



## A History of Britain in 21 Women

*Jenni Murray*

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Britain has been defined by its conflicts, its conquests, its men, and its monarchs. To say that it's high time that it was defined by its women falls some way short of an understatement.

Jenni Murray draws together the lives 21 women to shed light upon a variety of social, political, religious and cultural aspects of British history. In lively prose Murray reinvigorates the stories behind the names we all know and reveals the fascinating tales behind those less familiar, ultimately producing a unique history of Britain that is as long-overdue as it is absorbing. From famous queens to forgotten visionaries, and from great artists to our most influential political actors, *A History of Britain in 21 Women* is a veritable feast of page-turning history.

*A History of Britain in 21 Women* will profile Boudicca, Aphra Behn, Elizabeth I (this chapter will also feature Anne Boleyn and Mary Queen of Scots), Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, Constance Markievicz, Nancy Astor, Ada Lovelace, Caroline Herschel, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Emmeline Pankhurst, Gwen John, Rosalind Franklin, Ethel Smyth, Margaret Thatcher, Nicola Sturgeon, Mary Quant, Barbara Castle and Mary Somerville.

## A History of Britain in 21 Women Details

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### BAM The Bibliomaniac says

What a topical book! This is a must-have for high school girls in doubt, women interested in women's history, feminists. I wish I had a hard copy so I could go through the women with you, but there is mention of nurses and doctors, a composer, legislators, a designer, suffragettes, a warrior and a queen. This is not your typical discussion.

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### Sara says

I seem to be reading a lot of feminist texts at the moment, but they've all been so good and empowering and, most importantly, inspirational. This was no exception. Easy to dip in and out of, it charts a personal look at 21 great women in British history. The author states at the beginning that this is very much a selective and individual take on what it is to be an inspiring woman in British history. There are some rather controversial picks (Margaret Thatcher stands out as probably the most polarising inclusion in the list), but also some criminally underrated women I knew nothing, or next to nothing, about.

Women like Ethel Smyth - composer, bisexual (she had two affairs going at the same time, with a husband and wife) and all round fighter for equality, who used the First World War to her advantage. Or Nicola Sturgeon. Leader of the SNP, anti Trump, pro Scotland, but most importantly a successful and passionate leader. When asked in an interview if she was going to have children she replied with the cutting remark that such a question would never have been asked of her predecessor- the also childless Alan Salmond. And with that remark, it just highlighted that women's rights still has such a long way to go if we want to change society's views on what it is to be a successful woman.

This was such an eye opener for me, and just lit a fire underneath me to continue that fight. Not for myself, but for my children. The conclusion alludes to this, stating we should never be complacent, never back down, and always fight to further the goal of gender equality because at any moment it could be taken away.

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### Lauren James says

A feminist look at women from Boudiccia to the suffragettes, this is a nice little non-fiction collection of biographies. There's a few women I hadn't heard of that I want to learn more about.

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### J.A. Ironside says

Ok so this was history lite, but then it was never intended to be anything else and it's delivered in a very enjoyable and engaging way. A while back I read Cailyn Moran's 'How to be a Woman'. While shd is very funny and astute as well as savvy with gender politics, she made a comment that struck me with unease: that there is no proper canon of women scientists, entrepreneurs, inventors, artists, musicians, leaders and

politicians. For about 5 mins I was horribly afraid she was right. Women throughout the centuries start at such a disadvantage when trying to succeed in a world built and arranged for the primary use of men. And then I made a quick mental list of all the women I could think of off the top of my head who had bucked the system and made significant contributions to art, history, medicine and science. In a thirty second mental check list I came up with over 50. I decided Moran was just wrong on that point. However as Murray points out in this book you could be forgiven for thinking women haven't achieved very much unless you specifically go and find less biased accounts of history and science. Murray does an excellent job of providing her own favourite examples of female historical figures from British history, drawn from a far larger pool. They are not all good people. They are not modest or mild or even good natured. They make mistakes and have foibles and ethics clashes with a modern audience. But every single one of them is great, not just by the standards of what is perceived as being achievable for a woman but by the standards we set for men. This is a great springboard from which to jump on finding more out about women in history, art and science. In addition Murray is not strident or in anyway alienating to those with a broader viewpoint. Her call for equality is just that - all genders equal not 'now it's time for women to have a turn running things'. She appreciates the forward thinking supportive fathers who encouraged their daughters, the husbands who supported their wives reaching for more than marriage and children. It's a well rounded book and very enjoyable. I wish I'd read the book rather than listened to the audio. Murray is an excellent radio host/newsreader but is not suited for reading audio books. There are weird pauses at strange junctures in sentences that were at first distracting and then irritating. For all that a very good book.

