

## NATURE STUDY IN THE HOME.<sup>1</sup>

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### NATURE STUDY THE CHILDREN'S STUDY.

Nature Study is par excellence the children's study. Miss Mason the Founder of the Parents' National Educational Union, in her book on *Home Education* (page 58) says:—"Every child has a natural interest in the living things about him, which it is the business of his parents to encourage; for, but few children are equal to holding their own in the face of public opinion, and if they see that the things which interest them are indifferent or disgusting to you their pleasure in them vanishes and that chapter in the book of Nature is closed to them."

Parents are beginning to realize this: and are anxious to encourage their children in these studies. Unfortunately in the days of their childhood such knowledge was despised, and any attempt to acquire it was looked upon as a waste of time. But we have now changed all this. We have found in Nature Study a most potent instrument for the education of our children. For it develops the seeing eye, and the hearing ear: it satisfies the insatiable curiosity of childhood: lays the foundation of Art, in an early appreciation of Beauty; and of Science in a gradual perception of law: and last, but not least, of Religion, in that it increases the sense of reverence, wonder, and awe. In a beautiful

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passage our poet Browning has well summed up the true worth of Nature Study. It occurs in his poem of "Fra Lippo Lippi [sic], where the cloistered monk, rebelling against that false law which bade him shut his eyes against the beauties of the outward world, after which, with a poet's and painter's instinct, he yearned, tells how he both felt and saw,

"The beauty and the wonder and the Power  
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,  
Changes and surprises, . . . and, God made it all!"

I take it then, that there is a great desire to teach children about Nature in all classes, from parents, the architypal [sic] teachers to Education Committees their poor substitutes. Each is anxious to do something better, than has been done in the past.

### THE PARENT'S DIFFICULTY.

I am not unmindful that this generation of parents experiences a difficulty which will most probably be removed from the next. I know that many parents feel handicapped at present by their own defective education in Nature knowledge. It is such as these whom I am anxious to help in this paper. But before I can do this, they must dismiss from their minds any idea that it is the quantity of knowledge acquired that makes a Nature student. It is rather the particular habit of mind induced in the act of acquiring such knowledge which is of the most value to us and our children. For this reason it is that the mere reading about Nature is of but little value; but to watch an insect pollinating a flower; to study the arrangement of the buds on the common trees; to rear caterpillars into butterflies; to watch the little seed growing into the

perfect plant; such studies as these have a real educational value, they teach to SEE; and *seeing* is a faculty which this generation has shamefully neglected.

Feeble at the beginning, this faculty of "seeing," may be wonderfully educated, and a bountiful harvest of the quiet eye reaped at last. Moreover, the power to see correctly is one of the most valuable assets in our everyday life.

When children come in from their walk they should be asked what they have seen, what has excited their interest and curiosity. What made such men as Gilbert White, of [p 723] Selbourne, and Charles Darwin so notable was their wonderful power of seeing. So Nature Study may be shortly defined as the "science of seeing." Its great instrument is the EYE.

A HERESY.

There is a peculiar heresy abroad that some children and some persons are not gifted with powers of observation, and so Nature Study is not for such. Surely this is absurd. We all know persons who are born colour-blind, or music-blind, but did anybody ever hear of a normal person who was unable to observe? This valuable faculty may be shamefully neglected, but it cannot be done away with. Anyhow, children are born observers, and born naturalists, and these great and natural powers in them only require discreet guidance and encouragement from you to become to them a valuable possession and a joy for ever.

BOOKS.

But now to get to work. Let me say at first a few words about "books." And in particular about books for parents. The right kind of books will help you; but they are not easy to hit upon. I have brought with me for distribution a list of books which we have to some extent found useful to both parents and teachers. Some of them are not ideal Nature Students' books, but they are the best I can find. The list is annotated so that parent or teacher can the more readily select a suitable book.

Books are only useful for the purpose we have in mind when they send us back again to Nature, hungering to know more of her wonderful ways and works: more keen to observe and more patient to learn. Books are useless when they give us poor substitutes for this power of observation or tend to stifle it.

Of course, books of a purely technical character, helping us to find out something more about the interesting things which we have seen in our walks abroad, will always have a proper use and value. But it is books like dear old Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne*, or Kingsley's *Town Geology*, or Warde Fowler's, *A Year with the Birds*, which beget in us a powerful yearning to see for ourselves the wonderful and beautiful things they point out for us. [p 724]

Hosts of books on Nature Study are being issued almost every month; they are too often failures as being either mere compilations, by those who know but little first-hand of their subject; or else they are filled with descriptions of things which the true Nature Student is better left to find out for himself.

## POETRY AND SONGS FOR CHILDREN.

I should like now to say a few words about suitable poetry and songs for little children, in connection with the study of Nature.

