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***I WAS BROUGHT UP IN THE TIME OF THE DEPRESSION***





1960 Geraldine MacDonald and her children, Amanda, Caroline, Geraldine, and Andrew



With Mother Alma Player, (nee Fuller 1930)



Aged nine





Committee on Women 1977.  
Geraldine Mc Donald third to the left in the back row



The Cast of "Chocolate Biscuits" written by Geraldine MacDonald,  
performed at the 40th Anniversary of the N.Z. Playcentre Federation

I've got a much harder job telling you about myself in one hour than any of the other speakers in this series - because I'm the oldest. I was born on the 31st of May 1926 in Wellington. I was the only child of Gerald and Alma Player (nee Fuller) and except for spells overseas, I've lived in Wellington all my life. But rather than telling you about my early life, I'm going to begin by telling you how I got into early childhood education. It's quite simple and it's very typical of women of my generation. The reason was that I had a child. This child was two-and-a-half and driving me mad and a friend of mine said, "I'm going to join the playcentre, why don't you come too?" So I said, "Good idea ... what is it?" She said, "I don't know but there's one in Kelburn." So down we went. We found that there was a rule that you had to stay to settle your child. Everyone else's child got settled in two or three weeks and mine took a year! By the end of that time I was the champion in taking the jungle gym to pieces and stowing it in the back of the basement of a rather smelly church hall.

After a year, I also knew quite a bit about the playcentre itself and so some of the other mothers said, "Why don't you be President?" That's how I became president of Kelburn playcentre. I met Gwen Somerset at that time. We were very scared of her. She would come round and see whether we were doing things in the right way and usually we weren't. I became very much a part of Kelburn playcentre. From there I went on to be president of the Wellington Playcentre Association and part of the Playcentre Federation through the Standing Committee. I also came to know and respect Gwen.

While I was Wellington president I was given a task that has become something which has haunted me throughout my life. Every time I join anything, they're about to change the constitution and say, "Geraldine, will you rewrite the constitution for us?" The last one I had a hand in was the constitution of the Mental Health Foundation of which I am a past chairperson. So if you want your constitution rewritten, come to me!

Val Burns was in playcentre at that time and so was Beverley Morris. I wasn't in playcentre for very long because I went overseas to Indonesia with my former husband. He was employed under the New Zealand Colombo Plan and I tagged along with the children. That was a very interesting and formative three years of my life. Over there I had servants, so I had a bit of time on my hands. I wrote some plays for playcentre (actually I'd written one before I went overseas). Not so long ago the Playcentre Federation held its fortieth anniversary and in searching for historical records someone managed to resurrect one of my plays. I'd never seen it performed and had no idea whether it was any good or not. I'd intended it to be funny. Well if you've any idea what it's like wondering whether or not people are going to laugh at the things that you think are funny, then you can just imagine how I felt waiting for audience reaction. Anyway this play was performed and I heard it for the first time last year. Now that was thirty years after it had been written. I was standing next to Bill Renwick the previous Director-General of Education and I thought he would probably laugh politely but if nobody else laughed I would just quietly melt away. Fortunately people did laugh, not only did they laugh, the playcentre delegates renamed the play. It was originally called "Being Met Together" and they changed the name to "Chocolate

Biscuits". It has now been used to entertain various groups of playcentre parents particularly at Diploma evenings and I've brought a copy for you so you can keep it in your files. Somebody said to me after the performance, "Isn't it marvellous to think you're taking up new things so late in life".

When we came back from Indonesia I was asked to apply for the position of Assistant Principal at the Wellington Free Kindergarten Teachers College. I taught there for a while. Joyce Barnes was the principal and I became familiar with kindergarten work. I came to understand the problems and concerns of those who are employed in kindergartens and something of the history of early childhood education in New Zealand, because of course, it began with the free kindergarten movement.

I have always been interested in the history of early childhood education and some years ago I wrote *An Early Wellington Kindergarten* based in part on old records which I found in the Wellington Kindergarten Teachers College and partly on an interview with a kindergarten teacher Ted (Edna) Scott, who trained before the first world war.

I have interviewed other former kindergarten teachers and was approached recently by the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union to help with the production of a book to mark 100 years of kindergarten. This work, written by Beryl Hughes, and called *Flags and Building Blocks, Formality and Fun*, was published in time for the centenary celebrations in mid-1989. Beryl incorporated some of the material I had collected in this.

