

Ada Mary a'Beckett

Written by Frances Douglas. Featured in Acorns March 1996.

At a time when few married women continued to teach, Ada Mary a'Beckett combined her family commitments with teaching and philanthropic work at a local, national and international level.

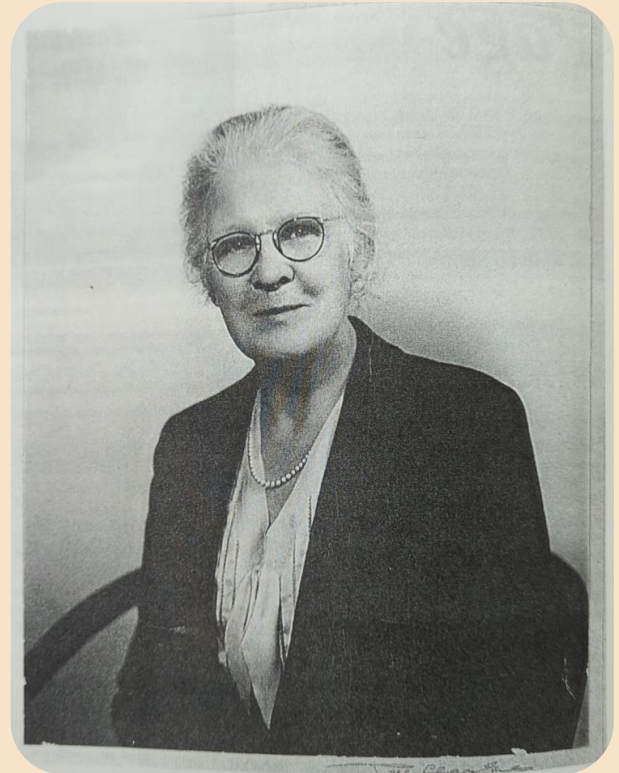
Ada a'Beckett was born Ada Mary Lambert 18 May 1872, the eldest of three daughters, of Helen and the Revered Henry John Lambert, an Englishman, at Norwood, South Australia.

Family tradition relates that when she was born, a friend of her mother's commiserating that the child was a girl, suggested 'My dear, you must educate her!'. This Helen did and Ada responded magnificently.

Ada Lambert was exceptionally fortunate in being born into a family with high educational accomplishments. Ada's maternal grandfather was a clergyman and a medical doctor who maintained a keen interest in zoology, sending specimens of fish teeth to the British Academy in London. At this time in the Australian colonies, men with university degrees were rare.

In 1927, when looking back on her early life, Ada mentioned that she grew up in an atmosphere of social and public service.

It is not known where Ada received her early schooling. Perhaps she had a governess or, as her father's stipend would not have been a substantial income, she may have attended a local primary school, or have been taught by her mother or another female relative.



At 13 Ada entered the Ad-School for Girls. The school offered a liberal education; its standards were similar to boys' schools and showed an awareness of university requirements. Preparation for a working life paid or unpaid, was also stressed. A number of past students of the school, after obtaining a university degree of teacher training, returned to the school as teachers.

Women were first admitted to universities in Australia in the early 1880s. When it was time for Ada to go to university, she decided to go to the University of Melbourne, possibly as her father had changed his job.

Reflecting the society of that time (1890s) student life was more formal at the University of Melbourne than was the case in later years. Students wore cap and gown to lectures and science students must have been relieved when Professor Spencer (Professor of Biology) organised a relaxation of this rule so that these

clothes did not have to be worn in the laboratory.

Ada received her B.Sc. on 16 March 1895, only the second woman to obtain this degree from the University of Melbourne. Her teaching career began in 1893 when she taught science, as a visiting teacher, at seven girls' schools in Melbourne.

In 1901, Ada was appointed as Lecturer in Biology at the University of Melbourne. She later claimed that this position was the first appointment of a woman to lecturer status at the University of Melbourne.

Ada wrote in the late 1930s that she 'gave up professional life' when she married in 1903. It is thought that she and her husband Thomas a'Beckett, a lawyer and five years her senior, met at Trinity College when they were students.

Ada and Tom bought a house at Lansdowne Street, St. Kilda, and lived there for the rest of their lives. Their three sons were born at home, Thomas, Edwards and Penleigh (Pen).

