

## **Academic Dress in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography***

**by William Gibson**

The new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, published to great acclaim in 2004, contains over 50,000 biographical articles of men and women who have contributed to the history of Britain. The printed edition runs to sixty volumes and has 60,000 pages; it was written by 10,000 specialist contributors and was a multi-million-pound project funded by the British Academy and Oxford University Press. It took over thirteen years to complete, replaces the Victorian *DNB* and the online edition has all the links and connections to the National Portrait Gallery and other sites you would expect of a major academic resource. But, for Burgon Society members, the question is: what does it say about academic dress?

In the articles on medieval subjects, academic dress makes only passing appearances. In the entry for John Carpenter, a fifteenth-century benefactor of a library in Worcester—attached to the Carnary Chapel next to the cathedral—his benefaction included funds for the chaplain was to have a salary of £10—£8 if he took meals with the sacrist—and cloth for hood and gown. In passing, we also find that Richard Pates, canon of Lincoln and archdeacon of Winchester in the 1520s, received a dispensation from attendance at university funerals and other formal occasions at Oxford because it would not be seemly for him to attend such acts in the lowly academic dress of a Bachelor of Arts—how he had become an archdeacon without obtaining an MA or BD is not clear.<sup>1</sup> The Reformation naturally brought religious upheaval. The article on William Fulke, a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, in the 1570s, includes the fact that his radical religious views led him to abandon academic dress (gown and square cap) and the wearing of a surplice in chapel. Such things were considered popish remnants by the zealous Protestants.<sup>2</sup> Matthew Godwin, organist and choirmaster, who died in 1587 is recorded in a monument, in colour, situated under the north tower of Exeter

---

I am grateful to Professor Bruce Christianson, FBS, Dr Alex Kerr, FBS, and Mr Nicholas Groves, FBS, for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Roy Martin Haines, 'Carpenter, John (c.1402–1476)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, printed edition 2004; online edition 2005 (and frequently enlarged)) [hereafter *ODNB*].

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauckham, 'Fulke, William (1536/7–1589)', in *ODNB*.

cathedral, which shows the youth in academic dress, kneeling in prayer before an organ (see photograph on front cover). It is accompanied by a Latin text that reads in translation: ‘Erected by G: M: ER: to the everlasting memory of Matthew Godwin, a good, gentle, clever youth, bachelor of music, most worthy and expert chief musician of the Cathedral Churches of Canterbury and Exeter.’<sup>3</sup>

Academic dress remained in the seventeenth century an important issue for those with strong religious values. John Owen, vice-chancellor of Oxford under the Commonwealth, tried to reform Oxford, in part by making traditional academic dress optional, but Convocation rejected his plan in April 1656. Although Owen enjoyed some support among Oxford visitors they refused to reduce Convocation’s powers, nor was he able to reform the traditional festivities and ceremonies at the end of the academic year.<sup>4</sup> At the Restoration, John Fell became vice-chancellor of the University. To Fell’s existing ambition to rule the entire University was united the particular aim of those who had suffered during the interregnum ‘to reduce the university to that manner and form, as to preaching, disputing, discipline, opinion &c as ‘twas when Dr Laud was chancellor’. Twenty years on, however, ‘a most strange liberty, loosness in manners and religion had taken place’. Fell moved swiftly to reintroduce the policies of Archbishop William Laud. He issued as *Cum de vestitu et habitu scholastico* regulations for academic dress and ‘with characteristic efficiency’ had done his best to ensure their enforceability by commanding Oxford tailors, under penalty of fine or withdrawal of custom, to cut their cloth according to his printed specifications. ‘For Fell as for Laud’, clothing appropriate to social rank and academic standing ‘was the mark of belonging to a well-ordered and disciplined society.’<sup>5</sup>

David Loggan, whose name is familiar to Burgon Society members, enjoys a detailed biography. In 1665 Loggan and his wife left London because of the plague and settled at Nuffield, Oxfordshire. There he engraved a portrait of an Oxford innkeeper, Mother Louse—supposedly the last woman in England to wear a ruff—and this brought him to the attention of Oxford University. He painted portraits, among others, of Elias Ashmole and John Aubrey. In March 1669 he was appointed engraver to the University, at an annual salary of 20 shillings. His first official commission was for a pair of plates of the newly built Sheldonian Theatre, where the university press was housed. In 1672 he was made a member of the University. The *ODNB* article claims that plates of academic dress in a book with the dedication *Reverendis ... doctoribus academiae Oxoniensis haec omnium ordinum [sic] habituumque academicorum exemplaria*, 1674, has usually been ascribed to Loggan, though they are not signed,<sup>6</sup> but it has been known for some

---

<sup>3</sup> Ian Payne, ‘Godwin, Matthew (1569?–1587)’, in *ODNB*.

<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Greaves, ‘Owen, John (1616–1683)’, in *ODNB*.

