



Jarvis, P., & Liebovitch, B. (2015). British Nurseries, Head and Heart: McMillan, Owen and the genesis of the education/care dichotomy. *Women's History Review*, 24(6), 917-937.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1025662>

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# British Nurseries, Head and Heart: McMillan, Owen and the genesis of the education/care dichotomy

Pam Jarvis and Betty Liebovich

*This article explores the origins of the modern nursery school in England, focusing upon the early work of the Nursery School Association and its internal debates, with particular consideration of the contributions of the first president and first secretary of the association, respectively Margaret McMillan and Grace Owen. It reflects upon dichotomies within the constructions of the purposes of the nursery espoused by these women and their supporters, essentially rooted in a care versus education debate, and the consequent differences in their orientations to the maternalist milieu that formed a backdrop to their activities. While the dispute between McMillan and Owen has been all but forgotten, similar dichotomies continue within policy creation for modern nursery classes and day-care environments.*

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**Introduction: a storm in a milk bottle?**

In 1932, as the Great Depression began to take a firm grip on the United Kingdom, Bradford Education Authority told local nursery schools that children were to receive a maximum of one-third of a pint of milk a day. Miss Miriam Lord, Superintendent (head teacher) of Lilycroft Nursery in Bradford, unleashed a spirited protest against this decision; in her nursery, located in an area of great socio-economic deprivation, one pint per day was allocated to each child. Lord's biographer, Ruth Murray, sought to understand the motives behind such an uncompromising stand on the provision of milk, pursuing a trail that led directly back to the trenchant, care-focused maternalism of Margaret McMillan, of whom, Murray posits, Lord was a 'disciple',<sup>1</sup> and the cooler, pedagogically focused maternalism of Grace Owen, which had, three years earlier, succeeded in silencing McMillan's strident voice within the Nursery School Association(NSA).<sup>2</sup>

Lord appealed to the first active female Member of Parliament, Conservative Nancy Astor, to put the 'Bradford milk' case directly to Parliament. As a staunch advocate of the nursery schools movement, Lady Astor swiftly obliged; unfortunately for Lord, however, Astor had constantly boasted to the House of McMillan's frugality within her Deptford-based nursery,<sup>3</sup> so when the Conservative chairman of the Bradford Elementary Schools sub-committee, incensed at his policy's examination on the national stage, was able to demonstrate that Lilycroft's bill for milk was more than double that of a similar nursery (£23 9s 5d as opposed to £9 13s 7d),<sup>4</sup> Astor's ability to pursue the case any further became irretrievably compromised. Lord was thus isolated and left to deal with the opprobrium of the Bradford politicians, who chose to demote her from superintendent of a nursery school to assistant mistress of a nursery class located within an infant school, a post in which she remained until her retirement in 1944.<sup>5</sup> A 1933 appeal to the NSA, of which Lord had been a founder member, elicited a tactful, sympathetic reply, but no further action on her behalf. Grace Owen, the Hon. General Secretary of the NSA, wrote to Lord: 'Lilycroft would not be a good case to bring up in relation to the staffing of Nursery/Infants Schools'.<sup>6</sup>

In the early twentieth century, mass nursery education was a relatively new concept within the UK. A network of nurseries had initially been set up to help married women to undertake paid labour during World War I, and over the immediate post-war period, the idea that a range of far-reaching benefits could be achieved through collective national public initiatives also began to permeate the British national consciousness. 'In the early 1920s ... discussions within the Labour Party focused on the public provision of health care, child care and other services by professionals.'<sup>7</sup> The Education Act 1921 made provision for grants to organise nursery schools for children over two years old and under five years old to be disseminated and overseen by local education authorities.<sup>8</sup> The establishment of the NSA soon followed in 1923, with Margaret McMillan as its first president.<sup>9</sup>

One of the key debates triggered by the emergence of modern, state-funded nursery education was that of the nursery school versus the nursery class within

an infant school. The early records of the NSA indicate that Margaret McMillan advocated a head-on confrontation with the mainstream political milieu with regard to an insistence upon the establishment of dedicated nursery schools, while Grace Owen was inclined to engage with the less expensive nursery class option favoured by austerity-conscious local government officials, ministers and civil servants, reflecting, 'it would be a pity, I think to slip into a pitched battle'.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that Owen emerged as the victor from the ensuing policy struggle within the NSA, despite some evident pockets of sympathy with McMillan within the committee.<sup>11</sup> Seth Koven reflects that while women 'used maternalist imagery and arguments in advancing themselves and their visions of child welfare... maternalist discourses did not exist in an ideological or political vacuum' and that a generic description of 'maternalist' female reformers may mask a wide range of agendas.<sup>12</sup> The nursery schools versus nursery classes debate within the NSA, which was constructed within a care versus education agenda, is a clear example of such an ideological and political struggle within early twentieth-century maternalism, and it is this event that is explored within the text below. The account will begin by exploring the different backgrounds of the principal opponents, considering the varied influences that led to their eventual confrontation.

