

Mrs Margoliouth: Jessie Payne Smith, Syriac Scholar and Suffragist

On 18 August 1933, the day that she died, the husband of Jessie Payne Smith (1856–1933)—since 1896 Jessie Payne Margoliouth—‘motored’ from Oxford to London in order to make sure that an obituary notice appeared in the next day’s edition of *The Times* newspaper.¹ The notice read as follows:

Mrs. Margoliouth, wife of Professor D. S. Margoliouth, Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, died at Boar’s Hill yesterday. She had a hereditary interest in Oriental languages, for she was Jessie, daughter of the late Dr. R. Payne-Smith, Dean of Canterbury, one of the most learned Syriac scholars of his generation. Professor Margoliouth had collaborated with the Dean in the *Thesaurus Syriacus*, and he married the Dean’s daughter in 1896 and helped her to carry that great work to a conclusion, a task which occupied more than 25 years. She was the sister of the Rev. W. H. Payne-Smith, senior student of Christ Church, Oxford.²

Almost a hundred years later it is arguable that Jessie’s scholarship,³ and especially her *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*,⁴ the main Syriac-English lexicon, is better known, and certainly more regularly used and cited, than that of her husband, but in this notice in *The Times* Jessie’s identity, status, and achievements are presented as being entirely derived from her male relations—her father, husband, and brother. Her life-long study of Syriac and Arabic is said to be ‘a hereditary interest’, although none of her five siblings inherited this DNA, and none of them had her fierce intelligence and intellectual curiosity; her brother William may have been a life fellow in Oxford, but he spent most of his life as a schoolmaster at Rugby School.⁵ The obituary notice also implies that her husband David Samuel Margoliouth⁶ enabled the poor overwhelmed Jessie to complete her father’s work, despite the fact that she had worked on the *Thesaurus Syriacus* for 16 years before her father’s death, and her knowledge of Syriac was significantly stronger than Margoliouth’s. In this notice Jessie is almost entirely overshadowed by the powerful men in her life, and so it is the purpose of this short article to throw some light on Jessie herself, and on her own life and significant accomplishments.

Sources for Jessie’s life include not only her own publications, primarily academic books and political articles and letters in journals and newspapers, but also a few appreciations of her work by contemporaries, and a single reminiscence of her life with Margoliouth.⁷ Most importantly the Bodleian Library in Oxford preserves a number of her personal diaries, notebooks, and work papers, as well as those of her husband. Her detailed narrative diaries mostly date from her early twenties to

¹ Private diary of David S. Margoliouth (Friday, 18 August 1933).

² *The Times* (of London) (19 August 1933), 10. A notice was also placed in *The Morning Post*.

³ In what follows I will refer to Jessie Payne Smith as ‘Jessie’, partly to avoid changes of family name and to avoid calling her Mrs Margoliouth, following the conventions of her day, and partly because in my day as a student in Oxford, professors and students addressed each other by their first names, and through her *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* Jessie was, and is still, my teacher. Her husband, David Samuel Margoliouth, I will refer to as ‘Margoliouth’, adhering to the social conventions of his day. This could be read as creating a gendered hierarchy, but that would be to misread my respect for Jessie’s scholarship and activism. For some earlier accounts of Jessie’s life, see: A. Mingana, ‘Jessie Payne Margoliouth’, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1934), 217–9; D. G. K. Taylor, ‘Margoliouth [née Smith], Jessie Payne (1856–1933)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (12 November 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58372>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

⁴ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896–1903); see below.

⁵ A fond memorial of the Revd William Henry Payne Smith (1852–1943) was published in the Rugby School magazine: B. C. H., ‘Rev. W. H. Payne-Smith’, *The Meteor* 893 (14 February 1944), 24–5. He joined the school staff in 1884, but retained a life fellowship (or Senior Studentship) at Christ Church, without any teaching duties there.

⁶ On Margoliouth see: F. L. Beeston, ‘Margoliouth, David Samuel (1858–1940)’, *ODNB* (28 September 2006) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34874>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026); Gilbert Murray, ‘David Samuel Margoliouth 1858–1940’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 26 (1940), 391–7; and the other papers published in this issue of *New College Notes*.

⁷ Arnold J. Toynbee, ‘The Margoliouths’, chapter 4 in his *Acquaintances* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 43–8.

her mid thirties, although there are also some appointments diaries and notebooks from later periods, when she was in her forties and sixties.⁸ From these a very vibrant picture emerges of the young scholar, passionate about her scholarship, and a feisty figure who was strongly committed to feminist and social issues of her day. The following account will therefore begin with a brief outline of Jessie's major life events, and will then turn to consider her academic life and her life as a political and social activist.

OUTLINE OF JESSIE'S LIFE

Jessie was born in Kensington, London, on 23 February 1856, the fourth of six children of Catherine née Freeman (1819–1894)⁹ and the Revd Robert Payne Smith (1818–1895),¹⁰ while her father was working as headmaster of a grammar school there, and simultaneously studying Syriac and Arabic.¹¹ The following year, 1857, the family moved to Oxford, where Robert took a major pay cut in order to become an assistant sub-librarian in the Bodleian Library, in which role he catalogued the Syriac manuscripts, and published various editions of Syriac texts. He also published several volumes of conservative evangelical biblical exegesis, and one of these, a collection of sermons vindicating the prophecies of Isaiah,¹² led in 1865 to his appointment to the Regius Professorship of Divinity by the prime minister, Palmerston. The family lived first in Park Town, and then after 1865 in the Rectory at Ewelme, some 22 km south of Oxford,¹³ where they kept a large free-range menagerie of birds and animals.¹⁴ The Payne Smiths remained in Oxford until 1871, and then, when Jessie was 15, they moved

⁸ Margoliouth's diaries are mostly desktop appointment diaries, with relatively infrequent and short entries.

⁹ Birth and death dates (4 January 1819–26 January 1894) are provided by her gravestone in St Martin's Churchyard, Canterbury, and correct those found in biographies of her husband. Her children, two sons and four daughters, were: Robert (*b.* 1851), William Henry (1852), Catherine (1855), Jessie (1856), Mary (1858), Esther (1861). Both Robert and William (on whom see above) were ordained Anglican priests, and Robert was vicar of St Laurence in Thanet, Kent, and then of St Mary's in Cheddton Fitzpaine, Somerset. Catherine married (1876) Sir Alfred Mellor Watkin, 2nd Baronet (1846–1914), a politician and railway director. Mary was living in Oxford by 1910, and was active in social work, and in local theatricals. On one occasion she also acted as auctioneer for a sale on behalf of the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society: 'and a most entertaining auctioneer she was, . . . it was quite impossible to tell the real value of articles in the hands of an irresponsible seller who was making jokes all the while' (*Oxfordshire Weekly News* (21 December 1910), 8. Esther became an SPG missionary in Natal, and built schools for the Indians there (one of which, in Pietermaritzburg, is still named after her): see Herby S. Govinden, *The Anglican Church among Indians in KwaZulu-Natal* (MA thesis, University of Durban-Westville, 2002), p. 36.

