

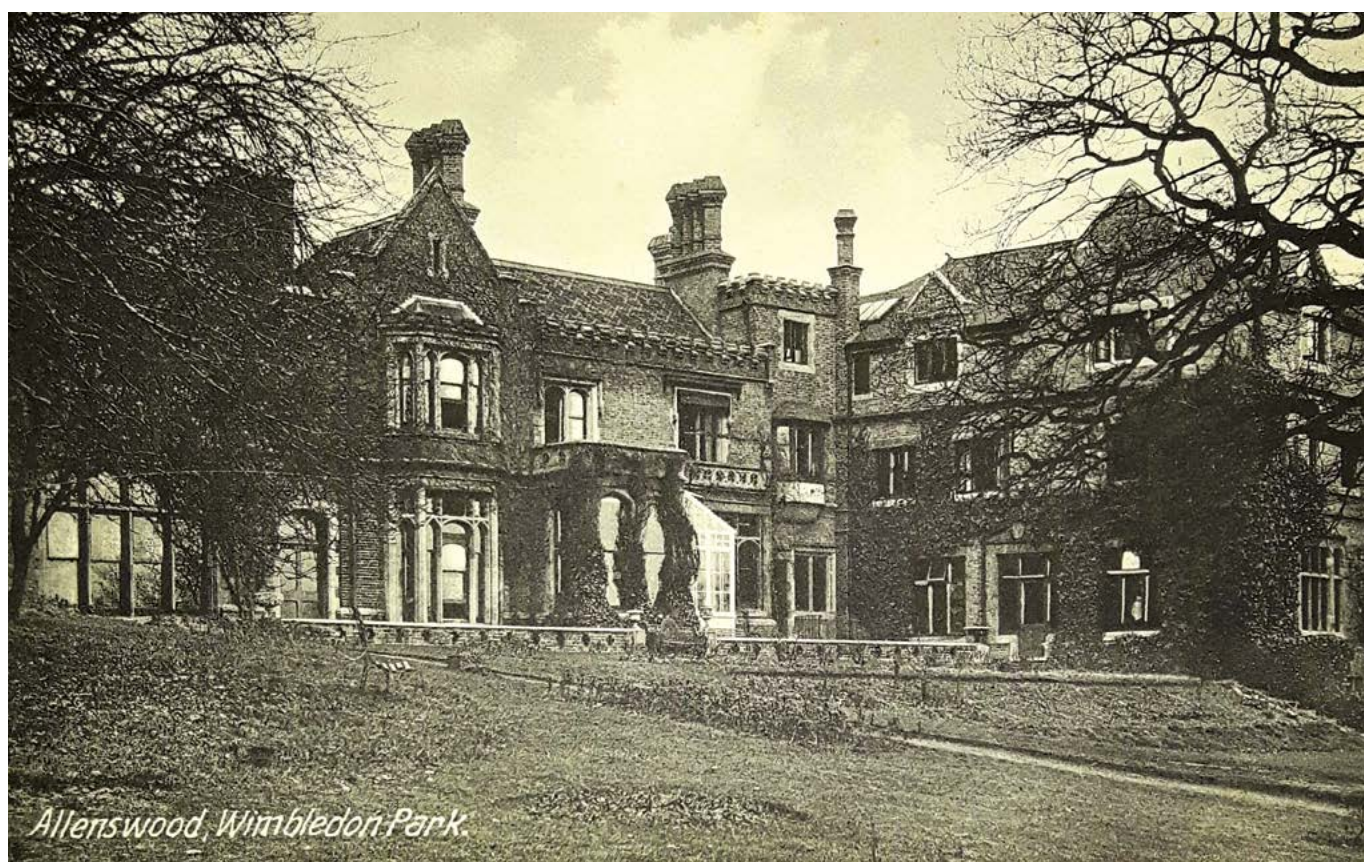
The Richard Milward Award for Local History

Second Prize 2016



Marie Souvestre at Allenswood c 1900
(Courtesy: The Women's Library collection, 7BSH/6/3/24 LSE Library)

**A new sense of savoir faire:
Marie Souvestre, charismatic, progressive
Headmistress of Allenswood School
by
Alice Fookes**



Postcards showing the drive (top) and the rear of Allenswood School (above)

(source: A. Fookes)

**A new sense of savoir faire:
Marie Souvestre, charismatic, progressive
Headmistress of Allenswood School
by
Alice Fookes**

In this essay I give a brief insight into a remarkable woman who helped change the course of education for young women. She lived and worked in Wimbledon and in this country surprisingly little is known about her or her school.

