

The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial: Women Educators and Transnational Knowledge Exchange in Early Childhood Education

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In recent years there has been a growing interest in transnational history, which is “the study of the ways in which past lives and events have been shaped by processes and relationships that have transcended the borders of nation states.”¹ The process of transnational knowledge exchange in early childhood education began in earnest in the early twentieth century when a growing number of women educators not only traveled overseas but also spent part of their working lives in other English-speaking countries.² These women established “webs of influence that linked countries such as Australia and the United States with each other as well as with Great Britain.”³

My report focuses on two women educators, Gwendolyn Watkins and Mary Gutteridge, whose careers benefited from Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM) funding in the 1920s. The LSRM funded the establishment of Departments of Child Study at universities in the United States and Canada, including McGill University in Montreal. The first section of my report explores the work of the British nursery school teacher, Gwen Watkins, who was recruited to conduct the nursery school at McGill University. Although the overall venture at McGill was not very successful, Watkins contributed significantly to the project. She also applied her insights from her work at McGill when she returned to England.

My study of Watkins' career shows that LSRM sponsorship influenced early childhood education through women's personal and professional networks.

In connection with the child study program, the LSRM provided fellowships "for the purpose of training personnel in the United States and Canada."⁴ A few women from other countries were also supported to study and travel abroad. They included one Australian, Mary Gutteridge, whose career forms the second section of my report. I will show that a LSRM fellowship enabled her to shape the field of early childhood education in Australia, as well as the United States, from the 1930s to the 1950s.

While previous studies of the LSRM's funding have focused mainly on its application in the United States and Canada, I argue that the LSRM also influenced early childhood education transnationally. Watkins and Gutteridge's careers are indicative of the ways in which LSRM support facilitated early childhood education in other countries. At the same time, LSRM projects benefited from the knowledge and experience of women educators such as Watkins and Gutteridge who had already lived and worked overseas. In essence, my report highlights the LSRM as an important hub in the process of transnational knowledge exchange in the early twentieth century.

Gwendolyn Watkins: "The Key Stone of a Nursery School Organization"

Gwendolyn Watkins was born in Blackheath, London, England, in 1891.⁵ At the age of twenty-six, she was among the first students to enroll at Gipsy Hill Training College (GHTC) in London in 1917.⁶ The college was dedicated to progressive practice and curriculum, and the preparation of nursery school teachers whose focus was on children aged three to six years old. Its founding principal was Lillian de Lissa, an Australian, who had established a Kindergarten Training College in Australia in 1907, and studied with Montessori in Rome in 1914. Her own training had drawn extensively on Dewey's critique of

Froebelian principles.⁷ GHTC students were hence exposed to a range of progressive ideas and practices in their two-year program of studies.

Watkins' commitments to progressive education were evident in her employment after she graduated. She taught in the Demonstration school that was attached to GHTC and then in "a private experimental Montessori school."⁸ She also studied with Montessori who conducted a six-month training course in London every alternate year. By 1923 she was teaching at Jellicoe Nursery School which was situated in "a very poor area in Kentish Town" in London.⁹ Along with the Rachel McMillan Nursery School in Deptford, Jellicoe Nursery School and GHTC were visited frequently by Australian, American and European early childhood educators who traveled to England in search of the latest developments in the field.¹⁰

In November 1925, the GHTC newsletter announced that "an old Gipsy Hill student, Gwen Watkins, or "Jinks" of the Jellicoe School, London, is going to Montreal to teach on modern lines in connection with some experiments and observations being made. The Professor of the University of Montreal had threatened to haunt Miss de Lissa's doorstep until she thought of a suitable Gipsy Hill person to go."¹¹ Although Watkins secured this position through some complex transnational networks, it was not in the manner suggested in the newsletter.

Negotiations between Lawrence Frank, the associate director of programs at the LSRM, and Clarence Hincks, the secretary of the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene (CNCMH), were seminal to the University of Toronto and McGill University's successful applications for LSRM funding.¹² In 1924 Frank reported that Dean Martin of the Medical School was taking the initiative at McGill and that Martin would try to secure the cooperation of other departments, including McDonald College, the center for teacher training. Frank also expressed some reservations about the McGill application because

“Montreal is divided by language and religion and does not have a close affiliation between the university and the social life of Montreal.”¹³ Nevertheless, the LSRM agreed to support both universities for five years.

