

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Oxford</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: UOA30</p>
<p>Title of case study: The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Public understanding of the national past has been expanded by the creation, updating, and widespread use of the <i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (ODNB). It is the most comprehensive biographical reference work in the English language and includes (in May 2013) biographies of 58,661 people over two millennia. The ODNB is the ‘national record’ of those who have shaped the British past, and disseminates knowledge while also prompting and enhancing public debate. The Dictionary informs teaching and research in HEIs worldwide, and is used routinely by family and local historians, public librarians, archivists, museum and gallery curators, schools, broadcasters, and journalists. The wider cultural benefit of this fundamental research resource has been advanced by a programme of online public engagement.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The ODNB was commissioned in 1992 as a research project of the Oxford History Faculty and was published by Oxford University Press in print and online in 2004; subsequently it has been extended online with 3 annual updates and the publication of two further print volumes. Since 2005, an important part of the editors’ work has been to update the Dictionary’s 56,000 existing entries in the light of new research, keeping biographies in-step with recent publications and new digitized primary sources. In this way, editors create and maintain a resource that is comprehensive, authoritative, and balanced, as well as publishing new historical research. The editors have also devised an ever-growing series of grouped entries that illuminate different historical themes or epochs and lead readers to entries they might not otherwise have consulted. The ODNB is considered the most reliable resource for historical biography, compared to other works of online reference, and is used and valued for these scholarly qualities.</p> <p>There are four lead researchers, all employed by the Oxford History Faculty and in post throughout the census period. Dr Lawrence Goldman is Editor and University Lecturer in History. The three Research Editors, Drs Philip Carter, Mark Curthoys, and Alex May, are also permanent members of staff, as were the two previous editors, Professor Colin Matthew (1992-9) and Professor Sir Brian Harrison (2000-4). Together, they undertake research which precedes the choosing of subjects to be added to the Dictionary and the commissioning of hundreds of articles each year; they work with specialist authors in the preparation of texts, and edit contributions for factual accuracy, balance, and accessibility; where required, the three Research Editors extend texts with further primary and secondary research. Subject specialists in their own right, the editors also write entries, often providing first-time accounts of figures for whom no previous biography exists. All ODNB authors undertake individual research for their commissions and draw upon the permanent ODNB editors for expertise and advice. Each article is peer-reviewed by external specialists who work with the Faculty editors. There are 14 Consultant Editors who oversee the development of very large chronological and thematic sections of the Dictionary; over 350 Associate Editors who provide help with specific themes and periods; and more than 450 Advisors, including leading figures in public life, organised into 43 subject panels, who advise on the inclusion of people who have died since the year 2001.</p> <p>In addition to the four staff mentioned, Oxford historians have contributed to the ODNB as advisers and contributors: 7 of the Dictionary’s 13 Consultant Editors were Faculty members in the period 1993-2013; 51 of the 350 Associate Editors were Faculty members; 75 current members of the Faculty have contributed one or more biographies to the ODNB, as have 23 former Faculty members, in post after 1993.</p>

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3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

The outputs of the project are:

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison 60 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2004), ISBN 978-0-19-861411-1, 61,472 pages. Available on request.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online, edited by Lawrence Goldman, www.oxforddnb.com (OUP, 2005-13), ISSN 1747-1001, ISBN 9780198614128

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography 2001-2004, edited by Lawrence Goldman (OUP, 2009) 978-0-19-956244-2, 1280 pages. Available on request.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography 2005-2008, edited by Lawrence Goldman (OUP, 2013) ISBN 978-0-19-967154-0, 1264 pages. Available on request.

The quality of the ODNB's research has been recognized since 2008 in several ways:

National awards

Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher Education, 2007-2011 (awarded for the 4-year period to 2011: only the 2nd humanities project to be awarded a QAP in its 40 year history).

