

Miss Mason's Ideal: Its Breadth and Balance.

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MANY of us here to-day must have known Miss Mason personally and probably the rest of us knew her so well through correspondence and various branches of her work that they too feel towards her as towards a personal friend. Perhaps there never has lived anyone who more speedily and lastingly won the friendship of persons she never saw. Teachers who had only known of her for a few months felt the blank of her loss with a curious intensity; so did parents whose knowledge of her was confined to gratitude for her teaching in Home Education and Parents and Children.

Breadth and balance are perhaps the main marks of Miss Mason's teaching, so that there are many standpoints from which we may try to study it. Surely few educationists have solved both a theory and a philosophy of education—in its broadest sense—and a practical concrete method of teaching as well. There are these two main sides of her ideal, often separated but not really separable. First, the upbringing of the child, *the person*; the teaching of habit, the training of the will, the gradual evolution of character. Founded on this and on much more, is Miss Mason's theory and practice of education in its narrower sense; how to teach children in their school days.

The training of the person is naturally a quieter affair than the imparting of knowledge; we can hold exhibitions of the work done by P.U. School children or give demonstration lessons, but what we cannot do is to exhibit the character training of our children. This would seem to be one reason for the strangely mistaken idea that Miss Mason cared more for knowledge than for character. It is not however the whole reason.

Nowadays we hear much—perhaps too much—about freedom, individuality, sense-training and the importance of baby's earliest habits and so on. But these are no new things to members of the P.N.E.U. In Home Education, written nearly thirty years ago, Miss Mason taught us that

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from the earliest days baby should learn the meaning of "must" and "must not," that we cannot too soon teach physical habits of regularity in sleep, food, etc. In her pamphlet "Children as Persons," we read that "liberty is the most sacred and inalienable right" of a child; that "public opinion is an insufferable bondage, depriving a person of his individual right to think for himself"; that "a mind that does not think and think its own thoughts, is as a paralysed arm or a blind eye." Much more could be quoted to show how important a place character, real character, held in Miss Mason's ideal, and how wonderfully this ideal has permeated educated thought. In fact some people who have seized this or that part of her teaching, not knowing whose it was, and have let it run away with them, have lost the balance and sane-ness which marks Miss Mason's teaching all through.

Indeed so much of what Miss Mason taught about the upbringing of children has passed into common possession of the thinking half of the nation that we forget to whom we owe it, which is just what she herself would have wished, what indeed she seems to have aimed at. And more than that, her teaching harmonises so well with the background of sane living, that when it is most there, we notice it least. Anyone taking up her book "Home Education" and

reading it for the first time is struck by the *sensibleness* of it all. “Of course” we say “that is just how we ought to do it, why didn’t we think of it before? This is the help we have been hungering for for years; even what we knew already we probably owe to her too.”

The following true story may serve as an illustration of this. There was a young mother who was wishful of joining the P.N.E.U. and so get help in the upbringing of her babies. But an older friend tried to dissuade her: “My dear, don’t be so silly; all these societies are full of fads. Now just look at Mrs. So and So; do you know of a better or a more sensibly brought up family than hers? I never heard that she belonged to any new-fangled educational society.”—“Oh, but,” answered the young mother, “It was she who told me of the P.N.E.U. and she says she owes everything to it.”

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Indeed there could be no one more free from “fads” than Miss Mason. She used to tell us that we were not to try to *develop* individuality for that was the way cranks were made, we were to allow freedom to the “person,” room for him to think his own thoughts.

Thus much of what was so new when Miss Mason first began to teach, is now part and parcel of common educational knowledge, and that being so, probably it no longer seemed necessary to Miss Mason that she should continually re-iterate that which was already learnt. And so some people say: “Miss Mason cared more for knowledge than for character.” But she held actually that the one was impossible without the other. Without knowledge there could be no character. Since character comes of thought and thoughts must come of what we know, knowledge makes character. This shows us what a sad fallacy underlies the argument that it does not matter what we learn but only how we learn it.