<sup>5</sup> Vivienne Larminie, ‘Fell, John (1625–1686)’, in *ODNB*.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Tyack, ‘Loggan, David (bap. 1634, d. 1692)’, in *ODNB*.

time that they were the work of Loggan's assistant, George Edwards.<sup>7</sup> But the main legacy of his time in Oxford is his *Oxonia illustrata* (1675), a set of bird's-eye views of all the colleges, academic halls, and university buildings, together with a map. The *ODNB* does not mention that it includes a superb panorama of robed figures, featuring the whole range of academic dress in use at Oxford at that time.

There are hardly any references to academic dress in the lives of eighteenth-century Britons. But it is recorded that Richard Harraden in 1803 executed aquatints for Thomas Girtin's *Views of Paris*. It was also then that he produced a series of etched costume plates of Cambridge academic dress;<sup>8</sup> focused on the human figure as a mannequin for the relevant robes, they were published in *Costume of Various Orders in the University of Cambridge*.<sup>9</sup> The nineteenth century has far more references. Alexander Mitchell, for example, was forty-six years as a professor in St Andrews University. He was convener of the committee entrusted by the senate with bringing in the report in 1868 which led to the adoption by the university of its much-admired system of academic dress, based on detailed research into the medieval practice at the University of Paris. His alma mater conferred upon him in 1862 the DD degree *honoris causa*, and the University of Glasgow the honorary degree of LLD in 1892.<sup>10</sup> More idiosyncratic is the life of Frederick North, Fifth Earl of Guilford. In the 1820s he founded a university on the Ionian Islands in Greece, which was finally located on Corfu. In November 1823 the legislative assembly appointed Guilford *archōn* (or chancellor) of the university, which was constituted with four faculties (Theology, Law, Medicine, and Philosophy) on 17 May 1824. The opening ceremony of the Ionian Academy, 'the first Greek university', was notable for the costumes worn by the professors and students, designed by Guilford himself from the example of ancient Athenian statues. His insistence on this peculiar academic dress attracted much ridicule when news reached England, Napier remarking 'He goes about dressed like Plato, with a gold band around his mad pate and flowing drapery of a purple hue.'<sup>11</sup>

References to women and academic dress emerge with the Suffragists. Hertha Ayrton, despite recurrent ill health, supported by her extended family, was a stalwart of the women's movement. She marched in all the suffrage processions: in 1911, with 800 women graduates in academic dress (which Cambridge women could not wear according to University statutes until 1948), she was in the Science section.<sup>12</sup> Dame Millicent Fawcett was another Suffragette. Between the Liberal election victory of 1906 and the outbreak of war in 1914 mass support for women's

---

<sup>7</sup> I owe this point to Dr Alex Kerr, FBS.

<sup>8</sup> J. W. Clark, 'Harraden, Richard (1756–1838)', rev. Lucy Peltz, in *ODNB*.

<sup>9</sup> I owe this to Dr Alex Kerr, FBS.

<sup>10</sup> James K. Cameron, 'Mitchell, Alexander Ferrier (1822–1899)', in *ODNB*.

<sup>11</sup> M. C. Curthoys, 'North, Frederick, fifth earl of Guilford (1766–1827)', in *ODNB*.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Mason, 'Ayrton, (Phoebe) Sarah (1854–1923)', in *ODNB*.

suffrage mobilized, initially at least—as Mrs Fawcett recognized—because of the militant campaign launched by the Pankhursts in the winter of 1905. The National Union of Women Suffrage Societies, reorganized under her presidency in 1907, and much the largest of the suffrage societies with more than 50,000 members by 1913, was committed to constitutional methods—although that did not preclude spectacular demonstrations and marches in which she took the lead, sometimes dressed in her St Andrews LLD robes, always youthful in appearance and setting an uncomfortably brisk pace.<sup>13</sup> Eleanor Jourdain was vice-principal and tutor in French at St Hugh’s College, Oxford, in the first two decades of the twentieth century. She was a complex, controversial, and powerful personality. From 1908 she led the St Hugh’s contingent at London suffrage demonstrations arrayed in her University of Paris doctoral robes.<sup>14</sup>

There are only three more recent entries that refer to academic dress. F. R. Leavis is described as favouring worn but good clothes, and he never sported a tie, except when the conventions of Cambridge academic dress required it.<sup>15</sup> Mary, Baroness Stocks found herself outvoted on the college council at Westfield College, London University, when she proposed the abolition of black stockings as a mandatory part of women’s academic dress.<sup>16</sup> The archaeologist Nowell Linton Myres is described as without pomposity: he brightened his later bedridden days with the use of one of his doctoral robes as a dressing-gown—he had honorary doctorates from Toronto, Reading, Belfast and Durham and an Oxford DLitt.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Janet Howarth, ‘Fawcett, Dame Millicent Garrett (1847–1929)’, in *ODNB*.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Howarth, ‘Jourdain, Eleanor Frances (1863–1924)’, *ODNB*.

<sup>15</sup> Ian MacKillop, ‘Leavis, Frank Raymond (1895–1978)’, in *ODNB*.

<sup>16</sup> Duncan Sutherland, ‘Stocks, Mary Danvers, Baroness Stocks (1891–1975)’, in *ODNB*.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold Taylor, ‘Myres, (John) Nowell Linton (1902–1989)’, rev., in *ODNB*.