

ON FIRST READING CHARLOTTE MASON'S BOOKS¹

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This talk has naturally to be largely personal, how the books and ideas fitted in to my previous experience and what my reaction to them was.

I have had most of my working life out of England, and when I came home I taught in a State school and then in an independent boarding school but I felt I wanted to see more of English education and get right inside different schools, and I was very glad to be able to take the Emergency Teachers' Training a few years ago. Many of the men and women there had lived with people of different countries and were feeling very much—as Charlotte Mason speaks of it—'the solidarity of the human race.' Abroad, men in the Forces saw life on a larger scale and they talked and discussed; and now back in England some were going to teach. The purpose of education and the thought that 'education is what is left when we have forgotten all we have been taught' was very much discussed. One man said, 'Well, we certainly ought to find out before we leave college what it is we expect to be left'.

Then I was to come here, to the Charlotte Mason College. I read the *Synopsis* and was glad to see in the last paragraph that the Holy Spirit is taken into account as a working force, a factor so often ignored. Then I arrived and had helpful talks with Miss van Straubenzee, and Miss Drury introduced me to Simone Memmi's picture of the Holy Spirit as the Inspirer of all knowledge. I read *In Memoriam*, *Some Studies* and *Ourselves* and appreciated their practical application.

The language and allusions were perhaps sometimes out-of-date but the thought was there, and anyone who wants the thought will make the jump from one era to another. Then in the programmes of work there was something worth while in the lives of great men, and their thoughts. How such a content of education would meet the need of schools I had been in! It was a great joy to find on the Terrace an oak tree planted when the 50th Council School joined the P.U.S. I thought, 'Yes, Miss Mason knew that these schools were needing something like this'. I said to Miss van Straubenzee, 'I wish many students would go to secondary modern schools where there is the scope and the desire for all this'.

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In reading Charlotte Mason's books, I have found so often that her own words are true of herself: 'Great ideas are brooding over the chaos of our thought; and it is he who shall say the thing we are all dumbly thinking, who shall be to us as a teacher sent from God.'

One such thought is that we are teaching 'persons', and I soon realised that the Ambleside student comes to know children very well, not only as pupils but as persons. In one college every student during his two years makes a special study of one particular child, watches his growth and development, notes his difficulties and victories. But then there is no guarantee that they will meet another child just like that one! How much wiser to get to know many different children, as they do here! Just before the 1951 Conference, I took Charlotte Mason's books to my room for the week-end and jotted down some of the ideas that I was glad to find expressed by a recognised educationist. One was that the child is in training for 'a fight which would last all our lives and try all our powers ... the world-old fight ... of Christ against the devil'. Charlotte Mason's comment on this quotation from Rugby is that 'education is only worthy of the name as it teaches this lesson.' Here indeed was a vital purpose of education.

Again 'Children should be taught Bible history with every elucidation which modern research makes possible. But they should not be taught to think of Assyrian inscriptions as *proofs* of the truth of the Bible records, but rather as illustrations of those records.' [I have since discovered that in some unpublished correspondence Miss Mason also wrote that, 'As for definite religious teaching, I think its aim should be that indicated in St. John 17.3' (quoted in the P.R., 1952, p. 311)].

Some months later I was to speak at a P.N.E.U. meeting and so began to read more deeply again, this time mainly in the *Essay*; and in conjunction with it, the newly-published volume for the Centenary of Froëbel, and also Professor Jefferies' *Glaucon*. Writing of educational research into such matters as I.Q.s and special abilities, we find, 'Froëbel's own outlook inevitably belongs to an age before the very nature (to say nothing of the complexity) of these problems had risen above the horizon.' But Charlotte Mason's work had already been proved able to overcome these differences and difficulties because its very nature and content answers to human nature rather than to special abilities!

We all know Miss Mason's second proposition in the *Synopsis* that 'children are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good or for evil'. Hence the need for discipline, good habits, and a trained will to choose the right ideas.

But of Froëbel, we read 'Progressive educationists, at any rate in this country, have very largely turned away from the practical Froëbelian scheme. ... The reason ... is irresistible. It is that the entire scheme rests to a great extent on an insufficient or erroneous child psychology. The belief that man could evolve into god-likeness out of his own self-activating will has always been inadequate.' But we find Miss Mason's work and thought resting on the sure basis of the conflict in the soul of man. As Professor Jefferies writes, 'History is man's struggle with himself. Man's first step towards coping realistically with his problems is to recognise his contradictory nature and the resulting conflict. He must recognise that human destiny is cast in the dimensions of heaven and hell rather than of plain earth, and that it is the tension between heaven and hell, not the tranquility of earth that gives human life its distinctive character.'

And so, as Miss Mason says, 'We are not meant to grow up in a state of nature.' 'We live in a redeemed world,' and 'this is the faith in which we would bring up our children, the strong passionate sense of the dear nearness of our God'.

And, as I was reading, the thought became a picture. It is as though there is a Garden—not only a child's garden—but a Garden where God is and there is sunshine and freedom and power. The 'world' is there as well, but God is ever present and our children should grow up in 'the glad and natural living in the presence of God,' and talk with Him and hear us commune with Him; 'Not a far-off God ... but a warm, breathing, spiritual Presence about his path and about his bed'. But even in the Garden, clouds of sin may overshadow the child and 'there is little comfort from fond parents and friends in the "peace, peace, when there is no peace".' Rather let us see that our children 'live in the instant healing in the dear Name of the Saviour of the world'. And so Miss Mason would have the child in an atmosphere which itself shall be an education.