### The Origins of the Modern British Nursery

Margaret McMillan's (1860–1931) approach to nursery education was deeply informed by her background in Christian socialism, and subsequent political activism aimed at reducing inequalities within society in general. Elizabeth Bradburn suggested that McMillan's perceived connection with a mystic spirituality, in particular, a 'transforming friendship with God... is the key to an understanding of the rest of her life; the social work in which she later became involved was cradled in it'.<sup>13</sup> There is evidence to support this assertion within the historical record. For example, McMillan refers to her sister Rachel's involvement in her induction to Christian socialism via the assertion that socialists are 'the true disciples and followers of Christ'.<sup>14</sup> In the final years of her life, McMillan was quoted as proposing that the work that she and others had been doing with slum children sprang from 'responsibilities as human beings to God'.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, in her private correspondence, she wrote to her long-standing friend and mentor, Robert Blatchford: 'the real leaders are not here, they're on the other side. They are exhilarating! No gloom there. They walk in joy'.<sup>16</sup>

A further influence upon McMillan's work can be found within her membership of the Fabian Society,<sup>17</sup> which, at that point in its development, could be construed as a highly elitist 'talking shop' for principally London-based, left-leaning intellectuals. Leading Fabian Edward Pease made it clear in his *History of the Fabian Society* published in 1916 that he was focused upon ideas that came from the London elite: 'the brain of the Empire, where reside the

leaders in politics and in commerce, in literature, in journalism and in art'.<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that education and teaching did not get a mention within this list, and that the roll-call of famous Fabians from McMillan's era reveals a cohort of intellectuals/political activists, for example poet Rupert Brooke, suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, first Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, socialist activist Annie Beasant, authors George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, and pioneer social scientists Beatrice and Sidney Webb.<sup>19</sup> McMillan's origins were therefore principally religious and political rather than pedagogic, and this was destined to become a key issue in her later debates with her fellow members of the NSA.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, McMillan built a reputation as a skilled political orator, initially drawing the attention of influential people within the fledgling British socialist movement by delivering a series of powerful speeches on the benefits of socialism at Hyde Park Corner.<sup>20</sup> Carolyn Steedman reported: 'by early 1893 McMillan had gained a considerable reputation as a propagandist and orator'.<sup>21</sup> During this year, McMillan was offered a salaried position by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Bradford; this required an extensive programme of socialist lectures to audiences across Yorkshire and Lancashire.<sup>22</sup> She was elected to the Bradford School Board as a representative of the ILP in November 1894, expanding her sphere of influence to an official role within the city.<sup>23</sup>

Mary Davis opined: 'the ILP was inspired by ethical (sometimes Christian) socialism—a non-Marxist moral critique of capitalism which found its best expression in the work of Robert Blatchford'.<sup>24</sup> Blatchford, a lapsed Fabian, was a highly influential mentor for Margaret McMillan, and, as an established writer and editor, he frequently published her articles in his journal *The Clarion*, launched in 1891.<sup>25</sup> Chris Waters reflected that English socialism in the late nineteenth century was of a singular construction, very much conceived and marketed by Blatchford: 'emotional outrage... was more important in Blatchford's conversion than was... Marxism. Indeed it was Blatchford's empathy for the poor, his sentimental desire to right all wrongs that characterised his socialism, even in its earliest days... the romantic critique of capitalism'.<sup>26</sup>

In her work on the Bradford School Board, McMillan proved herself to be a remarkably active social reformer with a keen interest in child welfare, using her gifts of rhetoric to make highly effective critiques of the board's lack of engagement with issues relating to local children's health and well-being. In 1947, Bradford-born author J. B. Priestley ironically reminisced that McMillan was 'one of those terrible nuisances... who are always bringing up awkward subjects and making decent people uncomfortable'.<sup>27</sup> Her first biographer, Albert Mansbridge, quoted her thus:

The state compels the children to work [in school]—it makes the demand for sustenance urgent, intolerable. But it does not compel parents to feed their

children. Hence it is certain to some of these hungry little ones, free education is less of a boon than an outrage.<sup>28</sup>

In 1906, in collaboration with her sister Rachel, McMillan led a deputation to Parliament to lobby for the compulsory medical inspection of school children.<sup>29</sup> This aim was subsequently realised in the Education (Administrative Procedures) Bill of 1907, and on the strength of this success, the sisters secured a substantial £5000 bursary from Joseph Fels, a wealthy Fabian socialist, with which they determined to open a school clinic in a suitably 'needy' area of London. The new clinic opened in Deptford on 21 June 1910, and the children began to 'arrive in torrents'.<sup>30</sup> The sisters had additionally set up an experimental overnight 'camp' in the garden at the back of the house in which the clinic was located in an attempt to address the children's ongoing well-being through the provision of washing facilities, fresh air, play and nourishment. When one of the Night Camp girls was permitted to bring her ailing little sister along, and the child died a few months later, Emma Stevinson reports that McMillan decreed: 'We must open our doors to the toddlers . . . we must plan the right kind of environment for them and give them sunshine, fresh air and good food *before* they become



**Figure 1** The Rachel McMillan Open Air Nursery School, showing a shelter in the background.<sup>33</sup>



rickety and diseased'.<sup>31</sup> In 1914, the McMillans acquired additional local premises for a dedicated nursery from the London County Council (LCC).<sup>32</sup> They soon established a familiar regime: cleanliness, sunshine, fresh air, good food and open access to an abundant garden. They scraped together more funds to build a number of open shelters attached to the main building facing the garden, and it was in these that the children were routinely housed.