But Miss Mason did not mean quite the same as does the man in the street when she spoke of knowledge. In the “Basis of National Strength,” she gives us a most illuminating definition of knowledge. She says “it is a *state* out of which persons may pass and into which they may return, but never a store upon which they may draw.” To her, knowledge was so bound up with “*living*” that the two were inseparable. Again, in the same pamphlet, Miss Mason gives us a negative definition of knowledge. “It is not” she says, “instruction, information, scholarship nor a well-stored memory.” “For too many of us” she says elsewhere “knowledge is a thing of shreds and patches, knowledge of this and of that, with yawning gaps between.” And again, “It is perhaps a beautiful whole, a great unity, embracing God and Man and the Universe, but having many parts . . . , all are necessary and each has its functions.” “Knowledge is the science of the proportion of things.” Yet one more quotation: “Fundamental knowledge is the knowledge of God and while we are ignorant of that principal knowledge, Science, Nature, Literature and History, all remain dumb.”

So we see that knowledge to Miss Mason was a tremendous thing—indeed not a thing at all but a state, just as

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friendship is a state. It is a condition of happy friendship with God, with man and with nature, in which one’s mind will grow and expand and blossom as happily as a plant in its native clime; the mind being in direct contact with other minds as a plant is surrounded by air; thus the mind drinks in from the Divine, from fellow men and from nature all that is needed for its complete sustenance It is interesting too to remember how Our Lord always *taught* people who

came to Him; he did not criticise or find fault, but He enlightened their understanding; gave them truer knowledge for their guidance.

May I repeat that definition? It makes so clear how in Miss Mason's philosophy character cannot exist without knowledge. "Knowledge is a state out of which people may pass and into which they may return but never a store upon which they may draw." . . . That is, real knowledge cannot be used as a servant, a crutch, a vaulting stick to be thrown aside when we have passed that final examination and have "arrived." When so treated knowledge becomes mere information about some particular subject or subjects—and oh! how dull is a "well-informed" person and how untrustworthy are his opinions on people and on life! It is an obvious result, not because he is a specialist, not because he has passed examinations, but because of his attitude towards knowledge—something acquired solely to be made use of.

In Miss Mason herself we have the most wonderful example of her own teaching. We ourselves are mostly so far "outside knowledge" that we wonder and grope when decisions have to be made, but, as an article in the April *Review* tells us, "she always *knew* without a second's hesitation what was the right thing" and afterwards the rightness of her decision was obvious to others.

But Miss Mason's idea of Education was not only that, it was an atmosphere and a life, but also a discipline. "Without labour there is no profit" she said; but to emphasise this aspect hardly concerns this paper; though it must never be forgotten, since no one believed more strongly than she that knowledge is only for those who have the *will* to labour earnestly for it; it cannot be freely given by anyone.

Perhaps I have been able to show dimly the amazing
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breadth of Miss Mason's ideal. But as to *balance* there are some who seem to think that the scales of her favour were weighted on the side of letters rather than of things. Well, it may be so. She did believe that knowledge of God, of our fellow men, of living nature was more life-giving than knowledge of things. But she did not, as some people imagine, rule science, for example, out of her scheme of education. In fact, she says, "For our generation, science seems to me to be the way of intellectual advance," though, "For the most part science as she is taught leaves us cold. But the fault is not in the science, but in our presentation of it." And again, "Natural Science should be taught through field-work or other immediate channel. Huxley told us long ago that Science should be taught in schools as common information."

Physical Exercises and handicrafts she considered most important, but rather as *adjuncts* to education than as an integral part of education. She calls them "excellent training."

And mathematics and music she put together in a class by themselves, two branches of knowledge each with a speech of its own; a speech, as she put it, "of exquisite clarity."

As to methods of teaching these subjects, Miss Mason did not lay claim to any special knowledge. It is for this reason probably that some persons think they are not included in her ideal education, but when we remember, as she always did, that "knowledge is truth," we know at once that no part of truth can be omitted without wrecking the whole. And in some wonderful way, P.U. School children do realise that knowledge is a balanced whole; that scripture, history, geography, botany and all the others are actually different facets of the same thing. Indeed it may be that herein lies the chief characteristic of a P.N.E.U. School; for it is merely another way of saying that the children have a wide curriculum and that they get at

knowledge for themselves and for its own sake. All this results in a real enjoyment and love of knowledge which is most delightful to witness, and certainly no P.N.E.U. children display boredom or are relieved when school days are over or give up learning or reading when they return home “for good” as we say.

