

A Middle-class Farming Family Negotiates “the Rural School Problem” in Interwar Australia

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ABSTRACT

Rural schooling was a site of educational and social tensions, and the one-room government school was viewed as pedagogically traditional in interwar Australia. Given this context, this article explores the decision-making and educational practices of a white middle-class family in 1930s Western Australia. Former kindergarten teacher Marjorie Caw, her husband, Alf, and their two children lived on a sheep-wheat farm ten kilometres from a one-room school. Convinced that private rather than government schools were progressive, Marjorie supplied the children with their elementary education at home, sometimes resorting to correspondence lessons from the Western Australian education department, and sent them to urban private boarding schools for secondary education. The article canvasses dilemmas this created for her as a teacher and mother and argues that the Caw children's experiences demonstrated a more complex and less dichotomous situation regarding “the rural school problem” and progressive education in the interwar years than is typically recognized in the literature.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'Australie de l'entre-deux-guerres, l'enseignement en milieu rural était marqué par des tensions éducatives et sociales, alors que les écoles publiques d'une seule pièce étaient considérées comme une tradition pédagogique. Dans ce contexte, cet article explore les choix et les pratiques en matière d'éducation d'une famille blanche de la classe moyenne dans l'Australie-Occidentale des années 1930. Ancienne éducatrice à la maternelle, Marjorie Caw, son mari Alf et leurs deux enfants vivaient sur une ferme alliant la culture du blé et l'élevage des brebis à dix kilomètres d'une école d'une pièce. Convaincue que les écoles privées étaient plus progressistes que les écoles publiques, Marjorie fournissait aux enfants une éducation élémentaire à la maison, recourant parfois aux cours par correspondance du département de l'éducation de l'Australie-Occidentale, et les envoyait recevoir leur éducation secondaire dans des pensionnats privés urbains. L'article aborde les dilemmes que ces décisions ont engendrés pour elle en tant qu'enseignante et mère, et démontre que l'éducation des enfants de Majorie Caw a été vécue dans un contexte plus complexe que le suggère la dichotomie entre le « problème de l'école rurale » et l'éducation progressiste dans l'entre-deux-guerres.

In August 1930, Marjorie Caw, a former teacher who was living on a farm in Western Australia, described the following scene in her weekly letter to her mother, Edith Hubbe, a retired teacher living in the city of Adelaide, South Australia:

The children and I are ensconced in the nursery doing "school," the first for some time. Babe [Virginia, aged five] has one table and Billec [aged seven] another, and I am on a chair writing on my knee. Babe will try to do Billec's work and nearly drives me mad.¹

In fact, Marjorie was supervising her son Billec's correspondence lessons supplied by the Western Australian education department and would continue to do so, on and off, for the next eight years. Marjorie had been an urban pre-school kindergarten teacher prior to her marriage and was committed to progressive education. However, as a wife and the mother of two children, she spent nearly forty years living in a rural community. This paper provides insights into the decision-making and educational practices of the white, middle-class Caw family. More broadly, it provides another lens on the intertwined issues of child-centred progressive education and the "rural school problem" in interwar Australia.

Free, compulsory elementary schooling was a transnational phenomenon that spread through Western countries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.² While it was seemingly a mass movement, in white settler countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, Indigenous children were excluded from state school systems or were educated separately, as were children with disabilities.³ Denominational schools in Australia were not government-funded either, so about one-quarter of the total school population attended non-government, private institutions. Although the majority of these were Catholic schools, some wealthy, white, middle-class families continued to patronize fee-charging private schools, giving rise to the perception that the government schools were for working-class children.⁴

Furthermore, the prime concern of early advocates and administrators in white settler countries was urban schooling rather than rural, and structures, processes, and expenditures were tailored to this end. While urban government schools were comprehensively funded, education departments required small, rural communities to provide school buildings and subsidize teachers' wages in various ways. State school systems soon became differentiated between urban, age-graded schools with qualified teachers and one-room schools taught by mostly unqualified teachers in thinly populated, rural locations. One of the consequences was that "a 'good education' given the scarcity of educational facilities in country districts was perforce associated with the city."⁵

By the interwar years, rural schooling was a contentious subject. Government school systems were well-established in urban and closely settled areas, but accessing and providing schooling in geographically isolated and thinly populated regions posed many difficulties for rural families and education departments alike. Farming families, for example, had to reconcile their need for their children's labour with compulsory school attendance. In some cases, the content of schooling was perceived as

irrelevant and/or biased towards urban children. These problems were compounded because the curriculum presumed full-time attendance: many rural children fell behind and were portrayed as academically deficient, and their parents were castigated for not supporting schooling.⁶ In essence, compulsory schooling for white, rural children was a contested site both ideologically and in practice.