You can see that I am likely to write something about anything I am involved in. By now I knew something about kindergarten and I knew something about playcentre. I realised that there weren't as many differences between playcentre and kindergarten as one might think. So I wrote a paper called "Grasping the Nettle" (published in *Education* the journal once published by the Department of Education) because the feelings between the two movements at that particular time were very strong. When I went to teach in the Wellington Kindergarten Teachers College, playcentre people thought I'd been disloyal to them. And that feeling, of course, has not entirely disappeared but, nevertheless, it is certainly not the same as it was in the 1960's.

I'd always wanted to return to university, so I gave up work at the kindergarten teachers college, and struggled to attend lectures between four and six each afternoon. I had three children and my mother (bless her) looked after the children and provided meals when necessary and was really so supportive throughout this entire period.

I got myself to the stage of a Masters degree. I'd been interested in research for many years. I went to the Professor of the Department and I said to him, "I'm ready to do my Masters." "Oh, yes, well it's by thesis - by research. What do you want to do?" "Well", I said, "I'd like to study playcentre." "Playcentre? ... Wouldn't you rather study reading?" "No", I said, "I'd really like to study playcentre." "I don't know about that - what exactly do you intend to look at?" "I'd like to look at the relationship between playcentres and their local community." "Community? - You can't do that. No one has been able to define community."

I decided that the best thing to do was to go ahead with my project and not bother anybody about it too much. I carried out the study in Wainuiomata by interviewing the mothers who were members of two playcentres in that area and by observing the sessions for the children. Of course, I'd been a playcentre mother myself and therefore I felt I knew something about playcentres and by that time I had realised that all early childhood institutions are as much for women and for families as they are for children. When the study was completed I went back one evening to report my findings and the mothers had set up one of the playcentres with small tables, checked tablecloths and candles. There was a great atmosphere and a splendid supper.

In the course of that study I met many wonderful women including a lot from Ngati Porou who had moved down from the East Coast to settle in that area. Understanding cultural differences had been important during my time in Indonesia and it has become a life time interest. My interest in things Maori stemmed from my Wainuiomata study.

In 1970 I received a J R McKenzie Fellowship for educational research and visited a number of Maori settlements, some of them quite remote, in order to carry out a research project similar to the Wainuiomata one. The book that resulted was called "Maori Mothers and Pre-School Education". Names have changed over the years; it was "pre-school education" then. It was a time when Pakehas still believed that the best thing for Maori people was for the Department of Education or some similar body to organise something for them. I made the point in my book that self-determination was the important issue.

At one stage I wrote something for the secondary school social studies syllabus. It was a bulletin for schools called "The Education of Young Children in New Zealand." What I was asked to do was to outline the history of the care and education of young children from the beginning to the present day - in story form. Story form? How was I going to do that? In the end I found it quite challenging. Now I wouldn't say that this bulletin was a best seller but, nevertheless, it was quite widely read and then one day I was down in the Government Bookshop and I found a pile of them. They were selling them for five cents. They'd all been remaindered. So I bought some and here's one for you. I found out later that they had been remaindered because of faults in their production and it was not a reflection on my stories.

Now, childcare. How did I get connected? That was really quite easy because 1975 came along and that was International Women's Year. At that time a lot of effort went into making sure that the things that women do are valued. I was always concerned if people did not attend to women's ideas and I knew that these ideas were generally thought less important than those which men held. I knew that there was something wrong in the way that childcare was being treated. It was defined as social welfare. By this time I had taken a position in research with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research and my job was to establish a unit to carry out research into early childhood education. Notice the name. Right from the beginning the Unit was concerned to include all forms of early childhood education and not only longer established organisations. Child care was included in our area of work.

I was invited to join a planning committee associated with the activities of International Women's Year and I was later appointed to the Committee on Women. The task of this committee was to advise the Government of the outcomes of International Women's Year and on matters that concerned women.

During the International Women's Year, because I was in a research organisation, and because my interest was early childhood, I was given what you might call the "childcare portfolio". I was closely associated with Ros Noonan in this work. Another person who was associated with me at that time was Rae Julian, who is now a Human Rights Commissioner. Between us we set out to write papers, to lobby people, and to understand the political process. I ended up for my sins, on what was called the State Services Commission Working Group on Early Childhood Care and Education. This was a very frustrating experience, so I wrote a paper about it and it was called "The story of a recommendation about early childhood education and care". At the time I wrote it I said that a hundred years might pass before anything real happened about a recommendation to do something practical about child care. Something has certainly happened recently, but it has taken a very long time. So I am leaving the story of the recommendation with you. I hope it makes you laugh.

