

A TRIBUTE TO:A NO-NONSENSE LADY
LADY ALLEN OF HURTWOOD. (1897 – 1976)
and
AN OUTLINE OF THE WORK OF THE TRUST.....

Lady Marjory Allen of Hurtwood was an able, strong and forthright advocate for children: she strove to overcome injustice and championed children's rights, particularly for orphans, the disabled and the deprived. In Britain she was a leader of many organisations, striving to improve conditions for children, and later worked with UNESCO and UNICEF on international projects. She was a founder leader of L'Organisation Mondiale Pour L'Education Préscolaire (OMEP) and her high level international contacts brought great benefits to early years provision in Britain.

As a child, Marjory Gill was brought up on a farm, within a large, loving and secure family, with much fun and affection. At Bedales School she followed her own interests and eventually became a landscape architect. Her great interest was in giving children the same opportunities as she had enjoyed by learning through good play opportunities. Nationally and internationally, she strove to improve children's lives by tirelessly appealing to politicians, the media and influential members of society to help overcome the injustices suffered by many children. Her recorded speeches and articles reflect her enthusiasm, and practical approach to solving problems. She was happily married to Lord Clifford Allen, a pacifist, socialist and internationalist, who helped to clarify and present her ideas effectively. Their daughter was a constant inspiration to them.

With great vision, determination and imagination, she inspired others to work with her in improving provision in nursery centres. During the war (1939 – 1945.), she organised teams of skilled craftsmen to work with many voluntary groups in making stout toys and nursery equipment out of remnants from bomb sites. Neither time nor materials were wasted!

Lady Allen's spirited leadership of The British Nursery Association (1942 - 1951) gave her opportunities to challenge government strategies aimed at persuading women to work full-time in munitions factories, leaving their babies and toddlers in day nurseries, run by the Ministry of Health. Lady Allen fought to give women a choice: either to work or stay at home for the first two years of a child's life. A debate that still continues!

In the 1943 Education White Paper, Lady Allen fought hard, through lobbying members of parliament and via the press, to make nursery provision for three to five year olds statutory rather than permissive, within primary education. Sadly, within the 1944 Education Act, it was stated that local education authorities had a *duty* to provide nursery education as part of the primary phase. Alas, since then, in many local authorities, when finances are limited, nursery provision is sacrificed as it is not compulsory. Young children and their families then suffer. In order to overcome this deficiency, Lady Allen realised the need to combine health, social services and education at national and local levels in a joint 'Ministry for Children'; there would then be less likelihood of unfortunate children slipping through the net. Until 2004 children's services have been fragmented, but now there is hope for more integrated services, many based in new 'Children's Centres' (2006).

In the nineteen forties there was a severe shortage of adequate nursery accommodation, Lady Allen designed pre-fabricated, purpose-built nursery centres, and fought hard to get a favourable adult –child ratio of one adult to eight or ten

children. Her understanding of the functions of national and local government and her political acumen made her well able to present clear arguments for good nursery and suitable residential provision for children, to influential local groups, powerful business leaders and members of the war-time coalition cabinet. Her influence is clear in the recommendations of 'The Curtiss Report'. Her pamphlet entitled 'Whose Children?' revealed the plight of many children in voluntary, church and state children's homes, some of which were harsh and indifferent to young children's feelings. Lady Allen saw the dreadful situations through the eyes of the children. Even today, some of us remember the public outcry in 1945 when it was revealed that two orphaned boys on a Shropshire farm were worked, thrashed and starved so badly that one died (Dennis O'Neill). This evidence greatly influenced the content of the Children Act of 1948, which provided some safeguards and more regular supervision to prevent such tragedies. Yet in the 21st. century, Victoria Climbié died through cruelty and neglect. Why do children have to die before some drastic action is taken?

Lady Allen created beautiful gardens, and from 1939 to 1946 was Vice-President of the Institute of Landscape Architects. Her burning ambition was to make gardens and adventure playgrounds for British children, as she had seen in Scandinavia. This she undertook with great vigour, lobbying those in power to gain financial and practical support. Many of her inner city playgrounds continue to function, once under the aegis of the Playground Association and the International Association for the Child's Right to Play. The outdoor play areas attached to nursery schools and children's centres display the genius of Lady Allen in using space and materials in aesthetically pleasing ways.

