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The Business of Childhood: Play and Nature in the Work of Marjory Allen

Lady Marjory Allen was a landscape architect and a founding member of the Institute of Landscape Architects. An overview of her life raises the question of what it means to be a landscape architect, when the bulk of her career consists of more ephemeral work on behalf of children. Running in the same circles as British landscape architects Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin, Allen's path followed a very different trajectory. Examining this closely illuminates a series of paradoxical linkages exposing historical attitudes towards gender, nature, and marginalized communities that continue to reverberate in debates about nature, climate, public health, and access to the outdoors. As we uncover and recognize women's contributions to the built environment and designed landscape, recent feminist scholarship has opened the door to new ways of understanding women's participation in the workplace. Revealing the constraints of family and personal circumstances of an individual designer can help us contextualize the career and output of women like Marjory Allen.¹

Landscape architects such as Crowe and Colvin each produced a sizable quantity of designed and built projects, leaving a rich trail of drawings, plans, and landscapes to study. Their works document how successfully they carved spaces for themselves within the growing field of landscape architecture in early to mid-twentieth century Britain. It is worth noting that both women never married, nor did they have children. While they began their careers designing gardens, they are best known for their work relating to infrastructure and town planning.

More difficult to trace and therefore understand is the role Lady Marjory Allen played in the field. With far fewer projects than Colvin and Crowe, and best known for her organizing skills and advocacy for children and Adventure Playgrounds, one could question if indeed she should even be called a landscape architect? Alexandra Lange refers to her as a "British youth advocate" in her recent book about play.² Relying on Allen's writings and interviews together with more recent

¹ Worden and Seddon argue that a deeper understanding of biographical circumstances can shed light on the variety of ways women participated in design. Suzette Worden and Jill Seddon, "Women Designers in Britain in the 1920s and 30s: Defining the Professional and Redefining Design," *Journal of Design History* 8, no. 3 (1995): 177–193.

² Alexandra Lange, *The Design of Childhood: How the Material World Shapes Independent Kids* (New York, London, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 229.

critical perspectives, I believe we can understand her within the late Victorian/Edwardian tradition of women garden writers such as Gertrude Jekyll, while recognizing the prescience of her ideas around children and the natural world which are trending in today's debates about environmental change and action.

Marjory Allen, née Gill, grew up in the hills of Suffolk and Kent. While solidly middle class, her family was not particularly wealthy, and Allen admitted that she spent more time playing in forests and meadows than in school. She looked back with great fondness to her childhood, remarking that these memories made her: "more determined than ever to restore to these [city] children some part of their lost childhood; gardens where they can keep their pets and enjoy their hobbies and perhaps watch their fathers working with real tools; secret places where they can create their own worlds; the shadow and mystery that lend enchantment to play."³ She attended Bedales School, a progressive co-ed school that afforded greater independence than most boarding schools and where she spent several happy years. She obtained a horticultural diploma from University College Reading in 1919 after apprenticing as a gardener's assistant at the Alderham Estate.

In 1921 she married Clifford Allen, a member of the Independent Labour Party. He was a pacifist and was imprisoned several times for refusing to fight in WWI. While in prison he fell ill with tuberculosis and was plagued with ill health for the rest of his life. Allen's memoir gives loyal and detailed accounts of her husband's political efforts, but an undercurrent of worry about his health runs through records of their married life. During this time, she read Gertrude Jekyll's works extensively and they inspired her planting plans throughout her career.⁴ During the 1920s and 30s she had a regular gardening column in the *Manchester Guardian* and designed several gardens for towns and country estates.⁵ As she wrote:

Throughout the late 20s, CA was constantly ill. I was torn between the need to earn a professional living and the need to give constant and loving care to my husband and daughter. I sometimes felt I was struggling from compromise to compromise, none of them felt satisfactory.⁶

In 1928 she and CA built Hurtwood House in the hills of Surrey. Together they founded Hurtwood School, which began as a nursery school for local children and has since become a well-known boarding school. In 1929 she was one of the founding members of the Institute of Landscape Architects, and Allen was the first

3 Marjory Allen and Mary Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 30.

4 Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood*, 60.

