

‘A Froebel trained “Scot” from Edinburgh’

Miss Isabel Little (1876-1937)

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“A Froebel-trained ‘Scot’ from Edinburgh”



Miss Isabel Little

b. 1876 Edinburgh, Scotland

d. 1937 Wellington, New Zealand

1934 detail, NZ Free Kindergarten
Union Conference Executive group

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Discovering ‘Miss Little’ has been a 30-year detective story and mainly accidental until encouragement from Kerry Bethell to undertake a more systematic search. Kerry intended to present a paper at the 2020 International Froebel Society conference in Edinburgh about two Scottish infant teachers, Agnes Inkpen and Isobel Jamieson, who immigrated to New Zealand in the early 20th century. My response to the idea was that, ‘I wish I knew more about Isabel Little but there is not enough to fill a paper.’ In 1990 Miss Little was described to me in an interview with a retired infant mistress, as ‘A Froebel trained “Scot” from Edinburgh’. A description of Miss Little’s playful classroom featured in the book *Teachers Talk Teaching* (1997).¹ Some years later while researching the book *I am five and I go to school* (2011) I found two more sightings of Miss Little including some school inspection reports.² There my searches stopped, but I sometimes wondered whether there were more traces of Miss Little who, in hindsight, can be described as one of the forgotten foot soldiers of new education methods across the 1910s-1930s. Kerry subsequently applied her genealogy and archiving skills to unearth more information about Miss Little both in Edinburgh and New Zealand.³ Her footprint in history was patchy and light, but sufficient to submit an abstract to the conference committee. Prior to the conference I planned further

searches in Edinburgh hopefully adding momentum to the unravelling detective story. This did not happen. The conference was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Miss Little's story is one of two case study papers in a trilogy by Kerry and myself, now destined for alternative website dissemination. Some PowerPoint slides prepared for the presentation are included. The broader context of Miss Little's contribution to early years education is outlined in our introductory paper: *'So far from home': Tracing the endeavours of three Froebel trained teachers from Edinburgh, who migrated to New Zealand in the early 20th century.*⁴



The few early facts

An ancestry.com search by Kerry revealed some basic facts about the Little family, confirming that 'Miss Little' as Isabella Little was indeed from Edinburgh and following the ancestry.com lead Kerry contacted a relative of Miss Little, Sheena Thomson, who gave permission to view the family tree.⁵ This provided a wealth of information, much of it beyond the scope of this paper, but also a photo of Isabella Little and of her parents.



Isabella Little and her parents Margaret Little and Jacob Little. The photos of Isabella and her mother appear to be in the 1890s and taken at the same time. Source ancestry.com 'Levenside', with permission of Sheena Thomson.

Isabella Duncan Bennet Little was born in Edinburgh in 1876. The few known facts combined with the images above indicate a well-dressed hard working family whose children through education moved into the professions. Her parents were Margaret (1837-1909) and Jacob (1821-1904) Little. Margaret was once a household servant, while Jacob was a retired Sergeant Major of the Royal Horse Artillery in the British army suggesting a skilled and able man. Jacob retired in 1866, cited for 'exemplary conduct' and recommended for the Victoria Cross at Crimea.⁶ Census records suggest that the family supplemented Jacob's pension by taking in boarders. He is also listed as 'coach builder (1872), School Board Officer (1876) and a school attendance officer (1891).⁷

Isabella appears on the 1881 Scotland census as a 'scholar' age five living at 59 Forrest Road close to Edinburgh University. She was the second youngest of five siblings. Ten years later in 1891, Isabella is still a scholar and the family is living at the same address but by 1901 the family is living at 40 Great King Street. Isabella is a 'school teacher' as is her younger sister Margaret. Two older brothers have professional work: James, as a classics scholar in 1891, is by 1901 a Church Minister in Nairn while Isabella's oldest brother John is an Insurance Office Clerk who immigrates to Australia. Jacob Little died in 1904 leaving a modest estate of £134.8s. His wife Margaret, died in 1909, by which time the siblings had

left home including Margaret who married William Page in 1908 and in 1909 immigrates to New Zealand, living in the middle class suburb of Karori, Wellington.⁸ Isabella immigrates to New Zealand in 1912 and appears in the education records in 1914 as Isabel Little an assistant teacher at Thorndon Normal School, an old inner city Wellington primary school close to Parliament. This skeletal record of Miss Little's life until the age of 38 years indicates that she had sufficient education to gain a teaching qualification, steady employment and the motivation to seek a new life in New Zealand with her sister. To win a teaching position at a normal school Miss Little would need to demonstrate expertise as a teacher and assist in the training of students. A later section sets out information on the qualifications Miss Little presented to the Wellington Education Board confirming that she was indeed a 'Froebel trained "Scot" from Edinburgh'.

Discovering Miss Little: an infant mistress in the 1920s

By the 1920s there were increasing numbers of teachers, particular in the infant classes, demonstrating new education methods, but this was the exception rather than standard practice. Nevertheless, there was much lively debate and interest amidst education circles about teaching methods involving playful and creative activity and choice, including more understanding of individual children's emotional development. Transforming the theory and idealism into practice was more problematic; a story outlined more fully elsewhere.⁹ Miss Little, who I liken to a 'foot-soldier', was one of a few teachers in the Wellington district noted for their 'modern methods'. She would have been forgotten if not for three reports from teachers who spent time in her classroom in the 1920s and who later recalled the impact Miss Little had on their own teaching. It was also possible to check these recollections against the school inspector reports for the Wellington district held in Archives New Zealand. Three PowerPoint slides summarise this era in New Zealand education with its mix of progressive practice amidst 'stagnant' conformity caused by a combination of: large class sizes, old and run-down classrooms, poorly trained teachers including many who did not agree with the freedoms espoused by new education pedagogy.

THE NEW ERA

A REVIEW of NEW EDUCATION



The New Era vol. 8, no. 32 (October 1927).

Professor James Shelley, 1920
Inaugural Address,
University of Canterbury, NZ.