Nature Study is of great value in educating the imaginative and poetical side of the child's nature. Beautiful descriptions of scenery, of the habits and activities of animals; of the beauties of flowers and insects; abound on every side. In this pleasant and easy way children may be helped to associate right and beautiful feeling with what they see in Nature: and will at length discover for themselves that much of the best poetry has been inspired by the sight of natural phenomena.

I have not as yet been able to put my hands on any one suitable book containing selected passages from the best poets illustrative of the varied phenomena of Nature. But any parent would, I am sure, find most interesting employment in studying poetry with this object; marking down any pieces which she thinks would be helpful to her child in realizing (to use rather a trite phrase) the poetic beauties of Nature. Fine descriptions of natural scenery, and phenomena, sympathetic references to bird and beast, insect and flower, and to all the varied moods of Nature. One might very easily make a truly valuable poetry book for one's child in this simple way. It may however be helpful to some parents to suggest the titles and publishers of two or three little books of songs and poetry, much used by kindergarten teachers with very little children. Here they are:—*Songs for Little Children*, Vols. I. and II., by Eleanor Smith (Curwen). *The Child's Song and Game Book*, Parts I. and II., by Keatley Moore (Sonnenschein). *Kindergarten Songs and Games*, by Berry & Michaelis (Charles & Dible).  
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## THE NOTE BOOK.      THE DRAWING BOOK.

A powerful adjunct to the cultivation of the seeing faculty in the child is the drawing book. All children, even little children, should be encouraged to draw natural objects with brush or pencil. Some children will display considerable ability in modelling in clay or plasticine. It is, however, important that this exercise should be regarded as a test to find out if the child is seeing correctly rather than as an art exercise.

Of equal importance with the drawing book, is the Diary and Nature Calendar which the child should be encouraged to make. In the diary, the first appearance of things will be carefully noted; the first flowers seen, the first buds opened, the first swallow, the first butterfly, etc., and in addition to this anything that has caught the interest of the child should find a place in it. Brush-work pictures, and selected pieces of poetry may also be added, until a quite fascinating little volume is produced. This calendar which I now show you was done by the children of a small village school in Nottinghamshire. It is not the funny little pictures upon it; it is not the colouring; not the poetry and texts which appeal to me most, but it is the witness which this little calendar bears to the keenness and joyousness of spirit in the happy children who helped to make it.

The Mistress of the school is imbued with the right spirit; a spirit of reverence and love towards all living things, and she is happily infecting the children with it.

## CHILDREN'S WALKS.

From note-books and diaries I pass on to children's walks. The value to a child of a couple of hours spent in the fresh air every day is well known to parents. It is customary to send the children out in the charge of a governess or nurse. I would, however, advise mothers who are in earnest about Nature Study to accompany the children oftener in order to call the child's attention to things interesting and beautiful; to encourage them to bring suitable objects home. They must be prepared to provide liberally bottles, boxes, jars and other suitable vessels for the purpose of keeping under observation for a short time any of the interesting living finds. But these when done with should be given their liberty and when possible restored to a similar place to that in which

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they were found, for in this way the child will readily learn reverence and respect for life.

Before the walk commences it is a better plan to have some definite aim to propose to the children: for example, that they should note how many different kinds of flowers they will find in their walk; how many different kinds of birds they will see, etc. Then on the next occasion when lessons are resumed the note-book must be brought out, and the children encouraged to make some notes, or little drawings of what they have seen.

The subject of making collections of anything that requires killing is fraught with many difficulties. I find myself almost in two minds about it. Collecting natural objects with the necessary mounting and labelling has undoubtedly some educational value. The difficulty is largely connected with the question whether young children should be encouraged to put any living thing to death. Very young children should certainly never be allowed to do this. I think we are all quite at one on this point. Moreover, numerous collections can be made of objects which do not require killing; seeds, minerals, empty shells, even plants, and many other things.

With older children more may be allowed, but the parent would be wise to see that the killing is done under proper circumstances. Collections made for purely scientific purposes stand on somewhat different grounds, and it is unnecessary to enter upon a discussion of these here.

There are, however, a few habits of children connected with this matter of collecting natural objects which require watching and correcting. They will gather great bunches of flowers and then after a short time, wearying of carrying them, will fling them away by the roadside to die and wither in the sun. They will also pluck up plants by the roots and do many other impulsive and careless things. Parents must be ever watchful to rebuke these faults. It is most important at the beginning of a child's life it should be taught the utmost reverence in these matters; who can say how much of its after-life will be influenced for good by it.

Therefore, if your children bring flowers home see that they put them in water at once; or if it is living caterpillars, see that they are as soon as possible provided with proper housing, food and air.

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## MUSEUMS.

