



THE TRIUMPHAL CAREER OF MARIA MONTESSORI

I've often felt that lives should not be defined by their endings. The image of an eighty year old individual in failing health is no more representative of a total life than the image of an infant. It is the totality of an experience that should be considered.



Too often, Maria Montessori is pictured as this benign, elderly woman, in heavy dark clothing, like some antiquated object. In fact, she was symbolic of the modern woman. Highly educated, independent, striking out on her own as a single parent, and facing the vicissitudes of life with amazing resiliency. She was an indomitable spirit who was dedicated to an idea that would never leave her.

Join me on a brief journey to gain some appreciation of her true identity.

Some of this material was commissioned by a strong woman in her own right, Cathy Barr, of a very fine Montessori School called Clanmore. A part of what follows was published, originally, in Dialogue Magazine, an educational publication. It was gratifying that the material was so widely appreciated by admirers of Maria Montessori around the world.



Dr. Robert Gardner, Professor Emeritus, Ryerson University.

The Maria Montessori No One Knows: A Heartbreaking Betrayal – Part 1 of 2

August 31st is Maria Montessori's 142nd Birthday and to celebrate Clanmore Montessori would like to share this article with you. Proudly, it is a collaboration between Dr. Robert Gardner and Clanmore Montessori School, written by Dr. Gardner

Dr. Maria Montessori is one of the most famous women in the world and yet a key part of her life is all but unknown. Dr. Robert Gardner, working with colleagues at Clanmore Montessori in Oakville, Ont., took a new look at a time in Maria Montessori's life that is glossed over, even by her most noted biographers. "Not to know this story is to have an incomplete understanding of one of history's most remarkable women," says Cathy Sustronk, one of the founders of Clanmore.

By Dr. Robert Gardner



When Maria Montessori was 30 (in 1900) her father presented her with a book filled with 200 articles he had clipped from the national and international press, all of which wrote glowingly about his unusually talented daughter. She was known as the “beautiful scholar,” and in an age when women were blocked from most professions and careers she had – against all odds – become the first woman physician in Italy. She had been interviewed by Queen Victoria and had represented her country at major international conferences. She was elegant, poised and – perhaps – just a bit vain. She was at the height of her fame, and it seemed that she could achieve anything. At this heady moment she was appointed the co-director for a school in Rome. It was an unprecedented appointment for a woman in that very conservative time. Her partner was another young physician, Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano. Italian sources suggest that he was not in robust good health, but he was elegantly handsome. He came from the south of Italy and in his family, while the sons all entered the professions, the daughters were consigned to “womanly tasks” such as lace-making and the study of music.

He and Montessori fell in love and she became pregnant. At that time, especially in Italy, to have a child out of wedlock would have been disastrous to anyone. Montessori was facing the ignominy of being a scarlet woman. Montesano’s mother, by all accounts a very severe dowager, refused to consider marriage. Montesano was desperate. Montessori, perhaps for the first time in a charmed life, was bewildered. Montesano had a solution. He would give the child his name, but the baby would have to be sent away to a

wet nurse as soon as it was born. There was, however, no possibility of marriage. His mother, a woman who traced her ancestry to the House of Aragon, the rulers of southern Italy, was adamant.

Montessori was devastated. Montesano, in trying to calm her, promised that he would never marry anyone else. She was the only one for him. Montessori made the same vow. In a sense, they would have a spiritual union which made the disastrous consequences of their affair less dismal.

A Crisis, Then Remarkable Recovery

A year later Montesano betrayed her and married another woman. Montessori was in complete crisis. She had sent her baby son away to live with strangers and she could not openly acknowledge the child's relationship to her. In the next decade she would see the child occasionally, but she never indicated to the boy that she was his mother. She was a tortured soul.

In this moment of absolute defeat she did something remarkable. Instead of crumbling under the strain, she went into the seclusion of a convent to meditate. Before the crisis she was likely somewhat egotistical and her life had been filled with triumph after triumph. As a woman of her time, and as an Italian, she was – of course – a Roman Catholic. But her faith was the faith of a scientist and a scholar, skeptical and refined.

Now this proud and brilliant woman was reduced to a state of desperation. However, during the days and weeks in seclusion something incredible happened. In fact, she underwent a complete psychological transformation and she emerged from this period of self-examination with a set of goals which seem unbelievable to the modern observer. She appeared determined to totally reinvent herself. She moved forward with a resolution that is at once baffling and inspiring.

Although she was the first female medical doctor in the history of Italy, she decided to leave the practice of medicine forever. Abruptly, and without explanation, she resigned her prestigious post as co-director of an institute for developmentally challenged children. Then she enrolled at the University of Rome to master totally new areas of study. She took courses in anthropology, educational philosophy, and experimental psychology. At the same time, she made another momentous decision that changed the course of education and teaching forever. Up to this time she had been preoccupied with children who were in some ways in the language of the times, "feeble minded." Now she decided to focus all of her energies on improving pedagogy for the normal child. With that decision, Dr. Maria Montessori proceeded to revolutionize our thoughts about infancy and the incredible capacities of children from the very moment of birth.