The Deptford nursery was a great local success during the war years of 1914–18, but sadly Rachel McMillan died in 1917.<sup>34</sup> Following the Armistice, a national and international interest began to coalesce around the newly christened 'Rachel McMillan Open Air Nursery School' and its holistic, outdoor-oriented regime.<sup>35</sup> Through this rare practical demonstration of 'the romantic critique of capitalism',<sup>36</sup> Margaret and Rachel had managed to raise slum children with the potential to become healthy, competent workers, mothers and soldiers, and the whole nation was now listening avidly to what the surviving sister had to say. The nursery was visited by a steady stream of dignitaries including Queen Mary, Rudolph Steiner, George Bernard Shaw, many MPs and the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, who wrote to McMillan: 'I shall never forget my visit to you and to your children; it was a revelation'.<sup>37</sup> Carolyn Steedman reflected: 'McMillan's reworking of the post-Wordsworthian romantic child into a practical political project is probably her first claim on historical importance'.<sup>38</sup>

The Rachel McMillan Nursery offered the opportunity for women interested in teaching and nurturing young children to train to become teachers and nursery nurses from its inception in 1914, an initiative which was officially supported and sanctioned by the local education authority in 1919. McMillan's training methods clearly drew heavily upon her oratorical skills:

Miss McMillan's lectures were the highlight... we never knew beforehand the subject... but we knew it would be inspiring... we never knew if it would last for half an hour or two hours. We came prepared to stay for a long time and we certainly learned to concentrate. No one was allowed to fidget.<sup>39</sup>

The 1918 Education Act stated a need for the creation of more nursery schools, and the aims of a nursery school were to include 'definite training—bodily, mental and social—involving the cultivation of good habits in the widest sense, under the guidance and oversight of a skilled and intelligent teacher' leading to a widespread focus on educating future teachers for young children. Further, this Act maintained that young children would be supported by 'women who possess qualifications and experience for the training and teaching of young children'. The government disseminated money to local education authorities which were instructed to 'encourage persons in their [nursery schools] employment to obtain, if they do not already possess, qualifications for work in elementary and other schools and departments for young children'.<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 2** Queen Mary visits the Deptford Nursery, 1921; Abigail Eliot (see below) is the adult second from left.<sup>41</sup>

The national nursery schools agenda moved inevitably towards the formation of a national professional association. Consequently, the skills that had marked Margaret McMillan as an overwhelmingly popular socialist orator,<sup>42</sup> added to an impressive set of high-profile connections extending into governance and monarchy, led to her nomination in 1923 for the inaugural presidency of the Nursery School Association.<sup>43</sup> Her ability, first demonstrated on the socialist platforms of London and Bradford, to harness the emotions of an audience with her vivid depictions of ‘a vision of health, joy and beauty in working lives to be demanded by the people themselves’<sup>44</sup> was to be put into service once again, this time on behalf of the nation’s youngest children. One of her closest colleagues in this venture was to be Grace Owen (1873–1965), who became the first Honorary Secretary to the NSA.<sup>45</sup>

Owen is described by Gay Wilgus as ‘a pivotal figure at the City of Manchester training school for nursery school teachers [who] also played a key role in designing the NSA’s “suggested scheme of training” for teachers’.<sup>46</sup> Manchester had an older tradition of nursery education than London, starting with Sir William Mather’s establishment of a free kindergarten in Salford in 1873. Shortly afterwards, Mather founded the Manchester Kindergarten Association, the first association for nursery education in Britain.<sup>47</sup> His methods were based upon those of Friedrich Froebel (1785–1852), the originator of the term ‘kindergarten’ for the Play and Activity Institute he founded in 1837 at Bad Blankenburg in Germany. Froebel, influenced by the ideas of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), developed one of the first comprehensive pedagogical frameworks for young children: ‘he developed a child-centred approach and stressed active learning’.<sup>48</sup> The



English Froebel Society was established in London in 1874, and continues to the present day as the National Froebel Foundation.<sup>49</sup> Owen trained in Froebelian methods at the Blackheath Kindergarten Training College, later taking a degree at the University of Columbia in the USA, graduating in 1905. On her return to England, she joined the staff of the University of Manchester,<sup>50</sup> later becoming principal of the Manchester Kindergarten Training College, recognised in 1917 by the Board of Education as an endorsed supplier of teacher training. Owen became the Organising Secretary of the Manchester and Salford Council for Day Nurseries and Nursery Schools,<sup>51</sup> and in 1920, she created a 'demonstration nursery school' at 61 Shakespeare Street, Manchester.<sup>52</sup>