New education



Te Aro Infant School, Wellington, NZ - 1920s

'A struggle was taking place on educational lines from the infant school to the university, all, including the teacher demanding freedom from the rigidity of the current system'



Dual realities of NZ classrooms: 1920s

How can [the child] show his individuality unless he is free to move, to choose his materials and tools, to experiment, to compare and to consult (Dorothy Baster)

Chief Inspector T.B. Strong's concern with 'stagnant educational thought'

I am inclined to welcome rather than to quell the revolutionary, who with his 'mad theories' at least stimulates thought and challenges contradiction.

New methods, required a teacher who would point the way and, as it were, to accompany the children in his search for truth. He and the child become co-workers

The new methods of teaching aim at securing the co-operation of the child, mainly though the interest that certain subjects possess in themselves, or through the satisfaction gained in acquiring knowledge by self effort.

Education Report to Parliament, 1923

1. Miss Moria Gallagher meets Miss Isabel Little at Karori School 1929



1938 Advisor for
Infant classes
1948 First
national
Preschool Officer



1997

There was at the school a wonderful woman called Isabel Little. She was a Froebel trained Scot from Edinburgh. And more than anybody else she taught me the whole understanding of children; what they stood for and how they learned. She was doing what came to be described as an activity programme

The inspectors came in the next Monday after she had finished and said, 'There is going to be no more of that nonsense.' They came and put things right and we were told to get on with the serious business of learning. **I stayed on and just carried on with my wicked ways!**

Moria Gallagher, interview 1990.

In 1948 Moira Gallagher became the first Preschool Officer in the Department of Education, charged with implementing the new policy of state partnership with kindergarten associations; heralding an expansion in preschool provision and the establishment of a professional rather than charitable preschool education service. This caused surprise, as Gallagher did not have a kindergarten background. It was clear that Dr Beeby, the progressive Director of Education, wanted someone who could steer the policy reforms but who could also encourage the kind of free-play programmes that were the hallmark of new education.¹⁰ While the kindergartens had periods of free play, their programmes were still quite regimented. This was why I was interviewing Gallagher in 1990. By the time of her appointment Gallagher had a reputation as an infant advisor supporting teachers to introduce free play activities into their classrooms. I asked Gallagher how she had been introduced to these ideas and she recalled her time as a first year probationary teacher in 1929 at Karori School in Wellington. Gallagher cited two infant teachers in the city who 'led the way', Miss Isabel Little at Karori School and Miss Dorothy Edwards at Te Aro School (whose class is seen in a circle game in the PowerPoint slide). Miss Little had been appointed Infant Mistress at Karori School in 1928 in charge of the classes for children aged 5-7 years. Gallagher described her experiences:

There was at the school a wonderful woman called Isobel Little. She was a Froebel trained Scot from Edinburgh. And more than anybody else she taught me the whole

understanding of children; what they stood for and how they learned. She was doing what came to be described as an activity programme.

I will describe my classroom. Instead of rows of desks I had three tables that were placed around the room. We had coconut matting on the floor. The way she taught me was that we got on with our work in the morning and after playtime we had a free choice of all sorts. During my time we changed to having the activity first thing in the morning, on the principle that the children were fresher in terms of energy and their most creative time . . . During this activity time we had templates, wooden things of all sorts and sizes, which were a hangover from the Montessori template pictures. There was a reading table with picture books, paper and crayons. We didn't have paint at that stage. We did sewing activities. ...There were about ten different things you could do. There were shelves with curtains along the wall, and the children could have free access to them. They could do anything we thought would help them.¹¹

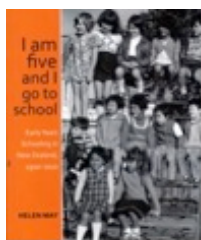
The 1929 inspector's report for Karori School confirms the presence of both women, but there is little indication of anything radical:

The infant department is well organised and efficiently conducted. The physical instruction and rhythmic exercises being particularly good. Probationer receiving careful attention.¹²

Miss Little probably adjusted her programme to fit the expectations of the inspectors. Gallagher recalled the change when Miss Little retired from the school:

The inspectors came in the next Monday after she had finished and said, 'There is going to be no more of that nonsense.' They came and put things right. We were told to get on with the serious business of learning. I just carried on with my wicked ways!¹³

Possibly, the inspectors did not think Miss Little's playful programme appropriate for a probationary teacher to manage. In the event, Gallagher continued to experiment: allowing more choice and freedom, introducing new activities and teaching reading based on the children's interests and drawings. She even invited parents into the classroom. Gallagher reported that she felt alone but clearly her efforts were recognised when she became one of the first infant advisors appointed by the Department of Education in 1938. Gallagher showed me letters from teachers thanking her for the ideas she gave them, and for her advice about how to convince the headmaster removing desks to make space for play was necessary.



2. Miss Elsie Andrews meets Miss Little South Wellington School 1924

A little Scottish woman... in a large room with small chairs here and there around the walls, mats scattered over the floors and no desks. This was a startling phenomenon. "Where are your desks?" I asked. She replied, "I pushed them under the school." She continued, --"On cold mornings I often break one up and burn it." --- **Seeds of revolt began to burgeon in my soul** (Elsie Andrews).

School Inspectors' Reports

Miss Little is a capable infant mistress. She secures harmony and efficient work in her department in addition to teaching a large class. **Her outlook is modern.** A fine tone prevails. Approved schemes of work are used (1925)

Probationers [1st year teachers] have not been trained and instructed in accordance with the Board requirements (1926)

In 1924 Miss Little was the infant mistress at South Wellington School in Newtown, an old working class suburb of closely packed small wooden houses; a different setting to the more rural valley of Karori where her sister Margaret lived and where Miss Little later taught. Around 2008, as I was searching for glimpses of life in the infant classroom in earlier times I found a memoir about Elsie Andrews (1888-1948) in the archives of the New Zealand Educational Institute - Te Tui Roa (NZEI). Andrews had been an infant teacher and involved in the Women's Teachers Association (WTA), an affiliated advocacy organisation founded in 1901 by a group of Wellington women, a number of whom were infant teachers with links to the Wellington Froebel Society as well NZEI.¹⁴ The manuscript provided insight into the activities of the WTA as women campaigned over a raft of measures concerning their low pay and status.¹⁵ In 1914 soon after Miss Little was appointed to Thorndon Normal School she presented a paper to the Wellington branch of WTA, an event detailed in a later section. It is likely that Miss Little came to the attention of Andrews through the WTA. In 1924 Andrews was the infant mistress at Fitzroy School in New Plymouth and was given leave to observe the 'latest methods' in the infant department at Kelburn Normal School, and to visit 'a school in Newtown' where she described:

