

THE TEACHING METHODS OF CHARLOTTE MASON AND THE P.N.E.U.¹

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EVER since Sir R. Morant, now many years ago, went to see Miss Mason, and began to infuse ideas which he had got from her into the "Instructions to Inspectors" and the subsequent "Suggestions," her influence has made itself felt more and more widely upon teaching methods. The number of those who know the source of the methods which they practise may be relatively small, for it is seldom identified, though the adept can trace it; but the influence is there, and it is growing.

But there are schools, every year more numerous, schools primary and secondary, day schools and residential, schools maintained by Local Education Authorities and supported by the State, as well as private schools, where with understanding and deliberate purpose her philosophy of education is given full scope in practise over the whole course of the curriculum by teachers who have studied it.

Now I do not know what you are doing, or how you teach. You would not be here if you were not devoted, and enthusiastic, and I may not doubt, skilful. But I think I may venture to guess that many of you will have the same tale to tell as the majority of teachers. In another class—though they never put themselves there—are those somewhat exceptional people who by sheer force of personality, by their enthusiasm, their imagination, their full stored minds, and their tireless devotion, call up, as only great teachers can, all the desire for knowledge and will to work that are latent in most children: and still in another class there are those who follow with joy the teaching methods of Charlotte Mason and find the great teachers in the books—or some of the books—that they put into the

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children's hands. Elsewhere it is a tale of disappointment. Many are called but few are chosen. The few do great things and rejoice their teacher's heart; the many work, if at all, under the spur without pleasure, because they must.

Under the pressure of examinations, and the demand for certificates, there may be an appearance, an increasing but deceptive appearance, of efficiency; there may be an increased absorption of information, which serves its main purpose if it is retained till the examination week is over; but I gravely doubt whether there is a greater percentage of intelligence or of culture.

The public schools of this country claim with ample right—no one disputes their claim—that they give a training to character that is recognised the world over; but character in these days, great asset though it be, will not take a boy or girl far without a developed intelligence and a trained mind—without ideas and reasoning power; and I think even the public schools will admit that quite a large proportion of their boys do not attain to those heights. A few do, along the lines of classics, mathematics, and science, handled as the requirements of university scholarship examinations and certificate examinations compel, or seem to compel, the teacher to handle them; but those methods destroy all interest in the majority, and they leave school with undeveloped minds.

I do not think our newer secondary schools would yet lay claim to the same famous reputation for the training of character that the public schools enjoy, and I am afraid that they would have to admit that they certainly are not more successful with the intellect.

It is the tendency to exaggerate the value of oral teaching, of uninspired text books, of manipulated information, that we have to guard against to-day. The ideal pupil of the moment is he who will not let his school down in the examination room, who can be relied upon to get his school certificate, who has handy all the information necessary, and has responded to the anxious drill in the use of it. Whether that wonder has been stirred in him out of which philosophy is born, whether he has caught the spirit of the great writers—poets, essayists, dramatists, historians—whose works he has begun to read, whether he has developed imagination, a trained intelligence, a cultured interest in the things of the mind, that will stand by him for life—there is hardly time to think of that with examina-

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tions always in the offing. Yet it is just that for which Charlotte Mason stood.

You are, no doubt, on the side of the angels, or you would not have covered thousands of miles by sea and land to come here, but you will probably confess that most schools are ridden by the seven devils of the examination room.

Let me give some examples of what I mean. I will take the first from the seven pages (I apologise for the coincidence in numbers) of a recent report upon one of our Gloucestershire Secondary Schools.

“The staff,” it is said, “are well qualified and hardworking, and though there are weaknesses in certain subjects, the standard of efficiency is satisfactorily high.”

“The standard of work in all the examination subjects except Geography, and, in a lesser degree, French is quite creditable.”

It is, then, on the whole a good school.

What are the main criticisms?

Of the History Teacher it is said,—“Her exposition is clear and interesting, and she is already a skilful questioner. She should encourage her pupils to do rather more for themselves.”

