in taking on the role of a writing editor. Many of the best entries in the DNB are signed "L.S.": Matthew wrote or (mostly) revised no fewer than 778 articles for his own Dictionary. The most substantial of the wholly original ones, reflecting his interests as a historian, are on politicians, monarchs and public figures - Gladstone, Balfour, Edward VII, Florence Nightingale and others. But he also contributed a number of entries on authors and journalists. His article on John Buchan is outstanding - a vast improvement on the one it replaces, marked by a real inwardness with its subject.

(Matthew himself was a Scotsman.) He also succeeds in breathing life into such largely forgotten figures as the Nonconformist editor and journalist William Robertson Nicoll - a great maker of literary reputations in his time - although one might have hoped for more from his account of the abrasive Tory man of letters Charles Whibley. It fails to convey the flavour of Whibley's personality, or to mention the essay by T. S. Eliot which is the one place where the general reader is likely to encounter him today.

One of Matthew's most important initial recommendations as editor was that the Dictionary should be illustrated. Over 10,000 entries (around 18 per cent of the total) are accompanied by a likeness of the subject; the criteria for selecting these portraits has been carefully thought out, and the work as a whole is greatly enhanced by them. With major authors, where you have some idea of the available possibilities, the choice of image almost always seems judicious and appropriate.

With lesser figures, the results are often intriguing, especially if you haven't seen a likeness of them before. Putting a face to a writer for the first time can modify your whole sense of him.

The editorial rulings as to which authors should or shouldn't be granted the privilege of a portrait are more debatable. If the Dictionary includes a likeness of the nineteenth-century poet Edwin Atherstone (is there a single living human being who has read his massive biblical epics?), it is hard to see on what principle there isn't one of Charlotte Mew, say, or Isaac Rosenberg. Among the professors of literature, it seems reasonable that we should be given a chance to see what L. C. Knights looked like, but then why not I. A. Richards? And not every choice of image will command universal assent. If authenticity or possible authenticity is the first consideration, I'm a bit puzzled as to why

the Chandos portrait of Shakespeare (the one with the earring) should have been chosen in preference to the Droeshout frontispiece to the First Folio or the bust in Holy Trinity, Stratford. You could argue that Virginia Woolf isn't necessarily best represented by a photograph taken when she was twenty. The well-known portrait of Ruskin by Millais is printed the wrong way round.

Among other innovations, the most useful (for students, at least) is a much fuller treatment of references and sources, while the most gossipworthy is the inclusion, whenever possible, of an individual's "wealth at death". The figures cited for this last, which represent probate, may not reflect the full picture, but they are undeniably interesting, and sometimes surprising.

Henry James, for instance, left £8,961. It seems a curiously small sum, all the more so when you compare it, say, with the £32,359 left by George Meredith or the £95,428 left by Thomas Hardy.

The new Dictionary contains entries for many writers who are not to be found in the old one. Some are men and women who have died since 1990, too late for inclusion in the last of the DNB supplements: Graham Greene, V. S. Pritchett and Anthony Powell are notable examples. Others - a much larger contingent - were passed over by earlier editors. They make a valuable addition, though one which would be even more striking if it were not for a previous attempt to remedy omissions, *Missing Persons* (1993). That volume included articles, admittedly fairly short ones, on major figures who had failed to find a place in the 1901 DNB - Thomas Traherne (virtually unknown at the time), Gerard Manley Hopkins (largely unknown), Dorothy Wordsworth (tucked into the entry for William) - and on some major-minor figures who had been overlooked by the supplements, including Baron Corvo and Ronald Firbank. None of the newcomers in the ODNB is in the same class as the first group, or even (apart from one or two post-1990 figures) the second.

It is in the treatment which has been accorded writers who were already represented in the DNB that the greatest gains have been made. The new entries embody, in the first instance, the advances of a hundred years and more of literary scholarship. To put it in more or less tabloid terms, there was no mention in the original entry for Wordsworth of Annette Vallon, and no mention in the entry for Dickens of Ellen Ternan. Now we know better (and Ellen Ternan gets an entry of her own, by Claire Tomalin). But even famous instances like these give only a faint notion of the extent to which research has deepened our knowledge and modified our perceptions.

On the whole, the leading writers dealt with in the ODNB have been assigned to leading authorities, contributors whose scholarly credentials are widely recognized. As for criticism and interpretation, a dictionary is no place to launch bold original theories, and most of the critical comment in this one sticks to the middle ground. But it avoids the fussiness which so often goes with that territory: it is lucid and concise, with relatively few descents into stodge.

