KILPATRICK'S CRITIQUE
OF MONTESSORI'S
METHOD AND THEORY

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"The Most Interesting Woman of Europe," ran the title of a feature story in the New York Tribune late in 1913. The Literary Digest picked up the story and used it for its own comment on December 20th of that same year, four days after Dr. Montessori set sail for Liverpool, ending a month's successful stay in the United States. On both occasions the person behind the headline was a brilliant, forceful, persuasive Italian physician and social scientist, Dr. Maria Montessori, who was making headlines with a visit to this country.

Dr. Montessori's triumphal lecture tour took her through much of the country, and seemed a happy climax to three years of steadily mounting enthusiasm for her theories of education by way of training of the senses through exercise with "didactic materials." In fact, a year's time, spanning a part of both 1912 and 1913, gained for Dr. Montessori genuine acclaim in the United States and, oddly, proved to be the last in which "the Montessori method" received serious attention by more than a handful of original supporters. Her American fame was truly meteoric, lasting from 1909 to 1915. William H. Kilpatrick added significantly to the extinction of Dr. Montessori's public and professional appeal in the United States.

Throughout most of 1913 Dr. Montessori enjoyed a press noteworthy; for its acclaim but no less so than the journals. Current Opinion¹ ran a fine photograph, front view, of the handsome Dottoressa and captioned the picture: "Hailed as Greater than Froebel and Pestalozzi." The columns that ran beneath the portrait carried the title: "What America Thinks of Montessori's Educational Crusade," a title that caught the spirit of Dr. Montessori's American tour. It was a crusade, though perhaps, less in the mind of Montessori, than in the minds of her American devotees. And the response of those who came to listen to Montessori was "surprisingly sympathetic" in contrast with the

¹ "What America Thinks of Montessori's Educational Crusade," CURRENT OPINION, 56 (February, 1914), 127-129.
usual apathy of response to the discussion of education. In 1913 the only question was whether the response tokened more than a fad. The *New York Times*, perhaps instructed by educational authorities near at hand, found "nothing new" in the "Montessori method" but admitted "...that the 'new' method is showing a vitality that proclaims it to be something better than an educational fad."²

The impressive roster of lay and professional enthusiasts of Dr. Montessori alarmed both conventional Froebelian kindergartners and a small group of educators, philosophically allied with John Dewey. Their opposition was formidable. Sponsoring Montessori were educators of note such as Henry W. Holmes, professor and head of Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Among layman none was a more effective advocate of the Montessori methods than S.S. McClure of *McClure's Magazine* and second Vice-President of the Montessori Educational Association of America. McClure and his journal lent all-out support to Montessori.

It was well worthwhile to have McClure on one's side, for his magazine had become clearly identified with educational reform since the days when Joseph M. Rice had written for McClure's widely-read exposés of the inefficiency plaguing American public schools. Rice had written as a friend of public schools, interested in "scientific management in education." The journal for which he had written, first through Rice and then by the efforts of successors, had earned its reputation for being first with educational news of imaginative innovation. In 1913 and 1914 *McClure's* extended itself on behalf of Montessori. By summer of 1913 McClure had initiated a special feature, a regular "department" written by Ellen Yale Stevens and titled, "The Montessori Movement." Ellen Stevens was an able columnist and capable of following her employer's directive that her page was to contribute to public knowledge of the Montessori methods. Bibliographies on Montessori appeared in *McClure's* and in one issue, that for July, 1913, "The Montessori Movement" brought its readers the titles of fifty-three books and articles on the Montessori method. Indeed the 'new' method showed vitality. Enthusiasm was fanned by the Doctor's visit and extended lecture-demonstration tour. *Current Opinion* had it that the visit made "libertarian education a burning issue."

Though the art and science of public relations was in its

² IBID., p. 228.