

## **The McMillan Sisters and the ‘Deptford Welfare Experiment’**

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The McMillan sisters, Rachel and Margaret were born in Westchester County New York in 1859 and 1860 respectively, but following the death of their father and youngest sister in 1865, their mother took them back to her family home in Inverness. Elizabeth Bradburn describes Margaret’s first five years in the US as ‘probably the happiest of her life’<sup>1</sup>, spent in a large wooden house with a wild garden that ran down to an estuary that Margaret remembered as ‘a mere shelter in summer. It seems less a house than a roofed series of gateways opening on the wide sunlit world’<sup>2</sup>.

The sisters grew up in Inverness, moving to London in the late 1880s, during which time Margaret developed her skills as a writer and orator for the Labour movement. She gave a well-received address on the Socialist platform at Hyde Park corner on May Day 1892, after which her employer, a wealthy Park Lane aristocrat, promptly dismissed her. The sisters subsequently moved to Bradford, where Margaret spent the next ten years, contributing to the birth of the Parliamentary Labour Party in Bradford in 1900.

Margaret travelled the Pennine area giving lectures for the socialist cause, and served on the Bradford School Board, where she came to the conclusion that that it was impossible to educate a tired, dirty, infested, diseased and hungry child, and the height of adult cruelty to insist against such odds that poor children entered a public education system that did not concern itself with their holistic welfare. She waged various campaigns within the city, with the result that Bradford became the first School Board in Britain to provide medical inspection, free/low cost school meals and school baths in some of its poorest areas. However in 1902 new legislation abolished the School Boards and gave the responsibility for education to local authorities, to which women could not be elected at that time.

Rachel had left Bradford to become a travelling health inspector located in Bromley, Kent in 1895, so by the end of 1902, Margaret moved to live with her. The sisters planned to work together to improve conditions for poor children in the London area. Margaret was appointed as the manager of a group of Deptford elementary schools in 1903. She and Rachel led a deputation to Parliament in 1906 to lobby for the compulsory medical inspection of school

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bradburn *Margaret McMillan: Portrait of a Pioneer* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.6

<sup>2</sup> Margaret McMillan ‘After the Echoes of the Congress of School Hygiene’, *The Labour Leader*, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1907

children<sup>3</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 a socialist philanthropist, Mr Joseph Fels, with which they determined to open a school clinic in a suitably 'needy' area of London.

Suitable premises became available at The Old Vestry Hall, 3 Deptford Green, and the clinic opened on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1910. Margaret reported that immediately, 'the children began to attend in torrents'<sup>4</sup>. Expansion of capacity was swiftly achieved when, in 1911, John Evelyn, a descendent of the famous diarist, put 353 Evelyn Street at the sisters' disposal. The sisters also moved into rooms at this address, becoming residents of Deptford for the remainder of their lives. A comment from one of the clinic staff soon led them to consider an ambitious extension of their work:

Nurse Spiker at the clinic said 'It's all a waste of time. These children come here, are cured and go but in two weeks, sometimes less, they are back again. All these ailments could be prevented; their cause is dirt, lack of light and sun, fresh air and good food'<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 1: The Dentist at work in the Deptford Clinic<sup>6</sup>**



<sup>3</sup> Margaret McMillan, *Life of Rachel McMillan* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1927), p.115

<sup>4</sup> Margaret McMillan, *Life of Rachel McMillan*, p.120

<sup>5</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/34: script of a programme broadcast by the BBC Home Service 27<sup>th</sup> November 1960. The source for the quote appears to have been Emma Stevinson, the first Principal of the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College, who died in 1959.

<sup>6</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/B7: The Dentist at work in the Deptford Clinic, ND

The McMillans subsequently determined that they would open an experimental overnight camp in the garden at Evelyn Street, for the use of local girls. They provided showering facilities, which Margaret described as ‘a hot water apparatus... rigged up in the garden fence communicating with a neighbour’s boiler’<sup>7</sup>. The sisters made sure that the children washed thoroughly before going to bed, and helped the older ones to cook a nutritious breakfast of porridge and milk in the morning.

**Figure 2: The Girls’ Camp**<sup>8</sup>



The camp soon became a local success, and the sisters determined to provide a night camp for boys, which proved more difficult. In 1912 they made their first attempt at a Boys’ Camp in the churchyard of St Nicholas, with the vestry as the shelter in bad weather, but some local people objected, one proposing that ‘to think of taking living children into a burying ground [was]... disgraceful’<sup>9</sup>. The vicar of St Nicholas subsequently bowed to pressure from his parishioners and asked the sisters to move the camp to a different location. Eventually they found a patch of waste ground in nearby Albury Street, and the boys’ camp thrived here.