“The way to Allenswood¹ from London: If coming by train: our station is Southfields, on the District Railway (Wimbledon Line). All trains marked “Wimbledon”, even the “non-stop” ones, stop at Southfields. The house, two minutes’ walk, from the station is the first past the little wood, on the left of Albert Road, which is the first turning on the left of the hill, up from the station.”² Hiding behind this bland set of directions was a very distinctive school for girls.

In the autumn of 1900, Marjorie North and her mother closely followed these directions in the school prospectus, making their way to view the school after a long journey from Norfolk.³ Allenswood stood in its own grounds of six acres.⁴ Accounts of the original house vary. Definitely not a Tudor building, as some writers have suggested, but an imposing Victorian mock Tudor house built between 1865 and 1870. It was owned by a successful lawyer and property conveyancer, Henry Hansler.⁵ In 1883 he was well placed to sell the house to a fiery French headmistress from Fontainebleau – Mlle Marie Claire Souvestre.⁶

1 See the 1896 map of Allenswood, page 11-12 of this essay

2 Allenswood prospectus

3 *The Educated Pin* – Marjorie Mack (Mrs Marjorie Dixon, nee North) Schooldays at Allenswood (where she is known as “Daw”) with sister Susannah North

4 Allenswood prospectus

5 Wikisource.org/Men-at-the-Bar

6 D.A. Steel: *Marie Souvestre 1835-1905 Pédagogue pionnière et féministe* p73

In her autobiography, Emily Pankhurst, reviewing her own education in the 1870s says: “...a girl’s education at that time seemed to have for its prime object the art of ‘making a home attractive’.”⁷ In 1863, Marie Souvestre and Caroline Dussaut, her colleague and possibly also her lover, founded Les Ruches (the beehives) in Fontainebleau-Avon where its pupils were known as Les Abeilles (the bees). Their aim was to provide young women with an education that was anything but ‘making a home attractive’. Its ethos centred on a strong Positivist philosophy espousing a sociological and humanistic view of the world: ‘vivre pour autrui’.⁸

Marie Souvestre, within a liberal curriculum of mainly the arts and humanities, sought to empower her pupils to think creatively and critically, to reason and ask questions. She passionately wanted them to investigate and understand human experience and acquire the intellectual skills and insight to envisage the future. This liberating objective was to attain a sense of personal independence regardless of marital status or convention. So the superficial notion of ‘savoir faire’ – a sense of polished social behaviour – was, I believe, enriched and modernised by Mlle Souvestre to include ideas of personal empowerment and responsibility to others, through a deep understanding of cultural, social and political issues.

A controversial end to her relationship with Caroline Dussaut at Les Ruches,⁹ meant that Marie Souvestre needed to make a fresh start. At Les Ruches she had built up a reputation amongst the wealthy, liberal-minded intelligentsia of Europe and America as an outstanding teacher and educator. Jane, Lady Strachey¹⁰ became one such influential friend having sent her daughters Elinor and Dorothy to the school. Souvestre and her Italian colleague from Les Ruches, Signorina Paulina Samaïa, began researching opportunities to attract families who could afford to pay for this unique educational opportunity for their daughters and they set their sights on Wimbledon.

7 Emily Pankhurst – *My Own Life*

8 Wikipedia – Auguste Comte (1798-1857) founder of the French Positivist Movement and influenced by the socialist Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825)

9 Dorothy Strachey (1865-1960), *Olivia*, Hogarth Press, 1949, a barely fictionalised account of life at Les Ruches including the strained relationship between Marie Souvestre and Caroline Dussaut

