Applying Miss Mason's Principles to Remedial Reading

BY MARION NEY

THE philosophy of Charlotte Mason is not only a lofty one, presented with great literary style, but a philosophy whose principles support the most practical efforts. Over the past few years I have had the pleasure of seeing how effectively the knowledge of these principles can help those heart-breaking children called in America 'non-readers'.

Remedial reading is a very large field, and is increasing constantly. In the United States much money is spent and vast departments are set up to teach teachers how to teach reading. How effective this all is remains to be seen . . . or does it? . . . for the number of non-readers increases annually. Some claim that the problem arose when the Look-Say method of teaching came into vogue, which may be so. There are, of course, more general and pervasive forces in modern society which deliver into our hands these unhappy children; the uncertain state of the world itself, the absence of religious certainty, television, the lack of form in the adult world, divorced parents. And since no one seems about to attack the cause (or causes) we must simply cure the effect as best we can when the miserable lamb is presented to us as a last resort. I should not feel it important to write about these experiences if I had not had complete success with every child, applying the principles of Miss Mason in a variety of combinations. The reason that this may be of interest is that all of the children whom I taught to read had been dragged to expensive psychiatrists, placed in exotic schools for the retarded, tested again and again for all sorts of things, or given all the remedial treatment that the school systems could provide.

Most of the children with whom I worked had reached Third or Fourth Grade (Upper IA or IIB) and still had not learned the sounds of vowels or consonants, but had been promoted each year in what we call 'social promotion'. In some cases they had been held back once, usually in the second year of schooling, but after that sent right along, as they looked too large in a class of younger children. Nearly every parent was quite uncertain as to the child's native ability (the tests all conflicted) and while some said frankly they feared their child was not of normal intelligence, others skirted around the subject but still expected me to answer the question.

When I first began this work I did somehow manage to teach each child to read, but it was with a great deal of groping about for the right key to each problem. However when I commenced the Study Course of the PNEU in preparation for removing my own children from the private schools, I found the scientific principles which made the work in remedial reading remarkably rapid and quite exhilarating for both myself and the astonished pupil. There is a wonderful moment with each of these children (a profoundly amusing moment!) when he who has successfully defied all attempts to make him read or suffered horribly because he wants to but cannot read, suddenly finds he can't *not* read.

I had to handle the excellent materials of the Carden Reading

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Method at all levels, but these children were in need of another sort of help first. All were damaged by society, by the problems of their parents, or the depressing atmosphere of the classroom. All were inordinately inarticulate; one ten year old girl could not learn the name of her street and stuttered badly, and all were drugged by too much television of the worst sort so

that their minds had become, as the much-vaunted Marshall McLuhan says, the final screen for the image and nothing more. In these children the imagination had become, through both abuse and disuse, almost a vestigial structure. Since, like most American children, they had no acquaintance with history, they had a very primitive sense of society. Obviously the imagination needed warming to bring the mind back to life. So instead of attacking the alphabet with my ten year old pupil I would begin perhaps by reading him Mrs. Beesley's *Stories of Rome*. We know that 'to leave off or even to begin with the history of our own country is fatal', and that even by the reading of history to young children 'the imagination is warmed'. We know, too, that education 'is an atmosphere', and for these children it had previously been an unfortunate one. I taught the children, therefore, in my dining-room, where my own children did their PNEU lessons in the mornings. The table itself would always rivet a boy's attention, as it was made by my husband of gun-stock walnut in a simple Mission style, and is held together by brass screws. It has no intimidating veneer to be wary of, so that one is comfortable dining, writing, painting, or sewing and cutting on it. On the walls were Audubon prints, which the children found provocative and engrossing. The pupil and I would sit on a bench at one side of the table, with our backs to the old wardrobe in which shelves had been put to hold all the PNEU books; the Carden readers and workbooks were on the table before us. It meant a great deal to the children to come into a house where work was considered fun, and much of what they saw was made at home. One potential millionaire of twelve painted my kitchen for me, which was much more beneficial to him than if I had let his trust officer pay the tutoring fees.

The PNEU books we have collected since my eldest daughter attended Queen Margaret's School in Edinburgh many years ago provide as 'varied a diet of mind-food' as one could wish. American children are used to badly-written textbooks which weigh a great deal and do not delight the mind at all, so one can imagine the astonishment of the non-reader in finding that some books were actually small, pretty, and had delicious stories inside; it would seem almost worthwhile to learn to read! There was a wealth of excellent literature within reach behind the bench, and we know that only what is presented in the 'finest literary form' speaks to or feeds the mind. One could not know just what would amuse or interest my dear little illiterates, but there was always something. Paradoxically, the fabulous vocabulary of *Tanglewood Tales* affected many of them most efficaciously. When they began to be able to read, I found that Unstead's Histories were very useful. Children form a very real and detailed picture from the stories in the 'People in History' series. Of course, between the first session when I read aloud to the child, no matter his age, and his own reading in Unstead later, there was some very serious building to be done. Narration, I knew, was the

real key which would unlock the powers of effort, but even that was scarcely to be expected in such cases of atrophy of the imagination. There were no images in the mind to relate (or what there were were too horrible to relate) and we had to outweigh the horrors and let in images upon which the child could exercise his own powers. 'Images' in such serious instances could be taken literally, and after reading to the child I allowed him to look as long as he liked at one or two of the lovely folios we have each term to study. 'Children require no pictures excepting the pictures of great artists', said Miss Mason, and indeed I found that these children required them greatly. Narration began here, and after the visual images could be told, the aural ones came easily.

It would take a small book to tell the myriad specific instances in which the knowledge I had gained from close study of Miss Mason's work created in turn knowledge in a child which enabled these non-readers to free themselves from their paralysis. I successfully urged parents to forego the psychiatric treatment if a child was being subjected to it, agreeing as I do with Miss Mason that 'Mind is of its nature infinitely and always conscious and to speak of the unconscious mind is a contradiction in terms . . .'. I was convinced, as all the 'testing' teachers were not, that the needed faculties were there in the child, that if the starved mind were nourished with proper food it would regain its natural ability to function. No amount of technical tricks had taught these children to read, and no further tampering by a psychiatrist was going to help. When a plausible image was presented, with the greatness of art, the mind responded. Narration began with the simple enthusiasm for the pictures; the child finally had some knowledge upon which the mind could act. He at last had something to express.

If the principles of education which are so clearly laid out in 'An Essay Towards a Philosophy of Education' were applied generally to remedial reading work, by teachers who understood and believed in the principles, one cannot conceive of the number of children it would rescue from illiteracy. Even without the atmosphere I was able to provide in my own home. I found that the same work could be done in a corner of a public school room, with the children of ranchers and Mexican workers in Arizona. I do not think there could be an instance in which our PNEU education would not prove that it 'satisfies brilliant children and discovers intelligence in the dull'. One is sorry for all children, dull or bright, who have not the privilege of it.