¹⁰ Robert's parents were Robert Smith (*d.* 1827) of Chipping Camden, Gloucestershire, and Esther Argles Payne, of Leggs Heath in Sussex, both from once important county families now impoverished. Throughout his adult life their son Robert always appears to have given his family name as Payne Smith, without a hyphen, and not as Smith, and this usage was continued by his own children.

¹¹ For further details of the life of Robert Payne Smith see: D. S. M. [i.e. David Samuel Margoliouth], 'Payne Smith, Robert (1819–1895)', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sidney Lee, vol. 44 (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1895), pp. 125–7; R. S. Simpson, 'Smith, Robert Payne (1818–1895)', *ODNB* (26 May 2005) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/21660>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026); Mary Payne Smith, (his youngest daughter), 'Mémorial of Robert Payne Smith, Dean of Canterbury', in Robert Payne Smith, *Sermons on the Pentateuch* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1896), pp. 5–78 (for his study of Syriac and Arabic, see pp. 18–21); J. Meadows Cowper, 'Robert Payne Smith, 1871–1895', in his *The Lives of the Deans of Canterbury, 1541 to 1900* (Canterbury: Cross & Jackman, 1900), pp. 237–42; obituary, Anon., *The Times* (1 April 1895), 6; Anon., 'The Dean of Canterbury', *The Church Portrait Journal*, new series, 5 (January 1884), 1–4; Donald Holdsworth, 'A Forgotten Worthy: Dr. Robert Payne Smith, Dean of Canterbury', *Camden & District Historical and Archaeological Society Notes & Queries* 6 (6) (2011), 79–80.

¹² R. Payne Smith, *The Authenticity and Messianic Interpretation of the Prophecies of Isaiah Vindicated in a Course of Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1862).

¹³ The living of Ewelme was attached to the Regius Professorship, and its associated canonry.

¹⁴ See Mary Payne Smith, 'Mémorial of Robert Payne Smith', pp. 22–24, 30–32. A venomous contemporary review of this Mémorial began as follows: 'The Mémorial of this kindly and ponderous Philistine Dean is perhaps the worst piece of writing published this year. . . . Out of seventy-seven pages of Mémorial, three are filled out with a description of the decanal poultry, three or four with cathedral gossip, and several more with Mrs. Payne Smith, her parties, potatoes, and the thin potations of her progeny'; 'Theological Skirmishers', *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* (19 September 1896), 326. Personally, I take the opposite point of view to the reviewer; these are the very passages

to Canterbury, following Robert's appointment as Dean of Canterbury cathedral. For the next 24 years, until her father's death in 1895, when she was 39, Jessie lived in the Deanery at Canterbury, at the political heart of the Church of England. Alongside her studies, she was constantly in the company of senior clergy, and attending church services, as well as being engaged in visiting poor parishioners, and other social work. On her father's death, which followed that of her mother by just over a year, Jessie had to leave her home and abandon her familiar life, and she moved back to Oxford where she lodged with Charlotte Toynbee (1841–1931),¹⁵ an influential activist for women's education.¹⁶



Robert Payne Smith (cabinet card)

During this time she became engaged to Margoliouth, although it is not clear when they first met. It is possible that they had already been in touch because of questions relating to Jessie's Syriac lexical work before her return to Oxford, but there is no trace of this in surviving documents. So a first meeting while in Oxford cannot be excluded. In any case, Jessie and Margoliouth were married in April 1896, when she was 40 and he 37.¹⁷ He was a strikingly handsome man, as is clear from early portraits,¹⁸ and he had an intellect and academic interests that closely matched her own.¹⁹

which bring life to the account of Payne Smith's career, and they are a strong testimony to the affection in which he was held by his children. (And the potatoes, it should be noted, were grown by Payne Smith himself!)

¹⁵ Frances Lannon, 'Toynbee [*née* Atwood], Charlotte Maria (1841–1931)', ODNB (23 September 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/48428>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

¹⁶ But an active opponent of women's suffrage.

¹⁷ They were married on 25 April 1896 at St Edmund's church, Lombard Street, London, with the Revd Canon Benham officiating, assisted by Jessie's brother the Revd W. H. Payne Smith, and Margoliouth's brother-in-law the Revd M. Rosenthal; see the marriage announcement, *The Times* (27 April 1896), 1.

¹⁸ An anonymous Italian woman is quoted by Gilbert Murray as saying of Margoliouth: 'Questo bel animal feroce'; see Murray, 'David S. Margoliouth', 389. Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), archaeologist and political officer, in a letter to her stepmother Dame Florence Bell, dated 3 January 1919 (Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University Library Special Collections, GB/1/1/1/1/28/1), also described Margoliouth in flattering terms. Margoliouth (apparently invited to Iraq to do 'some secretarial work for G.H.Q.'!) had just given a 50-minute lecture in Baghdad in classical Arabic, and Bell comments: 'It was the most extraordinary tour de force. . . . He is the greatest dear, Prof. M., and I think him the best piece of propaganda we've issued. It's generally admitted that he knows more of Arabic language and history than any Arab here and they all love him. So do I; he has got a most delicious edge, besides all his learning.'

¹⁹ And this did not pass unnoticed at the time. An anonymous report of their wedding in *The Northern Whig* (6 May 1896), 6i, reads: 'This lady (as well as her husband) is a distinguished Syriac scholar. She assisted her father in his great work, the Syriac Thesaurus, and has nearly ready a manual Syriac Lexicon of her own. It is somewhat rare to find husband and wife both interested in such pursuits'.



Portrait of David Samuel Margoliouth (oil on canvas, 1902) by Harriet Halhed
Now held in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford



Photograph of David Samuel Margoliouth
From *The Illustrated London News* (17 June 1911), 946

Little is known of their early relationship, but an Anglican nun named Sister Ellen Joanna, working at the Assyrian Mission in Urmia, Iran, gave the following report of a letter she had received from Jessie prior to the wedding:²⁰

I had a letter from Miss Payne Smith last week. She finds Professor Margoliouth of Oxford so very kind and useful in helping her with her Father's book [the *Thesaurus Syriacus*], "that she is going to marry him so that they can work at it together"—! This is exactly as she puts the fact.