A little Scottish woman ... in a large room with small chairs here and there around the walls, mats scattered over the floors and no desks. This was a startling phenomenon. 'Where are your desks?' I asked. She replied, 'I pushed them under the school.' She

continued, – ‘On cold mornings I often break one up and burn it.’ – seeds of revolt began to burgeon in my soul! ¹⁶

This extraordinary response spurred Andrews to make changes to the infant classrooms in New Plymouth. It gives a glimpse too of a brave and defiant ‘Scottish’ Miss Little. The inspector’s report on South Wellington School in 1925 gives a hint of the tightrope Miss Little was walking while she kept onside with the inspectors’ expectations

Miss Little is a capable infant mistress. She secures harmony and efficient work in her department in addition to teaching a large class. Her outlook is modern. A fine tone prevails. Approved schemes of work are used.¹⁷

Miss Little’s 1926 report included a less favourable observation that, ‘the probationers have not been trained and instructed according to the [Wellington Education] Board requirements.’¹⁸ Possibly suggesting that, like Gallagher at Karori a few years later, Miss Little was allowing her probationary teachers freedom to practice ‘modern methods’ too.

It was under the auspices of the WTA that infant mistresses formed local Infant Mistresses Circles or Groups. Except in Christchurch,¹⁹ records have not survived, but there are glimpses of the advocacy, interests and activities of members. There is no record of Miss Little’s attendance at Wellington meetings, but it would have been extraordinary for her not to be a member. In 1922 the Wellington Infant Mistresses Group forwarded remits to the national conference of the WTA. The *Evening Post* (8 April 1922) reported their demands:

1. That in all new infant and main school buildings provision should be made for assembly halls, separate cloak room, and lunch room, and windows in keeping with modern ideals of education.
2. That the Department of Education should manufacture kindergarten material as suits New Zealand schools and conditions, and supply all infant schools recommended by the inspector.
3. That no class in the infant department should consist of more than 25 children.
4. That the Education Department recognise the extra qualifications possessed by infant teachers holding the higher Froebel certificates [from England].

One can imagine Miss Little offering her opinions in support of such demands, and in particular Remit No 4, as she held this qualification. Maybe she tabled the remit!

3. Sylvia Ashton-Warner is a trainee teacher with Miss Little in 1926 at South Wellington



The programme is well considered. The pupils are orderly in conduct, neat in drawing and writing, skilled in handwork, and ready in dealing with number. Miss little is very successful in organising children's games, her musical abilities are of value in the classroom (Inspector's report on Miss Little, 1927)



Miss Little was big, a tall elegant person with a large secret bosom ... Grey the length and girth of her from her hair and eyes to her grey silk smock ... She had the clipped haughty accent of imperiousness ... A tall grey emblem of authority, regimentation, discipline, efficiency, obedience, order, the Great British Empire...

(Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *I passed this way*, 1979)

In 1926 Sylvia Ashton-Warner was a trainee teacher at Wadestown infant school with the unfortunately named Miss Whackington, one of a series of indomitable infant mistresses that Sylvia later described as 'saintly maiden ladies':

She saw strapping to be indispensable to productive teaching. There was a lot of it ... Far too much for young children. I myself felt the severity of the discipline. I could never stand to see the strap come down on a reluctant hand, especially a small one even though I had been schooled likewise. Yet it was not administered in anger She strapped in sorrow ... She emanated a saintly patience. The clock and the strap did much of the teaching ...²⁰

This was written by Ashton-Warner in her memoir, *I Passed this way* (1979). She was by then famed as a novelist and pedagogue who used the Māori infant classroom as a creative setting.²¹ Her bestselling book *Teacher* (1963) outlined her approach teaching Māori children to read using their own interest words and experiences rather than the standard reading texts about the lives of middle class European children often living in England!²² When re-reading Ashton-Warner's memoir I found a description of Miss Little; this time written by a creative writer and storyteller. Unlike Gallagher and Andrews, who portrayed Miss Little as a mentor who inspired their own forays into the 'modern methods' of free play, Ashton-Warner cites Miss Little as someone she did not want to emulate.²³ In 1926 Ashton-Warner also had a teaching practice with Miss Little at South Wellington School where Ashton-Warner portrayed herself as a 'vagabond' in the classroom who, along with 'Andrew' a child who

cried for attention, was one of the 'irregularities in the ranks of the regiment spoiling the look of the parade.'²⁴

Ashton-Warner's description of Miss Little does not tally with Elsie Andrew's perception of Miss Little being 'little' in size or capable of 'stirring 'revolt'. Yet Ashton-Warner's caricature provides an inkling of the demeanour of the ideal infant mistress of the time. She reports Miss Little as always being calm and kindly with children and in contrast to Miss Whackington, there was 'never a sign of the strap or even a word of reproof' in her classroom. 'The infant room', Ashton-Warner adds, 'was seen to be a very good one... . Miss Little's department was not much less than flawless.'²⁵ Order, however, was a problem for Ashton-Warner, whose own creative but chaotic classrooms in later years became her downfall as well as her hallmark:

The way those five year-olds rolled off the other end of the assembly line reading, writing, adding up, subtracting and obeying to supply in the future good little Soldiers of the Queen m'lad' ...²⁶

Her grouping and system of promotion was fool-proof so that each little child was working to capacity the whole time. Some leapt ahead and some stayed behind until they knew the work... . The children were happy, even Andrew in time, and since there was a high level of order it says something for order. Order and happiness went hand in hand ...²⁷

A programme based on individual and group work would have earned the description of 'modern methods'. It could also have been encouraged by inspectors, as long as the order and discipline Miss Little ably engendered was evident. The inspectors report for Miss Little in 1927 aligns with Ashton-Warner's recollection:

Miss Little teaches this class of 50 children (with only 36 present) and supervises the whole of the infant division. Measles, mumps and other complaints are affecting the attendance. The programme of studies is well considered. The pupils are orderly in conduct, neat in drawing and writing, skilled in handwork and ready in dealing with number. Miss Little is very successful in organizing children's games; her musical abilities are of value in the classroom.²⁸

In 1926, according to Ashton-Warner, Miss Little got the highest grading in the Wellington region: 'The crispness of success crackled through the classrooms.'²⁹

With years hindsight and the experience of fostering creativity in children, Sylvia later wrote:

I myself see Miss Little's teaching to be nearly all input material foreign to the native content of the mind so that you didn't see the personality showing through ... What you came up with was sixty small imprints of Miss Little, which I think is not desirable. It was the kind of schooling that produced efficient rather than interesting people ... No variations of the human theme were encouraged.³⁰

The three sightings described in this section present of Miss Little in her prime as an infant mistress, providing clues to her appearance, demeanour and expertise managing large groups of children without using physical punishment or verbal admonishment. This in itself was remarkable, but we also get an insight into how Miss Little balanced her instincts and understanding of modern methods alongside meeting the expectation of school inspectors. Apart from the archived inspector's reports no reports or photos have been traced of Miss Little in surviving school records. Later jubilee reports from these schools have forgotten her. Between 1920 and 1929 Miss Little was an infant mistress at three schools. It is generally long serving teachers who get remembered. Nevertheless, there are other documented sightings that are elaborated in the following sections.

Getting qualified

Miss Little was reported to have trained as a teacher in Edinburgh, but where and when were unknown; and according to Gallagher she was 'Froebel trained'. This could mean that her teaching qualification was a Froebel qualification or she had gained a Froebel qualification later. Aline-Wendy Dunlop, Emeritus Professor from the University of Strathclyde suggested that the two possibilities for training in Edinburgh would have been at the St George's College or the Free Church Training College at Moray House. St George's College offered a Froebel course but not when Miss Little would have trained. The first kindergarten was not established in Edinburgh until 1903 although there had been a Froebel Society in the city since 1894.³¹ I also contacted Kornelia Cepok, archivist at Froebel College, Roehampton University in London, which houses the records of the National Froebel Union (NFU) founded in 1886. During 1995 I spent some months at the archive researching my book *Discovery of Early Childhood* (1997) and am a member of the archive's advisory committee.³² The Froebel Educational Institute (now Froebel College) was established in 1893. Students were prepared for the NFU examination including an Elementary Certificate, being 'the minimum qualification that should be expected of any person who undertakes the education of young children' as well as the recommended Higher Certificate equivalent to the 'normal

qualification of teacher' in a kindergarten or elementary infant school.³³ NFU exams were also sat by trainees from other colleges or by private study.

In an overnight search Kornelia found 'Isabel Little' on the 1912 register, awarded the NFU Higher Certificate (second class) by 'private study' including details of her grades. Kornelia also forwarded the regulations, syllabus, examination papers and the examiners' reports across the subject areas for 1912.³⁴ The examination was in two parts, the first examined in July and the second in December, which would mean Miss Little sat the Part One exams prior to her departure for New Zealand. In September she is recorded as a passenger on a boat sailing between Melbourne and Sydney, accompanied by a Mr and Mrs Little, presumably her brother John and his wife.³⁵ Part Two exams must have been sat in Wellington. The 1912 NFU examination report lists Wellington as an examination centre, along with several other country outposts for 'private study' students. Possibly, Miss Little undertook this further study in anticipation of her shift to New Zealand. Her double qualification and years of experience would have been highly valued in New Zealand.

The Higher Certificate examinations for 1912 covered the following subject areas, each with several parts and detailed requirements:³⁶

- Literature
- Nature Knowledge
- Elementary Mathematics
- Geography
- Child Hygiene
- Singing
- Principles of Education
- History of Education
- Practice of Education
- Class Teaching
- Blackboard Drawing
- Educational Handwork

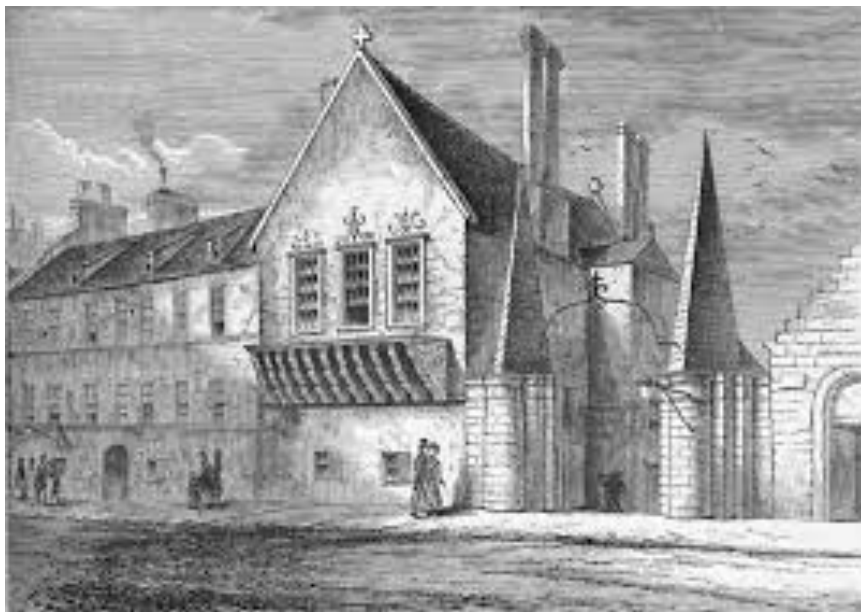
Notwithstanding rigorous assessment various examiners' reports expressed concerns about the knowledge and expertise displayed by candidates. Most significantly was the gap observed between theory and the practice in settings that were not Froebelian. For example, during the 'Free Expression Lessons' the examiners' noted 'some improvement, but the children were often interrupted by unnecessary questions and criticism'. They criticised too:

... the tendency in the minds of the candidates to confuse freedom and license - the result being sometimes a complete absence of control, and it was evident in some

cases that candidates had adopted their methods through no inner conviction, but rather in the attempt to appear up-to-date.³⁷

Such comments could equally apply in New Zealand infant classes of the time.³⁸

An enquiry to the University of Edinburgh library archive yielded Isabel Little's record at the Free Church Training College, Moray House between 1896-1898, the institution where the International Froebel Society conference was to be held in 2020. She might have been a pupil teacher prior to this because a New Zealand record of 34 years of service in 1929 would indicate that Isabel Little began teaching in 1894.³⁹ Her record from Moray House also detailed the courses taught and grades awarded.



