The Educational Philosophy of Charlotte Mason

IT is almost fifty years since Charlotte Mason died and since then her books have been used to explain her ideas to those wanting to discover what the PNEU is all about. They will be given *Home Education* or *An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education* to study and they must make the best of them. Some pamphlets have been written since Charlotte Mason's death but there has been no restatement of the whole philosophy. To those who have been connected with the PNEU since college days, who perhaps knew Charlotte Mason as a lively though venerable figure when they were very young, this may not seem in any way remarkable but to someone coming to the PNEU from outside it seems strange.

The books have dated. *Home Education* is very much of the nineteenth century that produced it and even the *Essay*, a product of the twentieth century, rings very oddly in places and fights education battles that have now passed into history.

Some of Charlotte Mason's expressions and turns of phrase are used slogan-fashion in articles and pamphlets. 'Education is an atmosphere, a discipline and a life' will be found on the same page as 'Education is the science of relations'. Now if it is the science of relations it cannot at the same time be an atmosphere, a discipline and a life. A study of the books, or a reference to the synopsis Charlotte Mason made of her philosophy, elucidates the point. She held that there were three valid educational instruments: environment, the discipline of habit and the presentation of living ideas. 'Education is an atmosphere, a discipline and a life'

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is a kind of shorthand form for this but the drawback is that it is misleading to an outsider. Probably the only impression gained would be that very strict discipline was advocated.

A restatement is necessary and indeed urgent. This does not mean Charlotte Mason's books should be rewritten. An attempt to rewrite someone else's book is doomed to failure before it even starts. But the expression of the ideas can be given a new form. It is not suggested that *Home Education* and the *Essay* should be relegated to the lumber room. They are precious for their own sake and someone studying the PNEU in depth—for a thesis for example—would need them, but the ordinary student might be instructed in other ways. It is worth remembering that a Froebel course can be taken without Froebel's *Education of Man* being so much as glanced at by the student. It may be the basis of everything but it was issued in 1826 and every chapter makes this more and more obvious. It is often amusing when the author had no intention of being so. The theory it contains can be expressed much more usefully in the modern idiom and this is done.

The Act of Knowing is the first in a series of articles attempting to express Charlotte Mason's educational ideas in a way suited to the 1970's. She would have been the first to insist that the PNEU should keep in touch with present day educational thought, not necessarily to agree with it but certainly to know about it. If we say we differ from Piaget on this point or that point and give our reasons an unbiased reader will be prepared to consider these reasons. If we merely repeat Charlotte Mason's words and give the impression that we have never heard of Piaget and his long, patient research a student or a teacher will shrug PNEU away as outdated and completely out of touch.

It is intended to make these articles the basis of a reinterpretation of Charlotte Mason's whole educational philosophy with special references to the needs of students at training college and teachers who are disturbed by the lack of any unity in modern educational thought and practice.

Comments and criticisms are invited from members so that mistakes can be corrected and omissions rectified. Members are particularly urged to express their views if they feel Charlotte Mason's basic principles are being misinterpreted in any way.

1. The Act of Knowing

We learn what we want to learn and everything else is just so much water under the bridge. This is as true for the six-year-old, or for the matter of that infant in arms, as it is for the adult. A refusal to accept this fact leads to a great deal of wear and tear on a teacher's nerves.

Perhaps it sounds like a good reason for giving up in despair. If children learn only what they want to learn what is the use of all the time spent in preparing and giving lessons, in setting up the film projector and making sure the tape recorder is working, in going on refresher courses to improve teaching techniques and combing shops and publishers' catalogues for the best books? A question like that does not take into account that by our very nature we want knowledge. From the first we are as hungry
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for it as we are for the bodily food that keeps us healthy. We long to be able to do things skilfully, to cope with the world around us and to cope with ourselves and other people. To do all this we need as much knowledge as we can get and no one has to tell us we need it. The longing is built-in. We are born with curiosity.

We get knowledge in one of two ways. Either we discover for ourselves or, by some means of communication, we learn what others have already discovered. Each way has its advantages and its weaknesses. What we discover for ourselves we never forget but it is a chancy method. The brain is guessing and it may guess wrongly or it may fail to make sense of the situation and have to give up. A teacher may structure the classroom situation very carefully and yet the child may fail to make the discovery that was hoped for. To learn from another person or a book is necessary when the association of events is too uncertain for the brain to make any useful guess but there is the drawback that the person or the book may be trying to tell us what we do not want to know and the words will just pass us by and be wasted.