In order to establish their Departments of Child Study, McGill University and the University of Toronto relied heavily on the advice and expertise of Edna Noble White, Director of the Merrill Palmer School in Detroit, and a key advisor to the LSRM.¹⁴ Staffs from both institutions visited Detroit and were very impressed with its nursery school. White had recruited teachers from GHTC to establish the Merrill Palmer School and knew de Lissa well.¹⁵ In July 1925, members of McGill’s “Child Laboratory Committee” co-opted White who was visiting England to recruit a “well trained teacher” to establish its nursery school.¹⁶ Consequently, through a dense web of personal and professional networks, de Lissa came to recommend Watkins as a “very suitable candidate ... She has originality, charm and artistic power, and is really rather an exceptional person.”¹⁷ Watkins was subsequently interviewed by Hincks, and his telegram to Martin announcing her appointment read in part, “engaged one of best nursery school teachers of England.”¹⁸ Martin relayed this news to Frank and stated that “it is our intention for the first six months to attempt nothing more than to run the school with two main features ... careful physical examination and psychological study.”¹⁹

McGill University’s nursery school opened in the refurbished premises of 708 University Street, Montreal, in January 1926, with twenty children ages two to four years, and a long waiting list.²⁰ The nursery school soon attracted the press, who reported that “the Laura Spelman Rockefeller foundation supplies the money; McGill University supplies the building, the doctor, psychologist, nurse and director.” The director, Miss Watkins, reviewed the British origins of the nursery school movement and its benefits. This article concluded that “McGill’s experiment ... promises well.”²¹ Lawrence Frank visited Montreal in May and was equally impressed: “Under the very competent direction of Miss Watkins, I

think you have a most favorable situation for the organization and carrying of research in child development.”²²

Watkins conducted the nursery school from 1926 to July 1930 and was intimately involved in the Department of Child Study’s programs of parent education and research. Besides teaching, she consulted with parents who visited the nursery school frequently and supervised postgraduate students’ “practical observation periods.” She gave lectures on “various aspects of child care and training” to child welfare study groups and other organizations in Montreal, and worked with the university’s Extension Department, presenting five lectures on “Training the Child” in its regular courses on the pre-school child. She assisted her colleagues in the Department of Child Study with their research and conducted some of her own. For example, she “made special studies” of children who had been identified as “behavior problems” and “devised methods of treatment.” Her study of children’s clothing for outdoor play in winter also led to the design, manufacture and commercial sale of a new winter playsuit.²³ In 1930, Dean Martin commented to Frank that “the nursery school has been wonderfully successful” and that there were one-hundred and fifty children on the waiting list.²⁴

Notwithstanding Watkins’ success in establishing and maintaining a progressive nursery school, the future of the Department of Child Study was in doubt by 1928. The original intent was that several university departments would use the nursery school for research, but none did so. Departmental staff carried out several studies, some of which were published in academic journals, and in 1929 the decision was made to “direct efforts to the field of community service.”²⁵ Given that Montreal was a predominantly French-speaking community, these efforts were limited to the minority English-speaking population.

In May 1930 the LSRM funding was about to expire and no university department was willing to take over administrative or financial responsibility. The Superintendent

surveyed various departmental heads, and their responses indicated that the nursery school had never been an essential part of their teaching or research.²⁶ Dean Martin from the medical school denied that the Department of Child Study had been under his jurisdiction, and Professor Clarke from Education argued that the nursery school “would be best associated with the Department of Psychology.” Clarke cited the following issues:

- 1) Located in downtown Montreal, the nursery school was too far from McDonald College where teacher training took place.
- 2) A tiny nursery school conducted according to Montessorian ideas “had only very restricted application ... to the training of teachers for schools as such.”
- 3) Clarke’s graduate students were concerned with “more advanced education” and the problems of the school system in Quebec.²⁷