Free Church Training College, Moray House

Some points to note are that Isabel Little was a good student with 'virtually perfect' punctuality, with 'excellent skills in teaching' and 'exemplary' conduct. These clues of character foreshadow the New Zealand inspectors' reports 30 years later. Isabel Little entered the programme with passes in History and Geography achieved from her entrance exams. The other subjects illustrate the different emphasis to her later Froebel qualification:

- Religious knowledge
- English
- Penmanship
- Algebra
- Arithmetic
- Mental
- Theory of Music,

- Vocal
- Drawing
- Science
- French
- School Management
- Domestic Economy
- Sewing and Cutting

The subjects indicate an emphasis on a comprehensive general education. In handwriting on the record, dated 1901, are the names of two schools Miss Little presumably taught at: Musselburgh and Stockbridge. There are no further clues about her teaching in Edinburgh prior to her going to New Zealand. Further research in Edinburgh is needed.

“Some aspects of Education in Scotland”

Paper read by Miss Little to the Women’s Teachers Association and published in *The Dominion* 6 June 1914

- “In the kindergartens and schools, in Scotland, all pictures that were not beautiful had been banished from the school-walls and only beautiful one only beautiful prints allowed”
- “The kindergartens, five in number, in Edinburgh, were doing good work, especially in the training of the slum children”
- “During recent years, teachers have become more and more persuaded that the child must be educated through his activities. Much more time is given to handwork in the infant department...especially handicraft... the result of which might result in a real object – a cup and saucer made of clay, or a couch and chair for the doll’s house”

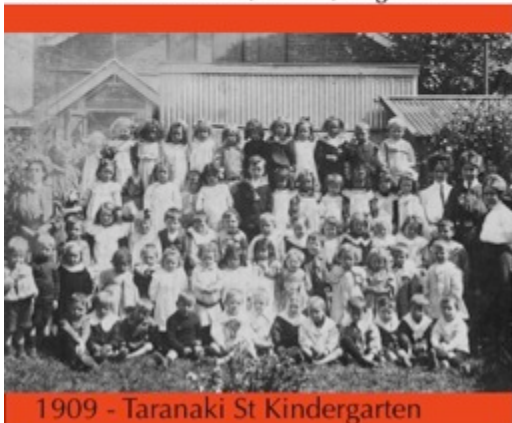
The WTA was introduced in an earlier section. While there was a collegial and professional function to the association it’s primary focus was advocacy concerning the status of women teachers and issues around the schooling of infants. Remits from the association were regularly tabled at NZEI conferences but the WTA had networks across a range of women’s organisations such as the National Council of Women. Miss Little probably joined the WTA after her appointment to Thorndon Normal School. Her talk about Scottish education was of sufficient interest for *The Dominion* newspaper to reprint it in full, including a summary of business matters discussed at the meeting. One item was a response from the Minister of Education to a letter sent by the branch requesting that women members be appointed to the

proposed Council of Education. The Minister's reply was read to members stating that, 'the matter would receive attention.'

Miss Little spoke to an audience of twenty-five and was clearly well-informed about education matters in Edinburgh. We learn that Miss Little had always taught infants. She gave insights into the introduction of elements of new education into Scottish schools, echoing the beliefs of progressive educators that, after the failure of legislation and philanthropy to solve social problems, 'many thinkers have decided that the future of our nation is in the hands of the teacher. This influences our system of handwork.' Wellington was not devoid of slums and poverty, but Miss Little's description of Edinburgh's slums, social problems and unemployment would have reminded her audience and readers why they or their ancestors had immigrated. Miss Little described how there was no formal teaching for the first six months of schooling no longer any 'drill' in the infant classes. There were 'periods set aside for story-telling, singing, dancing and games' as well as 'more time given to handwork... We also give time for drawing, allowing at least three periods a week...one for drawing objects, one for nature illustration, and one for story illustrating.'

Little also told her audience about the establishment of first free kindergartens in Edinburgh, in parallel to the establishment by Mary Richmond of the first free kindergartens in Wellington (as distinct from private kindergartens and in earlier years a few school based kindergartens.)⁴⁰

Miss (Mary) Richmond saw little ones, too small for school sitting about in the dirt on the pavements, dusty and grubby, learning language which was certainly no good to them, and her tender mother-heart ached for these neglected babies. 'We must have kindergartens for these children', she said and she set to work (in 1898) to get them



1909 - Taranaki St Kindergarten



Little's description of the work of Edinburgh's free kindergarten would resonate with Wellington kindergartners:

So many slum children are turned out to the street to play at the age of three. ... They pick up all manner of evil and become later the criminal. Now he is packed into a kindergarten, and begins to learn discipline himself. He becomes tidy, has clean habits, occupies his hands, and through them, his mind. He dances, he sings, he plays, he attends to his pots, and goes exploring and excavating a cartload of sand, or walking to the park, where the birds sing and build their nests, see the trees and many other delights only hitherto known to the middle-class child.



Lileen Hardy and the first Free kindergarten in Edinburgh opened in 1903.⁴¹

The Dominion newspaper reported an appreciative 'vote of thanks' for Miss Little's 'interesting paper'.

Thorndon Normal School, Wellington

- Assistant Teacher of infants 1914-1920
- Inspector's summary comments of her class: 'very satisfactory' 'good' 'very good'
- Comments on infant department positive ie: 'Marked attention to oral expression. All classes without exception children are bright and responsive'
- Salary starts at £120 pa and rises to £253pa
- Average of over 90 children on roll with 2 teachers. Attendance on inspection day around 60-70 children.