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### **Kelly says**

A really great book that looks at 21 women who have changed history for the female sex. There is a wide range of women from ones we all know, such as Elizabeth I, Margaret Thatcher and Emmeline Pankhurst, to ones I've ashamedly never heard of but I have come to wholeheartedly respect such as Fanny Burney (author and first woman to document a successful mastectomy without pain relief), Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (first female doctor) and Aphra Behn (who I knew as a playwright but not as a spy!).

There were those who I knew about and simply loved reading more about their lives; like Aphra Behn, as mentioned above, Mary Wollstonecraft, Queen Liz I, Mary Quant, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Jane Austen and Emmeline Pankhurst. However, there were those who I thought shouldn't be included, not because they weren't great but simply because the author wasn't entirely positive about them, Maggie Thatcher, or they were only loosely linked to Britain in some way; Mary Seacole, Caroline Herschel and Constance Markievicz. I feel Constance certainly wouldn't want to be included in this book as she fought so strongly against Britain, abstained from anything associated with Britain and was a lead figure in the Easter Rising events in Ireland.

Overall, this book is a fantastic insight into the strength and determination of women and it highlights what we can achieve when we have a cause in us that we want/need to fight for. We certainly have a lot to thank these women for and it is important that our children, male or female, know who they are and the impact they made in history.

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### **Hermien says**

Not only very interesting short biographies of the 21 women, but also a good reminder to appreciate the

freedoms women now enjoy which shouldn't be taken for granted.

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### **charlotte says**

some thoughts:

(1) shame the author's a terf huh...

(2) it was interesting in a way, because about half of these women are ones i've never heard of so that was cool, but then later on it went with some really boring choices (important women, yes, but boring choices) and yeah

(3) it's really interesting how murray didn't include marie stopes because of her interest in eugenics but included both millicent fawcett who was a staunch imperialist and classist, and maggie thatcher who was homophobic so!

(4) she makes no judgements about these women, which, okay, being non-biased and all, but *how* can you be non-biased about imperialism and classism and homophobia i'm sorry i just got so tired of her pointedly refusing to take a stance (she even says she grew up in a mining town, and all she says of thatcher is some people loved her and some people loathed her)

(5) it's very white (20/21) and very straight (20/21\*)

\*one lesbian, two potential bisexual women but i didn't count them as aphra behn is never mentioned as maybe being so, and gwen john only is in briefest passing with some unrequited infatuation so who really knows

(6) also to note on the thatcher chapter, it brings up some of her controversies like taking away free milk, not supporting women in cabinet, the falklands' war, and the miners, but there's a notable gap where section 28 should be - and ultimately these are all only briefly touched on, and no real judgement made

(7) i guess though, in the end, this was just to bring attention to some figures who are mostly overlooked in the history curriculum (i hate men)

(8) once again, it's a shame the author's a terf huh...

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### **Ali says**

It is worth pointing out, author Jenni Murray is clear, that this is a very personal selection. I think if you asked any group of people who would make their list they would all look very different. I fully admit I raised an eye brow at the inclusion of one or two and wondered at the exclusion of others. In reality, the book is twenty-one chapters of short biographies, there is very little from one chapter that feeds into another. Still, it does provide some fascinating information, the stories of many of these women are quite extraordinary.

The book begins with Boadicea (she insists on Boadicea rather than the more accepted Boudicca) and ends

with Nicola Sturgeon. Now there's a sentence I never thought I would be writing about a book. In between we have; Elizabeth I, Aphra Behn, Caroline Herschel, Fanny Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Mary Somerville, Mary Seacole, Ada Lovelace, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Emmeline Pankhurst, Ethel Smyth, Constance Markievicz, Gwen John, Nancy Astor, Barbara Castle, Margaret Thatcher and Mary Quant. There were a few names there completely new to me – others who I had fully expected to be included in a book of this kind.

Full review: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2018/...>

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### **Leore says**

DNF AT 45%

I just don't care anymore :/

RTC.