The a'Beckett household always ran smoothly, with the help of two maids when they boys were young and later with only one maid. Although sometimes stern, Tom senior supported Ada in her teaching and charitable activities, and did not mind if she had the limelight. A room of the house was converted into a study for her.

Nine years after her marriage, when Pen was two years old, Ada began teaching at Geelong Girls' Grammar School. Ada travelled to Geelong from Melbourne several days a week by train. The following year she returned to Merton Hall, where she taught Anatomy,

Physiology, and Botany. She continued teaching at Merton Hall until 1920.

Ada was asked by Dr. Littlejohn, Headmaster, to demonstrate at Scotch College from 1917 onwards. While at Scotch College, Ada also lectured to Kindergarten College students in Physiology and Hygiene between 1920 and 1923.

Her son Pen recalled that the job at Scotch College gave Ada a feeling of independence, as the money she earned there enabled her to run a car.



Her long teaching career ended when she resigned from Scotch College in 1936. Ada a'Beckett did not 'violate acceptable social norms' with regard to today's commonly

accepted values but it was uncommon for married women to continue a teaching career in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly at a boys' school. Ada valued her work as a teacher and 'did not want to have to choose between work and family'. Her husband did not appear to resist her occupational interest except if it interfered with her domestic role.

Ada continued to live at 'Penleigh', as the home in Lansdowne Street was known, and she remained in good health until a year before her death from cancer in 1948. Her sons all graduates from the University of Melbourne.

Seven years after Miss Maud Wilson set up the first kindergarten in Victoria, the Free Kindergarten Union (F.K.U) was formed in October 1908. A group of interested people, who called themselves delegates, met to elect a provisional president. Six of these met to draw up a constitution. These delegates were known as the Council of the F.K.U.

From the beginning, the Council wanted to ask well-known, influential people to be members, such as Countess Dudley who was invited to be a vice-regal patron and the 'two very active and able women,' Ada a'Beckett and Mrs. R. Harper, the latter married to a wealthy merchant and parliamentarian. Two Members of Parliament, George Swinburne and F.T. Derham, became associated with the F.K.U. during its early years.

Ada's name is first mentioned in minutes of F.K.U Council in October 1908 as a possible vice-president.

Ada became involved in a public discussion of two aspects of kindergarten work soon after she became Honorary Secretary of the

Union in 1912. Several letters she wrote to 'The Herald' in October 1912 and an articles in December 1913 describe the impetus for having kindergartens in Australia as being partly based on Froebel's educational ideas and partly on philanthropic impulses.

In her letter she reiterated the educational basis of Froebel's methods; he did not believe in haphazard management, nor in allowing children merely to 'do as they like'. She also described aspects of the philanthropic organisation; 'A number of kindergartens are worked in connection with churches. The clergymen of the churches take the keenest interest in their working'.

The dual interest of F.K.U supporters in philanthropic and educational aspects of kindergartens, as mentioned then, is still of importance today. Mary Lush, a kindergarten teacher who was actively training student teachers, wrote a book (Progressive Kindergarten Methods) describing kindergarten work. She also described a teacher's work and said, she 'was urged to make her kindergarten a lovely home where the child with nerves unstrung could find possible happiness and yet be bathed in an atmosphere of quietness and peace; to study Froebel's thought of unity and through nature nurture; to lead the child to see cause and effect' to develop in each little one the sense of his own power over material and ultimately his selfhood'.

The contribution of kindergartens to children's welfare was recognised by people such as John Smyth, principle of the Teacher's College in Melbourne from 1902 to 1927, and M.P. Hansen, teacher and inspector and

successor to Tate as Director of Education in Victoria. Kindergarten committees and voluntary helpers often considered the philanthropic aspects of paramount importance.

Although the educationalists realised hungry children needed sustenance, the philanthropists sometimes tended to overlook the educational aspect of kindergartens. Throughout the time she worked for the F.K.U. Ada a'Beckett demonstrated her keen interest in both aspects.

The rhetoric of people who described the developing kindergarten movement included some stirring phrases. Reports in newspapers mention a kindergarten as 'an elevating and reforming agency'.

Influential men spoke of 'the great social benefit' of the kindergarten and of its help in 'building a healthy, noble, God-fearing nation'. Ada used less stirring but more practical words. She wrote in letters in October 1912 that 'the highest welfare of the children under our charge... will be, at all times, our deepest and most pressing concern'.