In 1920, a report from British Columbia stated categorically that "the rural school problem is the most serious question confronting educational administrators in the province."⁷ Wilson and Stortz argue that "the attention accorded rural schools came within the framework of an intensely introspective post-war society dominated by progressive thought embodied in the 'New Education' movement."⁸ Although the nomenclature varied in different countries, the New Education movement was transnational, also encompassing Great Britain, the United States, and the European nations. It was promulgated by *The New Era*, which was published in Britain, and leading educators following international study tours and conferences.⁹

In 1924, the New Education was the context for the Putman Weir report, which outlined a litany of problems to do with rural schools in British Columbia and which resonated with other provinces and Australian states. The issues included inadequate buildings and equipment along with students' transience and academic retardation. However, the blame was placed squarely on the teacher (who was presumed to be female, young, single, inadequately qualified, and transient) and her traditional rather than progressive pedagogical practices. In Australia, the intertwined arguments about rural schooling and progressive education followed similar lines.¹⁰ Whether or not progressive education was being embraced by Canadian teachers more generally continues to be debated.¹¹ Notwithstanding contrary evidence, the perception in Australia was that student-centred progressive education was the prerogative of pre-school kindergartens and middle-class private schools with lower student-teacher ratios, rather than government school systems.¹²

In both interwar Canada and Australia, there was also a substantial number of school-aged children who lived beyond the reach of any school. Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, there was a well-established tradition among some isolated Australian rural families of employing governesses, and this strategy continues in contemporary times, often in concert with private boarding schools for older students.¹³ Education departments in both countries also experimented with the employment of itinerant teachers and travelling schools, for example, before settling on correspondence lessons in the early twentieth century.¹⁴

Analyzing family letters to the education department in British Columbia, Gleason has revealed much about white working-class parents', especially mothers', and children's perspectives on their everyday lives, work, and engagement with education in the interwar years.¹⁵ Australian research has focused mostly on the structures and processes of correspondence schooling, and they matched those in Canada.¹⁶ It also seems that correspondence schooling was aligned with the New Education movement, thereby making a complex education landscape in Australia.¹⁷ This paper focuses on Marjorie Caw's navigation of that landscape from her home in rural Western Australia.

Much of this paper is based on private letters between Marjorie and her mother, Edith Hubbe, written in the interwar years. As with all correspondence, the letters reflect the writers' backgrounds and concerns, and their perceptions of the recipient.¹⁸ Both Edith and Marjorie wrote from the vantage point of white, middle-class women and mothers of British heritage, rather than the "rural working-class settler mothers" whose insights informed Gleason's research, for example.¹⁹ Furthermore, both women were qualified, confident, and experienced teachers, and were well-informed about progressive education.²⁰ Urged by Marjorie, who claimed that "old letters are real and human" and asserted that "all our family's letters are worth keeping," both women assiduously stored each other's letters.²¹ Their combined correspondence is voluminous and spans the period from Marjorie's marriage and relocation to Western Australia in 1922 to Edith's death in South Australia in 1942. During this period, they rarely visited each other, and telephone calls were expensive and therefore reserved for special occasions. Weekly letters were the principal means of communication between them and, as Stanley claims, were "the material expression of their relationships in that they maintained the flow of contact, exchange, chatter and so forth that would have taken place (in somewhat different ways) when present face to face."²² While Edith remained in the urban, white, middle-class milieu of Marjorie's childhood and youth, Marjorie's letters chart her gradual acculturation to marriage and motherhood, and domestic and community life in a rural context. The first section of this article focuses on Marjorie's transition from urban to rural life. Her letters provide insights into her everyday life and the importance of "generational continuity" in mediating the social disruption that took place when she married Alf Caw and relocated to a farm in Western Australia. As Reiger states, "generational and cultural links were crucial to managing personal trauma and the social changes, including population movements of the twentieth century."²³ The remainder of the article prioritizes Marjorie's decision-making and her involvement in her children's elementary and secondary education in the interwar years, while paying some attention to Edith and Alf's perspectives. In negotiating her interlocking roles as mother and teacher to Billec and Virginia, Marjorie was not only well aware of the rural school problem but was also committed to progressive education and generational continuity. I argue that her strategizing and educational practices complicated the binaries of rural and urban, and progressive and traditional, which underpinned much of the discussion about interwar education.

"At Home—Washing Day, Mail Day, Sunday Mark the Three Definite Days"

Marjorie Hubbe was born in the city of Adelaide in 1893. Her father, Samuel, was killed in the Second Anglo-Boer War in South Africa, and she and four siblings were raised by their schoolteacher mother, Edith. Edith had begun her career as a government schoolteacher in Adelaide, continued teaching after her marriage in 1885, and resigned to have her first child. She joined her sister in establishing a fee-charging private school for white, middle-class girls in 1886. Knightsbridge School was located in the middle-class suburb of the same name, and in the same street as the Hubbe family home. Marjorie and her sisters were educated at Knightsbridge rather than the local

government school, and her brothers went to a private boys' school as did Marjorie's future husband.²⁴ As McCalman states, "private schooling, especially in Victoria and South Australia, has always been an important part of being 'middle-class' in this country: it is not a necessary condition, but it is a widely desired and practised one."²⁵