But it is just that which interesting exposition and skilful questioning prevent.

Of the Geography Teacher,—“He has plenty of information and administers it liberally to the classes. On the whole the children are interested and remember what they are taught, but it is found difficult in Upper V to develop an effective deductive capacity”—in plain English Upper V can't think for themselves! That is the natural consequence of floods of information administered liberally.

Of Science,—“The majority of the pupils cope adequately with both School and Higher Certificate Examinations when they reach them. On the other hand the time given to botany is inadequate to make it more than a cram subject. . . . Homework consists in the copying of notes or the writing up of experiments . . . The text books in use are such as to provide a sound grounding for examination purposes; the reference library, in this subject, contains some of the older advanced text books, but little that throws light on modern tendencies in Science. Pupils do but little outside reading.”

They do not do enough for themselves, you see; they do not think, they do not read—but they pass examinations.

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Here is my second example:—

A few years ago the teaching of History in the London elementary schools was investigated by Inspectors of the Board of Education. Their findings appeared in a Report, and what they say would undoubtedly be true of the teaching of history, and not of history only, in many if not in most elementary schools elsewhere.

“Mere knowledge of historical facts is no guarantee of historical understanding,” says a report of the London County Council, and the Inspectors quoted the words, but they had to say that they had not been able to find even a knowledge of the facts. They were dissatisfied with the quality of many of the text books in use, and they criticised the oral lesson. “The almost invariable practice in the lower classes,” they say, “is the oral lesson. The teacher is the narrator pure and simple, and the quality of the narration is not on the whole high . . . Even in the upper classes the oral lesson is still supreme. In most London schools a visitor, on entering a classroom during a History period, can rely upon finding the teacher addressing rows of silent and apparently attentive children. (You will recall that abundance of information administered so liberally to the classes by the Geography master in the Secondary School.) It is probably safe to say that the majority of children in London Elementary Schools spend at least seventy-five per cent. of their time during the History periods as passive listeners, and in some schools it is difficult to ascertain what else they do.”

My last example is taken from a recent article in the Educational Supplement of *The Times* with the theme “English should be better taught.” The writer refers to the frequent criticism to which for some time past the teaching of English has been subjected. “The teaching of English,” says one critic, whom he quotes, “. . . is as yet only an adventure of discovery, and the auspices have not proved favourable.”

The writer of the article finds one of the main causes of the ineffectiveness of English teaching in “the entry into our secondary schools of a population to whom standard English is virtually a foreign language.” The English which the children bring with them, he says, “is but the scraping together of a few common and daily words, a formless and structureless imitational chatter, an instrument sufficient—though only just—to meet their current material needs, but quite inadequate

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to bear any weight of thought. Thought and language are for them almost completely dissociated.”

That is a very grave reflection upon the methods of the primary schools; it is the natural consequence of methods such as the Board’s inspectors condemn in London.

“They need,” continues the writer—“and this is their primary and fundamental need—to be trained in the use of English as the instrument of thought which they will use throughout their lives every day and all day.”

“Philistine and heretical though the opinion may appear, he concludes, “ I hold that the main aim and object of the teaching of English in secondary schools during this or the next generation is not the appreciation of great literature, but the appreciation of and power to produce clear and forceful thought.”

There is nothing Philistine and heretical about this. The writer goes straight to the point. The training which we are giving to our children, the teaching methods which we employ, do

not produce the habit of clear and forceful thought. Indeed he goes more surely to the point than the report upon the Secondary School from which I have quoted. There it is only incidentally, and with the sting of meaning and intention almost concealed among the flowers of praise, that we hear of the need to encourage the pupils to do more for themselves, of the difficulty that Upper V find in developing “an effective deductive capacity,” of the lack of light on modern tendencies in Science, and the little outside reading.