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### **David Swanson says**

This is the sort of Audible book I really enjoy because it delves into the stories of individuals in history who made a difference. Unfortunately, the delivery of these stories is dull so I regard the content as 4\* but the delivery as 2\* resulting in a blended 3\*

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### **victoria\_tonks says**

This book is very hard for me to rate. I started by enjoying it immensely. I did not (do not) mind what some of the reviewers see as the arbitrariness of the author's choice of historical figures. Her book, her choice. I certainly never heard of some of the women before I found this book, and I am glad I finally have. As I said in one of my status' updates - we do owe a lot to the 19th/early 20th century feminists. A lot we nowadays take for granted. However, what has spoilt the whole experience for me was that I felt that toward the final chapters, the author's political views started taking over the narration. This culminated in the afterword which for me smacked strongly of modern left wing feminist propaganda. All in all, I do not regret reading the book - the greater part of it was indeed a fascinating, informative and inspiring listen, but I know I will not check out this writer's other books. I thought I would, but I won't.

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### **Katheryn Thompson says**

“The history of the world is but the biography of great men.” Or so Thomas Carlyle claimed.

Jenni Murray, a journalist and broadcaster who has presented BBC Radio 4's Women's Hour since 1987, provides an alternative history, in *A History of Britain in 21 Women*, through short, fascinating, and humorous biographies on twenty-one women who have made Britain what it is today: Great.

While the selection of women was never going to please everyone, Murray makes it clear from the start that her choices were wholly personal, and in fact the entire book has a very personal feel to it as she weaves her own stories and opinions with those of the women she is presenting. I also think that, while I may not necessarily agree with the choices, Murray has chosen very wisely. The women range from the well-known, such as Elizabeth I, to those whose names are familiar but not their stories, such as Mary Quant, to the unknown, such as Constance Markievicz. The women's political stances range from right, as Margaret Thatcher, to left, as Nicola Sturgeon; their fields from medicine, like Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, to art, like Gwen John; and Murray has shrewdly, in my opinion, included both Suffragist, in Millicent Garrett Fawcett, and Suffragette, in Emmeline Pankhurst.

Murray's talent as a journalist and especially as a broadcaster shines through the biographies, as her ever-present voice makes the reader feel a personal connection to each woman. She brings them to life through their voices, stories, and stunning illustrations (courtesy of Peter Locke), and shares quotations and anecdotes ranging from the intimate to the all-encompassing, and from the humorous to the awe-inspiring. She presents them as role models, history makers, and most importantly as women. And her tone throughout is as witty and engaging as these incredible women deserve.

The overtly personal tone surprised me at first, but I soon became accustomed to the refreshingly different style, finding it the perfect voice in which to tell such intensely powerful and personal stories. Murray manages to capture that elusive balance between information overloading and storytelling. And although the odd comment still made me cringe, such as her wish that Boadicea (to follow Murray's spelling) had won her rebellion, and her seeming lack of understanding, in relation to Elizabeth I, of the importance of a monarch to provide for the succession, it never detracted from that balance.

So while I may not agree with everything that Murray said, and everyone whom she chose, I definitely agree with her that the history of the world, to correct Carlyle, is but the biography of great men and women, as this inspirational book so aptly shows.

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### **Sarah says**

A very informative and interesting read! I find myself attracted to these kinds of books when I'm in the mood for some not too heavy non fiction (like *Wonder Women: 25 Innovators, Inventors, and Trailblazers Who Changed History*), and I enjoyed this one.

I guess this is essentially a collection of 10ish page long biographies, and is better suited to reading in short bursts. That said, it never gets boring, and the vast majority of these women were fascinating characters who I had never heard of before or knew only by name.

As the title states, this is a personal selection from Jenni Murray. But the book itself isn't too personal, and the anecdotes she does add are helpful ones (I enjoyed the chapter on Margaret Thatcher despite having a strong dislike for Thatcher herself, mostly thanks to Murray's memories of meeting her across her career).

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### **Rachel Ruddick says**

I had read Mary Beard's *SPQR* recently and was hoping for a history book that was equally rich and

satisfying. This book is not that kind of book. It reads like a cross between a set of Wikipedia pages and a set of personal remarks that are mostly just fandom and admiration. Its only contribution is the authors own encounters with some of these people, such as Thatcher. It's feminist intention is admirable. However this is not a real history book.

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### **Mary Arkless says**

This was a very personal choice of which women to include by the author. Every single one was a very strong person, every one promoted women in some way. Personally, I wouldn't have included Nicola Sturgeon, but I can't stand the woman. I am sure many wouldn't put in Margaret Thatcher. Murray admits that that woman's name wouldn't even be mentioned in the circles where Murray grew up (her family were miners). There is a lot to be learnt in this book. Some of these women were authors, and I will check if I can get some of their books from the library.

This is actually not a long book, but it took me a month to read because of the holidays.

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