

THE NURSERY SCHOOL

BY
MARGARET McMILLAN



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DEDICATED TO
MY SISTER
RACHEL .

*“Educate every child
as if he were your own.”*
RACHEL McMILLAN.

PREFACE

THIS book was written in response to a desire expressed by many people in every part of the country for some help and guidance in the starting of Nursery Schools.

The need for a book on this subject is certainly urgent. Not merely a few children here and there, but hundreds of thousands are in dire need of education and nurture in the first years; for lack of this early succour all the rest of life is clouded and weakened.

The fate of vast numbers of little children given over to all the dangers and horrors of the streets was brought very forcibly before us in the autumn of 1918, when after the summer holiday we found that one-third of all our nursery children were diseased and obliged to spend a week at the clinic ere they could come back to our school.

We set about the treatment and restoration of the few. This book was written in order to urge the nation to set vigorously about the salvation of the many.

Nursery Schools, we are often told, are in the experimental stage. This can hardly be true, for the experience of nearly twenty years' work has yielded convincing proof as to how nurture can be given. It has indicated beyond all question the kind of environment that should be secured, and the means (very simple means they are) by which the dangers of bringing many little children together can be avoided. The next step need not be tentative, it should certainly not be timid. There is a tide in the affairs of men and nations which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. That

flood-tide has come twice. It came in 1919, when this book was first published, and it was not taken. It is here, in 1930, once more. We should take it bravely; not by cautiously adapting small houses and leading into them groups of forty to fifty children can we solve this great problem in our great cities. How we should approach it, and what we should do, I have set forth as well as I can in this book.

In the last chapter I have tried to thank those who helped me in the work of pioneering the large open-air Nursery School. In the earlier Foreword I thanked my friend and publisher, Mr. J. M. Dent, for his unfailing courtesy and helpfulness. I now extend my warm thanks to his son, Mr. Hugh R. Dent.

The Preface to the first edition of *The Nursery School* was written by me in 1919. Over ten years have passed, and only now is a second edition asked for in England, though in America the book has sold well and has given, I am assured, the initial impulse which has resulted in the opening of hundreds of Nursery Schools in the United States. In England the book and the movement met with unexpected difficulty and arrest. The former won the faint praise that is often said to be the most damning form of condemnation when it comes, as it did, from influential quarters. Yet it did not die. To-day in 1930, after ten years, the sales quicken so that this second English edition is now in demand. As for the movement, after meeting the blasts of the first after-war years, it was forgotten or brushed aside by more instant and urgent problems. After twenty years there are not two thousand children in British Nursery Schools.

The American schools continue to multiply, but their aim and method are, for the most part, other than those which inspired this book.

In spite of all, there is little—there is nothing to change in the Preface. All that it claims holds good. We have had new experience only to learn that the main statements are now capable of new proof. Moreover, as I said, the flood-tide has returned. It is here once more, the moment that will settle the future of millions. Public opinion is gathering in volume. The great local authorities, the great cities of England are waking—are making ready. The message of this book is offered once more.

M. McMILLAN.

1930.

FOREWORD TO FIRST EDITION

BY PROFESSOR PATTY SMITH HILL

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HERE is an epoch-making book which all who have to do with the welfare of children cannot afford to overlook. It is truly an inspiring and absorbing account of experiment in child-saving which "warms the cockles of the heart" with its evidences of intelligent insight and sympathy in dealing with the "toddlers" and young children in the slums of London.

At last the world seems to be awakening to the fact that human destiny is largely shaped by the nurture or neglect of early infancy and childhood.

Miss McMillan presents a most convincing study in the power of early environment, which provides for health of body and the refinements of beauty, saturated with all those human values which make for morality, and mental and emotional health.

The importance of early influences has been appreciated by people of rare insight, or sympathy, in all ages, but society at large even to-day is singularly blind or indifferent to the practical outcome of such facts.

We are inclined to look upon what is vaguely designated "disposition" as a foregone issue, determined and controlled by the mysterious forces of physical heredity. The emotional habits of happiness and amiability, or

discontent and irritability: the habitual attitudes of affection and confidence, or antipathy and suspicion; the feelings of selfishness and malice, or generosity and good will toward man—are established in the dim beginnings of life by the social ideals and standards of those around the child. This influence which Professor Mark Baldwin calls "social heredity" has, in all probability, as much to do with the making of disposition and personality as the forces of physical heredity predetermined at birth. When Mr. Maltbie Babcock was making an effort to prove the power of the human will in controlling one's natural temperament, he said that while we may not be responsible for the disposition we are born with, we are for the disposition we die with. Even so scientific an observer of child life as Dr. John Dewey says:

Especially precious are the first dawnings of power. More than we imagine, the ways in which the tendencies of early childhood are treated fix fundamental dispositions and conditions in turn taken by powers that show themselves later.—*Education and Democracy*.

How slow the world has been in learning this.

Education seems to move from above, downward, the earliest and most impressionable years being left to chance, or positive neglect, centuries after later childhood and youth have been provided with the best that education can provide in guidance and environment.