Miss Little was appointed to a school with an established history, responsibilities for teacher training and links to kindergarten. Her previous teaching appointment is listed as 'Edinburgh' so Miss Little did not teach during 1913 after arriving in New Zealand in late 1912. Thorndon School opened in 1852, being one of the older public schools in Wellington. In the 1880s the school established a kindergarten class for three and four year olds, as did several Wellington schools.⁴² In 1908 'kindergarten mistresses' were appointed to run kindergarten classes in the normal schools attached each of the four teacher training colleges; intended to introduce primary trainees to kindergarten methodology. At Thorndon Normal School, Dorothy Fitch, also a member of the WTA, was appointed as a kindergartener and teacher. She was also a council member of the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association (WFKA). The year Miss Little was appointed Fitch's kindergarten class was shifted to the new Kelburn Normal School along with the training college. Fitch had earlier appeared before the 1912 Commission on Education. She argued for smaller class sizes for infants and was concerned at the split that occurred between kindergarten and school: 'It is obviously not desirable to dissociate the work done with children of three to five from the work of children five to seven, as continuity is at all stages to be greatly desired.'⁴³ Fitch argued, along with other WTA members, for women inspectors for the infant classes, on the grounds that they would be more appreciative of the problems involved in teaching infants.⁴⁴ Fitch's legacy of advocacy and support of kindergarten would have been evident to Miss Little during her time at Thorndon Normal School, although she would have noted too the locus of innovation shift to Kelburn Normal

School which became the showcase for modern methods under its new Principal Winifred Maitland who had trained at the Froebel Education Institute in London.⁴⁵



Standard Two, Thorndon School 1919. PA-Coll-1867 Alexander Turnbull Library. These children would have been pupils of Miss Little three years earlier. Note the Union Jack and the New Zealand flag being displayed.

Information about Miss Little at Thorndon Normal School is scant. She does not appear in any historical records or photos, but only in the listings of the Department of Education's annual reports to Parliament that include her position as an assistant teacher and her salary. The other sighting is in the annual school inspection reports 1914-1920, which only list the classroom, teacher's name, children on the roll and those present that day. There is an occasional comment alongside Miss Little's class as noted above. More detailed comments are made about the infant classes in general and the infant mistress. Noted in several reports were concern about the unsuitable buildings. Up until the 1920s there were still classrooms with the tiered galleries of earlier times. The inspectors commend the staff for their 'excellent' work under the circumstances and note that teaching is along 'modern lines': to be expected with a 'specially selected staff of skilled teachers'.⁴⁶ While Miss Little was an assistant teacher, well beyond the years of her experience, winning an appointment at a normal school was an acknowledgement of this and her qualifications.

Miss Little's remaining teaching record

- 1921-1922: Infant Mistress, Hutt District High
- 1922-27 Infant Mistress, South Wellington
- 1928-29 Infant Mistress, Karori
- 1931-1933 Infant Mistress, Ashburton Borough

The infant department has thoroughly sound foundation being laid in all subjects and instruction. Modern methods are used and pleasing progress in made. A fine example of the work is the kind and responsive of the little ones (Inspector's report 1921)

In 1921 Miss Little was appointed infant mistress at the Hutt District High School. The Hutt Valley was an expanding semi rural town outside Wellington although accessible by train. There are no records of the two years spent at the school except from inspectors' reports in which Miss Little got her own appraisal (above).⁴⁷ This echoes later reports cited from South Wellington and Karori schools. Miss Little would have enjoyed her pay rise listed at £353 in 1924.⁴⁸ According to her probationer Gallagher, Little 'retired' from Karori School in 1929. Exactly why she left is unclear but was possibly seconded to Wadestown School for a short time where she is cited in a report in September 1929.⁴⁹ In May 1931 there was a public farewell from Karori School to Miss Little. There were speeches, a concert and supper served by the ladies' committee of the home and school association. She received a travelling clock and was presented with a bouquet of flowers.⁵⁰ In the speeches it was stated that Miss Little was taking up a new appointment as infant mistress at Ashburton Borough School a small town in the South Island; a position she held until her retirement and return to Wellington at the end of 1933.

There are no clues why Miss Little left Wellington nor are there inspector reports for the region. The school committee's annual report for 1931 records the appointment of Miss Little, noting the 'calibre' of 'various infant mistresses' who 'have secured for the youngest children a successful start in their start in the their educational career'.⁵¹ In December 1933, Miss Little retired and wrote thanking the school committee, 'for the consideration shown to her during her two and a-half years' association with the school'.⁵² She was also farewelled from the Ashburton Cavendish Club at its Christmas party. This was a merry event, with

‘carols, competitions, instrumental and vocal items’. ‘A large Christmas pudding was handed around... the room was most artistically decorated with iris and sweet peas’.⁵³

Wider engagement

Already there are clues that Miss Little’s life beyond the classroom involved a range of professional associations and social networks, such as her membership of the Cavendish Club in Ashburton. Isabel Little arrived in Wellington to become an extended part of sister Margaret’s family. Margaret’s husband William Page, also Scottish, had an accountancy practice. Kerry unearthed a range of community projects the couple were involved in:

Arranging concerts for the Sailors’ Friend Society during WW1 and hosting the annual Karori Horticultural Society flower show, for which William serves as president. William serves as the first president on the Board of Governors of Queen Margaret College, a private girls school in the inner city, and later as President of the school’s Parent’s Association. Margaret’s work on the Women’s Borstal committee represents just one of her many causes. Together Margaret and William become leading figures in Wellington society.⁵⁴

Isabel Little was undoubtedly drawn into Margaret’s well-to-do social life, reported on one occasion as the ‘charming hostess’ of the annual flower show at Karori. In 1931 the Pages move into a new house in Karori built in spacious grounds that they named Sunninghill. Isabel lived with the family on her return from Ashburton.



‘Sunninghill’ 131 Karori Rd still in its ‘original’ condition, 2020.