10 Jane, Lady Strachey (1840-1928), lover of the arts and strong supporter of women’s suffrage

Marie Souvestre's links with England and the English language were through her family's Breton connections. The Souvestre's were part of a cultural circle first in Nantes and later in Paris that included the painter Jean-Hilaire Belloc and his wife Louise Swanton, who was an accomplished writer and translator. Marie's father, the novelist Emile Souvestre is best known today as the author of a prescient science fiction novel *Le Monde Tel Qu'il Sera* and her vivacious mother 'edited a *Journal des femmes*.'¹¹ Marie's elder sister, Naomi Lesbazeilles Souvestre, made the first translation of *Jane Eyre* in 1853; an intensely literary family then, who maintained the Belloc family friendship in Paris with Louis Belloc and his English wife Bessie Rayner Parkes Belloc.¹² Their daughter, Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes, became a prolific writer,¹³ while their son, Hilaire Belloc, achieved eminence as a poet and man of letters. It may have been Marie Adelaide who had a weekend cottage at 28 Crooked Billet,¹⁴ Wimbledon Common, who advised Marie Souvestre on the suitability of making the move to Wimbledon. The timing could not have been better. A passion for French culture was currently sweeping Europe and two other old friends of the Souvestre family, the French historian Jules Michelet,¹⁵ and the Prime Minister of France, Alexandre Ribot,¹⁶ no less, were only too happy to add their endorsement to the scheme.¹⁷

Lady Strachey, who lived not far away at Stowey House, Clapham Common,¹⁸ enthusiastically supported Mlle Souvestre in her venture. After her schooldays at Les Ruches, her daughter Dorothy¹⁹ became one of Allenswood's most gifted teachers. Lytton Strachey, Dorothy's brother, was a regular visitor to Allenswood before he achieved fame as a biographer and

11 D.A. Steel – Oxford DNB article – Souvestre, Marie Claire 2004

12 Louis Belloc (1830-1872) son of Jean-Hilaire Belloc, and his wife English wife, Bessie Rayner Parkes (1829-1925)

13 Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes (1868-1947), also founding member of the Association of Women Journalists

14 Wimbledon was thought of as a healthy retreat from London

15 Wikipedia – Jules Michelet (1798-1874), historian, humanist and free-thinker

16 Wikipedia – Alexandre Ribot (1842-1923) Prime Minister of France four times.

17 D.A. Steel – *Marie Souvestre*

18 In 1884 the Stracheys moved to Lancaster Gate, Michael Holroyd – *Lytton Strachey: A Biography*

19 *If It Die: Autobiographical Memoir* by André Gide, translated by Dorothy Strachey Bussy



The Drawing Room – Salon (top) and the Library (above)

(source: A. Fookes)

a founder member of the influential Bloomsbury Group.²⁰ We are told that Marie Souvestre’s “*influence on him was immensely important.*”²¹ Dorothy and Lytton’s younger sisters, Philippa (Pippa) and (Joan) Pernel were duly enrolled as pupils at Allenswood. Thus with drive, passion, skill and excellent connections Marie Souvestre founded Allenswood in 1883.²² The school set out to promote French culture providing intellectual breadth and depth for its pupils and “*all fell under the intellectual spell of Marie Souvestre.*”²³

With this robust combination of exceptional credentials and connections Allenswood became responsible for equipping and influencing young women intellectually to make their mark as notable leaders, teachers, writers and feminists in the twentieth century. There were many in wider society who were greatly influenced by the pioneering work of Marie Souvestre. Henry James²⁴ approved of Allenswood enough to recommend it for his nieces to his brother, William.²⁵ Social reformers such as Beatrice and Sydney Webb,²⁶ Dame Josephine Butler²⁷ and statesman Joseph Chamberlain,²⁸ whose four daughters went to the school, all recognised this extraordinary establishment which not only schooled its pupils, but it seemed, the wider world as well.

We rejoin young Marjorie North and her sister Susannah who “*with some misgivings entered for the first time the gates of Allenswood*”²⁹ wearing blue serge suits and sailor hats trimmed with the Allenswood colours of green and white. They were shown into the Salon where the other new girls and their parents awaited the grand entrance of Mlle Souvestre. This was the chance to take in their new surroundings “*over tea and plum cake.*”³⁰

20 The Bloomsbury Group included Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E.M. Forster

21 Michael Holroyd – *Lytton Strachey: A Biography*

22 Allenswood formally founded between 1883 and 1887

23 D.A. Steel – Oxford DNB article – Souvestre, Marie Claire 2004

24 Henry James (1843-1916) American born novelist, considered M.S. a friend and visited Allenswood
– see four letters, Yale University