A very similar tale is told of this courtship by the historian Arnold J. Toynbee, the nephew of Charlotte, in his reminiscences of the couple whom he met while an undergraduate in Oxford (1907–1911),²¹ although in this version it is reported that Dean Payne Smith on his death bed advised his daughter to marry Margoliouth in order to finish the *Thesaurus*. Since the Dean died of a sudden heart attack, no such scene was possible. My suspicion is that it amused Jessie and David to spread these ultra-academic and non-romantic accounts of their early relationship.

They set up home at 88 Woodstock Road in the north of Oxford, with, as was typical of the day, a live-in maid.²² All the available evidence, provided both by external witnesses and by their own diaries, suggests that it was a good marriage. Toynbee wrote:²³

The Margoliouths' marriage was a most happy one—perhaps partly because the contrast of temperaments was so extreme. . . . Mrs. Margoliouth was lively and talkative, while Professor Margoliouth was grave and was sparing of his words. His wife could manage him because she was not in awe of him, though he was an awe-inspiring figure, with his snow-white hair and his piercing black eyes. . . . I can still see Mrs. Margoliouth bustling fearlessly round him—like the keeper in a zoo who is not afraid to give his elephant a tiresome wash and brush-up, because he knows that the elephant loves him too much to think of turning and rending him.

Toynbee also provides an anecdote that hints at her sense of humour:²⁴

One afternoon . . . I called at the Margoliouths' house in North Oxford by appointment, I asked whether the professor was at home when Mrs. Margoliouth opened the door. 'Oh, I expect he is at the pub, as usual,' was her startling answer; and then, noticing my surprise, she explained to me that 'the pub' was her short title for the piece of work, whatever it might be, in which the professor was engrossed at the time.

Jessie and David Margoliouth had no children, and the topic is never discussed in surviving sources.

²⁰ J. F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of The Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 393, n. 303.

²¹ Toynbee, 'The Margoliouths', *Acquaintances*, pp. 43–8.

²² In 1931 they moved to a house named Romney on Boars Hill, near their friend Gilbert Murray. For their maid, see the City Police Court account of a burglary at their Woodstock Road house: *The Oxford Chronicle* (14 October 1921), 19c.

²³ Toynbee, 'The Margoliouths', p. 44. The Oxford historian and politician Sir John Marriott (1859–1945) gave a similar assessment of the marriage in a letter he wrote to *The Times* after Margoliouth's death (*The Times* (26 March 1940), 4): 'Until after his marriage in 1896 I never really knew Margoliouth. That singularly happy marriage transformed, or perhaps revealed, the man. It was my special function to burst in upon the Sunday luncheon parties which the Margoliouths regularly gave and, by dragging the host out for a walk, disperse a company too shy to know when to say good-bye.'

²⁴ Toynbee, 'The Margoliouths', p. 45. Gilbert Murray also refers to Jessie reading out an amusing passage from P. G. Wodehouse to Margoliouth, prompting a dryly ironic response: see Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', 396.

The pair regularly travelled together, most notably to Urmia in Iran in 1901, when she was 45, to visit the Archbishop's Assyrian Mission there, but also to Damascus before 1907, and Istanbul in 1908. On the outbreak of World War I the couple were caught in Switzerland, and only made it home with great difficulty.²⁵ Margoliouth offered his services to the War Office, and in October 1916 they sent Margoliouth to lecture in Lahore (modern Pakistan), and Jessie, now aged 60, went with him. Unfortunately, when they travelled to Bombay to return home six months later, only he was allowed to take passage, due to war shortages, and so she had to remain alone in Lahore for at least 20 months until the end of the war in 1918. She had trained as an artist in her youth,²⁶ and so much of the time seems to have been spent painting and sketching and learning Kashmiri. But it was clearly a difficult period.

On her return to Oxford, she resumed her academic and political work, and she eventually died in 1933, aged 77, after what appears to have been a short period of sickness. Like the Cambridge Syriac scholars Agnes Smith Lewis (1843–1926) and Francis Crawford Burkitt (1864–1935), and later Margoliouth himself,²⁷ Jessie was cremated at the newly fashionable Golders Green Crematorium in London. A grave has not yet been located.²⁸

JESSIE AS A SYRIAC SCHOLAR

Turning now to her academic training and later scholarship, it must be acknowledged that there are many gaps in what is known, especially for the early period of her childhood and her adolescence. She did not have access to the private schools followed by university education that her two brothers enjoyed—she was simply born a generation too early. Local state schools offered very little academic training for girls, and the now famous girls' private schools only started opening from the mid-1870s. London University did start offering degrees for women in some subjects in 1878 (when Jessie was 22), but Oxford, her clear centre of intellectual focus, only admitted women to lectures in 1875 and only gave them the right to matriculate and to receive degrees in 1920. (Cambridge finally granted women degrees in 1948.)

²⁵ See Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', 394; and for greater detail see 'Professor Margoliouth's escape', in *The Oxford Times* (5 September 1914), 4.

²⁶ Jessie's diary for 4 March 1879 already refers to her spending the day at a school of art, and the subsequent mention of Mr Sparkes may be a reference to John Sparkes (c. 1833–1907), who from 1875 was in charge of the National Art Training School (from 1896 renamed the Royal College of Art), and who was a renowned supporter of women artists. Further references to spending days at art school can be found in the diary for 1883. Jessie seems to have particularly favoured the painting of cityscapes and buildings. Margoliouth, in his *Cairo, Jerusalem & Damascus: Three Chief Cities of the Egyptian Sultans* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), p. viii, notes that 'the architectural paragraphs have been either revised or written by Mrs. Margoliouth, who has had training in architectural drawing'. Occasionally Jessie exhibited her work at the Oxford Art Society: in December 1908 she exhibited watercolours titled 'The Evening, Constantinople' and 'Dawn on the Bosphorus' (see *Oxfordshire Weekly News* (2 December 1908)); and sketches of Constantinople in November 1915 (see *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (5 November 1915), and *Oxfordshire Weekly News* (10 November 1915)); and her drawings of Indian buildings in November 1919 (see *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (7 November 1919)).

²⁷ See *The Times* (25 March 1940).

²⁸ The report of her funeral service, which was held at St Andrew's Church in Linton Road, Oxford, on 21 August 1933, was printed in *The Times* (22 August 1933), 13. It includes a list of the chief mourners, among whom was the Vice-Chancellor. She was then cremated in Golders Green in London (see *The Times* (19 August 1933), 10), one of the relatively small number of crematoria operating in the UK at that time. The first legal cremation in the UK took place at Woking in 1885, in the first crematorium established by the Cremation Society. Golders Green crematorium, a very elegant institution, was their second crematorium, established in 1902, and from this time on the cremation movement began to gain adherents and wider social and religious acceptance. For a historical overview see The Cremation Society, 'History of Modern Cremation in Great Britain from 1874: The First Hundred Years', <www.cremation.org.uk/history-of-cremation-in-the-united-kingdom> (Accessed: 1 July 2026); see also Lisa Kazmier, 'Leading the World: The Role of Britain and the First World War in Promoting the "Modern Cremation" Movement', *Journal of Social History* 42 (2009), 557–79.

