

Rita Kramer
Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori

A Biography

Maria Montessori



*A
Biography
by
Rita Kramer*

BASIL BLACKWELL
OXFORD

© 1976 by Rita Kramer

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Basil Blackwell & Mott Limited.

First published in the United Kingdom in 1978
by Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Kramer, Rita.
Maria Montessori.
1. Montessori, Maria 2. Educators – Italy –
Biography
372.1'3'0924 LB775.M8
ISBN 0-631-18430-9

For W.A.S.

PRINTED AND BOUND IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
WILLIAM CLOWES & SONS LIMITED
LONDON, BECCLES AND COLCHESTER

Foreword by Anna Freud

Maria Montessori's personality and the value of her contributions justify the thorough, scrupulous description that is allotted to them in this book. Those who were aware only of the later effects of her work will now see her endeavours arranged in the historical context to which they owe their origin, and can follow the bitter struggle for social progress of which only a strong will like hers could be capable. Guided by the author in an enthralling manner, the reader will see develop before him the picture of Maria Montessori, who in 1896 was the first woman to become a physician in Italy. She was fascinated by the goal of improving the lot of poor, subnormal children who were disadvantaged both by physical constitution and circumstances. What followed, and is here made completely comprehensible for the first time, is her turning away from medicine to pedagogy, and the broadening of her circle of influence beyond her native Italy to all the countries of the world—an inevitable step of momentous importance for entire generations of normal children.

As a contemporary of Maria Montessori and her co-workers, I can attest from my own experience to the grateful enthusiasm which is described in this book, the enthusiasm with which her teachings were received and applied in many places and under many titles. Social workers, kindergarten teachers, child psychologists, and child psychoanalysts agreed in the conviction that the Montessori method in important aspects surpassed everything that had been offered to the educator up to then. In a 'Montessori Children's House' (like the one in Vienna) the child was master in his own house. For the first time his interest in the material on hand could develop freely, instead of being arranged as in the usual kindergarten in a prescribed group activity. For the first time not the praise and disapproval of adults, but joy in the success of one's own work came into its own as a suitable impetus. Above all, not authoritarian discipline, but freedom within carefully placed limits was the principle of education.

Today, twenty-five years after Maria Montessori's death, her teachings share the fate of other innovations that were pioneering in their time; they are not always applied in the pure form sanctioned by their originators, but have had to submit to amplifications and changes.

Furthermore, only a few of those who are active today along the lines of Maria Montessori share her own religious and sense-perception/psychological background. That, however, does not alter the fact that the most important elements of the Montessori method have entered into modern pedagogy in one form or another and have become indispensable components of the education of small children, components that cannot be ignored.

Acknowledgments

The success of a work like this, for which the sources are in large part materials which have not been previously collected or published, depends greatly on the cooperation of others. Foremost among those who helped make it possible for me to learn what I had to know in order to write this account of Maria Montessori's life and work were her son, Mario Montessori, and his wife, Ada Montessori-Pierson, whose generosity in providing documents and sharing their memories was equaled only by the freedom they allowed me to use what they made available in my own way, interpreting it according to my own point of view as it evolved in the course of research and writing. During the years that I worked on this book they repeatedly made time to talk with me at their home in Holland, where they received me with cordial hospitality and never made me feel that my questions were impertinent. Mario Montessori talked with me freely about the many years he spent assisting his mother in her work and her travels as well as about his own early childhood experiences and what he had been told about his mother's early life. Without his confidences it would have been impossible to see the story of her life in any wholeness.

Dr. Mario M. Montessori, Jr., Maria Montessori's grandson, shared with me his memories of his grandmother and his own view of her work as a psychoanalyst interested in child development.

Between visits, Mario and Ada Montessori answered numerous letters full of queries with detailed information gathered from letters and documents in their personal possession and in the offices of the Association Montessori Internationale in Amsterdam. I am particularly indebted to them for preparing from documents in their possession a detailed chronology of events in the lives of Maria Montessori's parents and of her early school years and for making available to me the contents of a book of press clippings put together by Alessandro Montessori in the first year of this century, a unique record of the public events in Maria Montessori's life in the years from 1892 to 1900. In addition, they gave me free access to the clippings and other materials in the AMI offices in Amsterdam, where I was helped in countless ways by its executive secretary Nicolette VanderHeide-Verschuur. They also provided most of the photographs of Maria Montessori which illustrate

MARIA MONTESSORI: A BIOGRAPHY

this volume, which are taken from family albums and the files of the AMI.