With so many admirable articles to choose from, it is hard to single out one or two for praise without seeming arbitrary, but Pat Rogers on Dr Johnson and R. F. Foster on Yeats could reasonably be cited as model contributions. Both pieces are heroic feats of compression; both tell stories which must sometimes have seemed all too familiar to the authors but are nonetheless related with freshness and verve. And then there is the most idiosyncratic of the articles devoted to a major writer, the one on Tennyson. It is by Christopher Ricks, unmistakably so: we are told at one point, for example, that the poet's reputation changed as "imminent Edwardians ousted eminent Victorians". But along with the stylistic tics, the piece has all Ricks's penetration and power. It makes particularly telling use of quotations from Tennyson's contemporaries.

The article on Dickens has the added piquancy of replacing one which was notoriously unsympathetic. The original piece was the work of "L.S.", and it displays many of his virtues, but it also contains what is possibly the snottiest sentence in the entire DNB: "If literary fame could be safely measured by popularity with the half-educated, Dickens must claim the highest position among English novelists". A whole history lay behind this jibe. The Stephen family took Dickens's satire on the Civil Service personally. Leslie Stephen's brother Fitzjames, who disliked the novelist anyway, had written a slashing attack on *Little Dorrit*. (He was convinced that Tite Barnacle of the Circumlocution Office was meant to be a caricature of his father, Sir James Stephen.) Leslie Stephen himself, however, was at least prepared to leave the question of Dickens's greatness open. He concluded his DNB article by observing that the decision between his own cool verdict and "more eulogistic opinions" had to be left to "a future edition of this dictionary". And now the new edition is here, and the article on Dickens, by Michael Slater, is indeed eulogistic. It is also discriminating, and solidly rooted in modern Dickens scholarship.

Working out the balance between literary assessment and straight biography seems to have been left to individual contributors, and some entries tilt too far towards assessment. There is an excellent article on Arnold Bennett by John Lucas, but much of it might have been written with a guide to literature in mind rather than a dictionary of biography. Ezra Pound's caricature of Bennett in *Mauberry* is discussed in some detail, but for an idea of the part played by the novelist in London life in the 1920s you would do better to look up the old article in the 1949 supplement by Frank Swinnerton. In many entries, critical appraisal is mostly confined to a final section on the history of the subject's reputation. These are sometimes unduly academic. The changing fortunes of Shelley in the first half of the twentieth century are considered purely in terms of "lit crit" - Eliot, Leavis and so on. A broader approach, and a more appropriate one, would have taken into account such things as Shaw's championship of the poet and Andre Maurois's popular biographical portrait *Ariel* (the very first Penguin).

In general, contributors have avoided academic jargon, especially its more recent varieties, and few of them have been tempted to put their authors through the mangle of literary theory. A partial exception is Bruce Stewart, in his article on Joyce. Much of the time Stewart offers a straightforward and often spirited account of the writer's life and work, but he is also at pains to inform us that "écriture feminine was the very definition of Joyce's way of writing from 'Penelope' (in *Ulysses*) onwards", and that "the nature of the colonial world from which he sprang dictated that the only authentic representation of reality in language must follow the contours of a divided world". In his final summing-up Stewart is heavily preoccupied with the efforts made by some Irish critics to "repatriate" Joyce or enlist him under the banner of Irish nationalism. Stewart's own view is that the paradoxes of Joyce's position - at once very Irish and very cosmopolitan - are best accounted for by "the post-colonial concept of hybridity".

Some of the political observations which pop up in other entries are more partisan than the occasion warrants. Peter Holland's article on Shakespeare is a case in point. The first half, devoted to Shakespeare's life, could hardly be bettered.

The second half, which deals with his influence and reputation, is packed with interesting material, but at one point it adopts what is surely the wrong tone for a work like the Dictionary. In the 1980s, we are told, "right-wing Conservative politicians like Michael Portillo returned with mechanical frequency to Ulysses' speech on degree in Troilus and Cressida as 'proof' that Shakespeare supported the hierarchies and institutions Tories were committed to maintain". The hostility here is too naked. Colin Matthew himself wasn't above getting in a political blow. In his article on Samuel Smiles, he doesn't mention the centenary edition of *Self-Help*, which had a notable introductory essay by Asa Briggs, and perhaps there is no reason why he should have done. But he makes a point of telling us that an abridged version which was published in 1986, with an introduction by Sir Keith Joseph, did Smiles "little service".

