

Lillian de Lissa: Women Teachers and Teacher Education in the Twentieth Century a Transnational History

Edited by Kay Whitehead

Keywords Women teachers, Transnational history

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This was a book I initially purchased and read for pleasure and interest. Lillian de Lissa's pioneering work in early childhood teacher education, in Australia and England in the early twentieth century, was known to me. Her name weaves in and out of various sites and endeavours relating to: early childhood teacher education; the work of reformist Froebelian kindergarten teachers and nursery school pioneers; including her personal links with Maria Montessori, Margaret McMillan, Susan Isaacs and Grace Owen, to name a few. This is an era I have trawled over in the context of New Zealand-British-US connections concerning the history of new ideas in early education, as does Kay Whitehead in the context of Australia. I have heard Whitehead discuss the findings of her archival searches at various European conferences, with evidence that, like New Zealand, Australia was no colonial backwater in education innovation in the early twentieth century. These research works were, in part, linked to Whitehead's larger work on de Lissa, in progress. The book was worth waiting for, with a story that resonates in its interweaving of colonial and European contexts of education. I particularly enjoyed Whitehead's construction of the "modern Australian girl" of those times; bolder than her British middle class counterparts who were unable to vote for decades after women's suffrage was enacted in New Zealand and Australia.

I read this book a second time after I was asked to write this review. In applying a more critical scholarly gaze I did not find the flaws I might have overlooked in my earlier pleasurable read, but rather my admiration deepened for Whitehead's archival tenacity, theoretical rigour and breadth of analysis. While de Lissa is the centre stage character, and focus is given to her pioneering endeavours in early years of education in both South Australia and England, Whitehead uses these sites to construct a more complex analysis in terms of the contested politics of gender, schooling, teacher education and pedagogy that framed the rise of specialist early childhood teaching qualifications in the early twentieth century. Whitehead quite necessarily rejects traditional educational biographical approaches that might construct de Lissa as an "exemplary heroine", but rather, as Whitehead notes, Following Joan Scott, I position women such as de Lissa "as sites – historical locations and markers – where crucial political and cultural contexts are enacted and can be examined in detail" (p. 16). And it is the detail of Whitehead's evidence that makes this book so robust in its analysis. Yet I could not resist admiring the heroic tenacity of de Lissa who worked so tirelessly to uphold her vision for a "new education" for young women and young children in a "new society". She straddled the cultural politics of gender across country sites and education settings, amidst the pedagogical and territorial tensions besetting the institutions of early childhood, schooling and teacher education.

There is much in this story that resonates in current times. The disputes seeded in the times of de Lissa are still being played out in Australia and Britain – and indeed in my own country of New Zealand – between: the institutions of early childhood education and compulsory state schooling, stand-alone teachers' colleges and universities, specialist early childhood teacher institutions vs integrated teacher education colleges and programmes. De Lissa fought hard battles to preserve the independence of early childhood institutions for children and for teachers. This was not only about protecting early years pedagogy from the



inroads of mass schooling programmes but was an ongoing battle about gender and the politics of patriarchy concerning who controlled these institutions – men or women? Whitehead's book resounds with battles won and battles lost.

But there is more for the reader to appraise. Whitehead positions her book as a “transnational history”, a relatively new discourse that allows Whitehead and other adherents to “encapsulate the transnational flow of ideas” that are evident in de Lissa's own story but in the broader politics played out in the book. This approach is particularly useful for portraying the nuances of the imperial networks that are the backdrop to this age and de Lissa's story as a “British” colonial. Whitehead also gives presence and visibility to the lives and views of de Lissa's graduates in both South Australia and England. The archival detective work must have been enormous. As a pivotal generation, their lives are a window onto changing gender codes and the burgeoning opportunities (and its challenges) for young women choosing careers in early years education. De Lissa urged her students to be “makers of society”. Again, there is much that resonates to those of us working in early childhood teacher education, albeit now mainly in the university settings that de Lissa would have eschewed. We urge our students, who undoubtedly have many more opportunities in life and career than de Lissa's students, to be advocates for children's rights; to be vigilant and bold in the politics of gender and like de Lissa, to believe that through early childhood education we can make a difference in the lives of children, women and families that will make for a better and fairer society.

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Educational Reform and Environmental Concern: A History of School Nature Study in Australia

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What does this book do? It examines the history of nature study and environmental education in Australian schools. It relates that history to the more general history of conservation and appreciation of the Australian environment. It also expands our knowledge of the neglected history of the Australian primary school in the early twentieth century. In so doing, it contributes to the history of the educational reforms associated with the New Education in Australia and beyond. It also provides an exemplary study of a curriculum area that should help educational historians write better histories of school curricula, and pedagogy in the future.

This history of nature study has even broader significance. It may be read as an episode in the historical alienation of humankind and its societies from the rest of the natural world, where humanity is imagined as separate from nature, with superior, exploitative rights over all other animals, indeed all living things. Redress of this destructive process is very slow. “Educational Reform and Environmental Concern” charts an important part of that redress, when schools and school curricula were attached to new understandings of the relationships between the natural world and human society.