The contributions of the Montessori family extended to making no conditions as to my use of the material they provided. Much of the credit for the depth and breadth of the story told in the early pages of this book belongs to them; any limitations it has are my own. Although I had the unflagging cooperation of the Montessori family in the research on which this book is based, it is in no sense an "authorized" biography.

Many others made valuable contributions over the years:

Cleo Monson of the American Montessori Society opened her files and gave generously of her time and interest, and her assistant Judith Delman helped me locate many of Montessori's former pupils all over the world.

Many old friends and former students of Maria Montessori's shared their experiences and their impressions of her in letters and interviews. They are mentioned in the notes to the chapters in which their memories appear, but I would like to acknowledge in particular the interest shown by Elise Braun Barnett, Catherine Pomeroy Collins, Maria H. Mills, and Emma N. Plank, all of whom made singular contributions to the portrait of Montessori that emerges in these pages.

The first reader of early sections of the manuscript was my friend Diane Ravitch, whose own work in educational history suggested many ideas I applied in writing about the vicissitudes of the Montessori movement and whose encouragement was supplemented by the most practical kinds of help, not the least of which was inviting me to come with her to hear Lawrence A. Cremin lecture at Teachers College on the history of American education. Professor Cremin's lectures, and his book *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York, 1961), illuminated the dominant social and intellectual trends of the time of Maria Montessori's confrontation with the American teaching establishment and suggested numerous fruitful ways of thinking about the nature of education and the role of the educator. I am indebted to him for suggesting many kinds of questions the biographer can ask of the historical data in order to arrive at what he calls "the imaginative reconstruction of the past."

Professor Salvatore Saladino of the Department of History of Queens College of the City University of New York generously supplemented what I learned from his *Italy from Unification to 1919* (New York, 1970) in conversations which furthered my understanding of the periods in Italian history in which Montessori grew up and attended school and in which she returned to work there during the Fascist regime.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Bernard C. Meyer and the other members of the study group on biography and psychoanalysis held under the auspices of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute shared their ideas about character and creativity and listened to portions of the work in progress with the interest in "what happened next" that is a writer's greatest encouragement.

I am grateful to my scholar-friends Perle Epstein, who read sections of the manuscript and made a number of ruthless and therefore useful suggestions, and Louise J. Kaplan, Professor of Psychology at New York University, whose knowledge of early childhood education and passionate interest in how women live their professional lives made her a stimulating critic of an early draft of the chapters on Montessori's youth and early career.

Margherita Repetto did much valuable research for me in Italian archives.

More personal kinds of thanks remain to be recorded:

To my husband Yale, who supported this project in every way from making it possible for me to give it my full time through three years of research and writing to taking an unflagging interest in its progress; my daughter Mimi, who acted on her belief that mothers should be encouraged to leave home and strike out on their own; and my old friend architect Lewis Davis and his partners at Davis, Brody & Associates, who provided me with a room of my own where I could build my book. And to my editor, Walter Betkowski, whose idea it was to begin with.

New York

August, 1975

Preface

This book is an attempt to look at Maria Montessori's life and work in order to see who she was, where she came from, and what happened to her: to identify the intellectual influences on her thought and suggest the role of her personality in her work, not in order to diminish but to explain it—to show in just what her originality consisted. All ideas build on other ideas. The interesting thing is not that mere fact but which ones they were and how they were made use of and changed, combined and refined into something new.

Maria Montessori is much more complicated and interesting than the plaster saint her devoted followers have made her into. Under all the quasi-mystical reverence, the hagiography that has passed for biography, is a tough, intelligent woman who, at least in her youth, thought and did things no one had ever done before.

It is the search for that woman which motivated this attempt to go beyond a narrow cultist view of her self and her achievements, to introduce Maria Montessori to those to whom she remains unknown or misunderstood.

It is a search that led across several continents, into forgotten archives and into the memories of men and women whose lives she touched and often changed. What it revealed was a new woman—both in the sense in which Montessori herself used the term and in the biographer's sense.

