

SUSAN ISAACS

A Life Freeing the Minds of Children



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Preface

When Susan Isaacs died in October, 1948, the obituaries in the quality press were unanimous not only in her praise but in the top ranking they gave to her importance in the fields of education and psychoanalysis. *The London Times* (13 October 1948) enthused:

her teaching has probably influenced educational theory and practice in this country more than that of any living person. Her contribution to psychoanalytical theory, especially to the analysis of children, has also been notable.

Shortly afterwards (3 March 1949) *The Times* published a letter from various prominent individuals, headed by R. A. Butler, a former Conservative Minister of Education and soon to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, announcing the launch of a Susan Isaacs Memorial Fund and asking for contributions.

The leading science journal *Nature* (4 December 1948) was more precise in its compliments:

Dr. Isaacs's gifts were based on a combination of intellectual and emotional factors [...] her outstanding intellectual characteristic was an extremely rapid grasp of the matter in view and an ability to classify and summarise it, to present it with remarkable clarity and to discuss it from various angles. Her exceptional capacity for instantly translating her thoughts and impressions into verbal expression served as a powerful instrument for all her other gifts.

There were numerous similar eulogies in both the educational and psychoanalytic professional journals. For example, John Rickman (1950), a leading psychoanalyst, wrote a seven-page obituary in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in which he referred to Susan Isaacs as 'an intellectual delight' pinpointing her 'supreme contribution to her

times' in the way she acted as a psychoanalytic bridge between the two professions of medicine and teaching, 'interpreting the one to the other'.

Nor did Susan Isaacs's status among informed commentators decline with time. Adrian Wooldridge (1994) reviewing the whole field of psychology in England from 1860 to 1990 refers to her as the most influential English-born child psychologist of her generation. Her entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, proclaims her to be 'the greatest influence on British education in the twentieth century' (Pines, 2004).

Yet her name, let alone the nature of her contributions to education, psychology and psychoanalysis is so little known that when I have been asked whose biography I am writing the name usually elicits polite disbelief that anyone could write about someone so obscure. Mary Jane Drummond, a leading expert in nursery education, comments after listing her achievements — 'It is not the least remarkable aspect of Susan Isaacs's unique contribution to educational progress that it remains so undocumented by other educationalists in this country' (Drummond, 2000). A few teachers trained in the 1960s recollect having to read her books; to a few psychoanalysts the name produces a flicker of recognition, but no more. There has only been one previous account of her life. In 1969 Dorothy Gardner, her pupil and successor as Head of the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education, London, published a book entitled 'Susan Isaacs: the First Biography' (Gardner, 1969). Clearly Dorothy Gardner adored her teacher and the book is more of a hagiography than a considered appraisal of a woman's life and work. As well as suffering from its reverential tone, some of the information it carries is inaccurate in important detail and much is misleadingly incomplete. Nearly twenty years later an American educationist, Lydia Smith, wrote an account of Susan Isaacs's work 'To Understand and to Help' (Smith, 1985), but this did not add to the already published biographical material.

When I began this biography, some sixty years after Susan Isaacs's death, re-consideration of someone so widely and over such a long time period thought to be such a significant figure seemed clearly desirable. Though the concept of child-centred education had been around for many years, it was she, the first Head of the Department of Child Development at the London Institute of Education and the

author of key textbooks in teacher training from the 1930s to the 1960s, who forcefully introduced it into mainstream British education. The approach continues to elicit violently conflicting ideas and emotions not only among educationists but among all those who take an informed interest in educational matters — and who does not?

Among those in the child psychoanalytic field and those mental health professionals who mainly look to psychoanalysis for their understanding of child behaviour, Melanie Klein's influence remains paramount. Yet who realises that Melanie Klein might very well have been extruded from the British Psychoanalytic Society but for the intervention of Susan Isaacs who, during the 1930s and 1940s Klein regarded as her closest friend and associate? Andre Green, a leading French psychoanalyst, has described the record of the so-called Controversial Discussions that decided Klein's fate as 'the most important document of the history of psychoanalysis' (Perelberg, 2006). The discussions held by members of the British Psychoanalytic Society were spread over ten sessions of which the first five were entirely taken up by a key paper on phantasy written by Susan Isaacs and the following three by an article on regression of which she was co-author.