The LSRM was persuaded to support the Department of Child Study financially for another year from the 30th of June 1930, but Watkins “resigned to make a world tour, which she had planned for several years.”²⁸ In July 1930, the resident psychologist stated “I think some attempt might be made to entice Miss Watkins to return. She has already made the chief contribution to the success of the McGill nursery school and there are remarkably few people available with her capabilities in handling both child and parent problems.”²⁹

According to the Principal of McGill University, “the handicaps under which the School labored during the session 1930-1931 were too great to justify an application for further support.” Salaries were reduced and more staff resigned in addition to Watkins, “an outstanding woman for such a post and one who could not easily be replaced.”³⁰ The Department of Child Study and its nursery school were closed when the LSRM funding ended in July 1931.

Several years earlier, McGill’s Child Laboratory Committee had proposed that a “well-trained teacher represented the key stone of a nursery school organization.”³¹ Watkins

had brought a wealth of knowledge and experience from England to her work at McGill and provided the Department of Child Study with the key stone for success. Although the Department failed to reach its potential because of university politics, Watkins had learned a great deal from her work in Montreal.

In the 1930s Watkins worked mostly in the field of teacher education in England. De Lissa asked her “to help at the College [GHTC] while she was away for a years leave” in 1931. In 1932 she was working at the Froebel College at Roehampton and reported that she was “thoroughly upsetting the poor students’ piece of mind (with her Montessori ideas).”³² She also kept in close contact with GHTC by attending reunions and tutoring Third Year students.³³ Watkins’ work in Canada was also mentioned in GHTC publications. In 1933, for example, de Lissa reported that “several ex-students have held interesting appointments abroad and one very successfully conducted a five-year experiment in the Department of Child Study at McGill University, Montreal.”³⁴ While Watkins contributed to the transnational circulation of progressive ideas and practices through her personal and professional networks in England, her LSRM-sponsored work in Canada was promoted by De Lissa as far away as Australia, and in the histories of the College, thereby becoming part of its collective memory.³⁵ As it transpired, the LSRM’s commitment to early childhood education spread much further than had originally been intended when it sponsored research and parent education at McGill University.

Mary Gutteridge: “Anxious to Make the Utmost of Her Experience”

Mary Gutteridge was born in 1887 and spent most of her childhood in Melbourne, Australia, where she was educated at Faireleight School. She traveled to England in 1907 to train as a kindergarten teacher at the Froebel Institute, Roehampton.³⁶ After graduating in 1910, she worked briefly as a nursery school assistant. Upon her return to Australia in 1911,

she became “Head of the Preparatory School and Kindergarten of the Church of England Girls’ Grammar School – one of our leading girls’ schools,” for six years.³⁷

Gutteridge left Australia again during World War One and served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse while her brothers were at the front. Then she established a nursery school “in the East End [of London] for one to three year olds to prove that kindergartners rather than nurses were the appropriate staff ... her health broke down after nine months and she went to the south of France to recuperate.”³⁸ In 1920/21 she visited Italy, enrolled in a six-week summer course at the University of Geneva, and attended lectures at the Institute of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Relocating to Paris, she divided her time between lectures at the Sorbonne and Musee de Louvre, and taking charge of a nursery school for refugees from “the devastated regions of France.”³⁹

Having worked and studied abroad for four years, Gutteridge was “anxious to make the most of her experience” when she returned to Australia.⁴⁰ In 1922, she secured the dual roles of Principal of the Melbourne Kindergarten Training College (KTC) and Supervisor of the twenty-four kindergartens affiliated with the Free Kindergarten Union (FKU) of Victoria. The KTC trained teachers for the free kindergartens that were mostly located in the poorer parts of Melbourne. Gutteridge revised the training course and extended it to three years. She also lectured at the KTC and supervised students’ practical work in the kindergartens. Inspired by similar experiences in London, in 1925 she worked with the Past Students Association to establish a Holiday Home for children from the free kindergartens. In the 1920s she also arranged free dental treatment for the free kindergarten children and publicized early childhood education in a range of forums.⁴¹ In 1924 the FKU executive recorded its appreciation of Gutteridge’s work: “Her energy, her foresight, her judgment, as well as her sympathetic guidance and direction are distinct factors in the smooth working of the Free Kindergarten Union. Miss Gutteridge’s work has been crowned with success both in

the kindergartens and in the College, and this is due not merely to her qualifications but to her personality.”⁴²