Eight kindergartens affiliated with the Union in the first two years. The kindergartens were run by committees that organised equipment and furnishings. The kindergarten teacher was assisted by voluntary helpers, usually young women. The role of the Union was to give encouragement and advice but it was unable to give much financial assistance. However, if a teacher was in charge of more than sixty children, the F.K.U helped by employing an assistant teacher.

The procedure for the establishment of kindergartens were diverse. Some were established with the help of local churches; an example was the North Melbourne Kindergarten, which started in a schoolroom.

Ada a'Beckett also raised enough money at an afternoon party to establish what is now the Ada Mary a'Beckett Kindergarten at Fisherman's Bend in 1938. Part of Ada's duties as Honorary Secretary included attending meetings relating to kindergarten publicity. She also met public servants and government representatives to lobby for financial assistance, and actively participated in the social functions raising money for the F.K.U.

The social position of the F.K.U. Executive helped with its financial success. Women who were on the Executive at some time included Mrs. Deakin, whose husband was prime minister, Lillie Spencer, whose husband was a professor at the University of Melbourne, and



Ada, whose husband Thomas a'Beckett was a lawyer from a well-known family. Women who worked for the Union had similar backgrounds. This reflected the society of the time, as women who had servants to help them at home were expected to join philanthropic concerns.

Miss Westmoreland, a follower of Froebel, had lectured on Saturday mornings at the University High School to sub-primary teachers. She started a kindergarten in Kew which also trained kindergarten teachers.

A Victorian Education Department proposal of 1909 suggested that training be organised by a kindergarten board, with representatives from the Melbourne Teachers' College and the Education Committee of the F.K.U. Because it felt the Education Department would have too much control of the F.K.U. it was unwilling to 'become involved with the department', and refused Dr. Smyth's offer to use 'rooms at the teachers' college'.

It was arranged that Marion Champlin, who had helped Miss Westmoreland at Ruyton Kindergarten Training School and had kindergarten qualifications from the United States, should organise a curriculum for the first-year students.

Later in 1913, when Ada suggested that the F.K.U. Education committee draw up a statement of training for kindergarten teachers, several executive members proposed that the matter be left in the hands of a committee. This included Ada, Mr. M. Hansen and Miss Lett. The problem of training for kindergarten teachers continued from 1913 until the F.K.U. established its own college in 1922.

When the firm leadership of Mrs. Lillie Spencer and Ada a'Beckett, assisted by Miss Isabel Henderson, the F.K.U. decided to break its connection with the Education Department, and go its own way.

In August 1915 two rooms in Clyde House in Collins Street were rented, and the Education Committee outlined plans for a two-year course, to start in 1917. This course was finally approved for registration in August 1917. Although Ada was not a member of the Education Committee, she took an active interest in teacher training and kindergarten organisation.

About 12 to 15 students enrolled each year, half in first year and half in second year. The fees of ten guineas per year were more than those charged by the Education Department for sub-primary teachers.



Lecturers included Mrs Warren for English, Miss Dorothy Ross for Nature Study and Ada

for Physiology. A nominal fee was paid to each of these supporters.

On a completion of the course, teachers received forty pounds per annum and were registered as kindergarten and sub-primary teachers with the Council for Public Instruction. The executive, after a discussion in April 1920, unanimously voted for teachers' salaries to be raised to fifty pounds per year with a ten-pound bonus for the first two years and thereafter sixty pounds plus a bonus.

The seconder of the motion said in the past 'girls had good homes and did not need money', but now they 'liked to be self-supporting!'

Most kindergarten teachers came from middle class homes, and it was expected that they would be financially supported by their father or elder brother. This state of affairs has continued, with kindergarten teachers being among the lowest paid professional people.

Members of the F.K.U. Executive, including Ada a'Beckett, believe that if a new training college could be found, many students would enrol from the country. The Education Committee Convenor spoke to the Executive in 1920 and suggested that as the training course was straining Union finances, it should be abolished. Money would then be released to pay salaries and kindergartens, and the Supervisor, who was overworked and needed an assistant, could perhaps have one. Ada and the Executive responded by continuing to aim for new premises for the college.

