Isabel C. McKenzie

1858-1951

Founder of the
Isabel C. McKenzie Fund in
The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

At her death at the age of 92, Isabel C. McKenzie was a widow who had no children. She left her residual estate to establish the Isabel C. McKenzie Fund, to be administered by the New York Community Trust for charitable purposes.

I wonder why we're given things,
  Like engines and a drum,
And guns that go off with a bang,
  And tops that spin and hum.

And just when we get playing good,
  And have out all our toys,
Why, somebody is sure to say,
  "Do stop that awful noise!"

These lines were written more than fifty years ago. They project the point of view of a boy, the understanding of a mother, and a psychological insight that is valid today. Yet their author was a woman. She had no children of her own. And her insights grew from a lifelong observation of and devotion to young people and especially the very young. She was Isabel C. McKenzie, founder of the Isabel C. McKenzie Fund in the New York Community Trust.

Isabel McKenzie was born in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, where her father, Richard Spear (who was born in 1820, and whose own father was born in 1783) was active in the First Reformed Church. As a young woman she fell in love with and married a young architect named Andrew C. McKenzie, who had come down from the Lake Erie shore of Western New York to make his fortune in the city. Good fortune was his in more ways than one. He married Isabel Spear. And his young firm had the opportunity of designing the New York Times Tower, a building which became an instant Times Square landmark even before its completion.

The McKenzies settled in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn before the turn of the century. They bought a home at 297 East 18th Street—a rather typical Brooklyn detached house, with a broad veranda reaching close to the sidewalk in front, the width of a driveway separating the house from its neighbor on one side, and a small but well-hedged garden on the other side. Here Isabel McKenzie was to make her home for more than fifty years.

The house in Flatbush became the center of Isabel McKenzie's life, and the radius of her interests extended to include her husband's business associates, her church, and children in general and in particular—those she herself knew, and countless more she never knew personally.

"She was a jolly, outgoing person," recalls one who knew her. "She had a bouncy, cheerful disposition." Mrs. McKenzie's cheerfulness extended in warm hospitality to her husband's many business associates and contacts, and together they enjoyed entertaining his friends in their home. "She especially liked young people," says another recollection. "When Mr. McKenzie spoke of a young man who was alone in the city, she would invite him to come for Sunday dinner with them. She was sort of a mother hen to young people who were lonely."

Isabel McKenzie also opened her home to friends who came to play bridge during the daytime, and to the ladies of Mrs. Field's Literary Club, a Brooklyn organization named for its founder many years ago and still active today. At club meetings she read light poems she had composed. Some found acceptance, in the days before World War I, by the editors of *Harper's Magazine,* and were published therein.

In 1914, Mrs. McKenzie gathered together some fifty-six of her poems that had appeared in *Harper's* or had been read at club meetings. They were published in a volume titled *Through the Nursery Door* and dedicated to Andrew McKenzie. Though perhaps outdated by today's standards, Isabel McKenzie's verse was not unlike that of Robert Louis Stevenson and Eugene Field in its detailed observation and warm understanding of early childhood. And the poetess knew how to find form that fitted function. Consider the broad boyhood truth expressed and the universal iambic couplets used in:

A BRAVE BOY

I'm not a spec afraid at night;
I go to sleep without a light;
It's only girls and babies wee
That get scared, — not boys like me.

Oh, what's that standing by the door?
I never saw that there before.
It's crawling, and I hear it hum.
Oh, Mother, — Mother, — Mo-th-er!
Co-me!

And note the stubborn and halting insistence of the accented first and last beats in each line of:

THE LOITERER

Little Miss Anabel Dorothy Day
Idled so many good moments away,
Seeming to think it was perfectly right
Wasting her moments from morning till night.

When the gong sounded she never arose,—
Settled herself for another short doze,—
Getting to breakfast so dreadfully late,
Eating alone was her usual fate.

Really, it did seem to be her intent,
Keeping folks waiting wherever she went.
All the day long you could hear some one say:
"Hurry, Miss Anabel Dorothy Day!"

Elizabeth Todd with her "Aunt Belle" and four dolls named "Belle." About 1925.