In 1928 Gutteridge was granted sabbatical leave for one year to study in England and the United States.⁴³ She arrived in the latter part of April, spent some months at the Merrill Palmer School, and then enrolled at Teachers College at Columbia University in July.⁴⁴ With Edna Noble White’s support, she applied for a LSRM scholarship in October 1928. After an interview with Gutteridge, Dorothea Davis of the LSRM wrote that “Miss Gutteridge has been well-spoken of by Miss White of the Merrill Palmer School who thought her an unusual person and one who ought to be very important in the development of work of this sort in Australia.”⁴⁵ In her application, Gutteridge stated that “I am anxious to fit myself so that on my return to Australia I may forward a movement for the establishment of a Child Welfare Research institute and inaugurate parental and pre-parental education with regard to the needs of the pre-school child.”⁴⁶ Although there was some ambivalence in regard to supporting foreigners, Gutteridge’s application was successful, and she was also granted another year’s leave from her Australian employer.⁴⁷

Having “investigated the organization of the Child Research Institutions of America, including Canada” and completed her B.Sc. at Teachers College, Gutteridge’s American sojourn came to an end in August 1929.⁴⁸ Before sailing to Europe, she informed Frank that she had “gained enormously, and I go back to my work in Australia with a very new outlook.” Furthermore, “I am looking forward to an interesting four months in Europe to complete the picture of Pre-School Education, and in December, to set out back to Australia to attempt to put the results of what I have seen into practice.”⁴⁹ Furnished with letters of introduction from Frank, Gutteridge visited England, Paris, Geneva, Vienna, Prague and Moscow in the latter months of 1929, and reached Melbourne, Australia, in February 1930.⁵⁰

It is not known whether Gutteridge actually visited the Department of Child Study at McGill University or met Gwen Watkins during her sabbatical. However, she shared the same personal and professional networks, courtesy of her association with Edna Noble White at the Merrill Palmer School, and fellow Australian, Lillian de Lissa, at GHTC in London. De Lissa and White provided letters of introduction to leaders in the field in England and the United States, as well as recommending women for employment, thereby facilitating a trans-Atlantic exchange of personnel and information about early childhood education.⁵¹ Both Watkins and Gutteridge were beneficiaries of White and de Lissa's longstanding friendship and collegiality in the 1920s.

Between 1930 and 1936 Gutteridge worked hard to introduce and proselytize a more scientific and psychological approach to early childhood education in Australia. Her focus was on children from ages eighteen months to four years. In April 1930 she proposed that the FKU establish a "nursery school on scientific lines with the hope that it will eventually develop into a Child Research institution."⁵² The experimental nursery school opened in November 1930 with Gutteridge as its Director for the first year. At the same time, she was "elected a member of the Victorian Institute of Educational Research and received a grant from the Australian Council of Educational Research to investigate 'The Attention Span of the Pre-School Child'."⁵³ She made a detailed study of the thirty-three children in the nursery school and "conducted a Parent group on modern principles."⁵⁴ Her research was published as *The Story of an Australian Nursery School* in 1932.⁵⁵ Although the Child Research institution did not materialize, more nursery schools were established in Melbourne.

Gutteridge's influence also spread to other Australian states. In October 1931 and again in 1932, she was given leave to visit the Sydney Day Nursery Association in New South Wales.⁵⁶ She addressed meetings of the Woolloomooloo Day Nursery where she was introduced as "the founder in Australia of the nursery school movement."⁵⁷ In 1932 she gave

a series of lectures to students at the Sydney Kindergarten Training College. In Melbourne, Gutteridge had introduced a one-year course in nursery education for qualified kindergarten teachers, which attracted students from Sydney and Brisbane (1,000 miles away). This course included topics on “Child Research, Child Development, Parent Education and allied subjects.”⁵⁸ In essence, much of what Gutteridge had learned under the auspices of the LSRM fellowship was transferred to Australian early childhood education in the early 1930s.