25 D.A. Steel – *Marie Souvestre*, p121

26 Beatrice Webb – *My Apprenticeship*

27 Dame Josephine Butler (1808-1906), social reformer, from 1890 lived at 8 North View, Wimbledon Common

28 Joseph Chamberlain ((1836-1914) Liberal Unionist Politician)

29 Marjorie Mack – *The Educated Pin*

30 *ibid*



Postcards of the school showing the Hall (top left), No.7 Bedroom and the Small Drawing Room (top right) and the Dining Room (above)

(source: A. Fookes)

The school was not far from Wimbledon Common where organised walks were taken stoically every day, sometimes passing the poet Charles Swinburne³¹ on his way to the Rose and Crown. To newcomers Allenswood must have seemed like any other dull girl's boarding school of the day. But once inside you stepped into a thrilling world of French language, art, music, drama, books, furniture and sculpture. French was the language of the school and woe betide anyone who dropped into English ("*les imbéciles*" as they were known) and was found out. For beginners it was very difficult: "*Oh, suspendre!*" one of them would exclaim, knowing no better blasphemy. "*Look what you have done to my new cahier*" and, "*j'étais dans une si grande dépêche.*"³²

The artworks and furnishings³³ at Allenswood were thoughtfully displayed and had direct links with Marie Souvestre, her family and friends. Visitors would be greeted in the hall by a dramatic fresco of "*Scenes from the life of St Genevieve,*"³⁴ by Puvis de Chavennes, a friend of the Souvestre family. Marjorie North never forgot it.

In the Grand Salon Marie Souvestre held court surrounded by flowers from the Allenswood gardens,³⁵ while close by her were mounted two bronze reliefs: one was by Rodin,³⁶ while the other, by Ferdinand Barbedienne "*a fine cast of the Victory of Samothrace stood in one of the bow windows*".³⁷ A severe full length portrait of Mlle Souvestre overlooked the proceedings reminding parents, pupils and staff just who was in charge. Marjorie North describes her fine features and blue Breton eyes³⁸ and remembers her challenging words: "*If I chose, I could have each one of you at my feet – but I don't choose!*"³⁹

31 Marjorie Mack – *The Educated Pin*

32 *ibid*

33 See p8

34 D.A. Steel – *Marie Souvestre; St Genevieve: Patron saint and saviour of Paris*

35 See postcard of the Drive, Allenswood, showing the gardener at work, p2

36 *ibid* Chapter 5, p83

37 Dorothy Strachey Bussy – *Some Memories of Marie Souvestre* – (Royal Holloway College)
Ferdinand Barbedienne (1810-92) French metal worker and artist

38 Marjorie Mack – *The Educated Pin* p92

39 *ibid.* p100

Special classes were given in the Bibliothèque to those favourites who she felt deserved her attention. On the shelves were books by Voltaire, Racine, Molière, Georges Sand, the poet André Chénier,⁴⁰ Schiller and works of Roman and French history. One book is worthy of special mention – *The Treasury of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan,⁴¹ the great 15th Century champion of education for girls and women. She argued that with education women could become leaders in their communities with confidence, insight and subtlety. This was where the *savoir faire* as understood by Mlle Souvestre had its origins and there is no doubt it strongly influenced the teaching at Les Ruches and Allenswood. Both schools were Mlle Souvestre's very own 'colleges of ladies' rather than de Pizan's 'city of ladies'. Marie Souvestre read aloud from all these authors holding teachers and pupils spellbound. In her *Memories of Marie Souvestre* Dorothy Strachey recalls: "*Her commentary on the word Messidor*⁴² *was an unforgettable lesson on the sonority, the music, the measure of the French language.*"⁴³

Much has been written about Mlle Souvestre's pupils, notably Eleanor Roosevelt, whose life was immeasurably enriched by her time at Allenswood. Souvestre believed a true education was to be found in every aspect of life. Eleanor wrote that Mlle Souvestre introduced her to her lunchtime guests at Allenswood. One such was former pupil Beatrice Chamberlain.⁴⁴ Eleanor later recorded: "*Whenever I read her name or that of her father*⁴⁵ *in the newspapers after that it gave me a thrill, because I had really seen and talked with her. This is one way of giving youth an interest in the 'news'.*"⁴⁶