Nowhere have the editors of the Dictionary worked harder to remedy past injustices than in improving the representation of women. This is as true of literature as other departments, though it seems likely that women writers were less under-represented in the DNB than most social or occupational groups. By way of a small test, consider the authors included in the compendious anthology edited by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, *Victorian Women Poets* (1995). Thirty six of them died before 1900. Of these, three haven't even been accorded a place in the ODNB, and can perhaps be set to one side. Of the remainder, all but eight - twenty-five out of thirty-three - were in the original Dictionary. It doesn't seem an outrageously low score. Which is not to say that the newcomers shouldn't have gained admission the first time round. They include such interesting figures as the anarchist Louisa Guggenberger (nee Bevington) and the tragic Scottish working-class poet and autobiographer Ellen Johnston.

It isn't only a question of the number of women in the Dictionary, but of the way in which they are presented. To see how much ground had to be made up, you need only compare the DNB and the ODNB on the subject of Mary Wollstonecraft. In the new article devoted to her, she is treated thoughtfully, sympathetically and at considerable length. In the old article (by L.S., alas) her most famous book is dismissed in two short sentences: "She published her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. It had some success, was translated into French, and scandalised her sisters".

Many other women writers get much fuller treatment than they did in the DNB. But it is possible to exaggerate the sins of the past - Stephen on Mary Wollstonecraft is only part of the story - and to make Victorian critics sound more benighted than they were. In the course of the new (and very thorough) entry for Aphra Behn by Janet Todd, for instance, we are told that in the nineteenth century she was "either ignored or vilified". But if we turn to the old DNB article on Behn, we get a rather different impression. It is by Edmund Gosse, and he takes a prissy and disapproving view of her more scandalous activities. But he also says that "we may be sure that a woman so witty, so active, and so versatile, was not degraded, though she might be lamentably unconventional. She was the George Sand of the Restoration, the 'chère maitre' to such men as Dryden, Otway and Southerne, who all honoured her with their friendship. Her genius and vivacity were undoubted; her plays are very coarse, but very lively and humorous, while she possessed an indisputable touch of lyric genius". Vilification? I don't think so. Indeed, Gosse's sketch seems to me more calculated to arouse interest in Behn in the general reader than the rather dogged account of her historical significance that you get in the new article.

It is when it comes to lesser lives, the lives you are unlikely or unable to read about elsewhere, that a biographical dictionary can be most rewarding. The shorter entries were one of the glories of the DNB, and the same is true of its successor.

They were also one of its great pleasures, and if anything the new ones are even more enjoyable. The social scope of the work has been widened, and old inhibitions have been dropped; at the same time contributors continue to write with relish - with a feeling for quirks of character, and an eye for revealing detail.

This is not to say that there aren't misjudgements. The article on the eighteenth-century poet Matthew Green, author of *The Spleen*, relegates him firmly to the category of light verse, and gives no idea of his true quality. (Leavis, eccentrically but not crazily, thought that Green was a more engaging poet than Swift.) The article on the Romantic poet George Darley suggests, no doubt correctly, that much of his work is unreadable, but misses out on the rather more important fact that he wrote a few marvellous lines (try "The Mermaids' Vesper-Hymn", for instance).

Sometimes the ODNB takes a step backwards. The article in the 1959 supplement on Angela Brazil was a sparkling affair - not surprisingly, given that it was by Arthur Marshall. And Marshall didn't just highlight absurdities, he also seized on picturesque facts - pointing out, for instance, that when Angela Brazil was at art school one of her fellow students was Baroness Orczy of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. But all this has gone by the board: the entry which has replaced Marshall is dry and pedestrian.

Many of the new articles, on the other hand, are revised versions that retain the best bits of the old ones (which were often based on first-hand knowledge), while where there has been a complete change the gains generally far outweigh any losses. The new entry for Baroness Orczy herself is a good deal more informative than the old one. We simply used to be told, for instance, that her father, a Hungarian landowner, "abandoned agriculture for a musical career". We now learn that he was a figure of considerable importance: as Intendant of the national theatres in Budapest in the 1870s, he championed Wagner and appointed Hans Richter as Kapellmeister.