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<sup>7</sup> McMillan, M, *The Camp School* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1917), pp.80-81

<sup>8</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/B7: The Girls’ Camp

<sup>9</sup> Margaret McMillan, *The Camp School*, p.95

**Figure 3: The Boys' Churchyard Camp**<sup>10</sup>



On judging that the night camps had improved the children's behaviour and health, the McMillans then decided to start a *Camp School* for boys and girls from six-to-fourteen years old, to see if instead of spending long hours in over-crowded classrooms, children could receive a more holistic education in the open air. This they managed to do, engaging three pioneering teachers to work with fifty seven children. During this time, the sisters created a motto, which Margaret attributed to Rachel in the dedication of her book *The Nursery School*: 'educate every child as if he were your own'. They subsequently applied this throughout the remainder of their lives.

In 1914, aided by a national drive for childcare that would allow women to undertake work outside the home during World War I, the McMillans opened a 'Baby Camp' at 232 Church Street, Deptford<sup>11</sup>. The piece of ground was lent to them by the London County Council (LCC). It was (and is still) known locally as 'The Stowage', local legend insisting that smugglers had stored precious goods there in the days when Deptford had been a bustling international port. Such a history was very apt, given that the area now became the location for education and care of the most precious goods of all- the district's youngest children. A 'Baby Camp' had been Margaret McMillan's dream since one of her Night Camp girls had been permitted to bring her ailing little sister along: "We must open our doors to the toddlers,

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<sup>10</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/B7: The Boys' Churchyard Camp

<sup>11</sup> Margaret McMillan, *The Camp School*, p.51

Rachel”, Margaret said... “We must plan the right kind of environment for them and give them sunshine, fresh air and good food *before* they become rickety and diseased”<sup>12</sup>.

The Baby Camp, which soon became known locally as ‘The Nursery’ thrived during the war, but the transience of staff and sporadic but harrowing attacks by German Zeppelins took their toll on the sisters, now both in their middle fifties. In the last full year of the war, Margaret suffered a devastating personal loss: Rachel died on her 58<sup>th</sup> birthday, 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1917. Margaret renamed the Baby Camp ‘The Rachel McMillan Open Air Nursery’ during the same year and it remains on the same spot, under the same name to this day.

Margaret often reflected sadly that all her greatest successes came after Rachel's death. Less than a year before her own death, she wrote: ‘I wish it had been Rachel that lived and got the decorations’<sup>13</sup>. These decorations (a CBE and a Companion of Honour) were received in the light of a growing national and international interest in the ‘educare’ (education + welfare) delivered by the Deptford Open Air Nursery. In her book *The Nursery School* published in 1919, Margaret described the Deptford that she knew:

The Nursery-School of which I have experience, and of which, therefore, I must often speak, was started in a very poor, very crowded district in the south-east of London. The workers of this place are largely casual, and, save for such training as is given in large factories for the making of boxes, tin cans, packing cases, and the like, unskilled. There are a dozen public-houses within a stone's throw of the school, and some of the streets are quite dark and very noisy after dusk<sup>14</sup>.

Margaret served on the Education Committee of the LCC for a term beginning in 1919, and in 1921, the LCC gave a substantial grant to the open air nursery, which permitted it to expand its numbers to 216. Queen Mary presided at the opening of the new building (Figure 4).

Margaret was subsequently elected first president of the national Nursery School Association in 1923. She gave a national BBC radio broadcast about the Deptford nursery on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1927, where she seemed to evoke the experience of her own early childhood:

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<sup>12</sup> Emma Stevinson, *Margaret McMillan: Prophet and Pioneer*, (London: University of London Press, 1954), p.8

<sup>13</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/ A1/86: letter from Margaret McMillan to ‘Mr Mackenzie’, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1930

<sup>14</sup> Margaret McMillan, *The Nursery School* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1919)

**Figure 4: Queen Mary Visits the Deptford Nursery<sup>15</sup>**



[in the nursery school] everything is planned for life. The shelters are oblong in shape. The air is moving there always... healing light falls through the lowered gable and open doors. This world... is full of colour and movement... the children just emerging from the long sleep of pre-natal life and fitful dream of the first year, waken at last to a kind of paradise<sup>16</sup>.

In 1960, the centenary of Margaret McMillan's birth was celebrated by an appeal for memories from children who had been cared for and educated within the various Deptford initiatives. A small selection of these follow:

*Margaret McMillan gave her whole life to us children. She was truly a wonderful person in so much that she never thought of herself one bit. I can see her now, a determined figure with a head of lovely silver hair, not always very tidy. I often did it up for her and saw to it that she had no slip showing, that was Miss McMillan. Her whole life was*

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Bradburn, *Margaret McMillan: Framework and Expansion of Nursery Education* (Redhill, Denholm House, 1976), p.144

<sup>16</sup> Mansbridge: full text of a broadcast given by MM on BBC radio, on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1927, pp.104-106

*centred around us children ... I can still hear her now saying "You may be poor now but if you want, there is nothing to stop you sitting in the Houses of Parliament"<sup>17</sup>.*

*One cannot think of one's school days and its happy memories without thinking of Miss McMillan ... she made one see Wordsworth's daffodils fluttering and dancing in the breeze.... was there ever a school where the children were showered with so much love?<sup>18</sup>*