Digital newspaper records also give glimpses into Miss Little's interests:⁵⁵

- That Margaret and Isabel were both members of the Pioneer Club is evident from a report farewelling Miss Little as she shifts to Ashburton in 1931. Both sisters are mentioned.⁵⁶ The club was founded in 1909 because women were not eligible to be members of the Wellington Club. Mary Richmond was its first president. In the 1930s the club ran a Reading Circle and on the evening Miss Little was farewelled, the group read the play 'Alice sits by the fire' by J. M. Barrie with the 'actors' sitting on a stage appropriately decorated. Miss Little was not one of the actors but Margaret Page gave the vote of thanks.
- Miss Little remained active in the WTA and was elected to the national executive at the 1928 conference. Delegates were urged to 'zealously guard the status and privileges gained for women teachers by the pioneers of the association.' This was in response to a suggestion by the president of the NZEI, Mr Combs, in 1927 that to achieve unity across the profession the WTA should consider 'deregistration'. WTA branches resoundingly rejected the proposal. These were feisty times, and one wonders whether Miss Little added her voice to the debate. At the 1930 conference, she seconded the motion 'That separate boys' and girls' schools or departments, be provided, with women head teachers to be in charge of the latter'. After 'considerable discussion' the motion was 'heavily defeated'. Miss Little's support was possibly linked to the improved career opportunities for women teachers or by arguments tabled that girl pupils would gain more 'opportunities for self-reliance and learning handicrafts'. An argument against was that the 'benefits of such a scheme to the teacher outweigh those to the child, which is not desirable.'⁵⁷
- There are several reports of activities at South Wellington School during 1924-1927 when Miss Little was infant mistress. On 10 June 1924 'a large attendance of householders and parents' met to discuss the inadequate playground and approaches to the school. 'Miss Little, representing the staff of South Wellington School in the absence of the headmaster, Mr Thomas, gave enthusiastic support.' She told the meeting that 'the small playground in use at present was a great disadvantage. The teachers were prevented from carrying out organised games, and the children were so badly cramped for space that the girls' basketball team was not able to obtain the necessary practice owing to their requiring practically the whole playground'. It was decided to appoint more members to the school committee who could organise functions to raise money.⁵⁸ The first of a series of fortnightly dances

in the school hall was immediately arranged. 'The School Committee and their friends spent an enjoyable evening. Mr J. Thomas (headmaster), Miss Little (infant mistress) and the teaching staff were the guests of the evening'.⁵⁹ The *Evening Post* (22 August 1922) reported on the annual fancy dress ball for senior children. 'Large numbers of parents and friends attended to view this delightful throng of juvenile merry-makers.'⁶⁰ A 'thankyou' was also given to 'Miss Little, infant mistress, and her staff, who were responsible for the infants' dance held during the afternoon'. A 1926 report of the infants' party listed prizes given to the children for their outfits: the 'prettiest dresses' 'most economic outfit', 'most original' etc.⁶¹ Later in the year Miss Little hosted a farewell and paid tribute to 'the spirit of friendly co-operation which had characterised' Mr J. Thomas who had been headmaster for eleven years. She presented him with a travelling rug on behalf of the teachers.⁶² In this working class suburb such social events were undoubtedly appreciated and enjoyed.

- In the late 1920s home and school associations of parents and teachers were established alongside elected school committees that managed everyday operations of primary schools. This was an initiative supported by Miss Little who is reported as a member of two home and school associations: at Wadestown School in 1929 and in 1930 she is listed as 'headmistress' an ex officio member of the Karori home and school association. Both schools were in the more affluent suburbs however, at Karori the news headline was 'A Plea for Interest' in the new association. The headmaster reported that the school's finances were 'very serious' and he 'appealed to the citizens of Karori' for assistance.⁶³ In contrast, the Wadestown association purchased, 'a new piano, a colonial couch, framed pictures, and an electric urn... and £5 was donated towards procuring new books for the library.' 'A visiting committee of ladies had been set up to visit the school at intervals to keep the association in close touch with the requirements of the school' and a social committee was to arrange events for children and parents.⁶⁴ Wadestown was one of the most affluent residential areas of the city. The onset of the Depression years sorely impacted on the finances of schools and families, particularly in poorer suburbs and even Karori.
- Miss Little was active within NZEI, the professional organisation representing primary school teachers to which WTA was affiliated. In 1930, she was a Wellington delegate to the annual conference and mentioned twice in news reports. Firstly, in support of a motion to reduce class sizes: 'One of the outstanding reforms needed in our education system'. Miss Little spoke to the challenges for teachers for children arriving at school

when ‘the average child had not learned control.’ This was a difficult task to manage in large classes.⁶⁵ Despite a long campaign there were large class sizes for many more years. Miss Little also seconded a remit that an increase in grants to school committees was needed to make it possible to keep schools hygienically clean. She spoke about the ‘insanitary condition of many rooms in which children were taught. Cleanliness was a primary necessity.’⁶⁶ With the worsening economic situation this did not happen. School budgets and teachers’ salaries were cut. Not until the 1935 election of the first Labour Government was there a turnaround in the fortunes of schools and education more broadly. It would be interesting to know how Miss Little voted in the election, with the possible conservative votes of her family and social circles, or in support of the Labour Party’s promise of education and welfare reform.

Kindergarten links



After retiring from Ashburton Borough School and returning to Wellington, Miss Little became involved with the Wellington Free Kindergarten Association (WFKA). Free kindergartens were in difficult circumstances due the removal of their small government subsidy in 1931 that halted all kindergarten expansion with the focus on survival. This was described in the news headlines as a ‘National Disaster’ and generated huge public support for kindergarten.⁶⁷ The Wellington Headmasters’ Association argued that it had, ‘no

hesitation in saying that in proportion to its cost to the State (a very small one) no educational agency is doing more for the ultimate moral and mental development of the child.’⁶⁸ NZEI passed a resolution that, ‘In view of the results of the work done, the Institute regards its relatively small cost as more in the nature of a saving rather than an expenditure.’⁶⁹ Wellington’s *Evening Post* launched an appeal and gave space to a rash of protest letters, including one from the WFKA’s founder, Mary Richmond:

I wish to point out that the Free Kindergarten Council ... fully appreciate the serious financial condition of the country and are prepared for heavy cuts. All they ask is that the subsidy to their schools should not be entirely withdrawn. If this were done we should lose our status as part of the education system of New Zealand, and - if we cease to function, many working-class mothers would lose enlightened help and co-operation, at a most difficult time ... We plead with [the Department of Education] to reconsider, and not sever completely the tie that binds us.⁷⁰