I've carried out a number of research studies since then, each time using the ideas I've gained from previous studies and building them into the next one. Not long ago I carried out an observational study of special groups in kindergartens and playcentres. There were thirty-nine of these groups at the time of the study. I travelled from Invercargill to Wellsford and observed children and interviewed mothers and teachers. There are four booklets in the "Joining-In" series which reports the study, each one dealing with a different topic, and they're all illustrated. At NZCER we try to produce books that people will want to look at and read. So I'll leave a set of the "Joining-In" booklets for you too.

I've lectured at Wellington Teachers College to primary school teacher trainees and I've done some part-time lecturing at the University. I've always kept some issues to the fore. Sometimes I've probably bored people to tears by talking about the issues which I thought were important. For example, the acceptance of early childhood services, funding for childcare, and respect for women's ideas. I think that I've been most concerned about the acceptance of women's work, women's activities and women's ideas.

Now I don't know whether my early life or subsequent life for that matter can tell you anything about why I did the things I have described but that will be for you to judge. My father was seventeen when he volunteered for the first world war. He went off, fought in the trenches, and came back. Like many men of that time, he never talked about what the war was like. It was just too horrifying.

My mother was born in the Wairarapa and was really a small town girl. In a way my parents were caught between two wars. I was brought up in the time of the depression which I'm sure you've heard plenty about. It was many years before we owned a radio. We never had a telephone, or a car, and didn't ever own a house. So the things which one would expect to have today just weren't there. As for books - it would have been extravagant to buy books during the depression because you spent your money on other things. However, we always had library books in the house and there were a lot of magazines and comics which all parents disapproved of but which made no difference because we children read them anyway.

One of the effects of the depression was that the government, wanting to save money, decided in 1932 to exclude five year olds from the schools. So for two years five year olds weren't allowed to go to school. They had to wait until



they were six before they were enrolled. My parents had been looking around for somewhere to live and they hadn't finally decided where. So what with one thing and another I was nearly seven before I went to school. I was enrolled in Hataitai School in April 1933. Of course I could read by the time I went to school; I'd read full length books. Long before I went to school, my father, who worked in the Public Trust Office, would every day bring home a little cartoon that he'd drawn. It would have two characters and bubbles coming out of their mouths and I was to read what was written in the bubbles. I also remember my father teaching me phonics. He would teach me c-a-t, r-a-t, but I also remember quite well teaching myself to read by the whole word method, by looking at the flashing signs in Wellington streets. I was confused by some of these. There was one of them that said "Lynx". I didn't know what a "lynx" was. I found that it was the name of an animal but the sign was actually advertising a brand of men's suits. There was another sign that said "Conynghams" which was the name of a shop. I was very confused by this as well because I knew someone called Connie Ham and I didn't know how the 'g' had got into her name. It took me quite a long time to sort those things out. I think that most children have experiences where they don't quite understand but they are struck by the incongruity of what they think is the meaning.

When I began school I wasn't kept back. I didn't have to put in two years in the primers or anything like that. I was passed rapidly up through school. I actually loved Hataitai School. It was a good place to go to in the 1930's. I can remember very well in Standard 1 making an oil cloth table mat which I had blanket stitched round the edge - very attractive. I also made a hearth brush out of rope. You bent the rope over to make a handle and then frayed all the ends and the handle was wrapped with raffia. I was very proud of that. Then there was a little book of bits of paper which I coloured with water colour paint - each page a different colour. The idea was that a man could use one of the pieces of paper to wipe the shaving soap off his cut throat razor. My father had converted to safety razors but expressed great pleasure on being given this gift. I made a saucer - the base was paper maché. Our class saved up silver paper from chocolate wrappers and then we pressed it carefully on to the saucer. The result was like a saucer covered with jewels. Unfortunately mine was so nice that somebody stole it and I never got over it! I also made a cover for a cushion. This cover was one that you could put on your cushion if you were going for a picnic. It was made of sacking and was embroidered with cross stitch and drawn thread work. When I came back after one school holiday the rats had got at it and nibbled a hole. My mother was always able to cope with things like that. She said, "We'll put a little pocket in it". I think I had the only picnic cushion cover with a pocket.

Anyway you can see that I did well at school with my craft work. So the depression rolled on. We were particularly interested in the young princesses - Lillibet now Queen Elizabeth, and Margaret. We felt very closely in touch with royalty. I went to Brownies. The daughters of the Governor-General of the day were enrolled. We were once graciously invited to Government House to have "tea" with our fellow Brownies and we all rolled up. I think it was the most depressing experience that I've ever had, because of course "tea" to us meant a meal. What we had was plain bread and butter, cherries and a cup of tea. Cup of tea - most of us weren't allowed to drink tea. I've never shown any eagerness to return to Government House. To be honest, I haven't been invited.