So after early teaching by her mother,²⁹ her education was presumably entrusted, as with other children of her class, to governesses and private tutors.³⁰ But of this there is no trace in the surviving documents. The only part of an early notebook that survives comes from February 1870 (when she was turning 14), and this is a ‘Catalogue of my collection of curiosities in my cabinet’, whose drawers contained birds’ eggs, animal skulls, shells, fossils, and ‘curiosities from other countries’.

Other notebooks record all the books that she read from 1874 (when aged 18) until 1891 (aged 35), usually 40–60 books a year. She lists heavyweight historical and theological works, as well as both high and popular literature, and they were written not only in English, but also in German, French, Italian, as well as ancient texts in Latin and Syriac. For many of these books she added short comments on the facing page, and for German books her reviews are not only written in German, but in fluent cursive German script which is quite different from her English handwriting (and fiendishly difficult to read). So for German at least she appears to have had either a native German tutor, or to have spent time studying German in a German-speaking country.³¹ In her later diaries she frequently switches to German when she wishes to discuss sensitive topics.

The earliest surviving diaries date to 1877 and 1878 (when she was 21–22), and contain few details, but in these she regularly writes private comments in English Karshuni—that is English written in Syriac script, and over the years more and more Syriac and Arabic was added to these comments—especially when she was angry at herself or others. My favourite comment that reappears on various occasions is ܐܢܐ ܢܐ ܐܬܬܢܐ (*’enā ’nā ’attānā*), ‘I am an ass!’. So she had obviously learnt some Syriac prior to 1877.

It seems likely that her father Robert taught Jessie Syriac and Arabic, but there is as yet no actual evidence for this. We know that he was an active supporter of education for girls, and founded schools for them in the Canterbury area.³² We are also told that he was himself taught Hebrew by his elder sister Esther, and that she also helped him with his classical Greek and Latin texts.³³ So he came from a family where women’s educational ambitions were actively encouraged, and he may well have continued this with his own daughters. In her late 20s and early 30s Jessie attended University extension courses in Oxford, a precursor of modern summer schools, on theological, historical, and philosophical subjects.³⁴ She also paid for some private lessons in Hebrew, though she was unimpressed by the quality of the Oxford tuition available.

Her main scholarly work was obviously Syriac lexicography, a relentlessly time-consuming activity requiring excellent knowledge of Syriac, Arabic, and Latin, a wide reading knowledge of Syriac literature, and an attention to detail. Her father’s proposal for the *Thesaurus Syriacus*, the first major academic reference lexicon for Syriac, and still without rivals, was accepted by the Clarendon Press in Oxford in 1859 (when Jessie was just three years old), and the plan was to publish it in 10 fascicles in 10 years, although in practice it took 42 years.³⁵ The project was clearly far more complex than originally imagined, but with the aid of lexical notes from other scholars, and constant use of medieval Syro-Arabic lexica, the first fascicle was published nine years later, and the next four over the following 11 years, at which point, in 1879, they were combined and reissued as volume one.

²⁹ This appears to be implied by Mary Payne Smith, ‘Memoir of Robert Payne Smith’, p. 32.

³⁰ The same appears to have been true for her life-long friend Annie M. A. H. Rogers (1856–1937); see Annie M. A. H. Rogers, *Degrees by Degrees: The Story of the Admission of Oxford Women Students to Membership of the University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. xiii.

³¹ Later diaries from 1882 and 1883 record Jessie’s solo travels through provincial German cities, where she visited art galleries and manuscript libraries. In 1882 she timed her trip to hear Wagner’s *Parsifal*, a few days after its premiere.

³² Mary Payne Smith, ‘Memoir of Robert Payne Smith’, pp. 60–61; Anon., ‘The Dean of Canterbury’, 3. A primary school in Canterbury is still named after him.

³³ Mary Payne Smith, ‘Memoir of Robert Payne Smith’, pp. 8, 75.

³⁴ See Anne Ockwell and Harold Pollins, ‘“Extension” in all its Forms’, in *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol. VII, Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 2*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 661–88.

³⁵ Publishing details of the various lexica produced by Robert Payne Smith and later by Jessie can be found in the ‘Orders of the Delegates of the Clarendon Press’ in the archives of the press. The Delegates gave their formal approval of Payne Smith’s proposal for the *Thesaurus* on 20 May 1859.

It was in this year, according to an article written by the Margoliouths in 1901, that 23-year-old Jessie started working on the *Thesaurus* with her father.³⁶ Within her surviving diaries the earliest references I have seen to this work date to 1883 (when she was 27). At this time she was working on the entries for the 15th letter, *semkath* (ܫ), in Bernstein's lexical notes and in Bar Bahlul. From her diaries it appears that entries for each lexical item were prepared, and then written out in their final form on blue paper slips, and these were posted to the Press in batches, where they were set in print, and then posted back in four-page proof sheets.³⁷ So for 29 June 1886, when they were working on the 17th letter, *pe* (ܦ), she notes:

DD³⁸ w(a)nt(e)d to send some more copy to the Clarendon Press. They w(a)nt(e)d 250 slips + he had 50 + added 30.



Portrait of Robert Payne Smith (oil on canvas, 1886)
by Matthew Ridley Corbet
Held by Canterbury Cathedral



Detail showing the blue slips

By chance an image of these slips has been preserved in a portrait of the Dean painted by Matthew Ridley Corbet (1850–1902) between December 1885 and January 1886. We know from Jessie's diary for this period that Corbett was taken not only with Payne Smith's doctoral robes but also with the Syriac lexical manuscripts in his library in the Deanery in Canterbury, and so he painted their portrait too—along with the blue slips at the very top of the pile.³⁹

³⁶ It states that Jessie had worked on the *Thesaurus* for 16 years when her father died: see anonymous article (which must have been written by one or both of David and Jessie), 'Literary Notes. *Thesaurus Syriacus*. Payne Smith. *Clarendon Press*', *Quarterly Report of the Assyrian Mission* 42 (January 1901), 403–4.

³⁷ Many copies of these proof sheets, with hand-written corrections, are preserved in MS. Or. Margoliouth 33, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

³⁸ 'DD' was Jessie's nickname for her father, since it both sounds like 'daddy', and references the doctorate of divinity he received from Oxford in 1865.