In a strange way, if there had been no Dr. Montesano there would have been no Maria Montessori. He, inadvertently, became the catalyst for a monumental emotional crisis

that led Montessori, just into her thirties, to challenge every misconception about the capacities and needs of the very young.



Maria with her devoted son, Mario Montesano Montessori

A Son's Influence.

Dr. Montesano never recognized his child, Mario Montessori, as his own. Indeed, even Maria Montessori, on her many tours where Mario was her faithful interpreter, always introduced him as either her nephew or her adopted son. It was when she was close to death that she accepted him publicly and in her will she identified him as “Il figlio mio” – my son.

Montesano, though, was never more than a footnote to history while Maria Montessori was nominated for the Nobel Peace prize three times. Among scores of honours, she was the recipient of the French Legion of Honour decoration, and she received honorary doctorates from some of the greatest universities in the world.

Mario Montessori co-founded the Association Montessori Internationale with his mother, Maria Montessori, in 1929.

It was a terrible crisis that forged her untiring will to help children everywhere to reach their true potential. Without that searing ordeal her name, like that of the man who betrayed her, may have been forgotten.

It might be thought that the crisis that shaped her thinking might somehow have diminished her. Even generous modern readers may wonder why she abandoned her child for almost 15 years. The fact is, this terrible tragedy steeled her to recreate herself and caused her to focus her incredible talents in an effort to somehow make amends for the tragic loss of her son's presence during his formative years.

One day, when he was 15, the young Mario Montessori noticed an elegant woman watching him with great interest. Something told him that this was his mother. He approached her and they were reunited. For the rest of his life, although he subsequently married, he was her constant companion and confidant. They were inseparable and together they created an approach to education that exists to this day.

The remarkable ending to this story is that modern research continues to validate her findings. In a recent study by Dr. Angeline Lillard, titled *The Science Behind the Genius*, Dr. Lillard collects scores of modern research findings which support Dr. Montessori's earliest views on educating the child. Increasingly Dr. Montessori's observations are being employed in secondary schools with stunning results. In fact, her ideas could well be employed in the university system where students are often isolated in an arid world of abstract lectures.

Maria Montessori, in some academic settings, is ignored precisely because she had such a trenchant insight into the failings of so much of what we call education. More than half a century after her death her influence is still making itself felt, still creating a sense of discomfort amongst some professional educators, and still pointing towards a more humane form of transmitting information to young children and adolescents.



PART TWO

In the **first of this two-part series**, educational consultant Robert Gardner writes about the crisis Maria Montessori faced when her son, Mario, was born out of wedlock and how that crisis contributed to the development of her thinking about the capacities of children. In this article, Gardner explores how Montessori's experiences as an "enemy alien" in India during World War II contributed to her understanding of language development in the very young.

THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Just before the outbreak of World War II, Maria Montessori and her son were invited to visit India. At the time of the invitation, Maria was a mature woman of 69.



It was the beginning of a trip of discovery which had profound implications for Maria and her philosophy. Like her earlier experiences surrounding the birth of her son, the journey to India created another time of crisis, which brought her to new realizations about the unique capacities of the very young.

The stay in India began in 1939 but, unexpectedly, it was to last until 1946, well after World War II had come to a conclusion.

Perhaps it was somewhat naïve of the Montessoris to make the trip to the subcontinent. As part of the British Empire, India was at odds with the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and his Fascist state. In fact, when Italy declared war on Great Britain on June 10, 1940, Maria and her son were immediately identified as “enemy aliens.” Maria was stunned. Everything in her training and in her personal and religious philosophy placed her squarely against the Italian dictator. Fundamentally she was a pacifist and someone who believed that all people were substantially the same. There was nothing in her ideas that reflected the bombastic and racist notions of Mussolini and the extreme right in Italian political life.

Adding to the trauma of the situation was her son’s actual imprisonment. Maria, in deference to her advanced years (she was almost 70), was allowed to continue with her work in lecturing on the Montessori method to Indian audiences. The difficulty was that, Maria – for all her brilliance as a scholar and a teacher – had no facility with the English language. Without her son’s assistance as an interpreter, she was, quite literally, struck dumb. All around her were sympathetic people with whom she could not communicate beyond the most basic of ways. She was embarrassed and felt a sense of extreme humiliation.



Maria and Mario had been classified as Enemy Aliens

Dark Days in India Lead to Enlightenment

Only an individual who has been in a similar situation could understand how a highly educated person would feel when it is impossible to speak even at the level of a very young child. Those were dark days for Maria and it was the kindness of her Indian friends who made the situation tolerable.