And if the child in the school absorbs information without thinking, the man in the street does the same. The multitude do not think: they accept opinions ready made from pulpit, press, and platform, and then say that they *think* this or that. It is not too much to say that the stability of our modern civilisation may come to depend upon our ability to impart to the many this same power of clear and forceful thought. But is the average teacher, who employs the conventional class teaching methods, the oral lesson and the skilful questioning, likely to succeed in imparting it? He is but an average man; the text books that he uses were written by average men; there is nothing in him or in them, in the common phrase, to put across. The hungry mind that seeks its proper food will not find it there. It craves not information but knowledge; for knowledge furnishes ideas, and it is ideas

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that are the food of mind. Without that food in ample measure, and discipline in the use of it, no mind will achieve the power of clear and forceful thought; there will be no disciplined intelligence. That is why Charlotte Mason, that great educationist, said:—

“Mind appeals to mind, and thought begets thought, and that is how we become educated. For this reason we owe it to every child to put him into direct communication with great minds that he may get great thoughts; and here let me emphasise the importance of using first hand books; all compendiums, digests, compilations, selections, all books at second hand should be eschewed.”

So stated the proposition seems obvious enough. We can most of us remember occasions in our own experience when such a stimulating idea suddenly found access to our minds.

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific.

The orientation of the mind was altered. There was sudden intellectual growth and a new departure. We were never quite the same again. Sometimes, perhaps, we were fortunate enough to come into direct personal contact with the great mind. The man or woman talked to us and virtue passed. More often it was through the printed page that the message came. As David Grayson has said in his delightful *Adventures in Contentment*, “The great books have in them the burning fire of life.”

At the Universities there are many such men and women; now and again we find one among ministers of religion: sometimes there is a gifted teacher at our school, who flashes light

at us from an original and well-stored mind: occasionally we find the prophet in a business acquaintance, or a humble fellow worker, or the man who lives next door. But the mind must be there, or virtue will not pass; and it is only rarely that the schools can enlist the like upon their staffs. Yet the books stand on the shelves of the library that would impart the message; but instead of calling in their aid, the average teacher talks his average stuff, and uses text books written by other average teachers to convey potted knowledge for examination purposes—text books that have not one illuminating idea to communicate in all their predigested and unnatural pages, books that no adult would look at, nor any child save in school and upon compulsion.

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There was this to be said for the old way of Greek and Latin. It was a slow and painful road, but the books had stood the test of two millennia. Great minds spoke from their pages thoughts that compelled attention and begat thought. We might have done better perhaps if we had had more English, and if we had thought less, as we read laboriously, of difficult exercises to come in prose and verse, and more of the substance of the book; but at any rate we were spared the empty clatter of the oral lesson, and its sequel of ingenious but unprofitable questions.

The truth is that teaching methods began to go wrong when the nineteenth century conceived the primary school—an almost bookless school of huge classes, taught by relatively uneducated teachers, who were shaped for their impossible task by the Training Colleges that partly schooled and partly trained them. The few books the scholars had were for the most part mean text books, written down to a wholly derogatory conception of the needs and capacity of the worker's child. The classes are smaller now, the teachers are much better educated, and there are more books: the masters of English literature have made their way into the schools—too often it is true in the form of selections or adaptations; but the method of the oral lesson, the questions, the text book, and the dictated summary, largely persist. Naturally the results are disappointing. No mistakes of method it is true will defeat the able and ambitious: somehow they will overcome all obstacles and arrive; but the great mass of the school population do not find the mental food they need; they go hungry, and all their lives they show the visible signs of mental malnutrition.

But perhaps somebody will still ask, what is wrong with the oral lesson? Is it not a clever lesson, and do not the clever questions that follow it produce clever answers? Certainly, when well handled, as it often is, the oral lesson creates that impression.

But who does the work in such lessons? It is of course the teacher. He is really thinking. He selects and arranges the matter (serving up one and the same dish for two score different minds), he chooses the language, he is making the effort to win or to compel the attention of every mind in the passive group before him. All this demands real mental effort of him, but little or none is demanded of the listeners.