The Hubbe family was also well-connected with leading social and educational progressives in Adelaide; Edith was a founding member of the Kindergarten Union of South Australia (KUSA), established in 1905 to provide free pre-school kindergartens along Froebelian lines for poor, white, working-class, inner-city children. KUSA also established the Adelaide Kindergarten Training College (KTC) as a fee-charging private institution.²⁶ On completion of her schooling at Knightsbridge, Marjorie enrolled at the KTC. When she commenced in February 1911, the KTC had just secured its independence after attempts had been made to amalgamate it with the government teachers' college. During these acrimonious debates, KTC supporters alleged that the government college and schools were preoccupied with the 3Rs and mired in traditional pedagogy. Henceforth, the KTC and Marjorie refused any association with government schools.²⁷

Led by Lillian de Lissa, the KTC was a progressive institution where Marjorie was introduced to a universal model of child development and the Froebelian ideal of learning through play. However, Marjorie's responses to exam questions demonstrated that she differentiated between people on the basis of class, race, and gender: She subscribed to the commonly held view that Indigenous peoples were in a stage of "arrested development," and she experienced some difficulty in reconciling her commitment to child-centred education with her deficit views of the white, working-class children whom she was teaching in the free kindergartens.²⁸

Following her graduation from the KTC, Marjorie and Edith spent 1914 overseas, and during that trip visited Maria Montessori in Italy. Enthused by Montessori's approach to progressive education, Marjorie conducted a private, fee-charging Montessori kindergarten in the Hubbe family home from 1915 until her marriage to Alf Caw in 1922.²⁹ With a good deal of ambivalence, Marjorie joined Alf, who was establishing a wheat-sheep farm in Western Australia in partnership with Marjorie's brother Max, more than 2,600 kilometres from Adelaide. Edith also retired from teaching but remained in the city. Thus began Edith and Marjorie's weekly correspondence.

The Caws' farm was situated 250 kilometres from the capital city of Perth and 32 kilometres from the substantial township of Kojonup, which had several businesses, churches, a government school, and a hospital. The Kojonup district was typical in Australia in that there was "a clear social hierarchy, headed by the largest local [white] landowner," and his wife and family. "The next rungs were occupied by clergymen, doctors, lawyers, bank managers and newspaper proprietors. Further down came teachers, policemen and local tradesmen," followed by railway and farm labourers, and finally Indigenous people.³⁰ Among the largest landholders, the Caws and Max Hubbe were at the apex of the social pyramid, with Max being advantaged by his status as a First World War veteran. There were also soldier settlers in the district but some struggled to make a living.³¹ Stripped of their land, the local Nyungar people

lived on the outskirts of Kojonup or moved from place to place, some camping on the Caws' farm with Alf's permission.³²

Marjorie Caw had no experience of rural life or housekeeping because her middle-class family had always employed domestic labour. She heeded Edith's advice to employ a "white servant," and several of the young women who worked in the Caw household over the years were the daughters of poorer farmers.³³ Although Marjorie maintained her social distance, referring to the maids as the "lower orders," she shared all of the domestic duties, which were structured around cooking the midday meal for the whole household.³⁴ In April 1928, she wrote proudly, "I fowled [preserved] quinces, more tomatoes and made chutney last Friday... I have turned into quite a *housekeeper*."³⁵ Keeping poultry was also Marjorie's domain and she adored gardening, but she never participated in farm work, thereby maintaining her status as a white, middle-class woman.³⁶

In time, there were well-established routines in the Caw household: Monday "washing day, mail day, Sunday mark the three definite days" of the week.³⁷ Tuesday was mail day when the all-important letters from Edith, family, and friends were delivered, along with supplies from Kojonup, and Marjorie and Alf's correspondence were collected by the mail man. Marjorie's attachment to her cultural and family background continued to be central to her life in rural Western Australia.³⁸ It not only manifested itself in her correspondence, but also in domestic routines, objects such as "gran's fruitcake," which was served to visitors, plants from South Australian family and friends in her garden, and fiction and non-fiction books that circulated among family and friends. Marjorie was an avid reader and her evenings were spent reading, sewing, and listening to the wireless radio.³⁹ Sunday was the only day of the week when Alf's farm work was suspended and he spent time indoors.

Marjorie and Alf's social networks were confined to three or four white, middle-class farming families who visited with each other on Sundays and shared special occasions such as Christmas.⁴⁰ In keeping with their class, race, and gendered identities, however, the Caws assumed leading positions in the community. Alf was chairman of the (local government) Roads Board, named for its chief function.⁴¹ Confident in her capacity to lead, Marjorie asserted that "it is a waste for people with useful executive brains to do nothing but blasted house cleaning and cooking which less good brains would do as well and more happily."⁴² In 1932, "Mrs. Caw presided over a large attendance" at the initial meeting of the Kojonup Country Women's Association (CWA) and was duly elected president.⁴³ In 1934, the CWA and Roads Board combined to build a playground in Kojonup. Marjorie wrote:

There are no play places for children and they grow into such vicious youths and easy virtued girls, and a playground might make them more healthy in every way. Of course, I am not hinting at such a thing to the Kojonup people—only the health and happiness stunt.⁴⁴ [underlining in original]

Of course, the Nyungar people were marginalized from the Caws' social networks and all of these community facilities and organizations.