Because “the results of Miss Gutteridge’s research during her past visits abroad have been of incalculable value,” she was granted another year’s sabbatical leave to visit England and the United States in 1936.⁵⁹ Little did her employer know that Gutteridge would not be returning to Australia to work.

Traveling with her mother, Gutteridge arrived in England in January 1936, renewed her professional and social networks, and met with Susan Isaacs at the University of London.⁶⁰ It is also likely that the Gutteridges visited with de Lissa at her cottage in Surrey.⁶¹ Gutteridge was still in England in August 1936 when she submitted her resignation (“on the ground of ill-health”) to the FKU in Victoria.⁶² Thereafter, her career was followed with much interest in Australia. There were reports of her M.A. from Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1937 and Ph.D. in 1939. She also worked as an instructor in the Department of Childhood Education at Teachers College and was Acting Director of the Nursery School Department, Institute of Child Welfare, University of Minnesota. In 1940 she was appointed as Head of the Department of Early Childhood Education at the Merrill Palmer School in Detroit, working again with Edna Noble White.⁶³ In 1945 the Melbourne KTC Graduates Association “decided to establish a fund to provide an annual lecture to be known as the “Mary Gutteridge” lecture.” This lecture would become “a permanent memorial” to Gutteridge’s work “for pre-school children in Australia.”⁶⁴

Gutteridge spent the remaining twelve years of her career in Detroit but kept in touch with her colleagues in England and Australia. In 1943 de Lissa made a lecture tour of the United States and spent a very productive and enjoyable week with White and Gutteridge in Detroit. Their friendship was such that White and Gutteridge sent Christmas hampers to de Lissa in the lean years following World War Two.⁶⁵ Gutteridge was granted six months leave towards the end of 1947 and divided her time between Brisbane (where her brother lived) and Melbourne. She spent three very hectic weeks in Melbourne in which she gave a course of ten lectures in the Psychology of Child Development at the University of Melbourne, met with graduates and students at the KTC, and addressed the FKU.⁶⁶ In May 1948 she attended the twenty-first birthday celebrations of the holiday home she had helped to establish in 1925.⁶⁷ She also assured readers of the Kindergarten News that “I shall be working for the Child Development movement here even while I am away. The hope of one day establishing a Child Development Institute in Australia is a project very close to our hearts and enthusiasm will bring it to pass ... If we seek to influence public opinion it will perhaps be an accomplished fact in two or three years.”⁶⁸ When Gutteridge returned to the United States in August 1948, she was accompanied by the “pre-school adviser for the Kindergarten Union in South Australia ... who has been granted six months leave to make a study of pre-school work in the USA and Canada.”⁶⁹ Accordingly, Gutteridge continued to support the transnational exchange of knowledge and experience in early childhood education until her retirement in 1952.

Conclusion

Barbara Beatty has argued that the early twentieth century nursery school movement in the United States marked the beginning of modern early childhood education and research.

In general, the crusade for nursery schools belonged to younger women who had enjoyed the benefits of formal higher education themselves and had professional training in psychology and the social sciences. Nursery school leaders participated

actively in psychological studies, took pride in implementing the latest research and distanced themselves from older, less scientific, less objective forms of charity work with children.⁷⁰

This description encapsulates Mary Gutteridge's career and Gwen Watkins' to a lesser extent. Although Watkins did not have a university degree, she was no less committed to new scientific approaches to early childhood education than Gutteridge. Beatty also recognizes the LSRM as the major impetus in the development of modern early childhood education in the United States.⁷¹ LSRM support facilitated the careers of many women educators, as can be seen in the LSRM records at the Rockefeller Archive Center. This report has focused specifically on two of those women and considered their connections with the LSRM in the context of their entire careers. Having lived and worked in England and Australia, Watkins and Gutteridge were already very experienced early childhood educators when they came within the remit of the LSRM. In turn, LSRM funding enabled them to contribute to modern early childhood education in Canada, England, Australia and the United States over the course of their careers. As a result, the LSRM not only facilitated individual careers and child study and parent education in the United States, but also contributed significantly to the process of transnational knowledge exchange in early childhood education in the first half of the twentieth century.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

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¹⁵ Kay Whitehead, "Contextualizing and Contesting National Identities." Lillian de Lissa, 1885-1967." *Vitae Scholasticae* 28: 1 (2009), p. 50.