Ada's idea was that she 'thought it might be possible to obtain an old house in a good neighbourhood, and establish a paying kindergarten and where the offices of the

Union could be established'. It was to be eighteen months before this dream was realised when Sir Frank Madden's house at Kew was offered for sale in September 1921.

In May 1921, Ada a'Beckett was elected unanimously As President of the Free Kindergarten Union. In the annual report that year she was described as having 'wide knowledge of the kindergartens' and her 'long valued service' as making her especially fitted for the role.

Ada a'Beckett and Mary Emmerton, President and Honorary Secretary of the Union, sent a joint letter to 'The Argus' and 'The Age' asking for people to donate five and half thousand pounds to buy Sir Frank Madden's house for the F.K.U. The letter explained that eight hundred and fifty pounds was needed in the 'next ten days' for equipment at the house. As a result of the public appeal, the F.K.U. raised eight hundred pounds in ten days, and then it was decided to attempt the total of two thousand pounds 'by Christman' to assist with the necessary repairs and equipment. The outstanding success of the public appeal meant that in just over two weeks the F.K.U. was able to purchase the Madden house for use as a hostel and college due to Ada's outstanding organisational and persuasive abilities.

With a sense of satisfaction for all involved, the college was opened on the 15th March 1922 by Lady Forster.

After mentioning the name of the house as 'Mooroolbeek', which meant 'Happy Camp', Lady Forster described previous planning, saying: 'The college had come into existence as a result of great foresight and enterprise

on the part of the kindergarten committee, especially Mrs. a'Beckett.

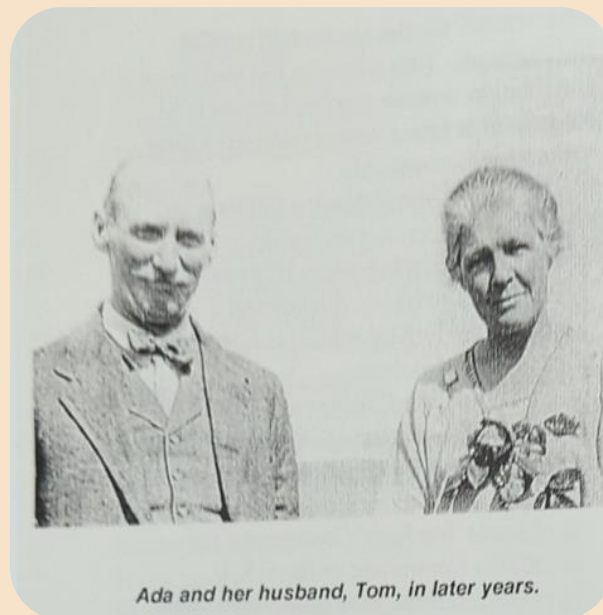
Miss Mary Gutteridge, a graduate of the Froebel Institute, Roehampton, England started work as the Union's supervisor that year. As principal of the Kindergarten Training College, she was responsible for twenty-five Union kindergartens.

Living at Mooroolbeek she would have been involved in all the domestic ups and downs, the housekeeper's monthly reports show that efforts were constantly being made to keep the costs down. Executive members helped by driving the housekeepers to the Victoria Market, and donating furnishings for the college, students assisted with fundraising activities which resulted in the purchase of a tennis court, for example.

To raise the educational image of the College, a College Advisory Council was formed in 1927. Ada a'Beckett was a member, being a F.K.U. representative. Other representatives included people the University of Melbourne, the Women's Graduate Association, a businessman and a publicity officer. This last position was a paid one, and Miss Harris, the incumbent, used radio to publicise the work. Her idea for broadcasting part of a kindergarten session was novel.

Ada was awarded the C.B.E. in 1935 and the Jubilee and Coronation Medals in 1935 & 1937.

In mid 1939 she resigned as President of the F.K.U. to concentrate her efforts on the work of the Australian Association for Pre-school Child Development. Thirty years service was to be extended a further nine years as Ada helped establish this organisation, to represent Australian preschool children and



Ada and her husband, Tom, in later years.

teachers. Not content with that, she also extended her horizons to encompass an international awareness and planning for children.

Ada, being a tireless fighter and gifted organiser, was able to help establish many kindergartens in Victoria. She had also been present at the foundation of many associations, several relating to the University of Melbourne and professional women. Her study of biology later developed into a life long dedication to the education of young children, and awareness of the needs of future generations.