Pernel Strachey,⁴⁷ (younger sister of Dorothy), wrote a series of letters to her sister Pippa in 1891, detailing her life as a pupil at Allenswood. In one

40 Andre Chenier, guillotined during the Reign of Terror

41 Eleanor Roosevelt's notes/essays on Christine de Pizan are in her French Literature notebook, summer 1901, Box1, FDRL

42 Messidor, the 10th month in the French Revolutionary Calendar used by the French Government 1793-1805

43 *ibid*: Dorothy Strachey Bussy – *Some Memories of Marie Souvestre*

44 Beatrice Chamberlain, eldest daughter of Joseph Chamberlain (1862 – 1818), social activist and reformer

45 Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914) Liberal Unionist Politician

46 Eleanor Roosevelt – *This is My Story* (1937) Bantam Books

47 Later became first Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge

letter she writes: “...trooped off to a concert...Miss Kathleen Grant, not as one would expect a young, beautiful person but a hideous old crone.” In another letter she says: “In a few minutes Ethel Chamberlain and I are going to be hoiked in to read ‘L’Italie Mystique’, with Mlle Souvestre.” Life at Allenswood was full, original, demanding and at times eccentric, with Mlle Souvestre⁴⁸ “generally most amusing at tea. Last night we had sort of shadow scenes in the schoolroom. The first was a statue of Bismarck, the three witches in Macbeth, Peulas⁴⁹ flying from Troy and the rape of Helen.”

Marie Souvestre is often portrayed as an atheist, but it is clear that her teaching aspired to a strong spiritual dimension. She supported the French anti-clericalist movement⁵⁰ but she was also an early subscriber⁵¹ to St Paul’s Church, Southfields, when it was built in 1877. Thanks to Pernel Strachey we know Mlle Souvestre attended St Paul’s: “I walked to church with Mlle Souvestre. Of course that was a great honour but my gloves are simply wee and so torture.” She then later writes: “I was simply sickened by the sermon. It was by Mr Brace⁵² and a perfect disgrace...when I came out I was the colour of scarlet with supressed wrath.” Marjorie North remembered she hated “the tin-can clamour of its solitary bell” and most of all “the long-winded sermons of the very ancient vicar.”⁵³

In March 1905 Marie Souvestre died at Allenswood. At her funeral oration in Paris it was said: “She worked within the limits of her strength to dispel some misunderstandings and to increase the reciprocal esteem two great nations ought to have for each other.”⁵⁴ The school continued under her deputy, Paulina Samaïa, until 1909 when another Allenswood teacher, Florence Boyce, succeeded her. In 1916 co-principals, Jeanne Dozat⁵⁵ and Helen Gifford,⁵⁶ an old pupil and

48 Or “the Sou” as she was sometimes nicknamed by the girls

49 Peulas – father of Achilles

50 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-clericalism#Third_Republic and Joseph P Rash

51 St Paul’s Annual Report, 1886

52 Revd Edmund Church Brace, Anglo-Catholic incumbent St Paul’s Church, Southfields 1877-1913

53 Marjorie Mack – *The Educated Pin*, p112

54 M.A. Ribot, funeral oration (FDR Library) delivered at the tomb of Mlle Souvestre, Cimetière du Père-La-Chaise, Paris

55 Marjorie Mack – p123, Jeanne Dozat, a niece of Marie Souvestre

56 Helen Gifford, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford where she read French. Editor of *The Fritillary Magazine* 1908

Eleanor Roosevelt's best friend at Allenswood led the school together. Six years later, Helen Gifford moved away to found the Marie Souvestre School⁵⁷ in Benfleet, Surrey.