In essence, kindergarten teacher Marjorie Caw transitioned from her urban, middle-class family into rural life in the 1920s. The Caw household was busy: Marjorie and the maid cooked, cleaned, and washed for Alf and a farm labourer; and they also fed a procession of male visitors to the farm. Marjorie kept poultry, established a large flower and vegetable garden, and was committed to community improvement, as befitted her status. She not only turned into a housekeeper and wife, but also became the mother of two children. Alec William (Billec) was born in January 1923 and Alice Virginia (Babe) in January 1925, and in time Marjorie had to make decisions about their education.⁴⁵

Correspondence Lessons "Will Compel Regularity... on a Farm"

In Western Australia, free, compulsory schooling applied to white children from the age of six to fourteen, and most Indigenous children were excluded from government education. In 1920 there were 793 government schools in Western Australia, with 580 of these being one-room rural schools.⁴⁶ In 1918, the Western Australian education department began to supply correspondence lessons for white children who were located too far away to attend any school. By 1930, thirty-six teachers based in Perth were sending and marking lessons every fortnight for 1,800 white students. The correspondence curriculum encompassed all subjects except physical education and music.⁴⁷

Besides the government school with approximately 100 students in Kojonup, there were several one-room schools in the district. Notwithstanding Marjorie's previous occupation, teachers were not included in the Caws' social circle. Headmasters and teachers, bank managers, and policemen as male employees of bureaucratic organizations based in capital cities were seen as "outsiders" in rural Australia.⁴⁸ They usually worked in rural areas "until promotion to higher office and the needs of their children's education recalled them to the metropolis."⁴⁹ Teachers' transience was exacerbated by the marriage bar, which compelled women teachers to resign when they married.⁵⁰ Together, these strategies and regulations contributed to the deficit view of rural education and the "rural school problem." Marjorie Caw rarely mentioned the local teaching workforce in letters to her mother.

The closest one-room school, Jinalup, was ten kilometres from the Caws' farm. Opened in 1919 and staffed by women teachers throughout the interwar years, the building was provided by the white settlers and doubled as the community hall.⁵¹ However, Jinalup was too far from the farm for young children to travel alone and Marjorie could not drive a car. In addition to these practical considerations, Marjorie had no experience of government schooling as a student or teacher. There were ideological issues as well. Marjorie's antipathy towards government schooling stemmed not only from her class-consciousness, but also from a curriculum and pedagogy that she considered traditional. Her options for elementary schooling were to employ a governess, teach Billec and Virginia using her knowledge and experience as a kindergarten teacher, or request correspondence lessons from the Western Australian education department. Only one family in the district employed a governess, and

two or three families used correspondence lessons that were supervised by mothers.⁵²

Marjorie had taken her Montessori materials to the farm and, in November 1927, four-year-old Billec and Virginia (Babe), aged two, “do Montessori most mornings now and seemed to profit by it, Babe particularly. Billec is doing number work principally, but letters occasionally.”⁵³ Although this strategy enabled Marjorie to deploy her pedagogical skills as a teacher and established continuity between Billec and Virginia’s rural education and progressive urban kindergartens, it imposed another task on Marjorie’s already-hectic domestic schedule. Billec was soon “reading nicely but I fear not so regularly.”⁵⁴

In April 1928, Marjorie’s prejudices against government schooling came to the fore: she was “looking up correspondence classes of the Western Australian government and am amazed at their rudimentariness!”⁵⁵ Teachers at the correspondence school took “special care that all lessons be made so simple as to be easily understood” and completed by students “with a little help and supervision by parents” who had limited time and pedagogical knowledge.⁵⁶ While this was a realistic assessment of most Australian rural families and their counterparts in Canada, parents were positioned as subordinate to teachers. Former kindergarten teacher Marjorie resisted such subordination and was determined to be a more active agent in negotiating her children’s education. She sought Edith’s advice on age-grading, asking “what age is standard 2?” Ever the teacher as well as mother and grandmother, Edith proffered her opinions and suggestions, including how to teach subtraction.⁵⁷ Early in 1929, Edith wrote:

I hope you will give Billec and Babe regular lessons this year! You can do it so well and it is time Billec was having the regular hours of work and training to apply himself... you have got such good apparatus that it should be interesting teaching. It is always difficult to teach one’s own children in the house but if you are determined and do not let yourself be interrupted they will soon come to it.⁵⁸

More or less reluctantly, Marjorie began correspondence lessons with Billec (aged six) in October 1929, noting that “we will have to post papers every fortnight... it will compel regularity which is so cursedly difficult on a farm. Probably he and I will be very busy in the last two days before mail Tuesday but that will be like the Dalton system perhaps.”⁵⁹ Her decision seemed to be related to her competing role as housekeeper. Supervision had to be incorporated into her domestic routines and correspondence lessons would induct her son into regular habits. However, her reference to the Dalton Plan indicated that her decision-making was also informed by her previous work as a progressive teacher. Given that Edith was well-versed in progressive education, there was no need for further explanation of the Dalton Plan of self-directed learning which was being used in some Canadian schools and some Australian private schools, including a few in Adelaide, in the 1920s.⁶⁰

When it came to correspondence schooling, Marjorie’s knowledge and commitment to progressive education was both a blessing and a burden. She had much in

common with the rural working-class mothers who had to reconcile supervision of their children's correspondence lessons with domestic work, but Marjorie was not content merely to oversee the lessons. As a former teacher, she was committed to deploying her knowledge and pedagogical experience to ensure that Billec and Virginia's rural education was activity-based, appropriate to their developmental stage, and engaged their interests. Within a month, she complained:

The correspondence lessons aren't very thrilling and far too easy and they expect them to take three hours a day, and Billec and Virginia could do them in far less time and I could teach them far better than that in far less time—this education business is a curse.⁶¹

Teaching her children at home required a substantial investment of time and pedagogical skill, but there was no reduction in the amount of cooking, cleaning, gardening, and community work that occupied Marjorie's week. She moved the Montessori cupboard into the dining room so that she could simultaneously teach the children and supervise the maid in the kitchen, but it was very difficult to devote regular time to instruction.⁶² During one maid's bi-monthly weekend leave, Marjorie contemplated the situation:

If a person had a really convenient house and could get the laundry done there would not be so much harm in doing with no maid, tho' I don't think I could teach the children or garden or do poultry at the same time and keep sane.⁶³

The tensions between Marjorie's multiple duties were exacerbated by her preconceptions of government schooling as traditional and these consistently mediated her judgments of correspondence lessons. As a progressive teacher, she became concerned about the amount of written work expected of Billec.⁶⁴ Having never experienced government schooling as a student or teacher, she consulted her maid and reported: "May said they needed a great deal of written work when she was at school so it may be the state school method."⁶⁵

Notwithstanding Marjorie's dismal view of government schooling and pedagogy, the correspondence curriculum was comprehensive and underpinned by progressive ideas. Indeed, the leading British journal, *The New Era*, highlighted the Western Australian correspondence school as an exemplar of progressive education.⁶⁶ Self-expression through creative writing and poetry were strongly encouraged, plus students had access to a circulating library of 2,000 books. From 1926, the education department initiated *Our Rural Magazine* and featured children's work. This publication "played a crucial role in providing appropriate examples of verse-writing for classroom study throughout the 1920s and 1930s, including the efforts of child poets."⁶⁷

Western Australian administrators explained the progressive features of correspondence schooling in newspaper articles and assured readers that the standards were "equal to that obtained in any city school."⁶⁸ Furthermore, there were regular

testimonies from mothers and former students.⁶⁹ Acclaimed Australian novelist, poet, and playwright Dorothy Hewitt experienced correspondence schooling in Western Australia at the same time as Billec and Virginia. Hewitt reflected that “correspondence classes suited the sort of child I was. There was a high emphasis on the art side of education, on things like creative writing and illustrating your own writing, and nature study, going into the field and drawing the birds, trees and animals.”⁷⁰ In 1931, Marjorie Caw conceded that “Virginia is reading a lot of poetry now and enjoying it”⁷¹ but she was intensely critical of the basal readers, contrasting them with her childhood experiences.

Billec has read about eighteen pages of his new reader and the print of that is normal size. The stories are dull — our old *Tom Tit Tot* book was far nicer. The stories are so emasculated nowadays. We might have got nightmares from our old giants and witches but these stories are too dull to make any impression on either the conscious or unconscious mind. Billec and Babe are all right because I read them so many other stories but it is awful to think that that is all the public [government] school children get. No wonder they love moving pictures where something does happen and one can *feel* something.⁷²

It seems that Marjorie’s anxieties were not just about the educational practices, but she was equally concerned that Billec and Virginia receive an education that preserved their middle-class status and was commensurate with her urban private schooling.

Another progressive strategy embedded in Western Australian correspondence lessons was the requirement to utilize illustrations as a pictorial expression of comprehension.⁷³ The *West Australian* outlined its merits but Marjorie complained about Billec’s “fiddling number work... They will make him draw all sorts of things and of course he is ready for abstract numbers and real sums but I suppose I must carry on with their ideas because it does help a bit to keep him going. He does not like the work except reading and oral work.”⁷⁴ Here, Marjorie’s concerns stemmed from her understanding that intellectual development occurred in regular stages through which all white children passed.⁷⁵

Activity-based nature study lessons were in keeping with Marjorie Caw’s progressive stance. Instructions for these lessons were outlined in *Our Rural Magazine* and began with her great passion for home gardening. The correspondence school supplied seeds, and Billec and Babe worked alongside Marjorie in the vegetable patch.⁷⁶ Correspondence children also completed bird, animal, and insect observation charts as part of this subject.⁷⁷

Marjorie periodically abandoned correspondence lessons “because they were too dull” and always supplemented them.⁷⁸ In so doing, she drew on her prior knowledge of Froebelian principles and activities, and her kindergarten teaching experience. In July 1930, she wrote that “Billec is using my kindergarten handwork book [for paper folding activities] which often inspires him.”⁷⁹ She asked Edith to purchase and send brass compasses and jigsaw puzzles to Western Australia.⁸⁰ She ordered “a raffia weaving frame” from Melbourne “as the children are at the weaving stage” and she taught

music and practised French with the children at the dinner table.⁸¹

Marjorie also kept abreast of new ideas by subscribing to *The New Era*, where she discovered a "very good plan for teaching Geography." She "evolved a plan for teaching history" on the same line and used "H. G. Wells books as a check on my endeavour."⁸² Marjorie read Billec's textbook ahead of him and sought Edith's expert advice on teaching history.⁸³