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What is the secret of this? I do not know. What we cannot do with Miss Mason’s ideal is to reduce it to lowest terms, and just in so far as we try to, so far we misrepresent it, and misunderstand it. But some of the secret undoubtedly lies in the Programmes of Work; the longer we work from those wonderful programmes the more we realise how well balanced they are; how satisfying to the hungry mind; how the subjects dovetail; how difficult it is to teach history only in history time, how it will “flow over” into geography, literature, or even into such unexpected channels as arithmetic or botany.

We all know how delicate a matter is balance; such and such a change which seems so clearly sensible will sometimes seriously endanger it. Somehow even slight imperfections seem positively to help to maintain the balance; certainly constant little changes in the programme are necessary because otherwise they would stiffen and become rigid and lifeless. And so the programmes grow and change always; looking back through twenty years, it is amazing how they have developed [sic]—the sense of balance perhaps growing even in Miss Mason herself all the while. This may explain why as we read in the *April Review*, Miss Mason so much disliked organisation, printed forms, stereotyped letters, card indexes and all the paraphernalia of a systematised business. Where the fulcrum is stiff there cannot be balance.

Looking through these old programmes it is most interesting to watch how subjects disappear and re-appear and are again displaced. Architecture for instance; and astronomy; geology and physiography. With a wonderful sense of fitness Miss Mason arranged and re-arranged; chose this book, rejected that, tried such a one and removed it, either because it had not sufficient weight or because those unerring children refused to “take to it.”

That is, they refused to “narrate” it, Narration is [sic], as we all know, of enormous importance, not however because it is the sum total of Miss Mason’s Methods, for very much more is included in her ideal, but because it looms so much larger in P.N.E.U. work than some teachers understand; because too its use is spreading to non-P.N.E.U. schools, where however its real significance as “food for the mind” is not yet fully understood.

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Of late years, Miss Mason, in her far-seeing wisdom, laid more and more stress on narration, for she had discovered in it the foundation stone of learning, which provides, when the right books are used, the food without which the mind cannot grow or thrive. But we *cannot* reduce Miss Mason’s method to lowest terms; we cannot say P.N.E.U. “teaching is narration”; for though it is not possible to do Miss Mason’s work without it, it is eminently possible to practise narration of a sort and yet be far indeed from her ideal.

Perhaps the root of the matter is that narration includes so much more than mere re-telling of matter read.

We take our children for a Nature Walk. They talk, wonder, discuss, they paint little sketches of their finds, whether fossil, shell, insect or flower. They write notes; they keep lists. Is this narration? Surely. But they have not *necessarily* read anything, though probably they are now poring over some book to find out the name or habitat of one or other of their finds. But

they have got at knowledge *direct*; no intervening wall of talk is there. Now in a non-P.N.E.U. school, each child, in nine cases out of ten would be made to copy its notes from the black board where teacher had written up what were really *her* observations, cleverly and quite friendlily imposed on the children. That is one difference.

Take Science. There is a great change coming over the teaching of science. It used to be "If you take so and so and do thus and thus, such and such will happen." But now methods are changing.

In a boys' school not long ago, where there was a jolly Science room, hardly grand enough to be called a "Lab." the boys were learning the habit of things much as our P.U.S. children learn the habits of bird or flower. That is, through patient observation. Books were there to fill out the knowledge so gained and a teacher who knew both his subject and his place, and was inconspicuously giving help and advice as needed. The boys were very busy. Some were trying experiments, other were writing down exactly what they had done and seen, others were making drawings in their note books—"nature notes" if you like. Wasn't that "narration"? Surely it fulfilled Miss Mason's

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dictum that we must ourselves perform the labour of learning, the act of knowing; that we do not know a thing until we have ourselves and individually "given back." In fact here, where we might least expect it, we find a change which Miss Mason has helped to bring about. She hoped for more literary books on Science; they too seem to be coming.

As time goes on, we shall probably find it increasingly difficult always to remember this "Breadth and Balance" which is the subject of this paper. One might almost sum up Miss Mason's philosophy in those two words "Breadth and Balance"; "a pioneer of *sane* education" the *Times* called her. And just in proportion to the greatness and importance of these two characteristics, is the difficulty of carrying them out.

