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Schonell, Sir Fred Joyce (1900–1969)

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This is a shared entry with Florence Eleanor Schonell

Sir Fred Joyce Schonell (1900-1969), vice-chancellor and educationist, and Florence Eleanor Schonell (1902-1962), educationist, were husband and wife. Fred was born on 3 August 1900 in Perth, son of Edward William Schonell, a schoolmaster from Victoria, and his English-born wife Agnes Mary, née Mawer. He attended (on a scholarship) Perth Modern School, qualified as a teacher at the Training College, Claremont, in 1920, and taught in turn at Perth Boys' and Highgate State schools. Eleanor was born on 31 October 1902 at Durban, South Africa, daughter of Francis William de Bracey Waterman, a furniture-dealer from England, and his wife Maud Rebecca, née Turner. After arriving in Perth, she completed teacher-training at Claremont in 1922, and taught (1923-26) at primary schools at Subiaco and Jolimont. She and Fred were part-time students at the University of Western Australia and graduated (B.A., 1925) together. They were married on 21 December 1926 at St Alban's Anglican Church, Perth, and were to have two children.

When Fred was awarded a **Hackett** studentship, the couple sailed for England in 1928. He studied at King's College and the London Day Training College, University of London (Dip.Ed., 1929; Ph.D., 1932; D.Lit., 1944). His Ph.D. thesis was on the diagnosis and remediation of difficulties in spelling. A lecturer (from 1933) at Goldsmiths' College, he carried out an extensive programme of research in schools. In 1942 he was appointed professor of education at the University College of Swansea, University of Wales. He rejuvenated a department suffering from the disruption caused by World War II. While his educational interests broadened from remedial education to include 'adolescence' and 'community involvement', he continued to be mainly concerned with the learning problems of primary-school children. *Backwardness in the Basic Subjects* (Edinburgh, 1942) and *The Psychology and Teaching of Reading* (Edinburgh, 1945) were his most important publications. His two series of reading books for children, the *Happy Venture* (Edinburgh, 1939-50) and *Wide Range* (Edinburgh, 1948-53), were used for several decades in schools throughout the English-speaking world, apart from the United States of America. A number of his books—some of which were co-authored with Eleanor—ran to several editions and reputedly sold 'millions' of copies.

In 1947 Schonell became professor of education at the University of Birmingham. Taking major responsibility for expanding the research activities of its institute of education, he developed a project that covered a wide range of topics: methods of teaching English to boys, the reading interests and library borrowings of children, the suitability of textbooks and leisure-reading books, selection of entrants for the teaching profession, and methods of teaching English and history. He was founding director of a remedial education centre: it tested and helped local students, and provided a base for research and in-service activities. To train teachers in aspects of remedial education, he instituted a diploma in educational psychology in 1948. That year he also established a journal, *Educational Review*.

Schonell received many invitations to lecture abroad. He declined the offer of a chair at the University of London to return to Australia where he became foundation professor of education at the University of Queensland in 1950. By 1952 a remedial education centre had opened with a former student from Birmingham, J. A. Richardson, as deputy-director. Schonell inaugurated a journal, *The Slow Learning Child* (first published in 1954), and introduced certificate courses to train remedial teachers and teachers of children with intellectual disabilities.

As head of the department of education, Schonell again displayed a broad range of interests. Projects included the oral language of Australian labourers, education of young Aborigines, maladjustment and school failure of intelligent children, social and educational problems of migrants' children, and the effect of the Queensland state scholarship examination on curriculum and teaching methods. The talented researchers whom he recruited included Betty Watts and R. J. Andrews. Schonell published *Essentials in Teaching and Testing Spelling* (Edinburgh, 1953) and, with Eleanor, *Diagnosis and Remedial Teaching in Arithmetic* (Edinburgh, 1957). He influenced teacher-training in Queensland by introducing a postgraduate diploma in education and a bachelor of education degree available to teachers by correspondence.