³⁹ Underneath the blue slips in the portrait lies a volume of Giuseppe Simone Assemani's *Bibliotheca Orientalis* (Rome: Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719–28); and under that a manuscript of the Syro-Arabic lexicon of Bar Bahlul which was on loan from the Bodleian Library (Oxford. Hunt. 157). Open on the Dean's knees is another Syriac lexicon on loan from Oxford (Oxford. Hunt. 170).

Her work at the beginning was largely to copy text from the medieval Syro-Arabic lexica for these slips, and to structure and arrange the various usages found for each root and form. So for 29 January 1886 she wrote:

stayed at home + did ܦܫܩ [pšq]. Don't remember any so difficult root, seems to mean someth(in)g different in almost each place + it is difficult to make out what. About 4 ½ hrs.

When her father died in 1895 he was working, according to Jessie and Margoliouth, on the Syriac verb *šammeš* (ܫܡܡܝܫ), that is, he was two-thirds of the way through the penultimate letter of the Syriac alphabet.⁴⁰ Given that *šammeš* means 'he has served', it is possible that this stopping-point was also selected as a tribute to a scholar and father who died whilst still in service to his church and to his chosen field of scholarship. In any case, thereafter Jessie had full responsibility for the *Thesaurus*, whatever help she may have received from Margoliouth, and she edited the remaining 293 columns. She published the last two fascicles in 1897 and 1901, at which point the fascicles from 6 to 10.2 were republished as the second volume.

But Jessie was not a one lexicon woman. In 1892 the Clarendon Press had agreed to her proposal to publish a *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* in English and in a more manageable format, and, importantly, to be sold at a price that was affordable for students.⁴¹ This was based on the larger *Thesaurus*, but also included updated entries where those were needed.⁴² The first fascicle was published in 1896, and the fourth and last in 1903, 11 years after she had begun, and it was then reissued as a single volume.⁴³ Interestingly, she insisted, against the wishes of the Press, on the fascicles being published under her maiden name Payne Smith, the name of her father, and it was only when they were reissued in a single volume that the Press sneakily added '(Mrs. Margoliouth)' in brackets on the title page.⁴⁴ This dictionary is still by far the best single volume Syriac dictionary currently available, with much stronger coverage of vocabulary and idiom than its rivals, even though in some technical details, such as its proposed etymologies of non-semitic lexemes, it no longer meets modern standards.⁴⁵

But Jessie was not yet finished. In 1922, to the horror of the University Press, she presented them with the finished manuscript of her *Supplement* to the *Thesaurus Syriacus*, even though they had no knowledge that she had been working on it. Eventually, after she produced various grants to subsidise the cost,⁴⁶ it was published in 1927.⁴⁷ There were some other arguments with the directors

⁴⁰ See the Latin preface by Jessie and Margoliouth to the first part of the 10th fascicle of the *Thesaurus Syriacus*, published in 1897, which was reprinted in the combined second volume of the *Thesaurus* (Oxford: e typographeo Clarendoniano, 1901), p. vi.

⁴¹ It is easy to forget that prior to this date there was no Syriac dictionary available in any European language which covered more than the New Testament and a few other randomly selected texts. The problem was also felt in Germany, and so simultaneously with Jessie's *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Carl Brockelmann was producing his own *Lexicon Syriacum* (with glosses in Latin) which was published in seven fascicles between 1894–5.

⁴² A handwritten first draft of part of the entry for the final letter *taw*, is preserved in MS. Or. Margoliouth 8.2, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁴³ J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith, D.D.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896–1903; reissued in one volume in 1903).

⁴⁴ See Jessie's letter to the press dated 23 June 1903. Her stated concern was to retain the link with her father's larger work, rather than a more modern academic desire to keep a professional name separate from a married name, and she signed the letter Jessie Payne Margoliouth.

⁴⁵ In her will Jessie bequeathed any profits from this and her other publications to Miss Juliet Foxell, aged nine years, daughter of the Revd Maurice Frederick Foxell, Succentor of St Paul's Cathedral, London. Since the Press had incurred serious costs in publishing her Syriac lexica, the young Juliet was eventually offered £3.3.0 in settlement, and this was accepted.

⁴⁶ For example, £50 (then a reasonable sum) was provided from the Revised Version Surplus Committee—that is the fund set up to disburse profits made from the Revised Version of the Bible, on which her father had worked.

⁴⁷ J. P. Margoliouth, *Supplement to the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith, S.T.P., formerly Oriental Sub-Librarian of the Bodleian Library, then Regius Professor of Divinity, later Dean of Canterbury. Collected and arranged by his Daughter, J. P. Margoliouth*

of the Press at this time—she had wanted, for example, to thank a Press proof-reader, Dr Naish, in her preface, which was against Press rules—and this led to one internal minute noting: ‘The lady is obdurate!’.⁴⁸

As already mentioned, the writing of a good dictionary requires an author to have a very wide and profound knowledge of the literature produced in that language. Several of her notebooks therefore contain lists of vocabulary identified in various Syriac sources. And her academic reputation spread quickly. In the preface to his 1885 translation of St Cyril’s Commentary on St John, which survives in Greek and Syriac, Thomas Randell noted: ‘In translating the Syriac he has been aided by the Very Rev. Dr. Payne-Smith, Dean of Canterbury, and his accomplished daughter, Miss Jessie Payne-Smith’.⁴⁹ This is a remarkable public statement for that age. When her forthcoming marriage to Margoliouth was announced in January 1896, the social column of one London newspaper enthusiastically declared: ‘The lady is one of the most learned women of the day’.⁵⁰ In 1902 it was to Jessie that Arthur J. Maclean, a noted Scottish Syriac scholar and a former missionary among the Assyrians,⁵¹ turned when he had come across some liturgical features in a Syriac manuscript that he could not explain, and a passage that he could not translate.⁵² And after her death, a sympathetic obituary was written for the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* by a fellow outsider to the British academic establishment, Alphonse Mingana.⁵³ He states: ‘The writer remembers having met in 1927 an eminent Orientalist who had been to 88 Woodstock Road, Oxford, where Professor and Mrs. Margoliouth then lived. “The house,” he said, “is not a *house* but a *store-house* of erudition, where Mrs. Margoliouth, with her extensive Syriac knowledge, supplies the last volume of a living encyclopaedia”.’

As Mingana also noted, the writing of Lexica did not leave much time for any other publications, whether books or articles. In 1909 Jessie published a useful student reader of John of Ephesus, with notes in English and German.⁵⁴ Perhaps her last publication, in 1932, was a complete translation of Severus of Sabokt’s important seventh-century treatise on the astrolabe, although her role as translator is only indicated in the preface to the volume containing it.⁵⁵

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927). In 1934 Alphonse Mingana wrote the following words about this Supplement: ‘Twenty-seven years had elapsed between the publication of the *Thesaurus* and the appearance of its *Supplement*. She spent all those years in reading Syriac books that were gradually being printed, and in perusing unedited texts that had not fallen under her father’s notice. The same masterly hand that was used in compiling the *Thesaurus* is seen in every page of its *Supplement*. Mrs. Margoliouth’s *Supplement* may in future be further supplemented, but it will be many years before it is superseded.’ Mingana, ‘Jessie Payne Margoliouth’, 217–19.

