

# Beyond the Malting House School

*Derek Gillard*

## **Susan Isaacs: a life freeing the minds of children**

Philip Graham, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2023.

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Susan Isaacs (born Fairhurst in 1885) did not have an easy childhood. Various events – including the death of her mother when she was six – left her with a sense of guilt which ‘took on great significance when Susan underwent psychoanalysis later in life’ (p8). When her father remarried, she became ‘a difficult, naughty child both at home and at school ... she seems to have been a thoroughly angry little girl’ (p12). Her childhood experiences, says Graham, explain why she chose to become:

a member of a group of analysts that put the greatest emphasis in the explanation of psychological problems on early relationships, anger, hostility, envy, guilt and loss. Her experience of not being listened to as a child, either at home or at school, surely provides some explanation for her later insistence that teachers should spend most of their time listening to children and answering their questions rather than imposing unasked-for and often unwanted information upon them. (p23)

After gaining a first-class honours degree in philosophy at Manchester, she became a research student in psychology at Cambridge, where she was asked to carry out a study of the methods people use for learning to spell new words. This ‘did not grab her interest and enthusiasm’ (p47) but, Graham suggests, she did take away from the study a lesson which would play a central part in her later work: ‘the fact that, when it comes to learning, people can arrive at the same satisfactory outcome via any number of different routes. It is the task of the teacher therefore to help the child identify which of these routes is right for him or her, not to insist on a particular pathway to success’ (p49).

A year after leaving Cambridge, Susan married William Brierley, a distinguished botanist whom she had met at Manchester. The marriage was not a success and the couple were finally divorced in 1922. Four days later she married Nathan Isaacs, a student in her Workers’ Educational Association class.

Meanwhile, her ‘extraordinary little book’ (p78) *An Introduction to Psychology* (1921) was selling well and she became a member of the British Psychoanalytical Society, after giving a paper about the differences in the sexual development of boys and girls.

Graham discusses her arguments in some detail.

Susan Isaacs is perhaps best remembered for her work as head of the Malting House School in Cambridge, where the philosophy of the progressive educational movement was put into practice. Graham outlines the development of the movement and the ideas underpinning child-centred education which, by the early 1920s, 'had entered the mainstream of educational ideas but certainly not the mainstream of educational practice' (p100).

The Malting House School was established by Geoffrey Pyke, a speculator on the London metals market, who had been extremely unhappy at school and was determined that his son should have a better experience. Like Susan, he was convinced that young children learn largely through play – a notion, says Graham, that 'is now so widely accepted, (though not always acted upon), as to seem almost banal, yet at the time it was little short of revolutionary to educators who were wedded to rote learning as the primary vehicle to academic achievement' (p113). He gives many examples of the sort of activities in which the Malting House children engaged.

By its third year, the school was well-established and Pyke was becoming increasingly ambitious. But then disaster struck: he lost all his money on the commodities market and became bankrupt. Susan resigned, Pyke became paranoid and the school closed in July 1929.

Nathan was devastated when he discovered that Susan had had an affair with Pyke (albeit a brief and ultimately unsatisfying one), though he himself was having a passionate affair with Evelyn Lawrence, a psychologist on the staff of the school. Despite these affairs, the couple 'enjoyed an intense intellectual relationship' (p144) and remained together. They returned to London, where Susan used her records of observations made at the school to write two books which were to become, says Graham, 'the main influences on the education of young children for the next thirty years; in fact, in some respects, for much longer than this ... Thus an experiment in education that lasted only five years in all and that had never involved more than twenty most unusual children at any one time made an impact far greater than Susan Isaacs herself can have expected' (p138).

In 1933, Susan became a fully trained analyst with a particular interest in child analysis. Graham explains the differing views of a number of prominent psychoanalysts, including Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Joan Rivière, and notes that they were 'sharply divided on the issue of child analysis' (p163).

He goes on to describe the extraordinary range and amount of work which Susan accomplished during the 1930s: her books *The Nursery Years* (1929) and *The Children We Teach* (1932); her weekly 'Childhood Problems' column for *The Nursery World*; her significant contribution to the 1933 Hadow report on *Infant and Nursery Schools*; her appointment in 1933 as head of the new Department of Child Development at the London

Institute of Education; her participation on many committees and editorial boards; her collaboration with Wiltshire Education Department in developing an educational assessment form; and her instigation and leadership of the *Cambridge Evacuation Survey*.

In addition, she remained active in the field of psychoanalysis, where the battle of ideas between the followers of Melanie Klein and Anna Freud reached a peak in 1939, when ‘the world of British psychoanalysis was in considerable disarray’ (p259). Susan Isaacs, though a Kleinian herself, played a significant role in resolving the tensions, says Graham.

