

CHARLOTTE MASON'S PRINCIPLES.

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The war has brought many of us back into harness, and as I sit and watch my form of 13-year-olds (the peak age of juvenile crime, they say) being their natural selves between periods, imagination travels back three generations to another more modest classroom. There in a school beneath the Sussex Downs a pioneer woman teacher must also at times have sat and watched her young people off their guard—if indeed they were ever on their guard with her. She, too, more than most of us, must have felt the spell of their enchanting naturalness and been moved to help them through the increasing division in their young characters, the old, old conflict of body with spirit. Besides sympathy and understanding, though, she had enthusiasm as the motive-power to make a living crusade of the education her mind then began to envisage, which should be at once 'an atmosphere, a discipline and a life.' Fénelon once said, '*L'ordre est ce qu'il y a de plus rare dans les opérations de l'esprit.*' He was a wise, disillusioned churchman who had travelled far from young enthusiasm. All he saw was a necessary disorder in passionate enterprise. Charlotte Mason's passion was deep; but her lifework was to be a challenge to the Bishop's realism, for she had the ability and the resolve to bring order into its expression.

[p 17]

Upon what principles did that achievement rest? There were clearly three: first, insistence upon the personality in every individual, child or man; then, the need for absolute relevance both in the material of education and in the manner of teaching it; and finally self-law.

The prerogative of a free spirit, of which à Kempis spoke, was what most deeply impressed Miss Mason. There they are before me, my crew of lively young creatures; yet not a crew at all, but thirty-one entirely separate and individual persons, each with his own nature—each, if you look deep enough, with his 'immortal longings'—each inviting, demanding, the one right approach proper to him. He won't get it; there is not nearly time or room enough on this overcrowded stage: but at least he can be spared the worst forms of mass treatment. And if now and then one can—as that young woman teacher used to do—catch him in the rightful setting of his own home, you will not ever again want to treat him as one of a regiment and (in the modern jargon) a potential punishee.

Moreover, each boy or girl, Charlotte Mason insisted, being a person, needs a person to speak to him; not just the familiar teacher of every day, but persons in the very books used. That was a corollary which she strongly emphasised: text-books must be the first-hand work of real enthusiasts in whose writings their personality has lived on.

But there was yet another consequence of this principle: the teachers must keep their personality from intruding between child and subject. The Literature, History, or whatever it is, must go straight from author to pupils on its own merits, not served with the stimulus of fear or gain, nor even—she would have insisted most of all—of personal affection. Neither punishment or marks and prizes, not yet devotion to a loved teacher, must be such false incentive to their learning. The word for the true, direct contact is relevance, which we may take as the second of the fundamental principles in her conception. It has been worked out in triumphant practice: it

is still being so applied in hundreds of homes and schools, as so many could tell. The story of some natural phenomenon, some historical event, some piece of literature is read once with undisturbed attention; then it is

[p 18]

re-told by the child—and it remains, no revision being needed; the lesson has come as a living experience, and come to stay.

Thirdly, there is self-law. The Apostle Paul made the discovery—to his excited surprise—that the function of the rigid Rabbinical Law, in which he had been strictly brought up, was chiefly to introduce sin. How many a boy has been led directly into offence by this or that prohibition! The modern freedom schools are reacting from this psychological twist in human nature when they urge that 'sin' is but a mischief in the child's make-up which must work its way out naturally—like foreign matter in the flesh. These modernists do at least escape the fatal tariff system in which evil-doing is cancelled by a penalty, as you buy and sell, leaving the youngster a little lower still for his moral effort to climb. But both the primitive traffic in cane and lines and this free process of 'natural' elimination are alike physical. They ignore the spirit in the human person. Charlotte Mason's solution lay between these extremes. She urged that the child must come to rule himself, to be his own law to himself. In this school where I work, as in others like it, the lid of tariff discipline may be taken off a boy who has passed the School Certificate Examination for a breathing space before he sits for the Higher Certificate. Then if one offers him, on their own merits, new pastures with real sustenance in them for his aesthetic and reasoning powers, often he simply has not the self-discipline needed to concentrate upon them seriously. The tradition of the intrinsic futility of all school work has clouded his horizon. He has neither self-law nor judgement: he waits pitifully to be coerced into attention as he has been throughout his school life. It is not so in a Charlotte Mason school. There the atmosphere of essential relevance in their work, together with the respect for personality in child and book, has led them to assume as a matter of course that the subject is worth while for its own sake, and has given them the impulse to assimilate it spontaneously; all this being the exact opposite to what is usual in our ordinary schools with their stimulation by marks and punishments. Both external law on the one hand, and lawless licence on the other, are transcended by the spiritual self-discipline to which Charlotte Mason has invited her children.

[p 19]

But no enterprise of the spirit will endure unless it can stand the test of development. Cardinal Newman was deeply impressed with this necessity in Christian doctrine. And Miss Mason's ideas of education have developed naturally and wholesomely with the times: like rings in water, the waves which her first impulse set radiating have opened out widely, but always centred upon her essential principles. She did not invent these, for they are fundamental in human nature; she realised and expressed them. But the technique she began has expanded, as she herself would have required.

Reflecting on these principles and their inspiring success, I return to my crowded roomful of youngsters and ask myself what ideal development might one day replace our nation's primitive gropings after education. When all the irrelevance of marks and of examination cramming, of fear in the boy and self-assertion in the man, of subjects chosen to be safely too difficult for the best possible candidate, and therefore hopelessly, humiliatingly,

irrelevant for all the rest—when all this has gone the way of the brutal and degrading cane and the futile imposition, what goal may we expect to reach? I believe it would be in the direct line of Charlotte Mason's own aspirations to hope for a golden age of education when *judgment* shall be the great objective, and not the present basketful of facts, irrelevantly acquired and with so little real relation to life—judgment of truth in thought, and in beauty, and in behaviour. Such might well be the crown of the order which that Leader in education, whose work we celebrate, has brought into the operations of the spirit.