⁴⁸ OUP file #864306. This file also contains newspaper cuttings relating to another controversy related to this volume. After the death of Ulric Gantillon, a rather curious linguist and a reader at the Press, in 1934 (the year after Jessie’s own death), there was a brief flurry of correspondence relating to this *Supplement* in the pages of *The Times*. An anonymous correspondent claimed (25 July 1934, 14) that Gantillon was ‘almost a partner of Mrs. Margoliouth in the preparation of the supplement to the great “Thesaurus Syriacus” written by her father, Dr. Payne Smith’. This was fiercely refuted by Margoliouth (*The Times* (30 July 1934), 8), who wrote that Gantillon had only ever been a proof-reader, and that the work was compiled solely by Jessie using her own materials and those of her father.

⁴⁹ Thomas Randell, *Commentary on the Gospel according to S. John Vol. II. S. John IX–XXI*, Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church 48 (London: Walter Smith, 1885), p. viii.

⁵⁰ *The Hackney Express and Shoreditch Observer* (18 January 1896), 4.

⁵¹ D. G. K. Taylor, ‘Maclean [formerly Maclean], Arthur John (1858–1943)’, ODNB (23 September 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58370>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

⁵² The letter, dated 2 July 1902, is inserted in MS. Or. Margoliouth 8.2.

⁵³ Mingana, ‘Jessie Payne Margoliouth’, 217–19. On Mingana himself, see Samir Khalil Samir, *Alphonse Mingana 1878–1937 and his Contribution to Early Christian-Muslim Studies*, Selly Oak Colleges Occasional Paper 7 (Birmingham: Selly Oak Colleges, 1990); D. G. K. Taylor, ‘Mingana, Alphonse [formerly Hurmiz Mingana] (1878?–1937)’, ODNB (23 September 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/59116>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

⁵⁴ Jessie Payne Margoliouth, *Extracts from the Ecclesiastical History of John Bishop of Ephesus, edited with grammatical, historical and geographical notes in English and German* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1909).

⁵⁵ Jessie Payne Margoliouth, ‘Description of the Astrolabe by Severus Sebokht’, in *The Astrolabes of the World: Based upon the Series of Instruments in the Lewis Evans Collection in the Old Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (...). Volume I. The Eastern Astrolabes* (Oxford: University Press, 1932), pp. 82–103; see preface, p. vii.

Her other publications all relate to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission, which was founded by Archbishop Benson in 1884, and sent out the first missionaries to Urmia in Iran in June 1886.⁵⁶ The aim of the mission was to aid and help educate the Assyrians of the Church of the East, and not to convert them to Anglicanism, nor to interfere with their doctrine and traditions. Jessie was involved with the mission from its inception. As early as late November 1884 Jessie was translating letters from the Catholicos of the East, Shimun XVIII Rubil, for Archbishop Benson, in which he requested protection, schools, a printing press, and service books,⁵⁷ a request that led to the mission being established. In June 1886 she attended the farewell service for the missionaries held in Lambeth Chapel, and in her diary she recorded some typically lively observations about them. She described Athelstan Riley as an 'laymā rēgā', 'an attractive young man', and added, with her tongue firmly in her cheek: 'He has £10.000 a year which he wants to use for God in some way, but does not yet know how'. In 1887 Jessie was appointed to a sub-committee charged with acquiring Syriac type for the mission press in Urmia, and in 1893 she produced an important English translation of the eucharistic and baptismal liturgies of the Church of the East, although this was published anonymously.⁵⁸

Her connections with the Church of the East, and with the Assyrian people, were further strengthened in 1901 when she and her husband travelled to Urmia via Constantinople, Tiflis, and Julfa. They journeyed around various Assyrian villages, and even made it to Qudshanis, the residence of the Catholicos.⁵⁹ Her notebooks from this time contain lists of Neo-Aramaic vocabulary, and useful phrases, and she brought home spun wool which she sold in Oxford on behalf of the Assyrian women who entrusted her with it.⁶⁰ From this time on her activism on behalf of the Assyrians was motivated by personal ties, and not just her scientific training. In 1913 Jessie co-edited a volume containing a collection of publications by the Mission to celebrate its 25th anniversary, although, perhaps typically, the introduction was written by Margoliouth.⁶¹ As so often, Jessie was working hard in the background, and rarely drawing attention to herself. As another example of this, a diary entry for 10 February 1920 records that she had 'finished typing Surma's booklet'. This will have been lady Surma d'Bait Mar Shimun's (1883–1975) book on the Assyrians which attempted to persuade the British government and people that they should not forget their promises to the Assyrians, nor abandon them in the midst of ongoing persecution—pleas which fell on deaf ears.⁶²

JESSIE AS A SUPPORTER OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND SUFFRAGE

In addition to her activism in support of the Assyrians, Jessie was active in many other movements and organisations at various periods of her life. During the first world war, for example, she organised a number of events in support of Serbia, an ally of the French and British,⁶³ and she was even involved in running a canteen for workers in an armaments factory near London.⁶⁴ But the

⁵⁶ See Coakley, *The Church of the East*.

⁵⁷ MS. Or. Margoliouth 1.9, Bodleian Library, Oxford, and see Coakley, *The Church of the East*, p. 95. She translated later letters also.

⁵⁸ *The Liturgy of the Holy Apostles Adai and Mari, together with two Additional Liturgies to be said on certain Feasts and other days and the Order of Baptism* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1893). For this translation Jessie revised and completed a partial draft of George Badger (1815–1888).

⁵⁹ In addition to her diary, some of these experiences were recounted in contemporary issues of the *Quarterly Report of the Assyrian Mission*.

⁶⁰ Meetings held in Oxford in support of the Assyrian Mission are occasionally recorded in the local newspapers. For example a lecture given by a visiting Assyrian doctor, Dr Jacobs, hosted by Jessie, is reported in *The Oxford Chronicle* (26 January 1923), 23.

⁶¹ F. N. Heazell and Mrs. Margoliouth, (eds), *Kurds & Christians* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1913).

⁶² Surma d'Bait Mar Shimun, Surma, *Assyrian Church Customs and the Murder of Mar Shimun* (London: The Faith Press, 1920). Jessie's contribution is not mentioned inside the volume.

⁶³ See *The Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (23 June 1916).

