



Isabel with Larry (author's dog). About.1986.

## **Isabel Menzies Lyth**

**1917 – 2008**

**A personal memory**

**By Alastair Bain**

This is not so much about Isabel Menzies Lyth but how she touched my life in different ways. There is an excellent description of Isabel's life and achievements in the Scotsman <http://news.scotsman.com/obituaries/Isabel-Menzies-Lyth.3699576.jp>

Isabel and I had a falling out in 1992 at the time of the International Group Relations and Scientific Conference sponsored by the Australian Institute of Socio-Analysis at Lorne. The memory is up to this time. Like all memories it

is distorted by time and the gap between who one was and who one is, and how who one is “remembers” who one was. This is something Isabel actually taught me about analysis and recalled childhood memories.

I first met Isabel Menzies in 1968 when I came for job interviews at the Tavistock Institute. At the time I had my “first job” teaching politics at the University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow, Scotland. I felt I wanted to work and learn about social science in an applied way from a psychoanalytic perspective. On a more pressing and personal level I also knew I needed psychoanalysis. The Tavistock seemed the obvious place to write to, although at the time I was very naïve as to what the Institute actually did and what had been achieved.

The position I was being interviewed for was as a Project Officer within the Centre for Applied Social Research, (CASR), a Unit of The Tavistock Institute. There was the possibility of employment on a new project to explore staff turnover within the British Merchant Navy. The project was to be directed by John Hill, a consultant within the Centre for Applied Social Research. During the interview day I met with John Hill, and other Consultants within CASR Eric Miller, Bob Wishlade, and Isabel Menzies<sup>1</sup>. My first impression of Isabel was of a woman of “presence” speaking firmly with a soft Scottish accent, and listening carefully to me. During one of the interviews with Isabel she offered to try to find me a Training Analyst who might have a vacancy. This she did and I will always be grateful for her choice.

Early in my days at the Tavi Isabel asked me to work with her on two projects: the first was a market research project for a large pharmaceutical company to explore “A theoretical study of bodily cleanliness”, and the second was the selection of a Race Relations Officer for Camden (local borough). These were wonderful opportunities to explore unconscious social meanings and motivations in a team. For example, in the selection of a Race Relations Officer, recognizing through Isabel’s observation that we are all prejudiced, but to be able to appreciate this and work with it is the hard part.

As a neophyte these projects also gave me the opportunity to learn about semi- structured interviews, intelligence and projective tests, and with Isabel leading the group discussions learning about how to introduce the topic and

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Rice, I think, was in India.

follow the thoughts and ideas of the group. And learning how to take good notes, which must be dictated as soon as possible afterwards, not to lose the freshness!

After Leicester Conference experience in 1969 I was asked in 1970 to join an Advanced Group Relations Training Program which included a Study Group with Isabel Menzies and Seminars with Pierre Turquet. As a Consultant, and this is not just from this study group experience, Isabel impressed me with her quiet firmness of expression, as someone with enormous sensitivity to what the group may be doing, and how individuals may be linked to this in various ways. The group is there but so are the individuals. This is in contrast to other study group experiences I have had where the Consultant may mainly refer to group behaviour. Perhaps linked with this is the impression I have that Isabel intervened more as a study group consultant than the other two Consultants I had experience of, who were more gnostic. Perhaps this has to do with the style of Kleinian analysis? Thinking as one goes and avenues opening up. And perhaps it had to do with her own analysis with Wilfred Bion.

Taking in and holding and then giving back at a time, and in it's own time, in a way that can be heard – perhaps this was at the heart of what she did, and what we could take in as learners.

In 1970 /71 Isabel directed a project for the Department of Health and Social Security into the quality of day care for children under 5. The project team included Joyce Robertson, Sheila Scott, and Geraldine Gwynne. One of the main conclusions of the study was: “that separating the child under 5 from his mother (or mother substitute) and putting him into all day care, either in a day nursery or with a child minder is to put him at considerable risk with regard to his social and psychological development”.

As a result of this project the DHSS commissioned the Tavistock Institute to carry out an action research project, 1975 – 1979, with the aim of designing an optimum system of day care for children under 5 in a nursery setting<sup>2</sup>. Isabel asked me to direct the project, and together with Lynn Barnett we constituted the project team, and had our own independent unit within the Tavistock, Group B. Lynn and I spent a couple of days a week in the day

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<sup>2</sup> See Alastair Bain and Lynn Barnett, “**The Design of a Day Care System in a Nursery Setting for Children under 5**”, Tavistock Occasional Paper, No.8, 1986. This Monograph can be downloaded from [www.acsa.net.au](http://www.acsa.net.au)

nursery in Ealing where the project was based, and we met with Isabel as Consultant to the Team on a weekly basis at the Tavistock. These meetings were invaluable in exploring dynamics in the nursery, and dynamics of how Lynn and I were working together.

On a personal level around this time I have memories of Isabel's great kindness when my wife, Pat, became very ill in 1977, and after she died, of visits to Isabel and Oliver Lyth in Iffley, when Oliver used to take Lauren and Josh (my children) to the bridge over the river to play Pooh sticks. These are wonderful memories of a very generous person and couple.

I came back to Australia in 1983 with the aim of starting something along the lines of the Tavistock Institute. Initial work with Stanley Gold, Ken Heyward, Richard Jones, Jamie Pearce, and Eve Steel, together with support from professionals interested in developing this work in Australia led to the formation of the Australian Institute of Social Analysis (AISA). Most people seemed to be interested in organising a Group Relations Conference as a first step. While I had trained in Group Relations at the Tavistock this had not been my work. I wrote to Isabel who suggested that she and I co-direct the first Conference, which we did at Mt. Eliza in April 1984. This Conference marked the public work beginnings of AISA which was to continue to grow for another 20 years. I would like to pay tribute to Isabel in enabling this work to start in the way it did in Australia.

There were workshops and lectures on children and institutions she also gave, and whenever she was in Australia she was in great demand for analytic supervisions. In 1986 she worked on the staff of the Sydney Health Professionals Conference, the first Group Relations Conference to be held in Sydney, and a great support to Bryan Gray and others in Sydney who were establishing this work.

Isabel was one of AISA's first Fellows<sup>3</sup> together with Harold Bridger, Larry Gould, and Gordon Lawrence.

Isabel's writings are contained in two books: "**Containing Anxiety in Institutions**" (1988), and "**The Dynamics of the Social**" (1989), both published by Free Associations Books, London. Her study of the nursing system in King's College Hospital, published as "**The Functioning of**

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<sup>3</sup> She resigned as a Fellow after the 1992 Conference.

**Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety**”, is probably the single most influential piece of writing in the socio-analytic field since 1960. It has served as a guide and inspiration in my work, and in the work of students I have taught in socio-analytic courses over the last 25 years.

To conclude, I am sorry that reconciliation was not possible between us after our falling out at the International Conference in 1992. However this doesn't diminish the gratitude and love I have for Isabel. Not memories but present now. Yes, she could be very stubborn, but she was primarily a woman of great generosity, and compassion, who was a wonderful teacher, guide, consultant, and thinker, and for those who were close to her all will have grown from the experience, and nurture.

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