*Miss McMillan came and opened new and wonderful doors for us ... thank you Miss McMillan<sup>19</sup>.*

These feelings were obviously reciprocated; one respondent with adult memories of Margaret McMillan remembered her discussing these very children with obvious pride:

*The first time I met Margaret McMillan was at an educational conference.... [When she spoke] we seemed to see her Dorothy- her Gladys.... heard their very voices. The theories we had been debating seemed vague or artificial, now we heard the truth ...<sup>20</sup>*

The same respondent also contributed to a range of memories of the Open Air Nursery Garden in which McMillan recreated 'the wide and sunlit world' of her own early childhood<sup>21</sup>:

*[When I visited Deptford] I had to ask my way through smelly streets, but all whom I asked became eager friends as soon as I mentioned Miss McMillan's name. At last I came to a door in the paling and when this was opened I saw a garden full of delphiniums. In among the flowers were many little children, like flowers themselves, with gay overalls and coloured ribbons in their hair<sup>22</sup>.*

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<sup>17</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/35: in a manuscript marked 'Miss Davies' broadcast 7<sup>th</sup> June 1960. These paragraphs are circled, with a handwritten note 'omit'. Comparing the contents of Archives A8/24 and A8/16 with information contained in *Margaret McMillan: The Children's Champion* (London: Museum Press, 1960), p.71-73, where the comments are presented anonymously indicates that either Dorothy Lob or Gladys Woodhams may have contributed this paragraph

<sup>18</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/24: letter from Dorothy Lob, Camp School

<sup>19</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/16: letter from Gladys Woodhams, Camp School

<sup>20</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A 8/22: letter from F. Hawtry from Darlington, who became the Principal of Avery Hill Training College Eltham in 1922.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret McMillan 'After the Echoes of the Congress of School Hygiene', *The Labour Leader*, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1907, quoted in Bradburn, p.6.

<sup>22</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A 8/22: letter from F. Hawtry from Darlington

*I came to the tall wooden gate... and passed through it to what seemed to me a veritable paradise<sup>23</sup>.*

*The opening of [the garden] door was symbolic of the place her nursery held in the community. Outside all seemed dark and hopeless, but inside there was the promise of fresh growth and beauty ...<sup>24</sup>*

In the final years of her life, Margaret McMillan campaigned for a teacher training college attached to the nursery, to train early years teachers in the 'educare' methods that the sisters had pioneered.

The Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College was formally opened on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1930 by Queen Mary. Margaret McMillan gave the inaugural speech, characteristically proposing 'the real object of our work is nurture ... we are trying to to make a place which shall be a training ground for the happier generations of the future'<sup>25</sup>. She had succeeded in her mission to stake a claim in the future for her unique mixture of child education and welfare, and subsequently died less than a year later, on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1931. Her philosophy of 'educare' in the early years is still alive today in England, enshrined in the national guidance document for early years education and care, the *Early Years Foundation Stage*.

A respondent to the Margaret McMillan centenary memories archive concludes:

*It was difficult to make people realise what a wonderful person Miss McMillan was unless they knew what Deptford was like many years ago- then they would understand what she was up against... the children had no shoes – they played in the streets, sat in the gutter and were very dirty... she was stern but when you got to know her she was very kind and gentle... in my opinion, there will never be another Margaret McMillan<sup>26</sup>.*

**Figure 5: Margaret McMillan with the Queen and students at the opening of the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1930<sup>27</sup>**

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<sup>23</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/18: letter from Helen Edwards, Bradford, student 1923-26.

<sup>24</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/28: letter from Jessie Porter, Dundee, student 1917-20

<sup>25</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/7: extract from Margaret McMillan's speech at the opening of the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College 8<sup>th</sup> May 1930.

<sup>26</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/A8/30: handwritten note, no date or address, signed 'Mrs Stiggear'.

<sup>27</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/B7: Margaret McMillan with the Queen and students at the opening of the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1930





**Figure 6: Margaret McMillan with a child in the Rachel McMillan Open Air Nursery Garden, circa 1930<sup>28</sup>**



Moving images of the Deptford Nursery in the 1930s can be viewed on the following links:  
British Pathé Archive, video file: *Nursery Days!* Video Newsreel Film, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1939  
<http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=11403>

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<sup>28</sup> University of Greenwich A94/16/B7: Margaret McMillan with a child in the Rachel McMillan Open Air Nursery Garden, circa 1930

British Pathé Archive, video file: *Her Majesty the Queen opens the Rachel McMillan Teacher Training College*. Video Newsreel Film, 12<sup>th</sup> May, 1930

<http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=8281>

**Reflecting on this piece ....**

- **Whether/how do you think the influence of the McMillan's resonates in today's practice?**
- **How does what is written chime with your own philosophy/values?**
- **Can you recognise the influence underlying/within specific parts of the EYFS documentation?**
- **If you're international, how does the McMillan's philosophy/values chime with those underpinning your own frameworks/curricula?**