⁶⁴ J. P. Margoliouth, 'A Canteen for Munitions-Makers', *The Oxfordshire Weekly News* (13 October 1915), 2.

two main political causes that dominated her life were the twin struggles for women's education and for women's suffrage, the right to vote in national elections.

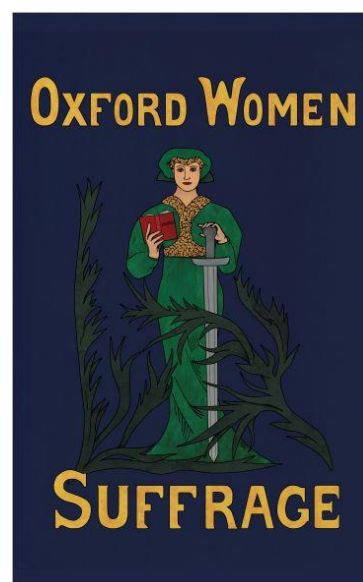
As we have seen, as a girl she was denied access to the schooling and university education that her brothers enjoyed. As a young woman Jessie was living in a world dominated by male clergy, often of a conservative bent, and not always intellectually gifted, and from the diaries that survive from her early twenties it is clear that she often found this infuriating. After one church service in February 1877 (when Jessie was 20) she wrote the following in her diary: 'Mr Dyson—stupid sermon'. And again and again she reproaches herself for losing her temper at some blatant act of stupidity, frequently male. In one succinct note from January 1883 she reports a dinner party conversation among Oxford men:

George will vote for admission of women to Oxford exams. "Fair play and no favour".
Has not a high idea of what women can do.

Her anger at this condescension is palpable, and she closely followed the fierce debates that were held in Oxford over the years relating to women being admitted to examinations. This interest must have been piqued by her close friendship, throughout her life, with Annie Rogers (1856–1937). She was born in the same year as Jessie, and was a famously brilliant classical scholar who in 1873 (aged 17) came top of the Oxford Schools Examinations in Greek and Latin, and so was offered scholarships to the Oxford colleges of Balliol and Worcester. When they realised that she was not a man, the offers were withdrawn. Two years later, in 1875, she was awarded first-class honours in Classics (Lit. Hum.), but was not allowed to receive her degree until 1920, 45 years later. And this was largely as a consequence of Annie Rogers's own campaigning during all of those years, by means of the Association for the Education of Women, for the full admission of women to Oxford University's degrees and institutions.⁶⁵ She had the same academic drive and abilities as Jessie, and they became the closest of friends, constantly meeting or writing to one another, and Annie was later asked to act as executrix of Jessie's will before Jessie travelled to India (although she declined).

Along with this personal influence, we can see from her notebooks that already by 1887 Jessie was reading some early feminist and trades unionist writings produced by authors like Edith Simcox (1844–1901) and Clementina Black (1853–1922), including their articles on women's wages and women's work conditions.⁶⁶ Twenty years later, in 1907, Jessie was one of the signatories to Clementina Black's 'Women's Franchise Declaration', and so presumably her earlier reading had exercised some influence upon her.⁶⁷

In 1904 Jessie co-founded the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society (OWSS) which was affiliated to the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), whose members were known as suffragists, to distinguish them from the members of the other main suffrage organisation the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), known as suffragettes. The suffragists of the NUWSS were by far the larger movement, and they welcomed men into their ranks and sought to campaign within the law. A very similar approach had long been adopted by women campaigning for women's admission to university education, who chose to work through men, and to avoid antagonising those who held the reins of power. By contrast, the



Banner of the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society

⁶⁵ For an account of this work, see: Rogers, *Degrees by Degrees*.

⁶⁶ For example, in 1887 Jessie references Edith Simcox, 'Women's Work and Women's Wages', *Longman's Magazine* 10 (1 July 1887), 252–67; and Clementina Black, 'Caveat Emptor', *Longman's Magazine* 10 (1 August 1887), 409–20.

⁶⁷ See *Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (11 January 1907).

suffragettes argued for the need for direct action and civil disobedience and were prepared to break the law, and this has had a far greater appeal to later activists than the tactics of the suffragists. There is a major debate among historians of the period about whether suffragette activities advanced or held back women's suffrage in the UK, and I suspect we can guess which side would have been taken by Jessie Margoliouth who was a fierce and proud suffragist (as indeed was her husband).

An excellent history of the Oxford suffrage movement was written by Katherine Bradley which charts the arguments over women's suffrage in Oxford,⁶⁸ and Jessie's activities can also be tracked through the surviving minute books and annual reports of the OWSS, as well as through reports in local newspapers and in suffragist publications such as *The Common Cause*. Having co-founded the OWSS in 1904, Jessie was immediately elected as chairwoman of its executive committee, and she held this post from 1904 to 1916, and remained on its committee until 1918.⁶⁹ When the Oxford branch of the lower profile (Anglican) Church League for Women's Suffrage was founded in 1910, it was again Jessie Margoliouth who was elected its chairman (until 1913).⁷⁰

And Jessie clearly took an active role in all the activities of the OWSS, which held its first public general meeting at Somerville College on 27 January 1906.⁷¹ A few weeks earlier in 1906, the year of a UK general election, Jessie wrote letters to parliamentary candidates asking them to declare whether they would support women's suffrage, and then published their replies in the press.⁷² At other times she published condemnations of suffragette violence and disruption.⁷³ Jessie helped organise large suffrage meetings in Oxford town hall,⁷⁴ in competition with the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage (chaired by Georgina, the widow of the Indologist Max Müller),⁷⁵ and in other venues.⁷⁶ She also participated in the national rallies and pilgrimages that were organised by the NUWSS and which attracted hundreds of thousands of supporters.⁷⁷

In addition to writing reports for local newspapers on OWSS events, Jessie was also sought after as a speaker at events not only in Oxford, but also in other towns and cities of the south and

⁶⁸ Katherine Bradley, 'Faith, Perseverance and Patience: The History of the Oxford Suffrage and Anti-Suffrage Movements, 1870–1930' (PhD thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 1997). I am very grateful to Dr Bradley for sending me a copy of her thesis when I was first starting research on Jessie's life.

⁶⁹ From 1913 she was the Literature Secretary, and wrote various articles and letters to the press (cf. her article in the NUWSS journal *Common Cause* (30 July 1915), and her letter in *The Oxford Times* (23 September 1916)). From 1914 to 1917, she was succeeded by her husband, who was also a founder of the Oxford Men's League for Women's Suffrage in 1911). Executive Committee meetings were held in their house at 88 Woodstock Road until 1911, when they moved to dedicated offices.

⁷⁰ Bradley, 'Faith, Perseverance and Patience', especially pp. 81, 89–90, 119, 296.

⁷¹ See *The Oxford Chronicle* (20 January 1905), 12.