School?... So far as my teachers were concerned, gender wasn't really an issue. Hataitai School had a falling roll and we had family-type classes - two or three classes in one room. We had a headmaster, Mr Marriott who also taught Standards 5 and 6. He played what he called a fiddle. In wet lunch hours he'd come into the classroom and play his fiddle and we'd all sing. He would also read works from the Romantic poets - "My heart leaps up when I behold a field of daffodils" and tears would come into his eyes but not into ours. We were brought up on "Break, break, break on thy cold grey stones oh sea" and similar touching poems of a hundred - well not quite, seventy-five years before. In the morning, after five minutes drill in mental arithmetic, some of the girls were allowed into the school office to type out parts for a play. Then they would come into class with copies of the play. Copies were made with carbon paper, and class members would perform the play. And then maybe we'd do something creative, or perhaps have a bit more mental arithmetic.

In the afternoon if it was fine, and my memory of those years was that it was often fine, we'd be outside. We were supposed to tend the school garden. It wasn't very rewarding. The soil was rather dry rotten rock and nothing seemed to grow for long but we quite enjoyed scratching around in it.

Sometimes the girls would be allowed to play the boys at cricket and then of course during the real summer weather we'd all be down on the Hataitai beach. You could go for a certificate in swimming and this is where it didn't really matter if you were a boy or a girl. I swam a mile - yes, yes I did! I couldn't any longer. It would be impossible. I doubt if I could stay afloat for five minutes. Well I swam a mile - backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards across the little bay. It is my theory that the only reason I was able to stay afloat for a mile was that the tide went out and I was so terrified of scraping my knees on the sea eggs and getting infected that I just kept on going. I've got a certificate to prove it. Much of my youth was spent on Hataitai beach.

I didn't ever own a bicycle or a scooter. I'd borrow them from my friends' brothers. I'd be so persistent that they'd give up. One of them once said, "Well you can have my roller skates but I'll only give you one". And I spent the whole afternoon skating on only one roller skate up and down Waipapa Road in Hataitai. I've never been much good with the left foot ever since and I put it down to this experience.

There was a lot of illness amongst children in those days and more deaths than there are today. Those diseases that we did have, we had rather badly. For example whooping cough was quite a frightening event. I remember it. Probably the worst aspect was that I wasn't allowed out for Guy Fawkes. A friend of mine had whooping cough at the same time. We were allowed to stay inside in my bed and look out the window while our two fathers had a great time with sparklers.

I went on to Wellington East Girls College. My father committed suicide when I was in my fourth form year and I think that it took me a long time to get over that. I never really settled down to school work subsequently. It didn't seem important to me any longer so it may have been the school or it may have been my age or it may have been bereavement but anyway I began to feel that I didn't really want to stay at school for very long. In addition to that, my mother and I by this time were living with her sister and her husband. They were very hospitable and very good and we certainly didn't

intend to stay there for long. But my aunt developed cancer and suffered a long debilitating illness which, as a teenager, I found very distressing to observe.

So I was keen to leave school. I'd had enough, but what could I do? I was too young to be accepted for primary teachers training. But they would take me for a Homecraft Teachers Course at Dunedin Teachers College. This course was just starting up and for some reason or other I was accepted into that. So I thought, that's an escape. I became a homecraft teacher.

I must say that I got a terrible fright when I got down to Dunedin Teachers College because the principal advanced upon me in the corridor and said, "And who are you?" and I said, "I'm Geraldine Player." "And how old are you?" I said, "I'm sixteen" and he said, "Well you're not supposed to be here, you're too young." I thought he was going to send me home. I could have chosen to teach either cooking or dressmaking. Because I could never tell whether the cakes were cooked or not, I thought I'd steer clear of the cookery bit. I'd be fairly safe on the dressmaking. I ended up teaching Clothing at Hutt Valley Memorial Technical College. My entire teaching career was about five years and included a year in London.

The fruit of that teaching experience was a book called "You and Your Clothes". This was first published in 1959, I think, and ran through a number of editions, even an English one. I've always said to people that that was the first thing I ever wrote and sometimes they have said to me - "Why do you mention it now you're into academic life?" The answer is that I have never despised the things women do. The book covered the School Certificate syllabus in clothing and textiles. I dealt first with budgeting and I included an illustration of five jars labelled 'house', 'food', 'heat and light', 'clothes' and 'rainy day', because that was the way I budgeted.