Biographies of famous men and women go through stages which seem to obey a set of laws applying to all ideas. Every generation consists of revisionists. Early attempts to gather facts and interpret them are inevitably superseded by views based on new discoveries, new outlooks.

If this history of Montessori's life and work serves to stimulate further research into her achievements and new ways of looking at them, it will have accomplished its purpose—to reintroduce her to new generations as a teacher from whom they have learned much of what they know and from whom they may still learn—about children, about her, about themselves.

CONTENTS

Foreword	5
Preface	11
Introduction	15
Part I. The Early Struggle	19
Part II. The Children's House	105
Part III. The Method and the Movement	233
Afterword	373
Notes	383
Index	401

**Illustrations will be found
following page 192.**

Introduction

When the Hamburg-America Line's *Cincinnati* steamed into New York harbor on a cool December morning in 1913, a stout, smiling woman in black, wrapped in furs, her thick chestnut hair piled under a large black hat and veil, stood at the railing. She stood there quietly from the moment the New York skyline became visible until the liner had docked. "I must see everything," she said to a companion. She had begun as an observer, and the habit of observation had led her to this moment. The ship docked and she came down the gangplank with regal self-assurance, a motherly smile for the disciples and dignitaries who surrounded her six-deep, embracing, gesturing, speaking at once in excited Italian. It was a royal welcome.¹

When Maria Montessori arrived in America at the end of 1913 she was at the height of her fame—indeed, one of the most famous women in the world. Newspapers, among them the august *New York Times*, devoted whole pages to interviews with her, and controversy about her ideas raged on the editorial pages and in letters-to-the-editors columns of all the major newspapers. The *New York Tribune* called her the most interesting woman in Europe. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* described her as "a woman who revolutionized the educational system of the world . . . the woman who taught the idiot and the insane to read and write—whose success has been so wonderful that the Montessori method has spread into nation after nation as far east as Korea, as far west as Honolulu and south to the Argentine Republic." Even the conservative *New York Sun* noted her arrival in headlines, along with the fact that she brought with her "a new race plan."

An eager public was waiting for Montessori in America.

Her arrival shared front-page space with the activities of Pancho Villa in Mexico, the arrest of the militant suffragist Mrs. Pankhurst in England and President Wilson's refusal in Washington to make a public statement on the question of women's suffrage, and the recovery in Italy of the stolen "Mona Lisa" of Da Vinci. For many, although they didn't know it, it was the last good year, the year before the first of the world wars that would devastate Europe and change the world forever. Women still hobbled in long skirts, the construction of the Panama Canal was under way, and the help-wanted columns were full of ads for valets and ladies'

MARIA MONTESSORI: A BIOGRAPHY

maids. Life was comfortable for an unprecedented number of Americans, and if there were also unprecedented numbers of immigrant poor, noblesse oblige still went along with privilege. The middle classes and the wealthy thought about education—to enrich the lives of their own children and to help civilize and Americanize the newly arrived urban hordes. The miracle-working woman doctor from Italy seemed to be bringing an answer to both needs.

Everywhere she went she was hailed as a prophet of pedagogy and a major force for wide social reforms, and by the time she sailed for home on Christmas Eve it seemed reasonable to suppose that American schools would never be the same again—at the very least, that Montessori would leave some lasting effect on education here.

History has a way of confounding expectation. Within five years Montessori was all but forgotten by the American public. Ten years later hardly anyone but a few professors of education knew her name.

And while many of her ideas took root in England, in Europe, and in Asia, they became enshrined in a movement that took on more and more of the character of a special cult rather than becoming part of the mainstream of educational theory and practice. She continued to work indefatigably, traveling throughout Europe and Asia, lecturing and writing, founding schools and teaching, until her death in Holland at the age of almost eighty-two. She had become a grande dame, a symbol to her devoted followers, little known to the rest of the world, no longer considered a major influence in educational thought but a historical relic. At the time of her death in 1952 many readers of her obituaries either did not know who she was or were surprised that she had still been alive and active in the postwar years. She seemed to belong to another time.

A decade after her death, half a century after her triumphant first visit to the United States, Montessori was rediscovered as the pendulum of school reform swung back to her view of the nature and aims of the educational process.

With the perspective of time, her genius becomes clearer. She remains one of the true originals of educational theory and practice.