Eleanor Schonell had enrolled at University College, London (B.A. Hons, 1938; M.A., 1940), and written her master's thesis on the diagnosis of difficulties in written English. She collaborated with her husband in producing standardized ways to test children's academic attainment; these tests were published in *Diagnostic and Attainment Testing* (Edinburgh, 1950). At the University of Birmingham (Ph.D., 1950), she began to study children with cerebral palsy. With the support of J. M. Smellie, professor of paediatrics and child health, she developed procedures for assessing the intellectual and educational characteristics of such children. She also conducted surveys on cerebral palsy. While holding a research fellowship at the university, she worked (part time) as an educational psychologist at the Carlson House School for Spastics, which she had helped to establish in 1948 with funding from Paul Cadbury.



Fred Joyce Schonell (1900-1969), by unknown photographer

Herald & Weekly Times Portrait Collection, State Library of Victoria, H38849/4013

On her return to Australia, Dr Schonell took an active interest in the Queensland Spastic Children's Welfare League; she served on its medical and educational house committee (1951-61) and as honorary psychologist (1958). Her book, *Educating Spastic Children* (Edinburgh, 1956), found a receptive audience in the U.S.A. as well as in Commonwealth countries. She initiated educational and psychological testing of children with cerebral palsy, and wrote a chapter on the subject in *Recent Advances in Cerebral Palsy* (London, 1958), edited by R. S. Illingworth. Committed to providing special education for these children, she saw it as a means of taking them from institutions into the community. Her approach to life was generous and humane. She died of cerebral glioma on 22 May 1962 in Brisbane and was cremated.

After serving as president of the professorial board, Fred Schonell was appointed the first full-time salaried vice-chancellor of the University of Queensland in 1960. One of his biggest challenges was to address the budgetary problems facing a university at which enrolments more than doubled between 1957 and 1963. He recognized the importance of an alumnae association, oversaw the process of moving the remaining departments from George Street to the St Lucia site and recommended the purchase of nearby houses to permit expansion of the campus. Appreciating that too many able secondary school students in Queensland were not proceeding to university, he advocated an increase in the proportion of females in the student body and proposed that a film be made about university education for screening in high schools around the State. He was a member (1961-65) of Sir Leslie Martin's committee on the future of tertiary education in Australia.

In Schonell's nine years as vice-chancellor the number of students at the university grew from 7000 to 15,000. His initiative led to the creation of a student counselling service. He wrote *How to Study at the University* (Brisbane, 1961), urged residential colleges to cease 'initiation' practices, and promoted new courses in Asian Studies, social work and speech therapy. By carrying out a six-year study of the experiences of students, *Promise and Performance* (Brisbane, c.1962), he drew attention at home and abroad to ways of improving tertiary education. He supported better teaching methods and training courses for university lecturers. Responding cautiously to the rise of student radicalism, he offered students the opportunity to participate in a liaison committee, while warning them against violence and treason.

Outside the university, Schonell worked in community groups (especially the Queensland Sub-Normal Children's Welfare Association) which struggled to secure educational and related services for intellectually impaired children and their families. A founding member (1954) of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, he was a director of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and chairman (1966) of its Queensland and national selection committees. He was awarded an honorary D.Litt. (1963) by the University of Western Australia and an honorary LL.D. (1965) by the University of Sydney. In 1962 he was knighted. That year he received the **Bancroft** medal from the Australian Medical Association and the **Alexander Mackie** medal from the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science. An inaugural fellow (1960) of the Australian College of Education, he was an honorary fellow of both the Australian and British Psychological societies.

In spite of illness, Sir Fred carried on as vice-chancellor, with increasing assistance from his deputy **Professor Hartley Teakle**. Survived by his son and daughter, he died of Hodgkin's disease on 22 February 1969 at his Indooroopilly home and was cremated. Like his wife, he was remembered for his warm nature and his interest in people. The Fred and Eleanor Schonell Educational Research Centre at the university was named (1967) after them.

Select Bibliography

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