

The New Dictionary of National Biography.

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Biography is clearly of great importance for prosopographers. The preparation of the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, work on whose mediaeval entries has been in progress now since October 1993, offers the prospect of a new kind of research tool for the prosopographer, as well as work of great interest to the general reader. When completed, the *New DNB* will be sufficiently extensive, comprehensive and up-to-date for it to be the starting point for all mediaeval prosopography centred on the British Isles.

The *New DNB* will be a database as well as a book. The decision to publish the *New DNB* on CD-Rom (or whatever electronic format succeeds it) has greatly expanded the possibilities for searching for and manipulating data. Contributors on mediaeval subjects have often been surprised at the kinds of details they have been asked to supply. Although dates and places are frequently obscure, if not unknowable, even the most approximate will help readers compile information on particular periods or places. It will be possible, for example, to list all the subjects who were active in Gloucestershire between, say, 1300 and 1399, to find out who they were related to, who were their political allies, which other places they frequented, which religious institutions they endowed, and so on.

The vast majority of approximately 3800 articles on mediaeval subjects have now been commissioned, from established scholars across the world – many readers of this newsletter among them. Although only a tithe of articles has yet been received, it seems clear that writing biography has proved a stimulating challenge for most contributors. The requirements of biography have focused their attention on details which are crucial for the prosopographer but which tend to be ignored in other forms of historical writing: places of birth or burial, upbringing, and a host of familial connections.

Contributors, asked to replace old *DNB* articles with their characteristic, overwhelming emphasis on the development of the monarchy and ‘Our Great Island Story’, have often reacted with horror at these late Victorian excesses. We can at least take some satisfaction from the great advances made in mediaeval studies over the last hundred years. But the *New DNB*’s contributors have had to straddle these historiographical movements. Since the 1890s, the assumptions of Tout, Round, *et al.*, about royal power and authority have been questioned, most notably by Macfarlane and his followers, the whole context of constitutional history has changed, and, more recently, historians of the later Middle Ages have either denied the importance of personalities altogether, or concentrated their focus on hitherto more obscure individuals with more localised power bases.

While acknowledging these developments, the *New DNB* can adopt a more sophisticated idea of biography: one which brings out the importance of horizontal social ties. Marriage, and its political and social implications, resumes a central position in the picture of aristocratic society. Personal relationships, so often underplayed or ignored, are seen to have had critical importance, for example, for the young aristocrats who supported Montfort at Lewes and Evesham. Indeed, the historiographical wheel has turned full circle

in the sense that the personality of the king once again appears as significant a factor in politics of the realm as institutional power or theoretical authority.

Not only will historians be able to construct family histories with the help of the CD-Rom edition, but there will also be entries on groups, ranging from late mediaeval gentry families to obscure early Anglo-Saxon kings, of whom all that is known is their genealogies. Delving into the realms of semi-history and myth, early Irish saints are best approached according to areas in which their cults were fostered and the familial connections they were supposed to have. This approach is far more useful than simply retelling the fictional later mediaeval accounts of their lives. In one sense, it will constitute the reverse of prosopography: the once huge family of the reputed kin of St Patrick, so prominent in the Irish hagiographies, will finally vanish from history.

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The Research Editors at the *New DNB* are happy to receive any information, or to hear of research, which may help in the preparation of articles on mediaeval subjects. Please write to Marios Costambeys, *New DNB*, Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP.