MONTESSORI AND AUSTRALIA

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At the beginning of the century Australians were amongst the first to be interested in the Montessori approach to the education of young children; four Australians attended the first Montessori International Training Course in Rome in 1913. Dr. Petersen describes the effects in Australia of this early enthusiasm for Montessori. Dr. Petersen, then Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Sydney, wrote the article in 1973 after travelling to Italy to study the history of the Montessori movement.

Now that Australians have become aware of Montessori again, as a result of the Montessori revival in the United States in the past decade, it is interesting to re-call that sixty years ago, when the Montessori movement was new and expanding, Australia was in the forefront of developments. Australians were in attendance at the very first Montessori International Training Course, held in Rome in 1913, and Sydney was the scene of one of the earliest practical experiments with Montessori methods ever conducted. In 1926, writing of the diffusion of her ideas, Montessori noted that 'in distant lands that we would think the most unlikely places to concern themselves with Italian things there have been perhaps the most important and active centres: as, e.g., in the various states of Australia and in New Zealand; or in Central-American countries like Colombia and Panama; or in the chain of islands from the Philippines to Java'.

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) was a physician originally interested in the education of intellectually-limited children. She devised for them a set of teaching apparatus which she later adapted for the education of normal children, using it after 1907 in a minding establishment for tenement children in Rome. Her little school she called Casa dei Bambini, or House of Children. The pupils, three to six years old, were led by the apparatus to teach themselves fine discriminations of size, shape, number, colour, etc., and to read and write without any tedious apprenticeship to strokes and pot-hooks. The teacher, called the directress, did not give lessons but rather offered this or that piece of apparatus to the individual child when she judged that he was ready to profit from it. Montessori wrote up her experiment in Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica Applicato all' Educazione Infantile nelle Case dei Bambini (1909), of which the translation into English, published early in 1912, was unwisely entitled The Montessori Method. It dealt of course only with the education of young children. In 1916 she described her experimental methods for children from seven to twelve, intending to go on to other books concerned with secondary and tertiary education. But these were never written, and instead she elaborated the philosophical and psychological principles underlying her pedagogical inventions in a number of works among which The Secret of Childhood (1936) and The Absorbent Mind (1949) are the most important. Montessori had a comprehensive theory of education that she expected others to embody in practical measures developed along the lines that she had found promising: in the event, her disciples congealed her experiments into a rigid system while she was widely considered to be merely a reformer of infant-school methods.

The first Australian notice of Montessori seems to be a review of the Pedagogia Scientifica, reprinted from the English Journal of Education, which appeared in the Western Australian Education Circular in April 1910. There was no detectable sequel to this notice in Western Australia, and though some people in the East read the review they did nothing either.

Not until a series of illustrated articles was published in the American McClure's Magazine in late 1911 and early 1912 can the Montessori movement in Australia be said to have begun.

The articles were read by the New South Wales Minister for Public Instruction, the young and dynamic A.C.Carmichael, and by Miss M.M.Simpson, mistress of the Infant Department in the key New South Wales school, Blackfriars Demonstration School. Both became enthusiastic for Montessori. Carmichael ordered the Pedagogia Scientifica for Miss Simpson but then the English translation arrived. Miss Simpson read it and wrote a report on it for Carmichael, dated 30 July 1912 and now in the New South Wales State Archives. In it she stated that Montessori promised to be of great benefit in New South Wales and suggested that a person be sent to Rome to study Montessori - a person mature, experienced, up-to-date in her thinking, unprejudiced. The description was of a person not unlike Miss Simpson herself. Carmichael endorsed the report: 'Arrangements may be made for studying the system as suggested', and Miss Simpson got ready to leave for Italy.

At the same time she extended an experiment with Montessori begun in a desultory fashion some months before. Careless of copyright, she had the didactic apparatus and other Montessori inventions copied for Blackfriars, she arranged the rooms, she briefed her staff - in effect she implemented a modified version of Montessori. It was not pure Montessori. The academic activities were stressed, physical and social activities were largely ignored, and the traditional Froebelian songs, stories, etc., were not abolished. It was not pure Montessori; but the children did read and write spontaneously, and they were very happy. Carmichael and Miss Simpson felt that their enthusiasm was not misplaced.

The Sydney Kindergarten world was not so enthusiastic as Miss Simpson, though Montessori was discussed in the Australian Kindergarten Magazine. Kindergartens, though strongly Froebelian, had been exposed to the liberalising trend in America associated with Patty Hill; and Montessori did not seem very revolutionary.