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- ⁵⁰ Mary Gutteridge to Miss Knight, 19 January 1932, Folder 303, Child Study Fellowships, Box 28, Series 3.5 Child Study and Parent Education, The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Papers, RAC.
- ⁵¹ See for example Folder 22, Foreign Correspondence 1937-1939, Box 60, Accession 1066, Merrill Palmer Institute: Edna Noble White Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit (hereafter designated ALUA).
- ⁵² Minutes of Executive meetings, 29 April 1930, Box 3, Executive, Accession No. 83/121, Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria, UMA; *Argus*, Melbourne, Australia, 26 February 1930, pp. 13-14.
- ⁵³ Mary Gutteridge to Miss Knight, 19 January 1932, Folder 303, Child Study Fellowships, Box 28, Series 3.5 Child Study and Parent Education, The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Papers, RAC.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ Mary Gutteridge, *The Story of an Australian Nursery School*. Melbourne, Australia: Brown, Prior and Company, 1932.
- ⁵⁶ Minutes of Executive meetings, 20 October 1931, 16 August 1932, Box 3, Executive, Accession No. 83/121, Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria, UMA.
- ⁵⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 November 1931, p. 4.
- ⁵⁸ Mary Gutteridge to Miss Knight, 19 January 1932, Folder 303, Child Study Fellowships, Box 28, Series 3.5 Child Study and Parent Education, The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Papers, RAC.
- ⁵⁹ Quoted in P. Walford, "An Investigation into the Contribution made by Dr. Mary V. Gutteridge," p. 10.
- ⁶⁰ Record for Mary V. Gutteridge, UK Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960, <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?h=10670146&db=BT26&indiv=try>; P. Walford, "An Investigation into the Contribution made by Dr. Mary V. Gutteridge," pp. 6-7.
- ⁶¹ Lillian de Lissa to Mary Gutteridge, 31 July 1946, Folder 28, Personal Correspondence 1946, Box 56, Accession 1066, Merrill Palmer Institute: Edna Noble White Collection, AULA.
- ⁶² Minutes of Executive meetings, 22 September 1936, Box 3, Executive, Accession No. 83/121, Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria, UMA.
- ⁶³ P. Walford, "An Investigation into the Contribution made by Dr. Mary V. Gutteridge," pp. 12-13.
- ⁶⁴ *Argus*, Melbourne, Australia, 5 July 1945, p. 8.
- ⁶⁵ Lillian de Lissa to Mary Gutteridge, 31 July 1946, Folder 28, Personal Correspondence 1946, Box 56, Accession 1066, Merrill Palmer Institute: Edna Noble White Collection, AULA; Kay Whitehead, "Contextualizing and Contesting National Identities: Lillian de Lissa, 1885-1967." *Vitae Scholasticae* 28: 1 (2009), pp. 51-52.
- ⁶⁶ *Kindergarten News*, 97, June 1948, p. 2, Box 5, Accession No. 83/121, Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria, UMA; *Argus*, Melbourne, Australia, 30 December 1947, p. 6.
- ⁶⁷ *Kindergarten News*, 96, May 1948, pp. 1-2, Box 5, Accession No. 83/121, Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria, UMA.
- ⁶⁸ *Kindergarten News*, 97, June 1948, p. 2, Box 5, Accession No. 83/121, Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria, UMA.
- ⁶⁹ *Argus*, Melbourne, Australia, 24 August 1948, p. 7.
- ⁷⁰ Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 132.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 133.