Despite emerging from quite different professional backgrounds, McMillan's religious and political compared to Owen's pedagogical and academic, both women were members of the Froebel Society at the time of the founding of the NSA. While both 'McMillan's and Owen's holistic views were arguably shaped by Froebel's approach to young children's development',<sup>53</sup> both contributed to professional journals beyond *Child Life*, the Froebel Society journal of the time. This suggested 'a distancing from the Froebel Society, if not the broader movement'.<sup>54</sup> It was subtle differences within these rather flexible orientations to the Froebelian philosophy, emerging from McMillan and Owen's different routes into their positions on the NSA, that was later to fuel the argument that arose between them.

Unembellished personal memories of the two women are difficult to find within the historical record. There is little information available with respect to Grace Owen, and Jane Read offers the opinion that biographies of McMillan based largely in living memories of her life and work, including those of Mansbridge (1932), Lowndes (1960) and Bradburn (1989), are, to a great extent 'hagiographic accounts'.<sup>55</sup> A further biography, written in 1954 by another McMillan disciple, Emma Stevinson, entitled *Margaret McMillan: prophet and pioneer*, could also feasibly be added to this list.<sup>56</sup>

There is, however, one less contrived source of living memories of both women in day-to-day practice: Abigail Eliot, who concluded her working life as the director of the Eliot–Pearson department of child study at Tufts University, Massachusetts, USA.<sup>57</sup> Eliot reported that she came from the US to 'work and study at the Rachel McMillan training centre for more than six months in 1921'. In 1960, she wrote vividly on the subject of Margaret McMillan as a professional mentor:

Such sincerity, self-confidence and commitment ... 'treat each child as if he were your own' ... a commanding manner and voice, she could frighten and dismay a young student. [She once] pointed with her imperious forefinger and said 'Miss Eliot, don't do it that way, do it this' ... these many years later I do not remember what [the directions] were, but I do remember that she was right; her way was better for the children ... When I asked her why it was better ... she had no explanation. Her answer was 'I just know it is the right way' ... Miss McMillan was right and her conviction on the matter was so strong and emotionally charged that she could brook no discussion of the matter ... she said to me it was her sister Rachel's spirit hovering near and telling her what to do.<sup>58</sup>

During her time in England, Eliot also made a visit to Owen's Manchester 'demonstration' nursery, later proposing that she found Owen to be 'scientific and broad minded',<sup>59</sup> a reflection possibly offered in comparison to her more critical orientation towards McMillan. While these accounts are of course not strictly objective, they do appear to represent genuine witness testimony upon each woman's day-to-day professional practice. In these, Eliot draws pen portraits that contrast Owen's professional, pedagogic orientation with McMillan's emotional, spiritually driven conviction. Such differences between the two women can thence be inductively traced into their uneasy relationship within the NSA, and into the eventual disagreement that led to McMillan's resignation from her post, an argument that emanated from a disjuncture between Owen's 'head' and McMillan's 'heart' oriented approaches, creating an incompatibility that marred the fledgling association's attempts to create a cohesive national policy for British nurseries.

### The Battle to Define an Agenda for the Modern British Nursery

The NSA had a significant number of Froebelians in its ranks but the organisation appealed to a wider range of women interested in nursery education, possibly because it did not have a unique pedagogical label and was not associated with an élite, as the Froebel Society was.<sup>60</sup>

The first order of business for the NSA was to create guidelines for nursery teacher education in England, and although McMillan agreed with and supported the need for high-quality education for young children, particularly those living in poverty, she soon found that she had quite a few differences with the mainstream, and that her approach to educating their teachers differed from the general consensus held by members of the NSA. As Steedman argues, 'McMillan's insistence on economies of scale and a schooling that acknowledged the pattern of working-class life brought her into conflict with the [NSA]'.<sup>61</sup> This issue was also acknowledged within the Historical Record of the NSA:

McMillan felt that tolerance of the inadequate nursery classes of the time would so endanger the future of Nursery Schools, that they must be condemned outright, as indeed they were by her on more than one public occasion. This unfortunate difference of outlook between the President and the majority of the Nursery School Association Committee caused frequent misunderstanding of the policy of the Association.<sup>62</sup>

Many of McMillan's 'unorthodox' beliefs emerged from a different, politically rather than pedagogically focused 'elite', rooted in the left-wing intellectual activism that emerged from the Fabian Society. Additionally, her Christian socialist insistence upon neighbourly relationships with local families was so entrenched that she planned her student teachers' accommodation to be adjacent to the Deptford nursery, proposing: 'Our students have to know their new neighbours. They have to get some idea of housing, of the cost of food, and the needs of a family who

live always on the brink of a financial precipice!’<sup>63</sup> However, the members of the NSA stated:

We are looking for a steady increase of Nursery Schools throughout the country. When these new schools are started their success in any true sense will depend (even more than in schools of an older tradition) on actual teachers who work in them. It is natural enough that at present few people outside the workers themselves know very much about what the internal working of a nursery school must be if it is to prove of lasting value to the children. It is therefore of critical importance to the future of the nursery school movement that wise measure be taken now to insure the necessary proportion of skilled and trained workers.<sup>64</sup>

So, while McMillan was looking for practitioners who understood the culture of the area surrounding the nursery, the NSA was focused upon the immersion of trainees within the culture of the nursery itself. This clash of ‘outside-in’ versus ‘inside-out’ perspectives, added to an exclusive focus upon the needs of children from socio-economically deprived homes, who required a focus on care, or what McMillan termed ‘nurture’,<sup>65</sup> before they could be effectively educated, lay at the heart of many of McMillan’s differences with the NSA mainstream.

McMillan was fervent about the importance of sound training, as she felt that young children were being ‘cheated’ by being subjected to inadequately trained teachers. In her opinion, two years with two teaching practices was insufficient; she firmly believed that three years’ training which principally comprised mentored practice in the nursery environment should be compulsory.<sup>66</sup> She was consequently quoted in the minutes of an NSA meeting addressing the creation of a standardised teacher training programme as not supporting or agreeing to the two-year course of study favoured by the majority, including Grace Owen.<sup>67</sup>

Candidate suitability for nursery teacher training was also a bone of contention between McMillan and the NSA. McMillan’s focus on her particular brand of nurture led her to the opinion that neither teachers nor nurses were properly trained for the highly varied role that practice in the Deptford nursery required:

After sad experience we gave up nurses and turned to teachers. Then came new revelations. Even the trained and certified enter school with only three to six weeks in teaching . . . those who came first were shocked; they had never seen the inside of a slum home.<sup>68</sup>

One of her students reported:

[Margaret McMillan] described to me the ideal type of student . . . she said that she had tried nurses and teachers but neither was just what was needed . . . She had decided that a new type of training was required . . . We had constant practice . . . Miss McMillan believed that theory should be put into practice while remembered.<sup>69</sup>

The NSA statement of policy in 1925 stipulated one trained teacher to thirty-five children;<sup>70</sup> however, in a bulletin from the NSA circulated in 1927 Margaret McMillan reiterated her personal position, advocating a ‘new method of staffing and building’, which presumably refers to the ‘shelters’ organisation of her

Deptford nursery, explaining that 150 children could be supervised by only 'one trained teacher per shelter' as long as there were plenty of untrained helpers.<sup>71</sup> An NSA Bulletin produced in 1936 contains a 1930 quote from Grace Owen proposing an alternative viewpoint; that 'the nursery class should . . . function as a small nursery'. An additional note in her handwriting clearly reiterates the formula of one teacher plus two helpers to thirty-five children contained in the NSA policy document of 1925.<sup>72</sup> Within the 1936 bulletin, Owen makes the point that the organisation of nurseries must recognise 'the type of accommodation provided [and] . . . must necessarily vary with the local circumstances.'<sup>73</sup> McMillan's stance on the use of non-teaching staff in nurseries was somewhat at odds with her socialist principles, in her description of such workers as 'thousands of girls who need not and will not enter the teachers' trade union, with only one teacher at the head of each shelter . . . [without such workers] all nurturance goes by the board.'<sup>74</sup> Her firm emphasis was upon the requirement for a high ratio of adults to children in order to ensure that the children's physical and emotional needs were effectively addressed, and the most realistic way to do this in terms of prudent financial management was to ensure a rigorous training for nursery teachers, preparing them to act as executive managers within the nursery.

Here we see the dichotomy between Owen's concept of a nursery *education* and McMillan's concept of *nurture* within the nursery environment emerging from the record. For McMillan, the core work of the nursery was nurture, which could be supplied by untrained workers, providing that they were sufficiently 'motherly', under the direction of a highly trained teacher. In contrast, for Owen, the pedagogy delivered by trained teaching staff was the central purpose of the nursery. This was a complex difference of emphasis, as while both women would no doubt have agreed that both pedagogy and nurture were important factors within the nursery, their emphases were very different. As such, this quickly became a fundamental sticking point, preventing the construction of a cohesive NSA policy for practice within the twentieth-century nursery.