If the findings of mental hygiene and psycho-analysis can be depended upon as pointing toward a future science of the power of the unconscious forces of life, they will go to prove that we have abandoned the most formative period of human life to the uncertain forces of chance experience.

Froebel and Montessori were wise in turning to the pre-school age as one of untold educational possibilities,

but the Nursery School Movement in England has improved upon their plan in pushing education back into the pre-kindergarten years, when neglect is most expensive both to the individual and society.

We must give full credit to the earlier efforts to care for infants in the crèches and day nurseries in England and other countries, but Miss McMillan's work has little in common with these. While she is aware of the fact that to neglect human life at the period when greatest susceptibility to disease is at its high-water mark, is the most expensive and tragic mistake a nation can make, she sees beyond this into the demands of the human spirit. Such national neglect is not to be measured only by the thousands of little lives snuffed out at the dawn of existence, but by the sickly, wrecked physical and moral specimens who survive to a bare existence, which leaves them incapable of coping with life, and a burden to themselves and society.

Life is more than meat, and man cannot live by bread alone. Thousands of infants die in institutions where the physical environment is far superior to that of the average home, providing all that makes for the welfare of the body. This mysterious missing element of human affection and devotion must permeate the atmosphere of any institution which hopes to save the souls as well as the bodies of little children.

Miss McMillan has proved that the children of poverty may not only be saved, but that they may be worth while to themselves and society in their survival. Rural life will always be impossible for large numbers of families. When the parents earn their livelihood in our great cities, it is neither possible nor advisable to sever the bond between children and parents by sending the little ones to the country, except for short vacations. While these short vacations are better than nothing,

the children quickly lapse when brought back to the city to continue their neglected existence in the squalid environment of the children of misfortune. Miss McMillan saw that it was impossible to keep large numbers of children in the country, so she created a garden spot in the slums of the city—literally a child-garden. Her transformation of a London “dump heap” into a paradise of childhood is a stroke of real genius.

Another interesting thing about this miraculous transformation of slum surroundings is the comparatively small outlay of money put into its equipment. A minimum of money goes into the buildings. They are little more than “shacks” or shelters set in a garden of flowers and trees, overlooked by tenements of the lowest order. Sunshine, open air, baths, food, sleep, play and work in beautiful and happy surroundings—these are the great means of education she employs. The money goes into land and good teachers, who are nurses as well as teachers. The number of children to the teacher is kept sufficiently small to make it possible to preserve the individuality—the personality of every little child. The best medical attendance is provided, clinics being an important part of her scheme of education, and not only death but disease is kept at bay.

These tiny toddlers with clean, well-nourished bodies, living in the open, surrounded by intelligent and sympathetic care, soon leave little for the physician to do. Strange as it may seem, these little children from the worst slums of London when they enter the regular school at eight years of age are straight of limb, broad-shouldered, tall, and, so far as can be seen now, are as normal in mind and heart as the children of the so-called privileged classes. This seems so logical that we wonder that society has come to the realization of it so slowly. A few years ago, a survey of the homes of

children below normal in weight, height and class-standing, proved that a regularity almost mathematical could be counted upon in the relation of weight and height to the one-, two-, three- or four-roomed homes from which they came. (*Hygiene of School Children*, Terman.)

If this be true, why should we be astonished at the beautiful children made possible, when they are rescued from these squalid homes and placed in gardens of delight, in sunshine and flowers? Walt Whitman expressed it long ago when he wrote: "A child went forth one day, and what he saw he became." We can almost imagine the thousands of little lives struggling to survive in the slums of our great modern cities, unconsciously offering the prayer of Matthew Arnold: "Nor let me die, before I have begun to live."

The little children of Miss McMillan's Nursery School not only live but have a rich abundant life of health, and happiness, and beauty, which should be the birth-right of all the children of all nations and races.

It has been said that the test of civilization is the attitude toward young children. Most superintendents are absorbed in the problems of secondary schools or in industrial and educational vocations at the cost of the younger children in our public school systems. The finest buildings, the costliest equipment, the most highly-trained and highly-paid teachers are procured for high schools. If funds run low, the younger children are usually the ones to be sacrificed. It is almost invariably the fate of the youngest to be housed in the most insanitary and the most unsightly buildings, herded in the largest classes and crowded in ill-ventilated rooms, with overworked, underpaid and often the most poorly-prepared teachers.

Civilization demands a new environment for our

youngest children—a new type of nurture and education—a high standard of teaching, teacher-nurses or nurse-teachers, who understand the right of the youngest in our democratic society to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Miss Margaret McMillan, Miss Grace Owen and others have been pioneers in this great movement for saving and educating the babies of England. State funds are now provided for the education of mere babies and the training of teacher-nurses in the Nursery Schools.

When will America awaken to the fact that her babies are left to chance, and that as Professor John Watkins, of Johns Hopkins University, says, if we wait until the child is three years old, it may be too late to form those habits of physical, mental and moral health which are the foundation of character and citizenship?