As you've probably gathered by now, I've been interested in writing all my life. My first story was called, "How the hedgehog found its prickles" because I couldn't spell "prickles". For those who are interested the hedgehog backed through a hedge and the twigs stuck into it. When I was a primary school child, there were then, as there are now, children's pages in the local newspapers. The Wellington 'Evening Post' had one and it was run by Auntie somebody or other whose name eludes me. I really began my literary career, such as it is, in the children's pages of the 'Evening Post'. We weren't allowed to use our real names. We had to have a nom de plume. I was absolutely wrapped up in King Arthur and his knights and Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot and so on, but I think somebody else had already appropriated the name "Queen Guinevere" so I couldn't be that. I thought I'd be "The Lily Maid of Astelot". I submitted this name but it was too long so it was cut back to "Maid of Astelot", which always reminded me of a dustpan and broom, whereas the image I really wanted to convey was sort of pale, tall, thin and with a long neck. Anyway, at the age of twelve, I wrote a poem called "Magic". (I'll read you just a little because you can't stand too much of this ...). It starts: "A little bit of morning dew, a little bit of lace, a spinner working hard all day, to put them in their place" and so on and so forth for about five verses.

Then of course, there were the stories. One I wrote for Easter was called "To Chickie-land". I was nine at the time. I also made a contribution to New Zealand literature. It's called "The Lost Bridal Veil - A Tale of Bushland Folk" by Maid of Astelot, 9, Hataitai.

My literary career went from bad to better, I think. When I got to secondary school of course there was even more scope for poetry; here's a sample:

"There is a tiny narrow road  
That passes down our way,  
A quiet sunny lovely road  
White on a summer's day"

It was actually a scrubby little path but you can see how I'd learnt a lot from the Daffodils and Break Break Break.

When I started to jot down some notes for today I began to write about other things in my childhood, particularly the time some neighbours, the McKenzies, had a New Years Eve party. All the children agreed that the McKenzies' parties were boring, boring, boring but this time it wasn't so boring. People thought that you could make rum by putting a parsnip into a tin of treacle and burying it for six months. The McKenzies had done this. The great excitement of the evening was digging up the rum. First of all Mr McKenzie couldn't find where he'd buried it. The kids all came out and held torches and they poked around with sticks so vigorously that Mr McKenzie's carrots never recovered. When someone finally found the tin and brought it into the kitchen no one could get the top off. One of the neighbours went and fetched his best screwdriver and wrecked that in an effort to lift the lid. Finally they got the tin open. All there was inside was black treacle, little bits of rust and mummified parsnip. We children were bitterly disappointed.

I've been involved in a number of committees and advisory groups which drew up recommendations for early childhood care. I've talked about the State Services Commission Working Party and there have been a number of others. They take up enormous amounts of time. Sometimes you wonder whether they do any good or not. I want to say to you that if you want to get things done you've got to use the reports from advisory groups. You've got to read them, to understand them and you've got to push the ideas wherever you possibly can.

People have said so often in my hearing, "Oh that's just early childhood education". I don't think that early childhood education should be separated from other forms of education in New Zealand. By that I mean, nobody should get locked into that one area. When I first did research in early childhood education, to the best of my knowledge only one paper on the subject had been written and published in a book about education in New Zealand. If I'm right it was a paper by Barbara Calvert who was a playcentre person. Then I was asked to write on the topic of pre-school education in a book of essays which was being edited by Richard Bates of Massey University. But this was rare and you could look at almost any book on 'education in New Zealand' and you wouldn't know pre-school education existed. That's not so very, very long ago. You still have to fight for early childhood education. Your area of education has just as much value as the others and indeed, a lot more to it, because it embraces families and communities.

More recently I have been doing different work which doesn't seem to have very much to do with early childhood education. It has dealt with the first years of primary school and with the way in which children are promoted to the standards. But the funny thing is that when I started looking at this topic I started thinking about what happens in early childhood education. When a child leaves an early childhood centre of any kind can you tell whether that



child is top or bottom, average or below average? The point is that you can't because it's not an issue in early childhood education but it is an issue in school. At what point should judgement of a child take place and what are the consequences? For the last three years I've been working on promotion and its effects and I've brought you a short piece on part of that work. It was published in NZCER's periodical Set.

My very best wishes for the success of your new course, may it flourish.