In an NSA meeting held on 3 January 1925, H. Ward, a member of the Board of Education, stated that:

We must be very careful to have teachers properly trained for this important period of school life. A girl with a secondary education and a motherly heart is not enough. At this age we have the great habit-forming period, and the younger the child is, the more rapid is his intellectual growth. This, then requires the skill of the wisest and best teachers we have.<sup>75</sup>

McMillan spoke in response to this statement and was summarised in the minutes as having said that:

All the members [of the NSA] had the same object in view—the ideal education of the child under five. In her opinion, however, the nursery class was in danger, vitiating the real aim and refusing the very people, who with widely differing qualifications, might as students help in the work. The nursery *school* needed an attendant to every six children, and it needed to have large numbers of children, with students of every type under trained

teachers to provide the right care and adequate culture at a reasonable cost. She considered the nursery *class* an extravagant investment failing to provide a good return.<sup>76</sup>

Her focus on the practice within her Deptford-based nursery is clear in this reply, and her entrenched objection to nursery classes within infant schools becomes more understandable when viewed in this light; she saw such a development as what we might nowadays term ‘schoolification’, and therefore incompatible with her more holistic ‘nurture’ principles.

McMillan began to develop a particular distaste for the operation of nursery education in Manchester, which largely ran via nursery classes within infant schools. This, of course, was the city over which Owen presided as the organising secretary for nursery education. Abigail Eliot experienced McMillan’s extreme displeasure when she learned that Miss Eliot had arranged a visit to a nursery class in a Manchester elementary school ‘on the ground I would learn nothing from it. Because of Miss McMillan’s disapproval I took only one working day off, but I went . . . it was an important part of my English education in regard to nursery schools.’<sup>77</sup>

Some correspondence between Manchester-based Shena D. Simon and Grace Owen in early 1929 indicates the extent of the split in the ranks of the NSA. Simon writes that she is ‘very interested’ in the NSA but wants to know whether ‘it will be made quite clear that “nursery school” includes “nursery class”’. She continues:

Some people associated with the nursery school movement are definitely hostile to them [nursery classes] . . . I should not like to be helping an operation that would be in any way hostile to properly constituted nursery classes.<sup>78</sup>

Owen replied the following day:

I think I understand your question perfectly . . . the president of our association is openly hostile to nursery classes . . . the NSA is however as stated in its constitution . . . pledged to work for the effective working of nursery school classes in the Education Act of 1918 . . . I heartily endorsed the nursery school policy of the Manchester Education Committee of a few years ago . . . [which was] nursery school departments in new schools.<sup>79</sup>

McMillan was also carrying on a feisty private correspondence about her disagreements within the NSA. The week after the exchange between Simon and Owen, McMillan wrote to Robert Blatchford:

I mean to give ’em a shock—all my enemies. The Froebelians who hate me and the teachers who fight me and the patriots who denounce me. The rank and file of Labour is with me, if they understand . . . Now I am battling for a nine hour day for nursery school children. We open at a quarter to eight. We close at five thirty. It is not much use to little ones to rattle them in and out of school as they do. *They need nurture*. You can’t give it in five hours . . . Such humbug. It is such a mean substitute.<sup>80</sup>

In this, McMillan draws clear battle lines between her ‘emotionally outraged’<sup>81</sup> socialist principles (‘the rank and file of Labour’) and the position of the education

professionals epitomised by Grace Owen ('the Froebelians who hate me and the teachers who fight me'), laying bare the conceptual roots of her disagreement with the mainstream NSA.

There are inevitably gaps in the record relating to the spiralling disagreement between McMillan and the mainstream policy of the NSA, but what is clear is that on 16 April 1929, McMillan formally wrote to Owen, addressing her as the Hon. Secretary to the NSA, with a brief message of an intention to resign from the presidency of the NSA, stating that a further letter would follow after which the resignation was to take effect 'forthwith'.<sup>82</sup> On 7 May, the NSA responded, requesting further information on the reasons relating to this decision,<sup>83</sup> and on 18 May McMillan submitted her letter of resignation.<sup>84</sup> Between times, on 8 May she wrote a letter to founder NSA member and fellow South London nursery principal Lillian de Lissa warning her of the decision to resign as president, professing 'admiration' for de Lissa, Owen and Everlegh and stating that there should be no bad feeling within the NSA.<sup>85</sup> On 18 May, McMillan wrote to de Lissa again, informing her that it had been 'quite a trial resigning from the presidentship [*sic*].'<sup>86</sup> On 20 June, the NSA discussed McMillan's resignation and temporarily replacing her as president with de Lissa.<sup>87</sup> On 21 June, McMillan wrote to Owen that the NSA episode had left her with 'a sense of failure and regret'.<sup>88</sup>

Some clues about the specific content of a recent McMillan–Owen disagreement can be found in the letter from the NSA to McMillan on 7 May 1929:

It would appear that you disapprove of our notes for speakers, which you state to be 'in breach of confidence' . . . You will remember that at our meeting of 22nd September at which you were present Miss Owen was instructed in her capacity as press secretary to prepare for publication . . . without consultation with the officers. She was given carte blanche provided that she did not exceed the published policy of the committee. Miss Owen has faithfully observed this instruction . . . We should like to know what particular aspect of it [the notes for speakers] you take exception.<sup>89</sup>