In her last years (she died in October 1948), she served on a government committee which investigated the appalling treatment of children in Poor Law institutions. In a memorandum to the committee she wrote: ‘The experience of love is just as necessary for the child’s mental and moral growth as good food and medical care are necessary for his bodily health and development’ (p282).

She went on to criticise ‘harsh punishments, rigid prohibition of natural pleasures and healthy activities’ which, she argued, ‘serve only to increase the child’s hate, aggression and anxiety and are far more likely to turn him into a delinquent than into a useful member of society’ (p283). In advocating the abolition of corporal punishment (as she had done many years previously), Susan Isaacs was, says Graham, ‘well ahead of her time’ (p283).

In his penultimate chapter, Philip Graham assesses Susan Isaacs’ legacy.

In education, he notes that the 1967 Plowden Report emphasised the importance of play, and argues that: ‘the report’s other recurring themes – individual learning, flexibility in the curriculum, the use of the environment, and learning by discovery – were all foundation stones of the Susan Isaacs approach to education and have stood the test of time’ (p290).

In child psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic child psychotherapy, it is clear, says Graham, that without the advocacy of Susan Isaacs, it is unlikely that Kleinian theories and practice would have flourished as they did – ‘and indeed continue to flourish today’ (p298).

Although he is critical of the suggestion that Susan Isaacs created a bridge between education and psychoanalysis, he argues that ‘many teachers find ideas derived from psychoanalysis such as denial, repression and transference very helpful in thinking about the disturbed behaviour some children show’ (p306), and that ‘Freudian language that Isaacs first made available in the training of teachers in state schools has now become so much part of everyday discourse as to be barely recognisable as such’ (p307).

Her advice to parents about encouraging children to ask questions, says Graham, helped to produce ‘the immediate post-war generation of scientists and creative artists who contributed so much to advance technology and enrich the cultural life of Britain ... Those of this generation, as I am myself, should be thankful to her’ (pp310-311).

In his final chapter, Graham considers views about Susan Isaacs' legacy in recent works. He concludes that 21st century scholarship has 'amply confirmed Susan Isaacs' reputation as an enduring, major influence in child-centred education' (p331), and he notes that there has been a considerable increase in the number of scientific studies of the effectiveness of child psychotherapy, 'a field in which Susan Isaacs was undoubtedly a pioneer' (p332).

He disagrees, however, with authors who have made exaggerated claims for the importance of Susan Isaacs and other psychoanalysts in the thinking which led to the creation of the welfare state, and he describes arguments that she was a significant figure in the inter-war movement against colonialism as 'misplaced' (p302): 'Susan Isaacs's place in history as a major influence in child-centred education and as a key player in the promotion of Kleinian ideas is well established. Her reputation does not need the additional embellishment some twenty-first century scholars have tried to achieve for her' (p332).

Philip Graham has three great strengths which make him an accomplished biographer, all of which are evident in this book.

First, he is a talented storyteller with the ability to produce a very readable text in which he brings his characters to life so that the reader feels able to get to know and understand them.

Second, he is a meticulous researcher with an eye for detail. For this book he has explored in depth the life stories of all the key figures, and some of the more peripheral ones, and, where possible, has been in personal communication with some of those involved. And he provides a huge amount of useful background information, including, for example, the position of Jews in British society in the early years of the 20th century (pp75-77).

Last, but by no means least, he has the ability to convey complex ideas in terms which make them accessible to the general reader. He explains, for example: the theories behind psychoanalysis (pp 63-67); the ideas expressed in Susan Isaacs' *An Introduction to Psychology* (pp77-81); the work and theories of Piaget (pp146-149); and the conflicting ideas about psychoanalysis, especially analysis of children (chapter 8). His account of the development of child-centred education (chapter 5) is probably the best I have ever read.

He clearly has a high opinion of his subject, though he is not afraid to criticise her when he feels she got something wrong. He details, for example, a number of 'obvious defects' (p209) in her 1932 paper in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* in which she analysed the contents of letters she had received from mothers when she was writing for *The Nursery World*.

Philip Graham's book is both a fascinating story of the intertwining lives of a number of flawed and damaged human beings and an invaluable account of the development

of ideas in education, psychology and psychoanalysis during the first half of the 20th century. Given Susan Isaacs' championing of child-centred education and nursery schools, her emphasis on the importance of play, and her insistence on the importance of listening to children, it is a book which will certainly appeal to *FORUM* readers.

**Derek Gillard** produces the Education in the UK website, where this review was originally published: <https://www.education-uk.org/>