



Leoarna Mathias continues her series on education's original thinkers with a look at Susan Sutherland Isaacs...

Revolutionising childhood

I AM, AT THE MOMENT, MAKING MY way through a large pile of essay marking for my third year degree students. The assignments in question are essays on pedagogy and play, and while some of them focus on Vygotsky (see last issue's column) many of them centre on the pioneering work of Susan Sutherland Isaacs (1885–1948). In being compelled to retrace the steps of this admirable woman's work, it felt only right that I should share them with the readers of *TN*.

Born in Lancashire, where her father was a journalist and lay preacher, Isaacs was unfortunate enough to lose her mother when she was only six years old (this early loss she shares with Rousseau and Froebel, and we can only surmise at whether it acts as a motivator for later work).

She had a difficult relationship with her father during her teenage years, when he remarried, and when she rejected Christianity for socialism. She soon left home to become a governess.

Observing play

Finding her intellectual feet, Isaacs enrolled at Manchester University in 1907 for a teaching degree, but from there moved on to achieve a first in philosophy and gain a Masters at Newnham College, Cambridge. Her stature within the relatively new discipline of social psychology and child development was growing – she wrote the introduction to Piaget's early published work in the UK – but it is as principal of the newly established Malting House School, set up by the Dons of the University for their children, that Isaacs is possibly best remembered. Children as young as two were enrolled, and pedagogues (not teachers) were employed to work alongside them.

The most concise way to understand the experiment of Malting House is to see it as just that – a real-life laboratory in which Isaacs' thinking about how children play, learn and develop could be implemented and observed in practice.

Isaacs developed a pedagogy that would share much with the vocationally dedicated early years practitioners of today – but in the context of the 1920s and 30s was revolutionary. She argued for the nursery to be a normal institution in the social life of any community, in which the love and warmth of the family home would be mirrored. It would be an extension of the home, not a replacement for it. Adults would observe children closely, entering into their play and offering positive behaviour role models – but not 'teach'. For Isaacs, the 'ripening' of

children comes first, instruction later; she saw no point, for example, in encouraging children to learn to read and write before seven. In this, and in many other views – that free play determined by the child is the best kind of play, that the outdoors is an ideal site for play, and that children learn to exercise responsibility and manage risk by being exposed to opportunities to *have* responsibility and *take* risks – Isaacs appears utterly modern to the 21st century early years practitioner. For these reasons, Isaacs and her work are still an integral part of any early childhood undergraduate studies.

Free of inhibitions

The Malting House struggled for funds and achieved some unwarranted notoriety, eventually closing. Despite its short lifespan both the pedagogical thinking, and in particular, the observation tools devised during its lifetime, were still in use in Wiltshire some 30 years later; they are in many ways the precursor of the paper and online EYFS tracking documents settings use today. Isaacs went on to study psychoanalysis, and embarked upon what would become a prolific writing career almost wholly dedicated to a psycho-social understanding of childhood and child development. She helped to establish the much-respected Institute of Education at University College London, and she also, somewhat amusingly and under the pseudonym of Ursula Wise, wrote regularly for several magazines as an agony aunt.

Isaacs' legacy – the notion that an education free from constraint protects children from what she called 'learning inhibitions' – still resonates for us today, as we attempt to square the top-down pressures of curricula and regulation with the circle of our vocational desire to see children free to play, unfettered, in their earliest years.