The poems of Isabel McKenzie were a way of reaching children themselves. In her garden, with its fish pool and fountain in the center, its sundial at one end and bird bath at the other, its hydrangeas in the four corners and its formal rosebeds, she sat and read her poems to the neighborhood children. "She was a sort of fairy godmother to the children," an across-the-street neighbor recalls. "It was always a great privilege for them to play in her garden and then to have lunch with her there."

To the young people she became known as "Aunt Belle." Many a little girl received a new doll each Christmas from her, and one remembers naming each new doll "Belle." Children less fortunate than those in the neighborhood knew "Aunt Belle's" warm

interest, too, for she soon became active as a worker for the Orphan Asylum Society of Brooklyn. She was elected to the Society's Board of Directors, and served for twenty-eight years on the Board. One of her chief projects was the Annual Orphan Asylum Fair.

Andrew McKenzie's architectural practice flourished during the first quarter of the century. He became the senior partner of McKenzie, Voorhees and Gmelin, and he and his firm were responsible for designing the New York Telephone building on West Street in Manhattan, the Brooklyn Municipal Building, some forty telephone buildings across the State of New York, and a number of the U.S. government buildings erected in Washington during the First World War. (It is interesting to note the persistence of McKenzie buildings: Countless Washington government buildings built for "temporary" use in 1918 were still in use when World War II erupted; the steel skeleton of the New York Times Tower became the framework of the "new" Allied Chemical Building during the 1960's; and the New York Telephone building stands today as the lone survivor in the vast area which has been demolished to make way for the World Trade Center of the 1970's.)

Isabel McKenzie and her husband had become devoted members of the parish of the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church. Among their closest friends in the parish were Mr. and Mrs. John T. Underwood, of the typewriter family. The Underwoods took a pioneer interest, some forty years before the rest of the nation, in the plight of the people who lived in the Cumberland plateau that has become famous today as Appalachia. They led the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in establishing a mission branch in the community of Buckhorn, Kentucky, some 100 miles southeast of Lexington. With headquarters in Brooklyn, the Buckhorn Association went to work sponsoring and developing a center in Buckhorn for children from broken and maladjusted homes in the surrounding area.

Isabel McKenzie approved of the idea and saw the need. When the center was built, the McKenzie Dining Hall, an imposing two-story building of huge native square-hewn logs and chinking, was its most integral structure. Within a few years, as the Buckhorn Children's Center grew, the McKenzies added a substantial kitchen wing to the dining hall. So children far away from Brooklyn benefited from the loving interest of Flatbush's Belle McKenzie.

The New York Community Trust was scarcely two years old in 1925 when Andrew and Isabel McKenzie, who were then in their sixties, discussed with their lawyer the possibility of creating, through bequest, a fund in the Trust. Less than a year later, Andrew McKenzie died suddenly of a heart attack. His widow, mindful of the uncertainty of human life, began making plans for her residual estate to go to work helping others through the New York Community Trust. "But she had a long and bright and alert old age," recalls a friend. "With her happy disposition, she came back after her grief and resumed her activities." Included were a trip to Europe with the Underwoods, when Isabel McKenzie was in her seventies, and a North Cape Cruise at the age of eighty with Mrs. Underwood after Mr. Underwood died. "Her mind was always very keen," another friend says. "She could toss off rhymes and jingles in no time."

The elderly Isabel McKenzie maintained her interest in children. Neighborhood young-

sters were always welcome in her home. "She loved to make a fuss over my kids," says one neighbor. But in her late eighties she was less able to get around. She depended on her faithful chauffeur, Philip Cousins, to make purchases and to handle details she had always handled herself. And one by one neighborhood friends of many years standing moved away or were taken by death.

When Isabel McKenzie died in 1951 she was almost ninety-three. All who had known her remembered her great devotion to the very young, but few could remember far enough back to recognize one probable cause of that devotion: Mrs. McKenzie's only child had died in infancy. And even fewer were those who knew that at some time Belle McKenzie had been in the process of writing a book of children's stories. The unpublished manuscript was found in her home after her death.

The New York Community Trust is a publicly supported community foundation that provides centralized management for many charitable funds. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for the Isabel C. McKenzie Fund is The Chase Manhattan Bank.