Marjorie was a knowledgeable, experienced, and conscientious teacher who was also juggling housework, care of poultry, gardening, and community involvement in her everyday work. The multiple demands on her time affected her complex relationship with government schooling, and she was frequently frustrated with one or more elements of her work. The exception was gardening, which gave her a great deal of pleasure. Although her critique of correspondence schooling was trenchant, she conceded that Billec and Virginia mostly enjoyed their lessons and met, and sometimes exceeded, the standards. There are also indications that she began to revise her assessment of correspondence schooling: In May 1934, she wrote:

Virginia is delighted and so am I as she passed her annual examination very well and is promoted to the Third Standard. The work is far more interesting and varied, and the books provided quite good. She is doing history which we much enjoy. It is a common little book to look at but with real sting in it and some good writing; vile copies of good illustrations on vile paper. It is a W[estern] A[ustralian] publication.⁸⁴

"Parent Responsibilities in Child Training"

In July 1930, *The New Era* was renamed *The New Era in Home and School* and it began to focus on "parent-teacher cooperation and child study." Canadian psychologist William Blatz contributed "Parent Responsibilities in Child Training" to this issue, nominating "education, socialisation and emancipation" as their duties.⁸⁵ As both parent and teacher, Marjorie keenly read this journal. She "itched to read the books" that were reviewed and bought *The Intellectual Growth of Young Children* by Susan Isaacs, a British psychologist, after reading its review.⁸⁶ Marjorie was well aware of her parental responsibilities for stimulating her children's physical, social, and psychological, as well as intellectual, development.⁸⁷ She endeavoured to ensure that her children had a "normal childhood" — patterned on white, middle-class values, of course.⁸⁸

Aside from a few colds, Billec and Virginia were very healthy. The Caw children had access to plenty of fresh meat, fruit, and vegetables; and Marjorie and the maid kept the home as clean as climatic conditions allowed on a farm. Marjorie occasionally sought medical advice and supplies of a multi-purpose supplement, Tricalcine, from her sister, who was a doctor in Adelaide.⁸⁹ She watched for signs of Billec and Virginia's emotional and social development and was satisfied that they were basically obedient and happy children.⁹⁰ Because they had very little peer contact, she took

particular note of their capacity to interact with other children who visited the farm with their parents.⁹¹ They participated in the annual Jingalup school sports day and fancy dress competitions, but otherwise there was limited socialization with other children.⁹²

The presence of toys and books in the Caws' home was indicative of a "normal" childhood.⁹³ Marjorie shared all her "book enthusiasms," and Alf joined in sometimes.⁹⁴ Besides encyclopedias, Billec and Virginia had access to some of Marjorie's childhood books but "children's books were hard to come by" in rural Western Australia.⁹⁵ Edith assisted enormously by buying them Australian children's fiction.⁹⁶ In April 1931, Marjorie was "reading *Dot and the Kangaroo* to the children. It is a really good story."⁹⁷ As a good parent, Marjorie helped her children "feel that they are part of the world" through access to books and also through family holidays, mostly at the coastal township of Albany.⁹⁸ She understood that these cultural activities contributed to generational continuity and were another marker of social difference from the local community.

As both mother and teacher to Billec and Virginia, Marjorie's responsibilities were inextricably entwined in the matter of their intellectual development. Mothers were expected to take an interest in contemporary educational issues, including government funding: "A related theme was that parents should appreciate, support and listen to teachers."⁹⁹ As previously stated, correspondence schooling was based on similar assumptions about parents' subordinate roles. Marjorie's dual responsibilities were complementary in cases such as reading with the children, but there were discordant moments, especially around the assessment of correspondence lessons. Sending Billec and Virginia's work to Perth created tensions, not only because it had to be completed by Tuesday mail day, but also because Marjorie was wary of the potential for judging her both as a mother and a teacher in the process of marking. She kept her social distance from the government teachers in the Kojonup district, and there was no hint of a collegial relationship with the correspondence teachers either. In June 1930, she wrote that "Billec and I have just folded up his correspondence work for Miss Fowler, his teacher. I think it is quite good but she will blame as usual."¹⁰⁰ On another occasion, Marjorie as mother was "not happy with the current teacher who is so rude to poor Babe."¹⁰¹ There were positive times as well, especially when correspondence schooling "was really quite excellent... and the teachers are quite personal and encouraging. That toad before hated all we did."¹⁰² Reconciling teaching and mothering was an ongoing challenge.

Finally, Virginia and Billec experienced plenty of informal learning on the farm, including playing with their numerous cats, dogs, and pet lambs.¹⁰³ They occasionally accompanied Alf but were not expected to participate regularly in farm work.¹⁰⁴ There were also skills that Marjorie could not teach: in June 1930, Bella, the maid, offered to teach the children to ride a horse, for which Marjorie was very grateful. With typical wit and humour, she commented:

what a hell of a lot of things children *have* to be taught, swimming, riding, music, drawing, dancing as well as all the school subjects; to be clean, moral

and tidy as well. No wonder Marie Stopes [the British authority on birth control] is so popular an authoress.¹⁰⁵

Ultimately, their mother-cum-teacher ensured that the Caw children experienced a comprehensive and progressive home education during their elementary school years.