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When it comes to questioning it is the same. Anybody can answer questions if he has listened—and the virtuous do listen even when they are bored; intellectual effort is demanded only of the one who puts them. It is he who must think clearly, and speak to the point. The answer in very truth leaps to the mind if the lesson has been well given, and the question well put.

This clever questioning flatters the teacher, and has delighted many an inspector, but it does little for the child except leave him with certain scraps of information, that have little interest, little value and little permanence. For the child does no real work, and that way he will not learn how to get knowledge and how to use it. Only by working hard himself—the effort usually relegated in the secondary schools to the dismal tired hours of unaided evening preparation—will he learn to do either the one or the other.

The oral lesson, the dictated summary, the predigested text book. There is no type of school in the country that has not been infected with the plague. The public secondary schools, the great public schools themselves, have perhaps caught it in a more virulent form than the elementary schools. They are most of them obsessed by the importance of securing examination results. They play for safety, and safety seems to lie that way. They dare not trust to the pupil's own desire to work. They are inclined to doubt whether there is any such desire in the majority of boys and girls: and indeed, where these methods obtain, there is not, for it has been killed by them. But the desire to learn was once there, and might have been cultivated. No child sits bored and inert by native choice: if he does not try to learn it is because the desire has been knocked out of him.

And the results are plainly to be seen even in the industrious, when they arrive at the university or the training college. It takes them the best part of their first year to learn how to grapple with a book, how to do independent work and dig for knowledge, when the teacher is no longer there to digest the matter for them. And they in their turn go out to teach in the same way, with the same result.

Read, read, read; that is the way to get knowledge—the child's way no less than the adult's way. And the reader must acquire the art, that Dr. Johnson and other great readers have practised, of telling again the substance of what he has
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read. It calls for real intellectual effort, but it is an effort that the child delights to make. It is a very different thing from answering questions.

If you want young children to read much, there is no better incentive or help than to read much to them, especially in the infant school or kindergarten; and if you then make them tell you (“narrate”) the substance—the kernel, not the words—of what they have read, you will have shown them how to get knowledge, how to fix it, and how to use it. So Charlotte Mason has taught us.

A wealth of good books, such as the programmes of the P.N.E.U. provide, directed to all the subjects of humane study, that find, or should find, a place in the curriculum of the primary or secondary school, enriches the vocabulary and stimulates the power of thoughtful ordered expression at a great rate—if the teacher will avoid the common fault of intervening between pupil and author with frequent, unnecessary, and irritating explanations. The context will generally reveal the meaning of new words, and there are dictionaries, and a child can ask a question when he feels the need. Get on with the reading: it is by using words, and not by talking about them, that their full connotation is mastered. And why do outrage to the music and appeal of poetry by stopping at the end of a verse to insist upon a paraphrase? And there is another disastrous mistake to be avoided, which is a consequence of the prevailing anxiety lest examination results should disappoint. The teacher has no confidence in the native power of the child, and so he crams: he will insist that every boy and girl shall see in the passage all that

he sees, forgetting that it is not natural that all children should see the same things, or that any child should see in poetry, prose, history, or drama, at any stage of childhood, what the adult sees. With the child, if we would believe it, the half is greater than the whole. The years will add the other half when the mind is ripe. Our premature insistence, our editions overloaded with elaborate notes, only ruin appetite and kill thought.

It is some fourteen years since I first heard of Charlotte Mason and her work. I must not pause to tell you the story of her life and work. Some of you know the books in which she expounded her philosophy of education. Those who do not should take the earliest opportunity of reading them, for in them you will find the remedy for what is wrong with

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education, and has been wrong with it for many a day. It is her doctrine that I have been preaching to you to-day. The oral lesson, the class as a unit, the predigested text book, the dictated notes, the blackboard summary—for these she has no use. For her each child is a person with a person's rights, and his individuality must be respected; not repressed so that he may fall into line with a class, nor so dominated by the teacher's personality that he learns to lean upon another instead of thinking, judging, acting for himself. It is not for us to tell him what to think or what judgments to form. He must have liberty to deal with knowledge in his own way, the way natural to him, not in our way, not in any uniform class way.