Commentaries in academic journals and monographs:

Helen Foxhall Forbes et al, 'Anglo-Saxon and related entries in the Oxford DNB', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 51 (Dec. 2008), 183-232. ODNB 'is already well established as an invaluable academic resource' (183).

'I could not have completed this work without the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: I did not realize when I began how invaluable I would find the ability to follow the turnings of individuals' careers, and like countless others I have come to treasure online and immediate access.' Derek Hirst (William Eliot Smith Professor of History, Washington University, St Louis) in his *Dominion: England and its Island Neighbours, 1500-1700* (2012).

(described with *American National Biography*) 'These extraordinary resources have hugely increased the quality of biographical material available to scholars, and constitute a trustworthy alternative to free material available on the Web.' Gordon Campbell (Professor of Renaissance English, University of Leicester), *Bible: the Story of the King James Version, 1611-2011* (2011).

Citations in scholarly journals/monographs

A search on Google Scholar records 34,000 citations and mentions of the ODNB since Jan. 2008. In the same period, 104 articles in the *English Historical Review* have cited the ODNB at least once, and 364 journal articles published by Cambridge University Press have cited the ODNB at least once.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

A wide range of readers have access to the ODNB in print copies or online. The impact this makes possible has been amplified since 2005 by a programme of public engagement. This has provided topical historical content to **general readers** in several forms: a 'Life of the Day'; a biography podcast (180 episodes); monthly features of biographies by theme; permanent bespoke pages for individual public libraries (promoting local/family history), for museums and galleries, and to mark national events, such as the Poetry Archive's 'Poetry by Heart' schools competition (2013). Public engagement is facilitated by updates associated with **national events**: in 2012, additional sporting figures included first-time biographies of pioneering British Olympians. The editors' decisions to commission or themselves write increasing numbers of biographies of individuals from groups whose contribution to national life has been previously under-represented – Scots, women, Olympic competitors and others – have made important contributions to **cultural diversity**.

The ODNB has made a contribution to a wide spectrum of public constituencies, as the following examples demonstrate. Different groups in the UK and beyond have been enabled to **understand the national and local past** and the sources of **cultural heritage**; to reflect upon them and investigate their family's or community's role in them; and, equipped by well-informed study of them, to shape **public policy** and **public debate**.

Government and Parliament: In January 2010, a motion was passed in the Scottish Parliament, stating : 'That the parliament notes with pleasure the inclusion of four notable Scots in the 2010 edition of the Oxford DNB'.^[1] The ODNB is also well-respected in Westminster: Emily Unell, Public

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Engagement Projects Manager, House of Commons attests that 'Having access to such a high-quality, scholarly resource as the ODNB is a real asset for the UK Parliament's annual 'Parliament Week'. We are often asked for further information from schools and members of the public and it is fantastic to be able to send people to a reliable, readable and engaging source of information on parliamentarians and political reformers.'^[1]

UK public libraries: The ODNB is a fundamental resource for research which is widely accessed through public libraries. Paul Hatch, Lancashire Libraries, explains that: '[the ODNB is] One of our most popular subscription resources—the comprehensive search facilities providing easy access to valuable material for local, family and national history topics. It is included in our "Learning Place", a curriculum compatible package for school children and students, and is also showcased in our promotion of online information resources to groups such as the U3A.'^[2] Jane Baker, Librarian, Telford and Wrekin public libraries, notes that 'At the library we use the ODNB to increase awareness of national and local history for general public, students, and local and family historians. ODNB is like a "trustworthy friend"; as public librarians we are happy to promote it to all users as a reliable, authoritative, and wide-ranging resource.'^[3]

Local and family historians: Two of the ODNB's main user groups are local and family historians. Malcolm Dick, Director of the Centre for West Midlands History, states that the ODNB is 'A particularly important resource for informing individuals, local historians and independent scholars outside academia of up-to-date biographical research.'^[4] Similarly, Alan Crosby, contributor to *Who Do You Think You Are?* Magazine, explains that 'It is rare that a project with the high academic standing of the Oxford DNB can also be of such value to those many independent scholars and personal researchers who are based outside the academy.'^[5]

UK schools: In 2008, Whitgift School in Croydon's annual essay-writing competition focused on using the ODNB to write about the life of a person born one hundred years ago. The winning essays were published on ODNB Online, encouraging others to follow suit. A similar use of the ODNB was made on a national level in 2013, with 80 biographies of poets extracted from the ODNB and made part of the 'Poetry by Heart' website and associated learning resources and newsletters. 250 English schools took part in the 'Poetry by Heart' project.