Thirty-four thousand people signed a petition urging the Government to change its mind. A vote in Parliament opposing the cuts was lost. Peter Fraser, who became the Labour Government Minister of Education in 1935, reminded Parliament of ‘the work of the kindergartens in these difficult times in supplying food, fresh air, and sunlight to children for whom parents could not adequately provide.’⁷¹ The subsidy was reinstated in 1935 and government support significantly increased thereafter.⁷²

Miss Little began her new role in kindergarten management during challenging political times. WFKA had seven kindergartens, including Owen Street Kindergarten established in 1936, and its own training programme. Miss Little’s main contribution to the WFKA was her expertise and knowledge of the early years of school. She also had links with NZEI and the WTA, organisations sympathetic to kindergarten. In 1935, Miss Little was welcomed as a WFKA delegate to the Wellington Branch of the National Council of Women (NCW) with its wide-ranging member organisations.⁷³ She was accompanied by Maud England, a long-time WFKA council member and founder of the Wellington Branch of NCW in 1917.⁷⁴ The pair also represented WFKA at the NCW Annual Conference in 1935. And in 1936, they were the WFKA delegates at the biennial conference of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union (NZFKU) representing six regional associations. This occasion was photographed (above) and includes the only known photo of Miss Little during her years in New Zealand. England had been one of the instigators of the Union, established in 1926 as an

umbrella group for kindergarten associations. England and Little clearly made a good team; while Miss Little was new to the politics of kindergarten, she was experienced in the operations of advocacy organisations. Minister Fraser presented a challenge to delegates at the NZFKU conference:

I am anxious to know in a practical way, how we can extend kindergarten education what is the scope of your ideas in the future? ... I want to be in a position to judge how far your organisation can carry the work out and whether as at present constituted it can carry it out.⁷⁵

Miss Little died the following year on 23 July 1937, still a member of the WFKA council whose members paid tribute to her knowledge of schooling matters.⁷⁶ She did not live to see the expansion of the kindergarten movement or the increasing financial and regulatory control of the Department of Education. Miss Little's protégée, Gallagher, and England served on the Government's Consultative Committee on Preschool Education established in 1945 to plan the new blueprint. Gallagher was appointed to lead the proposed kindergarten expansion and to manage what was a delicate relationship between the kindergarten organisations, which had spearheaded and kept free kindergartens afloat, and the Department of Education now intent of transforming kindergartens into an expanded professional education service.

Two significant events in 1937 conclude this story of Miss Isabel Little: the New Education Fellowship (NEF) conference held in July, and the WFKA's celebration of the birth of kindergarten a century earlier. Miss Little would have been at both events if she had not died; one signified a looking back to the origins and aspirations of the Froebelian kindergarten and the other, was looking forward in a 'new era' of education which Miss Little, as a 'foot soldier', had helped forge.

New Zealand was a distant member of the NEF established in 1921 as a rallying point for like-minded educators in Europe, the United States, Asia, and later Australia and New Zealand. In 1937 the New Labour Government hosted an extraordinary NEF conference with fourteen eminent speakers travelling to New Zealand from Europe and the US (then to Australia). This included Susan Isaacs, who in 1933 was appointed to head the new Department of Child Development at the London Institute of Education. Several New Zealanders studied with Isaacs and her books and advice to parents were widely

disseminated.⁷⁷ Minister Fraser closed schools and four regional conferences were held across the country. A total of 5883 teachers attended, including 1598 in Wellington, where the queues stretched around the town hall to hear Isaacs speak about: 'home and school', 'emotional difficulties', 'the pre-school child' and 'activity and modern education'.⁷⁸ Isaacs gave several radio talks and such was the overwhelming response from listeners that the WFKA provided support with the correspondence from parents. Mrs Ethel Kidd, President of the NZFKU summed up the event:

An event of wonder to New Zealand was an official visit of New Education Fellowship leaders who toured the country giving a series of lectures in the four main towns. Thousands of teachers assembled to hear them, none more eager than members of Kindergarten staffs and groups of students in training. Their message concerned human matters in education and international understanding. Dr Kandel of Columbia University who wrote a review of New Zealand education, visited our Kindergartens, showing keen interest in their welfare. A New Zealand branch of the Fellowship has been formed with organised groups for the study of educational problems.⁷⁹

Many kindergarten and infant teachers became collegial participants in study groups concerning younger age children that flourished in regional centres for several years thereafter.⁸⁰ These were times when realising the ideals of new education seemed achievable. Miss Little not only shared these ideals, but she had over many years practiced the possibilities of 'modern methods' in her classroom and inspired others.

Immediately following the heady times of the NEF conference, kindergarten associations celebrated the centennial of the beginning of kindergarten. New Zealand kindergarteners still regarded themselves as Froebelian in their reverence of Froebel even though they had embraced new curriculum approaches and activities.⁸¹ Celebrations in Wellington included a street appeal for funds, and invitations to the public to visit kindergartens. As a council member Miss Little would have been involved in the early preparations. A centennial party was held on 12 August 1937 for 400 people including Richmond, Wellington's pioneer founder and the Minister of Education. In his address, Fraser acknowledged the work of Froebel and assured the audience, 'that whatever the present government could do to assist the movement would be done.'⁸² Kidd's NZFKU 1938 report noted that centenaries were occasions for retrospect but there was need to look for ways to expand:

What have we achieved? We have built up an efficient organisation; won for ourselves a recognized place in the scheme of education; gained the cooperation of the mothers of the various clubs and witnessed to the efficiency of voluntary service. But we cannot congratulate ourselves while our Kindergartens reach less than 2,000 children.⁸³

It is a pity that Miss Little did not live to see the political support for kindergarten expansion and the pedagogical value placed on ‘playway’ methods in the infant classes.⁸⁴ There was much government investment in both settings that collectively became the first wave of reform across the education sectors including teacher education over the next three decades. Progressive practice and new education methods which had been experimental in Miss Little’s time became mainstream. Those teachers who experimented with what new education might look like in mainstream classrooms and took the risks such as Miss Little were mainly forgotten.

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