Afternoon rests and holidays gave further opportunity for reading and for following trains of thought on the nature of the mind and the brain, leading to more detailed educational

principles. In these, two key words seemed to be Habits and Ideas. Of habits, the physiological structure of the brain, enunciated by Dr. Maudsley, provides the basis of her thinking. Dr. Maudsley was contemporary with Miss Mason, and it is typical of her that she is indebted to his research, just as she is to much of the thought of past centuries.

The cells of the grey matter of the brain turn themselves and link up to form 'a track', along which, if a first response has proved correct, the same thought can proceed more easily a second time to produce the same response. Thus the brain of a well-disciplined man appears as a mass of fine silver cables.

The ease with which a mouse will find its way through a maze to a saucerful of milk, once it has successfully been through, illustrates the power of the brain to form a habit. An electronic machine will direct an electric 'mouse' (made of aluminium), through a maze with much trial and error on the first run, but with absolute certainty on the second run. (The electronic experts, with a machine that plays a perfect game of chess with another machine, may be able to connect mind with brain and tell us why our brain cells become disciplined as they do.) So in this realm also Charlotte Mason was working on a sure basis.

The child, whether living in the atmosphere of the Garden or not, and whether he is being disciplined or not, has a growing mind crying out for much sustenance and exercise, and in *Parents and Children* we see the great responsibility of supplying this mental pabulum. While reading of the *Many Awakenings* a picture came into my mind that within us there is, as it were, a stringed instrument; perhaps like the

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old ones with strings over the fingerboard, and down the side as well. And each string is waiting to be tuned up in response to some seed-thought or idea entering the mind; strings for Nature, History, Art, Music, Religion. Some of the notes on Nature's string are for stars, birds, trees, and mosses, each with their own variations. Parents and teachers may supply the ideas and the divine Spirit within the child will help to develop it. Charlotte Mason's thoughts on genius suggest that it is our responsibility to see that the child is not left to play only on one string. At some stage, we may ask the Master Musician in to help us to play, and then we find a harmony that was not there before.

Charlotte Mason felt that a scientific training of the mind should be given in at least one subject and she chose the study of natural things in their own surroundings as being the one most generally suitable for a wide range of children. Her method of putting the child into direct touch, through their works, with great men—Homer, Plutarch, Shakespeare, Bunyan—and in each term with one great composer and one artist, is still followed in the programmes of work. Educationists to-day plead for the Humanities on behalf of 'the crowded, centrally-administered schools'. A Bulletin of Education of 1952 says, 'If we can wake the sounds of Orpheus' harp in the new schools, it will soon seem that the music is expected and familiar there. Two generations would achieve it. What is needed is to claim a due share in the inheritance—not to behave as though the new schools have no part in Orpheus' music, as though history and poetry would never really belong to them. ... Surely there must be alive now a band of men and women "of unusual imagination and strength of will", who will form and carry through the conception of the comprehensive school. ... Buildings, organisation ... are all unimportant compared with the teacher's own power of response to the best that has been thought and known in the world. If the teacher has heard the sounds of the harp, its music will

echo in the ears of his pupils.' And how much there is in Charlotte Mason to show that she cared in the same way. These children are to be parents, in whom she saw such possibilities.

Her methods of ensuring that the child uses its powers of concentration and attention and understanding also develop power of expression both in spoken and written English and this fact in itself has a small contribution to make to the world. One of my old girls from Colombo was a delegate to the Asian Relations Conference in 1947 in which no European could take part, and there the proceedings were in English. And so it is important that one H.M.I. considers the English in P.N.E.U. schools to be the best in the country. Another aspect of her work became evident in chapters (originally written as articles for the *Parents' Review*), in which she examines some of what were then 'the burning questions of the hour'. We still face some of these, but others belonged to her age and new ones arise for us. Conditions of earlier Acts are replaced by those of the 1944 Act. The hot fire of contention between science and religion dies down; on evidence from Asia and Africa demonology is more easily accepted: (incidentally, living in parts of the Himalayas is like living in St. Mark's gospel). Miracles are now more generally believed in than fifty years ago.

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Commonwealth has taken the place of Empire. 'Can the leopard change his spots?' remains with us: 'That such renovation is possible is the old contention of Christianity'. 'The solidarity of the human race' has a deeper meaning now—we must consider the Fundamental Education of UNESCO, Dr. Laubach and mass illiteracy campaigns, Africa's need for teachers. For educational purposes we must balance mind-training with the possibilities of wireless and television. If we study Charlotte Mason's approach to the problems she faced we shall find guidance for ourselves, and her principles are such that we shall not need to violate them.

But it is in the books of the *Saviour of the World* that I have lately found her as a person. She 'ventures to hope that a rendering in verse which aims at no more than being faithful and reverent may give pleasure to Christian people', and that she has certainly given to me—not in the verse itself but as she says 'we know how arresting a new, though inferior, presentation is', giving the 'new convictions, new delights that we find in reading the Gospels in another tongue'. But it is also in these books that we share her deepest thoughts and it is here indeed that we can know her mind. Of the problems mentioned earlier she had said, 'The controversies of the day will interest but not excite us, for we are on the other side of all doubt, once we know Him in whom we have believed'. And in the *Saviour of the World* she speaks of 'the supreme moment of a very great number of lives—that in which a person is brought face to face with Christ'.

And so Charlotte Mason is one of a great body of Christian educationists. The service she has done is to draw together many strands of thought concerning body, mind and spirit and with her own genius she has woven them into a growing pattern of education. So many other books deal with body and mind, or mind and spirit, but who else has considered all three so completely and thoughtfully and thoroughly? As her disciples, we must continue to weave the pattern.

¹ From Charlotte Mason College Association Conference, 1954.