5 She refers to these vaguely and there is no documentation of them in the *Memoir*.

6 Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood*, 91.

woman Landscape Architect elected as vice president. She authored two projects of which she was particularly proud in the late 20s and early 30s: the first was a series of garden rooms on the roof of Selfridges Department Store in 1929. She approached Mr. Selfridge and offered to create an expansive and inspiring green space to provide store clerks and tired shoppers a lush respite amidst flowers, water fountains, and the occasional English sunshine. She consulted Richard Sudell, another early member of the ILA for help on a project of this scale. The second project was a nursery school garden on top of a block of flats for the St. Pancras House Improvement Society which included sheltered spaces for sand and water play and promised protection from the busy streets below.

This rooftop nursery school garden became important to her future career. The housing consultant, Elizabeth Denby's passion to make positive change inspired her and Allen saw her work on this rooftop transform the lives of children and mothers.

In a matter of weeks, I saw the children becoming as gay and brown as country children. I was also impressed. . . by the difference it made to the mothers once they were freed for a few hours each day to get on with their housework and shopping and enjoy chats with their friends.⁷

Allen joined the Nursery School Association in 1933 and worked as a consultant with Denby and Judith Leadeboer on the New Homes for Old exhibits in the early 1930s. She "began to feel that, when the right moment came, there might well be something I could usefully do in public life."⁸

These three projects brought her acclaim and recognition. It is worth noting that her work was focused on garden design and spaces for children. Children and gardens would continue to concern her throughout her life and link her in many ways with the older tradition of women nature writers and gardeners such as Gertrude Jekyll of the late nineteenth century. Writing about Jekyll, Grace Kehler argues "women writers on the garden played on the ambiguities of their identity (private-public, amateur-professional) in order to announce their proximity to nature and assert their distinctions from it."⁹ Keleher highlights Jekyll's modest apologies for her professional opinions, reminding readers that her expertise comes through practice not scientific study. Writing on nature and flowers was considered an acceptable avenue for women who were understood to have natural, physiological links with nature as women and mothers. Women's authority about children and their needs was understood as the natural purview of the women's

⁷ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood*, 117.

⁸ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood*, 116.

⁹ Grace Kehler, "Gertrude Jekyll and the Late-Victorian Garden Book: Representing Nature-Culture Relations," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35, no. 2 (2007): 622.

sphere in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The assumed physical and emotional connections of women to nature and children gave them a moral and professional platform. Paradoxically, Allen was a professional and the main breadwinner for the household. Yet these early works illustrate the themes of nature and children of the War and inner city that informed her career. Her experiences as a child growing up in the country, her role as mother, caregiver, and founder of a nursery school became the foundations upon which she built her professional life and gave her the voice she sought. Allen understood access to nature and play as fundamental moral rights. In 1963 in a critique of the rapidly rising tall flats designed for working families and their lack of child-friendly play spaces, she despaired: “What kind of morality is it to ignore ‘the birthright to play outdoors?’”¹⁰ Allen’s environmental ethics together with her commitment to children and nature root her in the gendered discourse around Victorian and Edwardian women garden writers whose work also relied on a moral perspective, that they, as women, possessed.

After the death of her husband in 1939, Allen travelled the country working to establish nursery schools for children whose mothers were working for the war effort and whose fathers were away fighting. In 1945, just as the war ended Allen visited Emdrup in Denmark and saw the first junk playground designed by C. TH. Sørensen as part of a new housing estate designed by Dan Fink. Sørensen’s playground consisted of a large open space surrounded by a protective berm and filled with wood, shovels, tools, and old cars. He claimed that though it was perhaps the ugliest space he “designed” he considered it the most beautiful.¹¹ Manned by one trained adult playground manager, it afforded free, imaginative creative, and destructive play. Allen was swept off her feet when she saw this site. She noted that the concept of the Adventure Playground (as it was known outside of Denmark) “was to approximate something nearer the natural freedom of the countryside, combined with opportunities for constructive work-play.”¹² What struck Allen was the freedom and agency given to children to design and create their own worlds.