The ODNB is stronger on dodgy characters than the DNB was. There is a first rate portrait of Frank Harris (by Richard Davenport-Hines) and an excellent account of Maurice Girodias of the Olympia Press. Davenport-Hines also contributes, among some thirty other colourful items, an article on Jack the Ripper which lists J. K.

Stephen - Leslie Stephen's nephew - among the candidates who have been fingered by Ripperologists as the possible killer. (The brief entry for J. K. Stephen himself is quite inadequate: it mentions his poems, but gives you no inkling of what kind of poems they were.) On the whole, disreputable or wayward personalities make for livelier reading than respectable ones, but you can never be sure who is going to prove interesting.

John Drinkwater was already a fairly dim figure when he made his appearance in the 1949 supplement, and he is even dimmer now. Yet the new article on him is full of good material. It turns out that not content with writing verse plays about Abraham Lincoln, Cromwell, Socrates, Mary Queen of Scots, Robert E. Lee and other historical personalities, he adapted a play from the Italian about Napoleon: it was

by Mussolini. (Shaw is supposed to have said, when someone asked him why he had decided to write about St Joan, "To save her from Drinkwater".) Not surprisingly - given Colin Matthew's professional interests, and those of his successor, Brian Harrison - historians are particularly well covered. The entry for Namier is much more vigorous than the one it replaces. (One characteristic touch it reveals is that Namier, who knew how much his career owed to a favourable review of one of his books by G. M. Trevelyan, "claimed to have repaid his debt by refusing ever to review Trevelyan's books".) The article on G. R. Elton by Patrick Collinson is enthralling, and likely to send readers back to Collinson's articles on Elton's predecessors Neale and Pollard. Many people know that Elton was Ben Elton's uncle; it will probably come as more of a surprise to learn that one of his grandfathers was a schoolfriend of Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Literary scholars and academic critics are also well represented, though there are gaps - nothing on D. W. Harding, for instance. Many Oxford figures are honoured - John Carey contributes a mellow piece about Nevill Coghill - but F. W. Bateson is passed over in silence. There is, as is only right, a fine account of Sidney Lee, the joint handiwork of Alan Bell and Katherine Duncan-Jones.

One important decision which Matthew and his colleagues took was to extend the coverage of foreigners, including "foreigners whose visits to Britain may have been short, but whose observations may have been influential". There are now, for the first time, articles on Voltaire and Hippolyte Taine, for example (though the latter doesn't mention Leslie Stephen's politely scathing account of Taine's History of English Literature). Possibly this category should have been widened to include visitors who were less well known in Britain at the time they were here, such as Theodor Fontane.

Writers from Central Europe who made their home in Britain in the middle decades of the twentieth century are under-represented. George Mikes the humorist, Erich Heller the critic and George Lichtheim the historian of Marxism are only three of the many missing persons in this group. Elsewhere there are inconsistencies. If Ezra Pound is included, why not Alice James or Robert Frost, both of whom spent significant periods of their lives in England? It is entirely right that the London-based American war correspondent Edward R. Murrow should get an entry, but you could argue that Nathaniel Hawthorne, say, deserved one too, on the strength of his time as a consul in Liverpool and his book *Our Old Home*.

As for the Dictionary as a whole, there are lots of minor literary absentees one would like to have seen included. The treatment of crime fiction, for example, is very good as far as it goes, but there are definite gaps. The ultra-prolific John Creasey should have been included; so should John Dickson Carr; so, whatever one thinks of him, should James Hadley Chase; so should Anthony Berkeley Cox - if not for the books he wrote as "Anthony Berkeley", then certainly on account of the ones he wrote as "Francis Iles".

Still, the impressive thing is how much ground has been covered, and how many byways (and highways) the reader is left free to explore. Popular literature in particular, and what Leslie Stephen or Sidney Lee would have called lighter literature, provide some of the ODNB's merriest pages. The article on Sellar and Yeatman of 1066 and All That is a gem. (They had very different personalities.) There is an admirable cameo of John Wells by Ferdinand Mount; the article on Frank Muir makes it clear that it was Muir and Dennis Norden, and not, as legend suggests, Kenneth Williams who were responsible for the line "Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me". Or take Harry Graham. His one claim to immortality is *Ruthless Rhymes*; but how pleasant to discover that he was once engaged to Ethel Barrymore, or that the song lyrics he wrote for the stage included the English version of Richard Tauber's "You Are My Heart's Delight".

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