Parents living in the towns, can sometimes get a certain amount of help from the local

museum. The creatures read about in the books may be seen as it were in "propria persona," in the museums; and something of their relative as well as real size revealed to children. In my own humble opinion, and speaking generally, museums are disappointing. I do not think we make the most or the best use of them. And children are always more interested in living animals than in dead ones, for a live dog is always better than a dead lion. Nevertheless, it would be profitable to take a child to the museum for an hour or so one morning in the week; particularly to see something which has been recently a subject of interest to the child.

#### KEEPING PACE.

And parents must keep pace with the children; must try to interest themselves in all that properly interests the child. I know that many would reply, "We have no time for it." But it is well worth making time for. To see our children growing up intelligent, keen, and reverential is worth the expenditure of any amount of time and trouble. Is it not true that too many of the young people of these days appear to have run through the whole circle of their interests before they are properly grown-up. Blasé with satiety; suffering from ennui, to them life seems scarcely worth living. Nature study will supply fresh interests, undying, always fresh, for Nature is full of surprises, and has the energy of eternal youth.

The study of Nature too is recreative, it is good for the parents, it is antidotal to the worry and fret of housekeeping or business. It kindles in us the growth of a loftier ideal, the outward expression of which will be the simpler life and the Garden City, and the end Paradise regained. And all this through the little child in our midst. Mothers should propose to themselves certain courses of reading, such as books of an elementary character treating of plant and animal life. The weekly consumption of Novels is prodigious, surely a little book on Natural History might be intercalated now and again. But if not this, mothers should be keen to look out for anything that will help the children. Good pictures  
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from the Magazines; suitable poetry. There are several weekly and monthly Magazines almost or entirely devoted to the interests of natural history, e.g., *The Country Side*, Mr. E. K. Robinson's little paper, published weekly at the price of one penny.

They would do also well to study some book drawn up by an expert in teaching Nature Knowledge to children, like Miss Jeanie Mackenzie's, *A Nature Programme and its Connections*, published by Charles & Dible, at, I think, about 5s.

But the Parent's [sic] National Education Union, will at any time advise its members on the best books and methods to attain the desired results.

#### CHILDREN'S PETS.

No address on the subject of Nature study in the home would be complete without a few words about children's pets. By all means, if the home allows of it let children have pets. They learn tenderness and kindness through them, and the keeping of them is an excellent discipline. Some burden is laid upon parents, however, to see that children attend to them properly. Otherwise the pets may suffer acutely through neglect. Unflinching terms must be made with the child that any repeated neglect will result in the pets being taken away. Then

again parents should take trouble to ascertain whether anything is being learnt from the pets; whether the habits of bird or rabbit or dog or cat are being properly observed by the child. Older children should be asked occasionally to write an account of their pets; how do they spend their day; what differences they have observed between the ways of cat and dog; I have known children write very clever letters to pets, in which quite close observation of their habits has been plain. Yes, I am sure pets make a very good subject of our curriculum. Cat and dog, canary and parrot, guinea-pigs and white mice, and all the host of farmyard animals, can give a kind of teaching which is of great value to our children; and which we cannot afford to neglect.

It is a common complaint that children tire very quickly of their pets. Some children undoubtedly do so; but the child is so little taught to observe that much of the true [p 729]

interests of these pets is lost to it. A change, more or less frequent, possibly an exchange of pets might be beneficial in some instances.

There are, however, many other living things which will readily interest children and are full of teaching. Such are for example, the germinating of seeds, watching the tiny plant unfolding its beautiful and interesting structures. Rearing caterpillars into butterflies and moths. Watching an aquarium with developing frog-spawn, and other living creatures. The life history of frog and newt is marvellously fascinating, and quite young children find endless delight in watching it; learning lessons of life and growth which they will never forget.

But I plead most of all for the country walk. The walk's the thing. In these days of rush typified by cycle and motor car, the country side has become a thing more for measuring the terrific rate we can progress at by means of the engines which we have invented, instead of a glorious opportunity and the priceless privilege of studying the works of the Great Creator, the garments of the Invisible, which fill his beautiful temple the world.

Age will not sever our love from Nature: but rather will the ties which draw us to her be strengthened: becoming of sacramental significance, so that she becomes to us an outward and visible sign of an infinite love enfolding our lives; filling our hearts with lofty hopes and high courage; till the symbols are replaced by realities; and the heart that was in Tune with the Universe finds itself in Tune with God and Heaven. Such is the outlook and we may sing with Browning:

“Grow old along with me; the best is yet to be  
The last of life, for which the first was made.  
Our times are in His hand  
Who saith, ‘a whole I planned,’  
Youth shows but half: trust God; see all, nor be afraid.”

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture delivered to the Bolton Branch of the P.N.E.U.