Individual users of the ODNB: Editors correspond with c.1000 readers annually. Comments include: 'I am simply amazed at the range and number of your updates. I am currently researching the Australian National Biography in the context of all the national dictionaries but none comes anywhere near your industry and depth' (27/5/10). The ODNB also receives feedback in response to the podcasts published on iTunes: 'These podcasts are a stylish and elegant means of disseminating knowledge. The DNB online is an imaginative and impressive use of technology to provide the fruits of scholarship to a wide audience.' In 2013 the ODNB podcast had 24 reviews on iTunes, collective rating 4.5 /5.^[iii] In 2012, 650,000 episodes of the podcasts were downloaded, a 100% increase since 2009. Finally, in May 2013, 12,000 people subscribed to the daily e-mail service or followed the ODNB's Twitter feed.

Worldwide readership: The ODNB online is accessible in 146 of 149 English library authorities; all Northern Ireland public libraries; 70% of Scottish library authorities, and 80% of Welsh authorities. In 2012, the ODNB had 78 UK university and HE institutional subscribers, 50 UK school subscribers, and 559 international institutional subscribers. There were 1.3 million visits to ODNB online in 2012, with visits defined as individual subscriber access and searches of the resource. 6.3 million pages (i.e., individual biographies) were viewed. UK public libraries' access was 20% of this usage. Usage shows a 14% increase in 2010-12. 60% of visits are from the UK; usage in the US, Canada, and Australia accounted for 23% of the total in 2012.

Contributions to public education/debate: Since 2008 there have been 48 national and local radio interviews with ODNB editors about the Dictionary (including 8 appearances on Radio 4's *Today* and *In Our Time* and 5 appearances on television including BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?*); 32 national newspaper and magazine articles; 107 regional newspaper articles about ODNB content, e.g. 'Great gardeners', *Royal Horticultural Society Magazine* (July 2008); Jeremy Paxman,

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'To have and to hold: why I love the Dictionary of National Biography', *Guardian*, 2/5/09; also 'You can't go wrong with the DNB', *Times*, 1/1/12; and articles in *Daily Mail* and *Sun* (3-4/1/13) on 'who should the nation remember?'

Standing as a national institution: In October 2009 the ODNB featured in the *Daily Telegraph's* 'defining cultural moments of the noughties'. In November of that year, it was ranked as one of the *Times's* 100 'best books' published between 2000 and 2010. By April 2013, the ODNB was among 100 websites judged 'essential reading for future generations' by the British Library and others. The citation notes ODNB's reach 'beyond [its] subscriber community ... An experiment worth following beyond 2013.'^[iii]

Overall, the ODNB serves the needs of a very wide range of users, and, as a fundamental national reference work, has had a huge impact by inspiring interest in the nation's history.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)*Testimony*

[1] Statement from Public Engagement Projects Manager, House of Commons

[2] Statement from Librarian, Information Services, Lancashire Libraries

[3] Statement from Librarian, Telford and Wrekin Public Libraries

[4] Statement from Director, Centre for West Midlands History

[5] Statement from Contributor to '*Who Do You Think You Are?*' Magazine

Other evidence sources

[i] Scottish parliament: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28877>

[ii] iTunes review: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/oxford-biographies/id211202896>

[iii] British Library's 100 websites of the future: <http://www.bl.uk/100websites/index.html>