Throughout the 50s and 60s, Brenda Colvin and Sylvia Crowe, her close contemporaries, were undertaking the design of large infrastructure projects and town planning. In a paradoxical twist, Allen embarked on what can be seen as an anti-landscape project, promoting the use of vacant lots left fallow by the war as places of destructive and creative play. These are places of erasure, bombs had wiped away the urban fabric, and they became sites of exploration for the mar-

¹⁰ Marjory Allen, unpublished speech, June 18, 1963. Allen Archives, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, mss.121/ap/3/11/44-1.

¹¹ C. TH. Sørensen, “Landscape Architect: Junk Playgrounds,” *Danish Outlook* 1, vol. iv (1951): 314.

¹² Marjory Allen, “Cambridge Adventure Playground: Holiday Experiment 1957. A Report” Allen Archives Mss.121/AP/3/1/1). 1.

ginalized children in cities such as London, Manchester, and Liverpool. Allen's involvement was not so much as a landscape architect, but as a committee member, as a well-known and respected voice for children. While she worked to find such sites and get permission to use them, she did not organize or control these spaces with paths and identifiable spaces for digging, climbing, or building as in traditional playground design. She labored to establish Adventure Playgrounds, with the freedom they entailed, as a means of connecting children in immediate and creative ways, with the land.

Roy Kozlovsky makes a powerful connection between the proponents of these play areas and a need in Post-War Britain for political and social control. He posits that these sites were places of "political citizenship"¹³ wherein children, who were freed to destruct, and rebuild and work together while doing so, would learn to be good citizens within the newly formed welfare state. Allen agreed about the need for such playgrounds to avert delinquency by offering constructive and creative play, what she considered to be the necessary alternatives to a bored and troubled youth emerging from the rubble of war. However, Allen's writings, both around Adventure Playgrounds as well as other campaigns for healthy, safe places for children suggest that her primary motive grew out of an empathetic quest to provide at least some of the happy memories she had growing up in the relative freedom of the countryside. She understood that the public might well embrace the idea of the Adventure Playground if it promised to help ameliorate delinquency, but such social control was not her main concern. She sought relief for mothers whose children had no safe place to play and expressed empathy for children whose play was so restricted. In an undated speech in the archives titled, "Who will champion the Under Fives?" she wrote:

Play is not a trivial thing; it is the business of childhood. It is the means by which they learn to think and feel and is the basis of all later learning and living. When a child's curiosity is checked, when his interest in machines, earth, animals, people, flowers and trees is limited by his living conditions, this divine curiosity is crushed and may never reappear.¹⁴

Allen supported Elizabeth Denby's progressive ideas around social housing in sites such as Kensal House where the plans included a nursery for working mothers and protected play areas for children. As the modernist housing paradigm developed, such care and attention to the needs of families was often not included in the

¹³ Roy Kozlovsky, "Adventure Playgrounds and Postwar Reconstruction," in *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children*, ed. Marta Gutman and Ning de Coninck-Smith (New Brunswick NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 187.

¹⁴ Lady Allen of Hurtwood, F.I.L.A., speech: "Who Will Champion the Under Fives? A Brisk Trade in 'Minding'," Allen Archives, n.d., mss.121/ns/5/4/1-4.

planning of new high-rise blocks. In “The Flat Bound Mother: New Prison Homes” Allen railed against the inhuman scale of these new blocks and complained that around them

is a sea of asphalt, drear, windswept, impersonal, and terribly forbidding.” She insists: “The planners, and here must be included the architects and their clients the local authorities, seem to have forgotten that children, to be happy and strong, must be able to play in the open air and in safety. They have forgotten many of the things that make childhood sweet and memorable; trees, grass, flowers, water, beauty, and calmness, all of which should be the birthright of young people.”¹⁵

By the 1960s, the modernist ideals around social housing on a large scale were often watered down for financial reasons, resulting in the anti-social, anti-family landscapes against which Allen railed.