The discovery method is of great value when a child's mind is evolving abstractions in Mathematics or Science. There will rarely be a single flash of insight. John Holt in his book *How Children Learn* describes the more usual process very graphically: 'You get a faint hunch, lose it, get it again, test it, lose it again, get it again—and all this many times over.' Or, as Professor Hawkins explains in the same book, we 'cross the line between ignorance and insight many times before we truly understand'. Holt's comment on this is: 'in the words of the old spiritual nobody else can cross it for us, we must cross it ourselves. Being shoved or dragged across does no good.'

It is very clear that learning by the discovery method means that a child must do the work for himself but it is not so obvious that the same thing must happen in learning by communication if the process is not to be a failure. No one can learn passively. Neither children nor adults can sit and have knowledge poured into them. We learn what we want to learn because then, as Charlotte Mason, the founder of the PNEU, said, we 'perform the act of knowing'.

Information that comes to us must be assimilated and become part of us before it can be called knowledge. Because it becomes part of us it changes us, perhaps only slightly but sometimes a great deal.

Facts that have not been assimilated are easy to forget. We have some superficial need of them so we carry them with us as convenient luggage for a while but they do not matter to us and, as soon as we can, we let them go, perhaps into some lumber room of the brain or perhaps to extinction. At the present stage of research we have no answer to the question of where they go but for all practical purposes they are lost forever. The brain may even refuse to give some of them house-room at all and then we say we always have to write down phone numbers or times of trains because we 'have a terrible memory'.

Sometimes people can be heard lamenting the falling standards in our schools. Children learned far more in the days gone by is the contention. If you stand over them and keep them at it they'll learn all right. But it depends what the aim is and

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what is understood by 'learning'. The brain will retain facts as best it can if there is sufficient motivation. Fear of the rod or fear of the examiner can be powerful but no one can call the result 'knowledge'. Charlotte Mason liked to quote Ruskin's words about the undue stress laid on examination results and the effect of this on the pupils: 'They cram to pass and not to know. They do pass and they don't know.' It is as true nowadays as it ever was—perhaps truer because the scramble for examination success has become even more frenzied. It can be argued that this kind of obstacle race is a good test of the physical and mental stamina of a pupil but the whole business has little to do with learning in the real sense of the word.

To assimilate knowledge means more than just remembering; it means growing and maturing mentally because this new knowledge has really become part of the learner. Charlotte Mason evolved a method of learning in this way, not theoretically but by long, practical experience in teaching, by studying her pupils and noting how some books were remembered and talked about while others made little or no impression. It was clear that the children had given their full attention to the books that were remembered and this attitude of attention was a pre-requisite of learning but it was not the whole story. The books the children preferred were well written; they had real literary merit. This was for the young mind much more attractive than a flow of talk from the teacher.

She learned to be very sparing with oral lessons—the kind of lesson where the teacher decides the book is too dull or too difficult and she can do much more for the children by talking. It is very important for a teacher to speak and read aloud well but it is bad for her to get too fond of the sound of her own voice and use it too often to instruct. It is unlikely that she will be a skilful speaker but even if she is she has a certain style with many unconscious mannerisms and if the children are over exposed to it persistently they are going to become bored. They may not be old enough to understand why they feel so restless but their fidgeting and shuffling will make it very plain.

For learning by communication Charlotte Mason discovered a book was far more effective than any amount of oral teaching, however eloquent and well prepared this might be. But not just any type of book; the successful books were those with real literary merit and style, often those that kindly, well-meaning teachers felt were too demanding for the age-group they were dealing with. A child wants to go out into the great world and know about it; he does not want books written down to him and purporting to bring the world 'down to his level'.

She also found by experience that questioning was nothing but a hindrance to the children. They did not want interruptions to find out if they had been listening or if they had understood. Such interruptions were irrelevant and exasperating. If this reaction seems exaggerated an adult might recall how it feels to have a good television play ruined by the irrelevant adverts. The children resented niggling questions but they wanted quite spontaneously to talk about what they had read—to tell it over again. This too is a very natural reaction when something has been enjoyable; we want to tell someone else about it. The small child will tell every detail he remem-
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bers of the circus performance or the parade he watched and an adult will live over again the incidents of a holiday or a play he saw unless he is inhibited by the fear of boring the company.

Charlotte Mason realised that this natural urge to tell other people about what we have enjoyed could be put to good use in securing a child's attention where knowledge was to be gained by reading. She evolved what is known as 'the narration method', tested it, found it worked and gave only one piece of advice to those who were doubtful about its value: 'Try it for yourself and see.'

Children learning by this method know in advance that a narration will be required and that the passage concerned will be read once only. This single reading is an essential part of the method. If we know that we will hear something again it is part of the way the mind works not to pay full attention the first time. Maybe it is conservation of mental energy but it certainly happens. One fully-attentive reading followed by an account of what has been read is the secret of a good narration lesson.