Allenswood continued under Jeanne Dozat who was joined later by Enid Michell.⁵⁸ The last headmistress with formal links to the founder Marie Souvestre, Enid continued to run the school until its closure.⁵⁹ In 1946 Enid's mother wrote: *"Enid will have to leave Allenswood, we have done all we can to prevent it."*⁶⁰

Despite a great struggle to keep the school going,⁶¹ Allenswood closed in 1950 when it was compulsorily acquired, along with other available sites in the area, by London County Council and Wandsworth Council⁶² and re-developed into The Wimbledon Park Estate we know today.⁶³

In the twenty-first century a Marie Souvestre could never exist. She had no training as a teacher. She was volatile in her relationships and positively cruel at times to staff and pupils alike. There was a darker side to Marie Souvestre not



57 Marie Souvestre School was jointly run with Olive Hepburn, Girton College Cambridge, former pupil of Marie Souvestre (Allenswood school Prospectus)

58 Enid Michell (1899-1957)

59 Although Enid Michell never met Marie Souvestre (François Michell) the prospectus was broadly the same

60 Letters from Marie Louise Haden (1864-1950) to her nephew Giles Haden mentioning the struggle to keep Allenswood open. In 1947 she notes "poor Jeanne Dozat is very ill ... it is awful for Enid who has to be with her ... and carry on the school as well".

61 "The school moved from Allenswood to Florys Court for about 5 years where it still managed to attract a number of gifted and spirited young ladies". (François Michell)

62 Simon Catling – *The Changing Face of Southfields*, p43

63 See photograph of site map (right)



Map showing Allenswood in 1896 – Wandsworth Heritage Service (above); Site map of the Wimbledon Park Estate (right). Block B is named Allenswood



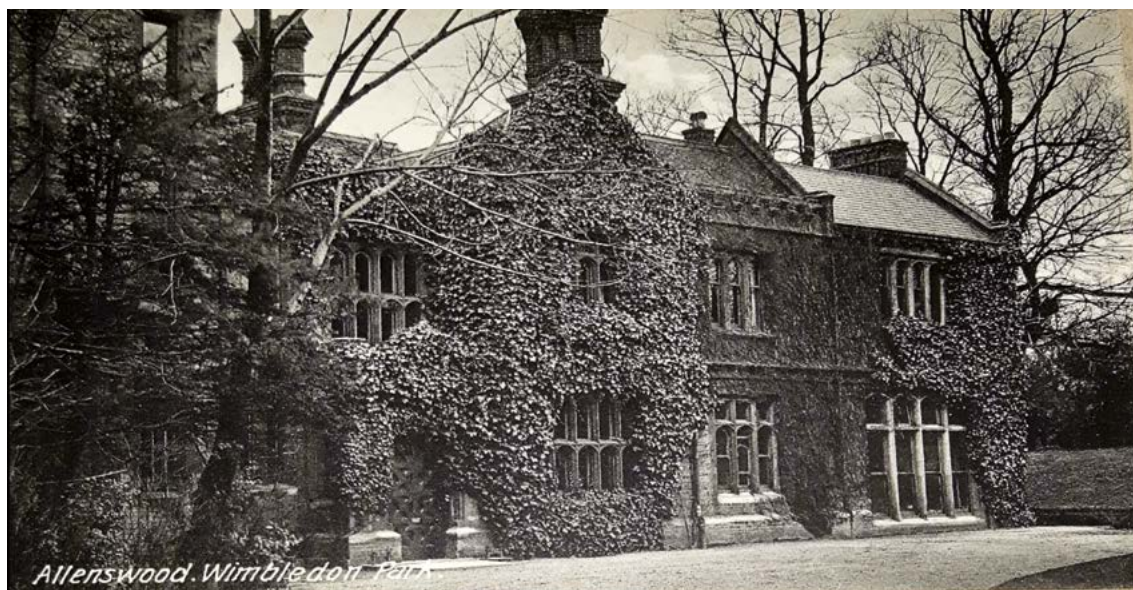
unlike Muriel Spark's Jean Brodie.⁶⁴ She had an inner circle of girls she considered worthy of her attention and for whom at times what could be best described as a Sapphic affection: "...*she put her hands on Cécile's bare arms ... and kissed her shoulder. A long deliberate kiss on the naked creamy shoulder.*"⁶⁵ Then there were those she hated: "*She detested Susannah ... and pursued her through each French class with the lashings of her tongue.*"⁶⁶ That Souvestre was a lesbian there is little doubt. Combined with her strong intellect and charismatic personality she could quickly stir up a turbulent, fraught atmosphere in the school. Dorothy Strachey writes that she was "*often injudicious, always impetuous and spontaneous, she must, in the light of later psychology, have made innumerable mistakes.*"⁶⁷ However, without women of her determination and innovation, the women's movement would have faltered in the late nineteenth century. Marjorie North, first encountered as a nervous young pupil became a key witness in her book *The Educated Pin* to the imparting of this richer, feminist sense of savoir-faire that was to be the enduring legacy of Marie Souvestre at Allenswood.