While rooted in the gendered sphere of women and their innate connection to the natural world, Allen’s passionate commitment to forging connections between nature and children can be seen as prescient in our current climate crisis. In a recent study in *Frontiers of Psychology*, the authors found that though the means and methods of providing access to nature for children are nuanced, studies show that “Experiences in nature are positively associated with stronger pro-environmentalism, such as an emotional affinity toward nature.”¹⁶ Richard Louv identified Nature Deficit Disorder as a condition affecting our children today as they are kept indoors out of safety concerns or by the overwhelming allure of the digital world of tiktok and video games,¹⁷ and there is a growing body of research linking the health and well-being of children and adults with time spent in nature.¹⁸

Generally, landscape architects are those who plan outdoor spaces that benefit the community, from parks and campuses, to trails and streetscapes. Allen designed private gardens throughout her life though only a few are documented. Perhaps it is in Allen’s personal memories of the countryside and her empathetic concern for children starved of that connection with nature, that she can be best understood as a landscape architect. It was Allen’s love of the natural world and her childhood in nature that drove her work with children and Adventure Playgrounds, in an effort to forge those connections in the younger generation. Through her writings,

15 Lady Allen of Hurtwood, “The Flat-Bound Mother: New Prison Homes,” Allen Archives, n.d. mss.121/ch/3/4/7.i. 1.

16 Claudio D. Rosa and Silvia Collado, “Experiences in Nature and Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours: Setting the Ground for Future Research,” *Frontiers of Psychology* 10 (April 2019): 2.

17 Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from Nature-Deficit disorder* (Chapel Hill NC: Algonquin Books. 2008).

18 Kathryn T. Stevenson et al., “A National research agenda supporting green schoolyard development and equitable access to nature,” *Elem Sci Anth* 8.10 (2020): 1–11.

lectures, and seemingly endless patience to manage committee work, she sought to provide relatively free and enchanting play for children in the outdoors. While we tend to valorize those architects and landscape architects with a long list of projects following their names, Allen's more ephemeral work is no less significant.

Scholars continue to interrogate traditional historiographies around landscape architecture and the well-known, canonical figures associated with these histories. Examining Marjory Allen's life and career furthers these interrogations and refreshes the conversation around what a landscape architect's training and contribution can and should be. While Allen was a trained landscape architect, she produced comparatively little designed work, and was happy to write garden design books with Susan Jellicoe featuring other people's gardens.¹⁹ She was a strong and determined figure in the vanguard of women entering the burgeoning field of landscape architecture, yet her design and planting interests lay in the nineteenth century and the work of Gertrude Jekyll. More than her academic training it was her empathetic concern for nature and children that shaped her career. Thus, the paradoxical exchanges in her life between an Edwardian past and a Modernist era, between traditional notions of womanhood and her own independent trajectory, as well as her role as a landscape architect best known for spaces left empty for the creative contributions of children, all offer fresh and nuanced understandings of what landscape architecture can be. Allen's work challenges us to understand this discipline, in its most fundamental iteration, as a means of connecting humans and the earth.

In 1975 after decades of work on behalf of children, the publication of books on play and gardens, and the steering of numerous influential committees and organizations, Allen published her memoir, co-authored with Mary Nicholson, titled, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady*. Does this cunningly oxymoronic title touch on issues of both class and gender as seen in figures such as Jekyll who also professed little intellectual background, preferring to couch her advice and writings with caveats, and arguing for the benefits of instinct and practice? Is it a possible reference to the Oxbridge circles in which Allen often ran and whose intellectual output cowed her? Is it an apology for a dearth of designed works, when set against the oeuvre of her exact contemporaries, Colvin and Crowe whose output and reputations as landscape architects were well established? Or is it perhaps a subversive assertion that regardless of an individual's education level, a passionate commitment to fight injustice on the part of marginalized children, and a love of the natural world, can improve lives?

19 Lady Allen of Hurtwood, F.I.L.A and Susan Jellicoe, *The New Small Garden* (London: Architectural Press, 1956).

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Figure 1.6: Scattered pattern of Louise Bethune and her work. Pattern inspired by “The Sleuth’s Dilemma: Uncovering the Hidden Histories of Early Women Architects”.