In a school using the Masonian method the children narrate from the age of six onwards and in the lower forms, since the books used are not of the 'infant' type, the teacher reads aloud. When children are reading and writing fluently narrations begin to be written. The habit of attention has been acquired and is of great value throughout life.

Naturally a child performs the act of knowing in this way only with those books where ideas are communicated in verbal form. If the knowledge is set down in some condensed or non-verbal form, such as formulae, tables or lists of words set out artificially to show their use in a language then the approach is different because a narration lesson never involves committing to memory what a passage says.

When Charlotte Mason was introducing schools to this method it would sometimes happen that older children would attempt to learn the passage word for word instead of reading it with attention. They would find this could not be done in the time and would be inclined to panic. It was found on such occasions that it helped if the teacher read aloud to them until they grasped the idea of listening to *what* was being said and then giving their own version of it. It is best to begin with young children who take the whole thing with ease and naturalness and find it great fun but it can be begun at any age. It is just that the further we are from spontaneity the more effort it is at the beginning until the mind has learned it like any other skill.

It might be objected that while the method is effective it could lead to uncritical acceptance of the words of the book. If, from the age of six, pupils learn to assimilate the knowledge presented to them like this is it not a form of conditioning? If they accept unquestioningly what they read this is surely a poor preparation for living in a world where propaganda and advertising are rife and the printed word is debased as never before.

The answer to the first part of the objection is that children are not being taught to think in a certain way; they are being taught to think for themselves. They accept or reject what is offered to them. Mostly they accept it because books are well chosen and offer the kind of knowledge they want but they are actively encouraged throughout their school
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life to judge what is being presented to them. This is clearly not conditioning of any kind. The answer to the second part is that the habit of attention is no bad preparation for the modern world. It is when we really attend to propaganda and advertising that we see the activity for what it really is.

Charlotte Mason often compared the assimilation of knowledge by the mind to the digestion of food by the body. Knowledge is in a very real way the food of the mind and it becomes part of us when it is assimilated but this does not mean it is swallowed whole. We taste food before we chew it and if we find it is sufficiently unpleasant it is spat out before it gets any further. If it is acceptable it is chewed well before being swallowed. The analogy is a useful one because something of the kind is necessary with ideas. We accept or reject the initial idea; if it is not something we want it gets no further. If it is felt to be acceptable it is considered in the mind, studied from various aspects and thoroughly investigated before it becomes part of our mental make-up.

There is much more danger of swallowing books whole where there is no narration. The mind is only half convinced that the idea is worthwhile but laziness prevents it from making a real investigation. With narration if there is an objection then having to interpret for himself will force the child to give serious consideration to it. Of course his personal reaction will affect the account that he gives and he has a way open to him to voice his objection.

The children are responsible for their own learning. They do the work by their own efforts. The teacher is there to give help where needed but she should not allow her own personality to come between the children and the knowledge they are trying to reach. It is possible for a teacher to give pupils more help than they need. This can be done in a variety of ways.

John Holt, who is a teacher himself, says plainly: ‘We must recognise that there are some teachers who like being “leader-draggers”. They like to feel that they are at every moment in control, not only of the child’s body, but also of his mind. They like to feel themselves the source and the sole source of all knowledge, wisdom and learning in the classroom. Some such teachers are moved by a love of power, of which the classroom gives them plenty; others, by a deep and sometimes desperate need to feel useful, necessary and even indispensable to their students. Both kinds are strongly threatened by any suggestion that children can and should learn on their own. It must be said in fairness, too, that so far not many of the curriculum reformers and educational revolutionaries have shown much interest in it either. They tend to be so sure that the path they have marked out for their students is the best of all possible paths that their main concern is how to lead or drag them down it as fast as possible.’

He is speaking of the American situation but it is easy to see how his remarks can apply anywhere. Teachers with a power mania are mercifully rare though they do exist. Much more common is the eager, dedicated teacher who does too much, who spends not only her time but herself in an attempt to make things easy for the children. The Masonian philosophy sees this as a lack of detachment on the part of the teacher. She is allowing her-
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self to become too important in the classroom. If the correct method is followed, not sporadically but consistently and completely, teachers will teach less and pupils will learn more.

There may be teachers who are marvels of all-round competence They can communicate knowledge effortlessly and accurately. They are never tired or out of sorts. They never have days when everything is a disaster from the first minute. Such people no doubt exist but most of us are only human. We can get confused and then confuse other people when we explain something. Maybe we get our facts quite wrong occasionally. (A student on teaching practice has been known to teach that the English won the Battle of Bannockburn until the glare of the Scottish lecturer at the back of the room caused her to have second thoughts and explain to the children that it was more like a draw than a win for England.) The vast majority of teachers have the humility to know that left to themselves they are not equal to the work. Some of the more sensitive are afraid of damaging the children's capacity for learning, just as some over-conscientious parents are afraid of correcting little Johnny when he pulls the cat's tail or belabours his playmate from next-door with his toy truck. Who knows what harm a sharp slap administered in temper might do? Fortunately common sense—and a mild burst of temper—will often come to the rescue and scatter the indecision. The teacher who is afraid of projecting her own personality and driving the children to go in ways of her own choosing can be driven to similar bursts of temper—sometimes not mild—because the children can sense the indecision and will make use of it.