64 Muriel Spark (1918-2006) – *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*: a charismatic teacher sets out to educate 'my girls' in her own idiosyncratic style – effectively running a school within a school

65 Dorothy Strachey Bussy – *Olivia* p64. Mlle Julie is the pseudonym used for Marie Souvestre

66 Marjorie Mack – *The Educated Pin*

67 Dorothy Strachey Bussy – *Some Memories of Marie Souvestre*



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cook, Blanche Wiesen, *Eleanor Roosevelt* Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd
Cusick, Philip A, *A Passion for Learning* Teachers College Press
Riviere, Marc Serge, *Daisy in Exile: the Diary of an Australian Schoolgirl in France 1887-89*
National Library of Australia 2003
Gerber, Robin, *Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way: Timeless Strategies from the First Lady of Courage*
Portfolio Books/Women's Studies
Strachey, Dorothy, *Olivia* Vintage Classics
Roosevelt, Eleanor, *This is my Story* Bantam Books
Holroyd, Michael, *Lytton Strachey* Penguin Books
Mack, Marjorie, *The Educated Pin* Faber & Faber Ltd
Steel, David, *Marie Souvestre 1835-1905 Pédagogue pionnière et féministe* Presses Universitaires de Rennes
Lash, Joseph P, *Eleanor and Franklin* Signet Books
Clifford Barney, Nathalie, *Souvenirs Indescript, A Perilous Advantage: The best of Nathalie C-B*

ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece: Marie Souvestre – LSE Library Ref 7BSH/6/324 – Pernel/Phillipa Strachey papers
Postcard collection A. Fookes; David Devons – Victoria Drive Conservation Area
Map of Allenswood 1896 – Wandsworth Heritage Service
Wimbledon Park Estate – A. Fookes – photograph
Marie Souvestre sculptured medallion – Maison Marie Souvestre, (building of La Societe Philanthropique)
Passage de Melun, 19th Arr. Paris

SOURCES

Franklin D Roosevelt Library NY 12538: Archivist: Kendra Lighter
PierPont Morgan Library, NY
LSE Library: The Pernel and Philippa Strachey Papers – Archivist: Gemma Read
Royal Holloway College Archives: *Some Memories of Marie Souvestre* by Dorothy Strachey and
Marie Souvestre scholarship: Archivist Annabel Gill
Elizabeth Simon, Archivist, St Paul's Church, Augustus Road, Southfields
David Devons, Victoria Drive Conservation Area: Postcards & Prospectus Allenswood
The 1881 Census
Wandsworth Historical Society: Neil Robson – Notes on Allenswood
Oxford DNB: Article Souvestre, Marie-Claire – D.A. Steel
Eleanor Roosevelt's Freethought Mentor: Jeffrey D. Vowles
Merton Local Studies Centre: article by W. Myson
Wimbledon Society: article by Charles Toase 12.10.2010
Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham for "The Papers of Neville Chamberlain" regarding Beatrice, Ida,
Hilda and Ethel Chamberlain.
A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honour: The Treasury of the City of Ladies Christine de Pizan –
Introduction by Charity Cannon Willard

AND MANY THANKS TO

Many thanks to Robin Gerber for introducing me to Mlle Souvestre through her own research into Eleanor Roosevelt at Allenswood. Alan and Caroline Jenkins, Griselda Warr, Marguerite Tyler, Owen Beith, Philippe Carden, Jean-Renaud Le Milon, François Gordon Michell and Anna Souter – all for providing invaluable assistance and advice.



*Medallion sculpture of Marie Souvestre. Maison Marie Souvestre,
Passage de Melun, 19 Paris*



Published by The Wimbledon Society
22 Ridgway, London SW19 4QN
Registered Charity No 1164261

Edited by Monica Ellison

Designed by Nigel Davies

Printed by Wimbledon Print Co. Ltd
257 - 261 Haydons Road Wimbledon, London SW19 8TY