The standard objections to Montessori were raised: that she set infants to reading and writing; that she did not permit stories about pussies and flower-fairies; that she did not permit the didactic apparatus to be used for purposes other than those for which it had been designed; that a teacher could not possibly use the method with more than a dozen children. No representative of the Kindergarten Union was sent to Rome to inquire how valid those standard objections were.

Annually since 1909 Montessori had offered a training course for teachers, mainly Italians; the furore created by the translations of her book led to her conducting in 1913 the first International Course. It was held in Rome between 15 January and 15 May, and was attended by some eighty students, mostly American kindergarteners. Four Australians happened to attend: Miss Ruby Starling, the sisters Rhoda and Norma Selfe, all kindergarteners trained in Sydney, and Miss Emily Barton of Tasmania. Lectures were delivered by Montessori in Italian, interpreted into English, and mimeographed for the students. Excursions were arranged to the Roman schools that were using Montessori's methods and there was some practical work, including the making of equipment for the experiment with older children.

At the end of the course there was a perfunctory examination, a medal, and a spectacular certificate. Though there was a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the lectures, which tended to duplicate the book the students had read already, the experience as a whole seems to have been delightful: Montessori was impressive, the children were charming, the group was congenial, there was plenty of leisure, and Rome in spring was beautiful. When they returned to their homelands many of the students were disciples.

Miss Simpson left Sydney on 21 December and arrived in Rome on 23 January. She telephoned to enrol for the training course, but as soon as she mentioned the Blackfriars experiment, she was invited to frequent the lectures and the schools as she wished. She seemed to have spent about a month in Rome, on one occasion telling the assembled students about the Sydney work, before

leaving for Milan, Germany and England. Her impressions of the Montessori experiments were favourable and nowhere did anything cause her to query her own approach. On her way back to Australia she passed through Rome and saw the experiments with the older children. Reaching Sydney in mid-August, she at once plunged into a round of meetings and lectures while both resuming her duties at Blackfriars and preparing her report for Carmichael. The report completed, she broke down, and spent some months recuperating.

Miss Simpson's Report on the Montessori Methods of Education was published in March 1914. It was an elaborate version of her report to Carmichael in 1912, illustrated with many photographs. She recounted her travels, told about Montessori and described her theory and practice, explained the work at Blackfriars, and made some recommendations for New South Wales education. She recommended that Montessori's method of teaching to read and write be generally employed, estimating a 50% saving in time and energy; that the didactic apparatus be used in one-teacher schools to give the teacher more time for older pupils; that the infant schools of the State use Montessori's methods for developing the intellectual, physical and moral powers of the children and for reducing academic retardation. And, she remarked, 'based as it is on liberty, the Montessori system is particularly well suited to the educational needs of a free, democratic country like Australia, where self-reliance, individuality, resource, originality, and freshness of thought are qualities much to be desired in the future citizens'. The Report was widely distributed and a copy was even conveyed to Montessori herself by a special messenger.

In the following years Blackfriars Infants Department was a hive of Montessori activity. Visitors came in a stream, teachers in training and older teachers learned how to manage a Montessori class, the teachers at Blackfriars gave lectures and demonstrations before groups and societies of many kinds. One experimental class was taken beyond the infants level using the methods for older children that Miss Simpson had seen. When Miss Simpson became the first woman inspector of schools in 1917, she was enabled to promote Montessori directly throughout the State. Rachel Stevens, her collaborator, succeeded her at Blackfriars, and continued the work. It is hard to say how widely Montessori methods spread in New South Wales. They were employed intensively at North Newtown, Darlington, Auburn and half a dozen other Sydney schools, partly at perhaps thirty others throughout the State, and probably to some extent (usually in connection with writing) in the rest. Official syllabuses in fact recommended that writing be begun with the sandpaper letters. The schools of New South Wales were undoubtedly influenced by Montessori , but hardly transformed.

By the time Miss Simpson's Report appeared, the Selfe sisters and Miss Starling had come home. The Selfes entered the Department of Education, Rhoda going to Blackfriars and Norma to North Newtown. They came to dislike the way in which Montessori and Froebel were combined in Miss Simpson's system, and in 1915 they founded their own little Casa dei Bambini in the suburb of Ashfield.

The venture lasted only two years. Miss Starling, who returned to the Kindergarten Union, managed to have a Casa dei Bambini established in the inner-city suburb of Pyrmont, with herself as directress. Named 'Montessori', it was opened with eclat in May 1915 as a demonstration of the pure system.