⁷² 'Women who are prepared to take an active part in the work of the coming election venture to enquire whether, in the event of your being returned to Parliament, you will vote for a Bill granting the Parliamentary franchise to women on the same terms as men, and thereby removing all unjust disability?'; *The Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (12 January 1906), 7.

⁷³ See *The Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (4 May 1906), 9; *The Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (28 February 1913), 9.

⁷⁴ See, for example, *The Oxford Journal* (9 March 1907)—the meeting was presided over by Mrs Bertrand Russell; *The Oxford Chronicle* (7 February 1908), 3.

⁷⁵ A surprising number of women opposed women's suffrage in the UK, including many of those in Oxford who had campaigned for women's education. In 1909 a 'No votes for women' petition presented to parliament was signed by 243,852 women. See Julia Bush, *Women Against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷⁶ She chaired a large meeting of the OWSS in Somerville College in 1911, for example: *The Oxford Journal* (10 May 1911).

⁷⁷ For an article by Jessie on the Great Suffrage Pilgrimage of 1913, see: *The Oxford Times* (19 July 1913), 12. A famous photograph of the pilgrimage crossing Magdalen Bridge may well contain an image of Jessie, but I have been unable to identify her in it: see J. P. Margoliouth, 'Sir John Rhys and the Oxford Women's Suffrage Society', *The Common Cause of Humanity: The Organ of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* (7 January 1916), 523; and Bradley, 'Faith, Perseverance and Patience', p. 107. For her participation in the two-day half-yearly council of the NUWSS in Chelsea, see: *The Oxford Chronicle* (8 May 1914), 4.

midlands.⁷⁸ I have not found any copies of these speeches, but a taste of their style can perhaps be found in a combative suffrage article she published in the political journal *The Nineteenth Century and After* in 1908.⁷⁹ It was a response to an article by Edith M. Massie, 'A Woman's Plea against Woman Suffrage', which claimed that women did not need the vote, because they were protected by their menfolk, because they had their own role to play in society, and because they had nothing to gain from suffrage.⁸⁰ Jessie Margoliouth systematically dissected and refuted Massie's arguments, and it provides a fascinating insight into her political thinking at this time. She argues that many women are their own breadwinners, and that without the vote they can have no guarantee of fair wages. She discusses male violence against women, and especially by husbands, and argues that only by having the vote will women be considered to be full human beings, and so be guaranteed heavier legal penalties for wife murder and assault. She points out the inequality of the divorce laws with regard to man and woman, and argues against contemporary attempts to limit the number of hours that women could work. She is contemptuous of claims that men and women have been given their own distinctive areas of work, and writes:

Division of labour, if logically carried out, points to the employment of each person, whether man or woman, according to his or her talents and tastes; and in order to obtain the best from each for the good of all 'equality of opportunity' must be granted. And this freedom of choice can only be attained by the full freedom, political and social, of each member of the nation.⁸¹

It is a fascinating read, both for the arguments it presents, some of which are unexpected in a woman raised in conservative Christian circles, but also because it seems to bring together Jessie's own academic and intellectual life, her own struggles as an independent woman and her empathy for other women facing far more violent responses to their choices.

The campaign for women's suffrage in the UK was eventually successful, but although propertied women over 30 were given the vote in 1918, it was not until 1928 that women were given the same voting rights as men (at that time all adults over 21). Given her campaigning history, it is no surprise to see that when Queen Mary was offered an honorary doctorate by Oxford University in 1921, the year after women were finally awarded degrees, Jessie (and not her husband) was one of the invited guests.⁸² It is also no surprise that Jessie knew that despite suffrage in 1918, the fight for equal rights was far from won, and so she became a financial supporter of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship which continued the battle.⁸³

From these brief comments I hope a picture of the academic and political activities of Jessie Payne Smith, or Jessie Margoliouth, is beginning to emerge, as well as something of her character. Over the years I have also done my best to find a good photograph of her, but I have largely failed.⁸⁴ I know she must be included in the poor newspaper images of suffragist gatherings in Oxford, but how can we pick her out? The irony is that for now it comes back to the men in her life, whose faces

⁷⁸ Jessie spoke on suffrage in Camberley in June 1910 (*The Common Cause: The Organ of the Women's Movement for Reform* (9 June 1910), 140); in Moseley, Birmingham in March 1912 (*The Church League for Women's Suffrage* (1 March 1912), 15; in Wokingham in March 1915: '[She] gave an able and interesting address on the work of the National Union during the war. She spoke especially of the excellent and invaluable work being done by the different hospital units of the Scottish Federation' (*The Common Cause of Humanity: The Organ of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies* (16 April 1915), 23).

⁷⁹ Jessie Payne Margoliouth, 'The Protection of Women. A Reply to Mrs. John Massie', *The Nineteenth Century and After* 63, issue 375 (May 1908), 819–24.

⁸⁰ Edith M. Massie, 'A Woman's Plea against Woman Suffrage', in *The Nineteenth Century and After* 63, issue 373 (March 1908), 381–5. I presume she was the wife of the Oxford professor John Massie (1842–1925) who was also a liberal MP from 1906–1910.

⁸¹ Margoliouth, 'The Protection of Women', 823.

⁸² See *The Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette* (7 October 1921).

⁸³ See *The Woman's Leader and The Common Cause* (17 June 1921), 314; (5 August 1921), 398.

⁸⁴ If you know of a photograph of Jessie Margoliouth in a private collection, do please tell me.

we do know. In 1916 Abraham Yohannan published his book, *The Death of a Nation*, drawing attention to the recent genocide of Christians in Turkey. On one page there is an image claiming to picture refugee girls, but it is in fact an earlier school photograph.⁸⁵ On the right we see Gulnaz Neesan who founded a girls' school in Urmia, and her husband the priest Yaroo Neesan.⁸⁶ On the left is a European or American couple. I believe the man to be David Margoliouth, and so by association, the woman must be Jessie, and the picture must have been taken during their trip to Urmia in 1901 when they lived in the house of the Neesans, and she filled her days recording Syriac and Assyrian neo-Aramaic vocabulary. She may have been mislabelled, misdated, and overlooked, but there she is, Jessie Payne Smith, our constant guide and *malpānitā*, our teacher.



Photograph captioned 'Refugee Girls from Kurdistan Mountains', from A. Yohannan's *The Death of a Nation* (1916)



Detail believed to show Margoliouth and Jessie

⁸⁵ Abraham Yohannan, *The Death of a Nation, or The Ever Persecuted Nestorians or Assyrian Christians* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916); the image follows p. 126.

⁸⁶ See Coakley, *The Church of the East*, p. 152.



Detail focussing on Jessie, with image 'enhanced' by ChatGPT

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