It is such a temptation to us ordinary folks to emphasise some part at the expense of the rest and so turn a strength into a weakness. There is only one way to avoid this danger. That is constantly to read and re-read Miss Mason's books, constantly to remind ourselves of her first principles—for from now onwards Miss Mason's work is in our hands; we dare not leave unmade any effort to keep the truth.

May I take Narration, the corner stone, as an example?

In such a book subject as history, does P.N.E.U. teaching consist merely in reading a set portion once through and then allowing a certain number of children—out of perhaps a class of fifty—to narrate as best they can? Is it not possible that such a lesson, repeated *ad infinitum* would result in a rigid system?

What is narration? Miss Mason tells us it is "the answer to a question put by the mind to itself," Then might there not be times when the narration might be a drawing or even a sketch map?

Are we perhaps in danger of systematising the method by insisting that reading and narration are in themselves for ever all-sufficient? We know we may never omit that part of the lesson in which the child puts to his mind a question and answers it, in which he himself performs the definite act of knowing, in which his mind is fed. But should we, for example, never also set questions for the older children of a thought-provoking type? Let us see

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what Miss Mason says. In "School Education" after giving an account of narration she adds: "But this is only *one* way to use books; others are to enumerate the statements in a given chapter, to analyse a chapter, to divide it into paragraphs under proper headings, to tabulate and classify series, to trace cause to consequence and consequence to cause, to discern character—and perceive how character and circumstance interact The teacher's part is, among other things, to set such questions and such tasks as shall give full scope to his pupil's mental activity . . . Let the pupil write for himself half a dozen questions which cover the passage studied. These few hints by no means cover the disciplinary uses of a good school book."

So we evidently may require—at least from our older pupils—something more than narration. But, we must never forget that without narration the mind will starve; whatever disciplinary exercises we use, they should be *in addition to* and never *instead of* narration. Physical exercises of the mind are admirable, but will not take the place of food. On the other hand, a well fed mind does need a certain amount of disciplinary exercise at times, and the children lose something when they do not have it.

Miss Mason was an idealist; unperceiving persons might even call her a "mere visionary." All of us who try to follow in her steps are idealists too, and yet on every hand we hear that what the world wants is a sound, practical, useful education; it has "no use" for the idealist. But, looking back through history, it is inspiring and immensely cheering to notice who it is who have most greatly influenced the world. Is it not always the idealist? The man who attempts the impossible? What practical man of affairs or politics or war or commerce can stand alongside Plato, Socrates, Dante?

For Spirit is stronger than matter and we who know even but a little of Miss Mason's teaching, know that it rests on eternal truth.

In discussion at the end of the paper Miss Pennethorne said she thought it might interest members of the Conference to know how Miss Mason's ideal struck people in ordinary educational circles in England. She went about so much

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that she had a chance of seeing that one set looked upon P.N.E.U. teachers as teachers of literature, and another as teachers of nature study. Many people did not realise that Miss Mason's ideal was to give each human being a chance of expanding in all directions. Almost unconsciously children working in the school felt this themselves. For instance, a girl in the P.U.S. was heard to say of her brother who was at another school, "Tom thinks education is sums and Latin: I tell him it is "Plutarch's Lives" and Picture Talk!"

A good many questions were asked. One was "What should you do with a child who has been in the P.U.S. eight months and who cannot narrate at all?"

Miss Pennethorne said that she was frequently asked this question. She generally found that a child who could not narrate in class would go home and tell it all to his brother or sister. With children who found narration difficult it was well to practise with something that was easy to reproduce, for instance Longfellow's narrative poems. Often, too, children who were tongue-tied wrote well and they could be made to do this and then to read what they had written. They would in the end be able to do without the writing. Sometimes children who were slow to

narrate in class could be told to narrate to each other, as is done in the group system in big schools.

Another question was, "When the lesson does not consist of only reading and narrating, should the talk come before or after this?"

Miss Wix replied that she thought the talk should come last.

Colonel Ward thanked Miss Wix for her extremely interesting paper, and said that he felt that she had shown them how an ideal can be practically applied.