If asked to name the first British pioneer of direct observational studies of children in schools, now common place, no psychologist today would be likely to give the name of Susan Isaacs, yet she it was who, in the 1920s long before ethological observation became a recognised approach to the study of children's relationships and behaviour, first recorded, minute by minute, the speech and actions of schoolchildren in their natural setting. Who knows that it was she who first formulated serious criticisms of the studies of Jean Piaget, the foremost child psychologist of his time, forcing him to re-consider his approach? It was not until the 1970s, over forty years later that developmental psychologists re-discovered the objections she had been the first to raise.

Not only was her work ground-breaking in the fields of education, psychoanalysis and psychology, but as an 'agony aunt', answering readers' questions in the *Nursery World*, she had a strong influence on the way middle-class mothers brought up their young children in the pre-Spock era of the 1930s in Britain. In 1937, in the United States, her extremely successful baby book won the Annual Award given by *Parents Magazine*, the most popular periodical for parents published in

the world, for the best book for parents published in the previous year. Finally, she was deeply involved in controversies, no less active today than they were in her time, around the quality of parenting, children's rights, physical punishment, the care of deprived children, and the capacity of lone parents.

Her historical significance in the fields of education, psychoanalysis, child psychology, child welfare and upbringing can thus hardly be exaggerated. As I made progress on this book I was repeatedly struck by the contemporary importance of an understanding of her ideas. My sense of the relevance of this biography grew rather than diminished as her story unfolded.

There is an important sense in which I might be regarded as doubly disqualified from writing a life of Susan Isaacs, for I am neither an educationist nor a psychoanalyst. I can, in defence, plead a number of compensatory advantages. As an academic child and adolescent psychiatrist, my professional work has brought me into close touch with the fields of both psychoanalysis and education. I have worked, happily I think, with psychoanalytic colleagues from the Kleinian, Freudian and Independent groups. I even once had the chairman's responsibility for introducing Anna Freud to a vast audience of psychiatrists eager to hear what she had to say. On the educational side, my research has taken me into many mainstream schools as an observer both formally interviewing schoolchildren about their lives and informally listening to teachers in their staff rooms. I have worked with educationists on various committees including one (chaired by Mary Warnock), on children with special educational needs. At one time I served on the Management Committee of the Institute of Education, London, where Susan Isaacs had earlier pioneered the teaching of child development. So my double disqualification is, I hope, tempered by some relevant experience. Further, the fact that I do not, by virtue of my professional work belong to any particular school of thought either in education or in psychoanalysis does, I hope, allow me to take a more dispassionate view of her ideas than might otherwise be the case.

Knowing as little as I did about Susan Isaacs when I began researching for and writing this book it turned out that I had been extremely fortunate in my choice of subject. Not only was it a learning experience in more ways than I care to admit, but I was lucky to discover that there

was much original material that had not been available when Dorothy Gardner wrote her biography in the 1960s. Sadly this did not include any previously undiscovered diaries kept by Susan Isaacs herself or any letters written by her. But Nathan Isaacs, her second husband, was a prolific letter writer, many of his letters casting an indirect, though unexpectedly piercing light on his wife's personality and the life they led together. These letters that I discovered, partly held in recent years at the Archive of the Institute of Education and partly privately owned, have enabled me to make much more sense of the personal reasons why Susan Isaacs embarked on her various crusades. Further, the courage in recent years of the British psychoanalytic establishment in making available for general consumption verbatim accounts of the extremely bitter exchanges between the rival schools of psychoanalysis before and during the Second World War has enabled me to describe the historically significant part Susan Isaacs played at this time. All these advantages were not available to Dorothy Gardner when she wrote the first and only previous biography. They alone amply justify another book about this intriguing woman, the worlds in which she lived and the influence she exercised in so many different spheres of life.