Whereas the school-leaving age of fourteen divided childhood from adult responsibilities for most white children in Western Australia, this was not the case for middle-class Billec and Virginia. Proctor and Weaver argue that there were "several dimensions of complexity in the job of mothering for (prolonged) schooling, including the emotional and intellectual work required to negotiate the life paths of older children."¹⁰⁶ Marjorie invested heavily in the decision-making about her children's secondary schooling, first with Billec. He was not very interested in the farm and there was a widespread perception that only dull boys took up farm work anyway.¹⁰⁷ Marjorie portrayed him as introspective and brilliant with his hands, always making models and jigsaws. In May 1934, for example, he made some "beautiful toys" including "a flapping winged duck and a turtle that wags its head, tail and legs" for the annual exhibition of correspondence students' work at the Centenary Pavilion in Perth.¹⁰⁸ Some secondary schooling was available via correspondence lessons and the education department offered four scholarships for rural children to attend high schools that were located in Perth and major regional centres.¹⁰⁹ However, Marjorie did not consider these options.

Convinced that "Billec is such a darling with such clever head and hands that I could not bear to think of him not getting all the chances a boy of our kind should have," Marjorie sent for prospectuses from elite boys' private boarding schools. She discussed their merits with Alf and Edith, noting to Edith that "the photographs look very attractive but the dormitories gave a mother a pang—rows of beds and no cubicles or privacy."¹¹⁰ However, Alf had made some bad investments and wool prices had slumped: he gratefully accepted Edith's offer to pay the fees for Billec's private schooling. As McCalman notes, "grandparents and maiden aunts often helped out financially."¹¹¹ After much discussion, they decided to send twelve-year-old Billec to Adelaide to live with his grandmother Edith and attend St Peter's College, Alf's alma mater, in January 1935. Alf was "really delighted to think of him at Saints."¹¹² Generational continuity was assured, as was social class, because Saints was arguably the most elite private school in Adelaide.

For the following five years, Edith and Marjorie's correspondence tracked Billec's schooling intimately. Ever the teacher, Edith invested her intellectual capital heavily, helping Billec with Latin and history. Alf, Marjorie, and Edith dissected the St Peter's curriculum and expressed their disappointment: far from being an exemplar of progressive education, there was "not a single 'doing' or creative subject" in 1935, so it was arranged that Billec enrol in "carpentry and drawing" in 1936.¹¹³ Billec's reports were also scrutinized closely.¹¹⁴ When he came top in Latin, Alf commented wryly, "he ought to say granny and I are top." Marjorie added that she was "pleased that he is now used to school/academic, probably next year he will get accustomed to playing," sport being a key agent of socialization in private boys' schools.¹¹⁵ Cricket,

rowing, and football had long been an integral part of school life at St Peter's College, which recruited many of its staff from English public schools.¹¹⁶

Virginia continued with correspondence lessons, except at shearing time, when she was "in the shed most of the day or out mustering" where she felt "amazingly free with no teaching."¹¹⁷ Virginia enjoyed listening to the wireless which had begun to broadcast programs for children in 1935.¹¹⁸ She joined the *Western Mail* Junior group and wrote letters to the newspaper about her pets and farm life.¹¹⁹ She was interested in the farm, but farm work was not an option for a white, middle-class girl, and Marjorie and Alf were reluctant to send her to boarding school so young.

In February 1938, thirteen-year-old Virginia was enrolled in the Jingalup one-room school, which had re-opened as an "assisted school" after a year's hiatus for lack of children. The education department required a minimum enrolment of six students and insisted that the local community provide the building and subsidize the teacher's wages.¹²⁰ Virginia rode her bicycle partway and was collected by another family for the remainder of the ten-kilometre journey.¹²¹ Marjorie tempered her opinion of government schooling and its pedagogical practices as soon as she saw that the schoolroom was "supplied with lots of good maps and posters and friezes and a clean floor." These teaching materials indicated that the teacher, Frances Muir, might be adopting and adapting progressive pedagogy to suit her students.¹²² Furthermore, "Miss Muir looked most pleasant" and was invited to spend a weekend on the farm: she met with approval. Virginia loved school and "seems more of a scholar than she used to be."¹²³ Given that the materials, teacher, and her daughter's progress were satisfactory, there was little evidence of the rural school problem to distract Marjorie. Edith asked to see Virginia's reports and they also met with approval.¹²⁴

Within a week of Virginia's enrolment, Marjorie was fulfilling her duties as a mother and community worker. She had joined the Jingalup parents and citizens committee, was lobbying for a wireless at the school, and complaining that:

the government is mean to all these small schools and has just spent £53,000 on a beautiful girls' school in Perth. You sometimes wish a government had only one neck so you could wring it for them, but it takes so long to extirpate a field of stink weed doesn't it.¹²⁵

Henceforth, she worked assiduously for the local schools, fundraising to supplement the inadequate government investment in rural education. Alf played his part by renovating the rickety desks at Jingalup.¹²⁶ Unfortunately, Jingalup closed again in 1940 for want of students, much to the Caws' and Edith's disappointment.¹²⁷ Marjorie also used her position in the CWA to advocate for hostels for rural children attending district high schools.¹²⁸ However, there were definite limits to the Caws' relationship with the state school system. Enrolling in a government high school was not an option for Virginia.