I ought to give you some indication of the wealth of books that our Gloucestershire children enjoy, and of the use they make of them in the primary schools, now more than three hundred, that follow the teaching methods of Charlotte Mason and the programmes of the P.N.E.U. We are indeed giving a liberal education.

Let me tell you rapidly the books that will be used by a child of ten next term.

English History	Arnold Forster, pp. 326-393 (1547-1587).
French History	Creighton, pp. 158-176 (1547-1584).
General History	Mackenzie, <i>Ancient Egypt</i> , pp. 1-41.
Citizenship ..	North's <i>Plutarch's Lives; Pompey</i> , pp. 1-64. Arnold Forster, <i>The Citizen Reader</i> , pp. 13-47.
Geography ..	<i>Ambleside Geography</i> , Book III.; <i>The Counties of England</i> , pp. 254-276. Parkin, <i>Round the Empire</i> , pp. 214-244. Hakluyt's <i>English Voyages</i> (Marshall), pp. 145-190.
Natural History	Buckley, <i>Life and Her Children</i> , pp. 66-102. Holden, <i>The Sciences</i> , pp. 148-182.
Reading ..	Shakespeare, <i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i> . Plain text edition. Scott, <i>Kenilworth</i> . Kipling, <i>Rewards and Fairies</i> . Bulfinch, <i>Age of Fable</i> , pp. 68-97.
Recitations ..	From <i>Historical Lyrics and Ballads</i> and <i>Lyra Heroica</i> .

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What is the effect of these teaching methods and this wealth of books? There is interest; there is ability to do independent work with the book; there is knowledge and the capacity to use it; there is a range of vocabulary, the extent of which you would not believe till you had witnessed it yourselves. The English these children take on to the secondary schools, is

no “formless and structureless imitational chatter . . . inadequate to bear any weight of thought.” I will not ask you to accept my word for it. Another shall speak.

In the Report of my Committee for the year 1928-29, in connection with the annual examination for the award of Free Places, for which two thousand three hundred and forty-six children sat, occurs the following passage:—

“The Committee were much gratified at the testimony to the work of the children and, incidentally, to the standard attained by the elementary schools of the county, which was paid by the chief examiner (Dr. G. Perrie Williams) when forwarding his report on the examination held in March, 1928.”

Dr. Williams wrote as follows:—

“I am very much struck by the quality of the English work. Is there some special reason for the very high standard? Your children’s range of knowledge and their power of judgment seem to me remarkable; it is certainly totally unlike anything I see elsewhere and I cannot but think that there must be some reason for it.”

The reason, as I told Dr. Williams, is to be found in the range and quality of the books used, and in the general adoption of Charlotte Mason’s teaching methods.

Even in a poorly handled school the clever child can make amazing progress: and in a good school the slow child, the child of late development, gets his chance; a chance that the conventional methods, the oral lesson and the rapid oral questioning, never give him. He craves for knowledge as much as any other. Read to him: he loves it. If you don’t hustle him, he will narrate just as well as another. Pride of achievement is now his. He gains confidence; he makes brave efforts; and the things that by the old method were impossible, become possible now. He no longer feels, he is no longer regarded as, a dolt. He finds that what he can tell he can write, and he begins to spell. The teachers have been amazed by the progress made by children of this type.

I wish I could give you examples of the written work the
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children do, both in their daily routine and in the examinations at the end of each term, examinations which are a joy—I speak the bare truth—to child and teacher: but I have already taken up too much of your time and I cannot do it. If you are curious—and I hope some of you may be—you can find such examples in pamphlets which the P.N.E.U. have printed.

Our schools get a good many visitors who wish to see for themselves the work about which they have heard or read. Teachers and children are used to them. If any of you are still in England when the schools re-open in September, and would wish to visit one or more of them, I hope you will let me know, and I can arrange such a visit for you at any point of the county at which you like to enter it.

¹ An address given at the British Commonwealth Education Conference held at Bedford College, July, 1931.