Out of the sense of isolation and embarrassment, Maria could not help but notice that infants seemed able to absorb a capacity for language innately. She watched in fascination as they learned, in a very short time, the beginnings of their own language (often an Indian dialect) and English. She realized that language acquisition has nothing to do with will or discipline; it was a propensity or drive, which is innate to every child. She also came face to face with the painful realization that after a certain time, the adult faces great difficulty in acquiring a second language.*

She said, emphatically, that at a point in our maturation our mind does not develop as a child's does and we simply "grow older." That point, she theorized, may be at the end of adolescence. It became clear to her that actual language acquisition with complete fluency is largely unconscious in the child. It does not matter how difficult the language – whether it is Latin, Sanskrit, Greek, or any of the thousands of dialects in the world – the child will learn to speak with fluency the language it hears on a daily basis in the home.



Discovering Where the 'Arc of Development' Begins

Maria, from her earlier studies of accounts of “wild children” raised in total isolation, knew full well that a child who does not grow hearing language around him or her will not develop the capacity to speak. Such children are mute, not because they have any intrinsic deficiency, but because they have not been exposed to words and sentence structure during their most important developmental period. Further, these children, even after they were returned to civilization, never developed the capacity to converse. Experts who have attempted to reverse this situation in totally isolated children have always been frustrated in their attempts. No amount of remedial effort will reverse the situation.

She agonized over the idea that some children, left in isolation in nurseries, or left with nannies who were either uneducated or not motivated to speak with the children under their care, could actually suffer intellectual damage. It became clear to her that the arc of development began at birth. She actually felt that so-called “poorer” children who were constantly with the parents might fare better linguistically than wealthy children who were deprived of social contact.

Always an avid reader, she commented on a study she had encountered in the 1940s where “some Belgian psychologist had found that the child of two and a half has only 200 or 300 words, but at six he knows thousands. And this all happens without a teacher (other than the family). It is a spontaneous acquisition. After the child has done all this by himself, we send him to school and offer, as a “great treat,” to teach him the alphabet. Her tone is ironic for she had no great admiration for standard educational techniques.

Montessori fully appreciated that the child will only learn to speak fluently a language which he or she hears in the daily environment. Moreover, the capacity to use words and then to create meaningful sentences with all the correct tonalities and correct grammatical structures is something that the child acquires, almost unconsciously, in the process of hearing the language *correctly* spoken. In an excerpt from her work, *The Absorbent Mind*, she may have been thinking of her own experience when she said: “In a foreign country, we adults cannot even detect all the sounds we hear, far less reproduce them vocally. We can only use the machinery of our own language; no one but a child can construct his own machinery and so learn to perfection as many languages as he hears spoken about him.”

It has been noted by many observers that even very cultured individuals who do acquire a second language in later life will always speak that language with an accent no matter how diligently they attempt to erase the traces of their mother tongue.

Finding Freedom for Mario

After this time of great trial in Maria’s life and the sense of isolation which she endured, in an unprecedented move for a country at war with Italy, the Indian authorities decided to give Maria Montessori a special gift for her 70th birthday. In a complete and utter surprise, they

released Mario from detention and he was able to resume his task as his mother's helper and official interpreter.

It was only at this point that Maria could begin work on what became her major work. Few individuals realize that *The Absorbent Mind*, the culmination of all of her thinking and decades of research and observation, had its genesis in India. It was based on her lectures to Indian audiences during her enforced exile. She always lectured in a precise and melodic Italian, which was translated painstakingly by Mario into English.

It is difficult to estimate how fluent Mario was since he was not a highly educated man. Apparently, his mother would gently correct some of his translations from time to time. Later Maria took all of Mario's notes and wrote an Italian version of the material for a book intended for publication in Italy. It was this Italian version that was eventually translated into English by another Montessori disciple, a gentleman named Claude A. Claremont. The English version was published in Madras, India in 1949. In various editions, the book has sold thousands of copies in the ensuing half century.

Maria's time of isolation and relative helplessness made her even more empathetic to the state of the child as it develops. The infant has huge capacities that are constantly underestimated by the adult mind. The babbling of a baby may strike the adult observer as mindless and little more than noise. In fact, it is a necessary precursor to the development of language and the entire linguistic variety of a particular tongue. Fundamentally, Maria came to the realization that in many ways the capacities of the developing child are actually greater than our own. This was, and still is, the keystone to her educational approach.

It is strange to see that sometimes periods of crisis can provide an individual with a great gift. Maria Montessori's experiences, in the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the birth of her child, and her enforced isolation in India, provided her with the gift of insight into the incredible – and previously unimaginable – capacities of the infant.

As a footnote to this story, it is important to realize that the Indian people never forgot Maria Montessori's contribution to education in their country. In 1970, they honoured her by placing her image on a stamp, which celebrated her presence for so long a duration in their country.

** A famous example of the inability of even a great mind to acquire language in later years is offered by the experience of Napoleon Bonaparte. During his six years of exile in St. Helena after his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo, he never learned to speak more than a few words in English. In part, he depended on a prepubescent English girl, Betsy Balcombe, to act as his interpreter in his interactions with his British captors.*