The youngest babies at the school are taught to dress and undress themselves, to wash their hands and faces, to brush their hair, and to rely upon themselves for those personal offices. Their early lessons consist of learning to button, hook, clasp, snap, and lace the various articles of a child's dress, and to tie bows and knots. Leather substitutes, on frames, are used for demonstration and practice. The senses are thoroughly trained. By touch the pupils learn to differentiate between rough and smooth, shape, etc., which they soon learn to use with closed eyes.

The primary colours are taught, and after them the various shades of each group. One of the most important (and popular) means of instruction is provided by wooden cylinders which teach the difference between large and small, high and low, thick and thin. The 'silence game' is one of the prettiest imaginable. Marching, running, skipping, are all taught and entered into with enthusiasm. At their meals the babies 'behave themselves' beautifully, singing a little grace before they begin; laying the table, and 'clearing away' afterwards.

Miss Starling's demonstration was sufficiently successful to persuade the Kindergarten Union to introduce some of the methods into other kindergartens; but 'Montessori' encountered financial and other troubles, in 1921 the local council resumed its site, and it reopened in 1922 as an orthodox kindergarten called 'Maybanke'.

The Kindergarten Unions of South and Western Australia took up Montessori more readily than did that in New South Wales, largely because of Lillian De Lissa, author of the perennial Life in the Nursery School (1939) and since 1908 the leader in South Australian kindergarten. Trained in Sydney, she had introduced kindergarten into Adelaide and Perth. In December 1913 she left Adelaide for Rome, where she undertook the second International Training Course, and for other places in Europe where educational experiments were being conducted.

Spending two weeks in Perth on the way, she returned to Adelaide in July 1915; wrote a report for the South Australian government in which she said that she 'realised how little of the true Montessori we had here' and that 'there can be no half measures'; announced that she would reorganise the South Australian kindergartens along pure Montessori lines. A beginning was made by her in this direction, but she left Australia to become in 1917 principal of the new Gipsy Hill college in England.
Nevertheless, she and her followers in South Australia and in the West firmly placed the Montessori imprint on the kindergartens there. The State Departments were also interested. South Australia sent infant teachers to Blackfriars, Western Australia borrowed Miss Stevens from Blackfriars for a year.

Tasmania invited Miss Simpson to lecture; and Miss Rowntree, a former Tasmanian student of Miss Simpson's continued to work after her departure. In the other States Montessori was received rather coolly. In Queensland there was a kind of experiment at Kangaroo Point and another at Maryborough, both of them shortlived; there was some interest in Montessori as a method for handicapped children. The Victorian inspector, James McRae, thought that Montessori's ideas 'must exercise a considerable influence on future educational developments'; and at least one experiment was conducted in Melbourne, at the Glenferrie Infants Practising School. But Miss Emmeline Pye, doyenne of Victorian infant teachers, remained a devout Froebelian: moreover she had, we are told, 'anticipated the Montessori devices and materials by inventing her own'. Montessori did not catch on in Victoria.

When she retired in 1930, Miss Simpson wrote two valedictory articles for the Journal of the Institute of Inspectors in which she rehearsed the events of 1911 - 17 and reaffirmed her faith in Montessori. By that time interest in Montessori was dying down rapidly. When, in 1937, in connection with the New Education Fellowship Conference, she was asked to talk on Montessori, almost nobody turned up to hear her; and the Kindergarten Union in pity arranged a little social evening for her. By the time Miss Simpson died in 1948 Montessori equipment was knocking about in a few infant schools but, so it seems, only some older teachers remembered how to use it.

After thirty years of neglect in Australia, Montessori has begun to attract attention again. Visitors to the United States have seen Montessori schools and reported their impressions. In June 1968 Dr Marion de Lemos of the Australian Council for Educational Research called on Australian pre-school teachers to think again about the worth of Montessori's principles and methods. Some teachers have dusted off salvaged copies of her books, some parents have cut out sandpaper

letters for their kiddies. One Catholic School in Melbourne, St. Luke's at South Blackburn, has a Montessori class with a trained directress. In May 1969 in Sydney Mrs G.Minwalla, President of the Pakistan Montessori Association, gave a course on Montessori which, consisting of only eight lectures and heard by a mere dozen persons, was yet of historic importance for being the first course ever given in Australia by a Montessori trainer (since Miss Simpson and the others were qualified at most to run a Casa dei Bambini). A flurry of sparks does not constitute a fire, certainly; but sparks may start a fire.

Montessori's interest for Australian educators is of long standing, the interest has been fanned lately, and it will not be surprising if more Case dei Bambini, or schools on Montessori lines, are opened in Australia in the next few years. Perhaps directresses will be imported from North America or from England, perhaps Australians will be sent abroad for training; whatever the means employed to procure trained personnel, it is not improbable that the pioneers of sixty years ago will soon have their successors.