McMillan's position is further elaborated upon in the notes of the NSA discussion of the McMillan resignation on 20 June:

Miss McMillan stated that her resignation was 'the result of a growing recognition that I am not in your movement. The salvation of the children of the poorest class will not come through the school that is advocated by the NSA' . . . [she proposed that] the statement of the principles of the NSA (1925) was never properly discussed by the members.<sup>90</sup>

McMillan's Christian socialist mission had focused her sights primarily upon the nursery as a remedy for social disadvantage, and this agenda became increasingly at odds with the professionalised, pedagogy-driven policy direction emanating from the NSA. The *Manchester Guardian* reported on 22 May 1930:

Margaret McMillan addressed an open meeting . . . on the subject of 'Nursery Schools' . . . Miss McMillan . . . described very trenchantly the nature of the problem [in Manchester] emphasising that the age of 2 was immensely more



important than any age that followed it. A child's destiny was practically settled by the age of 5. If you wanted to give nurture you must give it properly or not waste the nation's money.<sup>91</sup>

In 1927 McMillan publicly iterated her frustration with teachers: 'teachers, isolated as a profession . . . do not touch the lives of the mothers in poor streets . . . they do not even live in the neighbourhood . . . they visit it for a few hours every day and see the children in masses'.<sup>92</sup> McMillan's immersion within the uncompromising culture of her religious and political mission clearly placed her at odds with the Frobelian pedagogues who dominated policy construction within the NSA. Her substantial previous experience as a highly successful 'propagandist and orator . . . [with] a reputation for a charismatic and highly effective platform performance'<sup>93</sup> must have added to her frustration at such sustained opposition to her passionate appeals. As Jane Read reflects:

McMillan seemed to have qualities in line with the Weberian conception of charismatic personalities . . . however, the opposition to McMillan within the NSA presents a challenge to [the] argument that charismatic leaders reduce their followers to acolytes lacking agency.<sup>94</sup>

It is certainly clear from the historical record that McMillan's abilities in the areas of oracy and rhetoric were extremely impressive, and Abigail Elliott's testimonies indicate that the way that she communicated her position—'a commanding manner and voice . . . strong and emotionally charged'<sup>95</sup>—contrasted with Owen's cooler 'scientific and broad minded' orientation.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, it should be noted that McMillan's propagandist skills first brought her to the attention of the Independent Labour Movement, and consequently set her on the path to her later achievements. In the first NSA bulletin these skills are clearly in evidence in the manner in which she promotes the practice within her Deptford nursery, simultaneously hinting at the inferiority of the infant school-based nursery class:

If I quote from the reports of only one school it is because there is alas no other large open air nursery in existence . . . yes, this is beautiful . . . everyone feels it who comes here . . . compare it with the forbidding heavy wall of our prison-like schools . . . [there are] few days in the year when the Sun God does not come for a while . . . we let Him bring His great healing joy to our children.<sup>97</sup>

She also adds to the impact by passionately evoking the memory of her dead sister, Rachel, 'the first great worker for the open air nursery school [who] laid down her life in Deptford', further informing the reader that 'Rachel designed the first shelter'.<sup>98</sup> It is highly likely that those within the NSA who opposed McMillan's uncompromising position would have been no match for her in this respect, but in the end, it was their greater willingness to pragmatically align their construction of the maternalist agenda with the very worldly concerns of the mainstream political milieu that endured, a strategy to which Owen subsequently resorted in her dealings with Miriam Lord over the 'Bradford milk' incident.

### Conclusion: the legacy of Margaret McMillan

It would appear that McMillan made one final, indirect attempt to induce the NSA to bend to her will. A letter from Richard M. Philby from the Department of Health dated 28 August 1929 appears in the NSA archive, referring to McMillan's resignation as a 'most unfortunate matter ... a great pity that this has arisen'. He continues, 'I would personally like to see it [the NSA] called the Open Air Nursery School Association [to] keep prominently in mind the ideals of nurture which Miss McMillan has so constantly followed. What do you think of this suggestion?'<sup>99</sup> No reply exists on the record, but it would appear that the NSA was *not* in agreement, as their name was never amended as suggested! Although there is no concrete evidence, it is highly possible that McMillan herself had some hand in eliciting such a communication.

By March 1930, however, McMillan appeared to have resigned herself to the idea that the NSA battle had been lost. In a letter she wrote to Grace Owen, apparently refusing an invitation to write a chapter on outdoor nursery accommodation in a book that Owen was editing on the behalf of the NSA, McMillan states:

I would do anything to help the open air nursery school movement, but in obscuring my sister's and my own [*sic*] you are really hindering it ... If I wrote in your book I should be perhaps in conflict with other writers ... I will not be in conflict at all ... I have learned my lesson and will not ally myself again.<sup>100</sup>

A few days prior to writing this letter, McMillan had engaged in a further heated debate on the topic of nursery classes versus nursery schools through the letter pages of the *Manchester Guardian*. In response to a criticism from Owen's earlier correspondent, Shena D. Simon, opining that 'although Miss McMillan has never visited one of the Manchester nursery classes, she does not hesitate to attack',<sup>101</sup> McMillan wrote:

What we have got instead of the open air nursery school and its sharp thrust into the nest of evil things that rot and destroy our race is a substitute—that is a nursery class grafted on to an infant school. A diluted new wine safely landed in the new bottle ... to begin with the 2 year old is dropped altogether ... also 3 meals have gone. The long nurture day—nine hours—has vanished. The great and powerful services are represented of course: the medical and the teaching services. But they are present under circumstances that make their work barren and fruitless.<sup>102</sup>

The reference to 'destroy our race' was clearly an emotive appeal to a popular socio-political belief of the time; that of 'the value of a healthy and numerous population as a national resource'.<sup>103</sup>

The argument was abruptly curtailed less than a year later by the final illness and death of McMillan. The NSA archive records that some 'spring flowers' were sent to McMillan from the Association on 16 February 1931. A note explains that they are sent 'with our love ... to express deep concern we all felt on hearing of your illness'.<sup>104</sup> McMillan died six weeks later on 29 March 1931. It is clear that McMillan's enduring posthumous fame utterly eclipsed all of her contemporaries within

the NSA and this process began almost immediately; for example, Jane Read postulates that McMillan was ‘designated a “prophetess” by London County Council Inspectors Philip Ballard, Gwendolen Sanson and Miss E. Stevenson’ in evidence to the Hadow Committee of 1933.<sup>105</sup> While McMillan’s gift for polemic and propaganda transcended her physical demise, however, Owen’s professional, conciliatory approach inspired no such accolades, thus consigning her to a ‘supporting role’ in the history of nursery education; while Owen won the battle, fresh, posthumous memories of McMillan’s compelling appeals on behalf of the nation’s deprived infants won the war, in terms of enduring legacy. McMillan and Owen’s very different constructions of the purpose of a nursery were both broadly located within a maternalist paradigm, but, as Koven posits, ‘a generic description of ‘maternalist’ female reformers ... mask(s) a wide range of agendas’<sup>106</sup>

As the dust around nursery education’s niche within the wider national culture began to settle, all debates ongoing within the ‘bubble’ of maternalism were eclipsed by far stronger influences emanating from the national and international socio-political arena with which Owen’s less confrontational approach was more compatible. This is vividly illustrated by the case of Miriam Lord and the ‘Bradford milk’ incident. Despite the place in history that McMillan secured, her grand plan of a network of nurturant nursery schools throughout the UK, based within an agenda promoting social equality, never came to pass. Instead, Owen’s pedagogically focused nursery classes became the conventional face of nursery education that was carried into the later years of the twentieth century.

The fortunes of nursery education briefly waxed in the war years of 1939–45, then waned over a period of fifty-three years before moving back onto the agenda of the New Labour government, 1997–2010, in the National Childcare Strategy of 1998, ‘in the context of workfarism [and] ... lucrative childcare markets’.<sup>107</sup> A new clash of agendas quickly emerged from two different impetuses: the requirement to provide the type of care-oriented framework that McMillan would have termed ‘nurture’ for children from socio-economically deprived families, and a growing impetus to meet a demand for progressive, intensely educative settings for young children from aspirational middle-class families in which both parents were working long hours within the postmodern, service-driven economy of the early twenty-first century. The dichotomy between the nurturant ‘heart’ and the pedagogical ‘head’ thence re-emerged, long after the deaths of both Owen and McMillan and the disappearance of their tangled debate from living memory. Peter Moss recently described the current situation:

Split between ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’, with a fragmented and incoherent patchwork of services, and combining high cost to parents with a poorly paid and poorly qualified workforce: we find ourselves in a hole, and don’t seem to know what to do.<sup>108</sup>

The free play and continuous provision that emerged from Grace Owen’s Frobelian legacy is still in evidence within the vast majority of contemporary nursery

classes, and within the highly pedagogically focused English national framework for nursery education, the Early Years Foundation Stage.<sup>109</sup> It can, however, also be argued that McMillan's innovative practice was the direct ancestor of the New Labour children's centre concept. Her trenchant focus upon high adult-child ratios, and nurturant role of practitioners within the nursery, including an understanding of the lives of local families, not only pre-empted but extended concepts of working in partnership with families that would not resurface in Britain until nearly a century later, initially in local movements such as the Northampton-based Pen Green project<sup>110</sup> and later within the English policy document of 2003, *Birth to Three Matters*.<sup>111</sup> In this sense, it can be argued that McMillan was indeed to some extent a 'prophet',<sup>112</sup> and that her legacy to English nursery education and care policy and practice retains its currency following the centenary year of her Deptford nursery.<sup>113</sup>

### Acknowledgements

With many thanks to Dr Rosemary Mitchell, Reader in Victorian Studies at Leeds Trinity University, for her comments on a draft of this article, and the two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

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