Lady Allen was so keen to spread good nursery practice, that she persuaded J.Arthur Rank to make a film showing best practice. It showed the close relationship between nursery staff and parents and was entitled: '*Double Thread*'. This was used effectively across the country by nursery staff, and was later used at UNESCO conferences. Many of Lady Allen's articles concentrated on creating a rich environment for young children, in which they could develop their creative, imaginative and constructive play on their own and in groups, both indoors and outside. Thus, gaining confidence and learning to co-operate with others.

Between 1945 and 1948 there were many young children and their families misplaced across Europe. Lady Allen, together with Alva Myrdal of Sweden and Suzanne Herbinier-Lebert of France, worked hard to create OMEP: The World Organisation for Early Childhood Education: intended for all who are involved with children up to the age of eight years. It was a tremendous challenge: to involve the leaders of early childhood activities in many countries, with different regimes and approaches. Lady Allen created the first draft constitution, with the help of UNESCO colleagues. The first OMEP World Assembly, with sixteen countries represented, was at Charles University, Prague, immediately following a world seminar arranged by UNESCO.

The aim of OMEP is to improve the quality of provision for young children and for those who work with them. This is to be undertaken by:

'Publishing books and pamphlets on child development; encouraging seminars, workshops and study groups on child growth; promoting the establishment of good institutions for young children; working for better legislation for the protection of children and families; giving consultations on child development problems; improving standards of teacher education; cooperating with other professional community and government groups in work for young children; participating in short-range and long-range planning at local, state or national levels...' (by Marjory Allen)

The status of OMEP is that of an international non-governmental organisation which co-operates with other national and international organisations with similar aims. It has consultative status with UNICEF, UNESCO and The Council of Europe. OMEP champions children's rights under the United Nations Convention and supports the UN Resolution for 2000 – 2010 Decade of Peace and Non-violence.

These activities continue to be undertaken in sixty five countries, with full OMEP membership and in a further five countries with preparatory membership status. There is a World President and five vice-presidents, representing the world regions. The work of OMEP for young children continues in all these countries and upholds the aims - so wisely fashioned by Lady Allen. Each year OMEP issues two international journals of research accounts, which are highly valued in academic circles.

From 1949 onwards Lady Allen worked for UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) as a liaison officer and travelled extensively to see projects in very poor communities. Her OMEP work took her to Scandinavia and the USA, where she undertook lecture tours on the fundamentals of good early years provision, and learnt more of the value of adventure play facilities for children.

Lady Allen's contribution to early childhood care and education in Britain and across the world has been inestimable. The implementation of her ideas in effective practice has enriched the lives of generations of children and of those who work with them.

THE LADY ALLEN MEMORIAL TRUST

Three organisations, of which Lady Allen was a founder member, OMEP, The International Playground Association and The Handicapped Adventure Playground Association, set up a Trust as a Registered Charity to provide scholarships to commemorate and extend her work. The scholarships are awarded annually to selected candidates for travel at home and abroad, to enlarge their experiences and enhance the quality of their work with children and families.

Applications are welcome from those working with children, especially the disabled or disadvantaged. **Attendance at conferences, award bearing courses or academic research is not funded.**

Awards do not usually exceed £1000 (UK Currency). The closing date for applications is 15th January annually, short-listing is in February and awards are granted in March when successful candidates will be notified.

Application forms and further details are available from:
The Honorary Secretary, Caroline Richards, 89 Thurleigh Road, London SW12 8TY.

Recent grants have been awarded to early years' workers for visits to special needs facilities in California, and to see a range of toy library services in the UK.

Dorothy Selleck (Eiddona)
OMEP (UK)

References: 'Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady' by Marjory Allen and Mary Nicholson
Publisher: Thames & Hudson, London.
The papers of Lady Allen at The Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.