Throughout 1938, Marjorie searched for a private girls' school that would enable her daughter to complete secondary schooling "in preparation for being a kindergartener," which was Virginia's ambition.¹²⁹ Edith was involved in the decision-making,

and Marjorie's sister would help with the fees.¹³⁰ Neither the advertisements for Kobeelya, "a select country boarding school" for girls, nor a visit to the premises convinced Marjorie of its suitability.¹³¹ They eventually chose the new Park School in Albany, 160 kilometres from the farm. "Formerly the state governor's summer residence," Park School was led by Miss Margaret Swan, whose qualifications were vetted by Edith.¹³² Virginia enrolled in February 1939 and Marjorie hoped that "the tone of the school is towards work, not too much sport or social stuff."¹³³ Virginia was much more gregarious than Billec, so her socialization was not an issue.

Virginia's private school relocated to Perth in 1940.¹³⁴ Edith sent a long letter to Virginia in case she felt lonely at the beginning of term and also discussed Virginia's future kindergarten training with Marjorie.¹³⁵ Marjorie castigated the teachers at Park School "with so much of the Junior English, History and Geography untouched. I am appalled at such slackness"¹³⁶ [underlining in original]. Edith commiserated with Marjorie and urged Virginia to work hard.¹³⁷ Attempting to supplement the deficiencies, Marjorie and Virginia were "reading the Merchant of Venice together every night" while she was home on vacation.¹³⁸ Although Marjorie conceptualized private schooling as progressive and superior to government institutions, neither of the private schools attended by the Caw children met their mother-cum-teacher's expectations. Nevertheless, Virginia graduated successfully in 1942.¹³⁹ And so ended Billec and Virginia's formal education and Marjorie's oversight as their mother and teacher.

Conclusion

In 1931, a British progressive educator, Gwen Watkins, reviewed the Australian book *Primary Education by Correspondence* in *The New Era* and commented that the "title suggested a dead and lifeless book and it was somewhat of a surprise to find oneself following a romantic adventure in education."¹⁴⁰ Watkins had much in common with Marjorie Caw: both women had trained under the leadership of Lillian de Lissa. Watkins did so after de Lissa relocated to England as the foundation principal of Gipsy Hill Teacher Training College. Both women invested in Montessori's ideas, with Watkins leading the first (Montessori) nursery school at McGill University in Montreal for five years before returning to England.¹⁴¹ De Lissa, Watkins, and Caw also contributed to the transnational flow of ideas about the New Education in their travel, teaching, and writing. However, Marjorie Caw's letters to her mother did not portray correspondence schooling as a romantic adventure.

Marjorie was raised in a white, middle-class, urban family at the turn of the century, when education was free and compulsory in state school systems but was by no means inclusive of all Australian children. It was divided by class, race, gender, and location, and these social differences marked Marjorie's education and her work as a kindergarten teacher prior to her marriage. She belonged to a family that believed that "the true mark of being 'middle-class' was being educated, preferably in a private school."¹⁴² She also spent her childhood, youth, and working life as a kindergarten teacher amidst influential people who claimed a nexus between private schooling and progressive education. She left Adelaide in 1922 with minimal knowledge of

domestic work, plenty of teaching experience, and a commitment to progressive education, but deficit views of rural communities and government schooling.

Coming to terms with life in a rural context, Marjorie adhered to the social hierarchy in her relationships at home, in the Kojonup community, and in her decision-making about her children's schooling. She strategized to sidestep the rural school problem and provide Billec and Virginia with a progressive elementary and secondary education that maintained generational continuity and was commensurate with their middle-class status. Her foray into correspondence schooling as part of the state school system challenged her identities as a well-informed progressive teacher and mother. She experienced the same issues of time management as working-class mothers in rural Canada did, but she was able to be proactive in her children's elementary schooling because she had the knowledge, pedagogical skills, and access to transnational conversations about the New Education. However, she could not call upon experience of government schooling to help her interpret correspondence lessons, and her frustrations are evident in her correspondence with Edith. Marjorie's support for the Jingalup one-room school is indicative of her capacity to reconsider her stance on government elementary schooling; it also suggests the need for further interrogation of progressive pedagogy in the rural Australian context.

Finally, this article has not only highlighted Marjorie's perspectives and everyday negotiations of mothering and teaching, but also demonstrated that progressive educational practices were not necessarily the prerogative of urban private schools. Progressive pedagogy underpinned correspondence lessons of the Western Australian education department, but the two private secondary schools attended by the Caw children did not match their mother-cum-teacher's vision of progressivism. It could be that the adoption of progressive ideas was as patchy and uneven in private schools as in state school systems in white settler countries, though this would require further research. Virginia and Billec's experiences of elementary and secondary, rural and urban, government and private schooling demonstrated a far more fluid situation regarding the rural school problem and progressive education in the interwar years.

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