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE infant welfare movement has had a wonderful success in this country. It has brought down the baby death-rate at a run, and all within a short period. In January 1912 my sister and I opened our infant clinic and ran it as part of our school clinic, and this work for infants will probably be resumed at an early date. In this book there will be no reference to baby camp or infant welfare at all.

The open-air Nursery School is a new departure and is distinct, if not in aim, yet necessarily in method, from infant welfare work. The swiftly changing characteristics of growing young children demand new treatment. As soon as he can toddle we introduce the child to a new environment, which is nevertheless his long-lost natural home, his God-designed habitat, where his senses and spirit may be allowed to waken, and his impulse and activity will not meet unnatural obstacle or definite arrest. He is to live in the open air from the first, having shelter from rain, cold, and heat, every extreme and undue rigour of climate, but free to look upon the sky—to see the moving trees and living creatures of the world at last. He, the slum child, is to feel the warm and healing light of the sun on his limbs and to experience if not watch the continuous changes that we call morning, midday, and evening. This is a great revolution, and I do not believe that this present generation is able to estimate fully all that it implies.

The garden is the essential matter. Not the lessons, or the pictures, or the talk. The lessons and talk are about things seen and done in the garden, just as the best of all the paintings in the picture galleries are shadows of originals now available to the children of the open air. This new contact with originals, under trained helpers, should mean a great release of power in children: it should make them ready for the later work of "lessons" by letting them learn in a natural way from the first. Ruskin declares that all the best books have been written in the country (with the exception of a few, perhaps, that were written in jail). Little children, as well as great writers, should be, if not in the country, at least in a place that is very like it, and does not take all its great advantages from them in the first years. If not in great space with moorland or forests and lakes, at least in sunny places, not in foul air and in grimy congestion.

It is important to get the question of environment settled first—to have it take precedence of method (of which much is said and written); for until this matter of environment is settled no method can save us. Moreover, the loss involved in putting up expensive and unsuitable buildings will cripple the finances of local authorities so that they will shrink from every and any kind of new proposal. When economy is possible it should be practised at the beginning of an enterprise, for later, as vistas open, we may learn new ways of spending; and the opportunity seems to have come in view of the new proposals for meeting the needs of older scholars. If the indoor school can be used for the senior classes of fourteen- to fifteen-year-old girls and boys, we can now surely make new plans for the nurture and education of the younger children. The open-air garden school can be theirs first. There need be no

more building of costly infant schools, but rather a new finding and clearing of suitable sites, especially in crowded areas, where the new work can begin under new conditions.

This would seem to have been impossible in the distressed nineteenth century to the boldest reformer. The prophets cried aloud, but the destruction of a great race went on apace. The bravest and most practical educational reformer of all, Lord Shaftesbury, pressed with salvage work of every description, yet found time to go out into the dens and dark places of the city and rescue the lost children exposed to weather under railway arches. He introduced Esquirol to the English Parliament of the forties. Being well-informed about the work of Pinel, Itard, and Séguin, he held a world of knowledge and insight in reserve, which he could not, in his own day, apply. Fierce political antagonisms held back the mere possibility of getting the greatest reforms carried out in the new schools. They were schools of a party dominated by industrialists on one hand, troubled by religious feuds on the other. Earlier in the century one man, Friedrich Froebel, saw the vision of the future, the Nursery Child Garden. He saw it with the inner eye, but he never saw it in material reality.

My dear sister and I acquired, in 1911, free of rent, the full use and life ownership of a good six-roomed house, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Evelyn. We never used it as a school, but as a kind of hospital; for our experience of the school clinic had, by this time, shown us that the children (other than those fit only for hospital) were in no need of any kind of house. They suffered from lack of experience in the open, and of the open.

We installed, in the little garden behind the house, a canvas tent facing the east, and fitted with very primitive

bedsteads and a more or less sound wooden floor. This was our first camp school; it was also our first Nursery School shelter, and it is through the experience gained by working with these children, all of the poorest class, and all living with us under the most primitive conditions, that we learned to trust nature and the masters altogether, and to advocate not merely gardens as an annexe, but as the only proper kind of schools for all children, but above all for young children up to their eighth or ninth year.

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The subject of this book was divided in the first edition into two distinct parts. First, the Nursery School and all that concerns the children who attend or will attend it; and secondly, the Teacher; also the Student Teacher and Probationer and their preparation and training for the new work. This last formed the subject of the second part of the book.

In 1919 there were very few Nursery Schools of any kind, and no large open-air Nursery School that I know of other than our own. As for the training of teachers it was not even considered as yet, so confused, so blind indeed was the general view on this. Many people believed that training of any kind was unnecessary for a nursery teacher, just as they still believe that it is quite unnecessary for the woman who is a mother. Nursery Schools were to be a dumping-ground for the well-intentioned but dull women of that day.

The rapid fall in infantile death-rate which has lately followed the tentative instruction of mothers has given pause to many. It is surmised that instinct is not the only guide in child nurture. True, there are many intelligent men and women who tacitly believe that a very little knowledge will go a long way in mother or