Charlotte Mason had experienced this in her early days of teaching and, having a mind at once analytical and intuitive, had worked out not only the causes but a remedy.

Children have the right to all knowledge that there is, as far as they can make it their own, but what teacher is capable of being the intermediary between this huge world of knowledge and these questing young minds? To stand aside and let a writer whose business is communication be the intermediary is the solution. Books should not be chosen because the pictures are colourful or because they are advertised as being written for a particular age-group. They should be chosen only if they are living books, that is if the writer has put something of himself into the writing and the result is able to quicken a child's mind. Once they are found the teacher can stand aside and let the writer and the child understand one another without hindrance. Pictures can be a snare and a delusion. More and more it is to be noted that the more colourful the pictures the less impressive the text and it is the text that matters. Young children have a great capacity for making their own mental pictures of what they read or hear. Because of the maturing of the mind this capacity weakens; it is a slow way of thinking and cannot handle all the situations in life but while it exists in its full power it should be made use of much more than it is. If he is dealing with the right sort of book the child will 'see' a far better picture than any artist can draw for him and though this ability to think in pictures will be lost in time it will have served its true purpose. The child has been thinking in the way suited to him; a power has not been left unused because some kindly

adult felt he 'needed' pictures and provided them on all sides.

By the Masonian method a child has access to many and varied books because the mind needs variety for its development. He attends because he knows he will hear what is read, or will read it for himself, once only. Then he narrates and in finding his own words for

the ideas he masters them and increases in confidence. Soon it seems the most natural way in the world of learning.

A widespread use of this method would mean much less windy talking in public life and the mass media. If a speaker is dealing with people who can follow the line of his argument and see that it is faulty, or can flick through the points he has made and see that he contradicted himself twice or made only one point and for the rest of the time rambled around saying nothing, the uncritical unthinking audience would be a thing of the past. With the widening influence of the mass media this would be a wholly desirable state of affairs.

While it is not hard to understand the value of narration in training a child to perform the act of knowing in this way it might be feared that it would hinder the development of creativity and intuitive thought. A child might be prevented from going off at a tangent and following up the sequence of thought or visual imagery the book had set off in his mind if this sequence had nothing to do with the substance of the passage.

This is a point of view worth considering because creativity is becoming more and more a word to conjure with. Since the turn of the century psychologists have been measuring intelligence by fairly adequate tests but a test of creativity has proved much more difficult to find. The Uses of Objects test is well thought of in some quarters. In this test the child is given a list of very ordinary objects and asked to think of as many uses as he can for each of them. On occasions it has been shown to be no indication at all of creative potential. Liam Hudson in his research for his book *Contrary Imaginations* reported on one boy: 'Hancock, at the age of 16, has built a computer which plays the Chinese stick game "Nim" against all comers. He is at the moment building a computer that will teach a ball to escape from a maze—or rather it teaches the maze how to allow the ball to escape from it. He is a boy of remarkable inventiveness with great stamina and a good theoretical grasp of what he is doing. Yet his responses to Uses of Objects are few and banal.' But surely it cannot be wondered at. To have to withdraw your attention from all these fascinating matters to tell a researcher how many uses you could find for a milk bottle or an elastic band or a tin of treacle cannot seem like anything but a monumental waste of time.

Kenneth Richmond in *The Teaching Revolution* admits that even if it were possible to identify pupils who are potentially creative no one would be sure how best to help them.

The Masonian attitude that each child is a person in his own right and should be given every opportunity to develop in his own way seems much more to the point than vague suggestions about what might or might not help a creative mind. It is true that a child who is naturally creative and intuitive will be asked to narrate and to do this he will need to keep his mind on the sequence of events or the points of

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the description he is concerned with but this practice will not harm him. No one is a completely intellectual or a completely intuitive thinker. It is just that everyone has a tendency one way or the other and some people have a much stronger tendency than others.

The best work is done when one way of thinking reinforces the other so that both of them are heightened and all kinds of things are done with more elegance. It might be young Hancock playing with his computers or it might be a labourer walking round a building site 'looking' for the right place to dig to find some pipes, laid long ago and now deeply buried. Random use of machinery to dig for them could result in expensive damage and the plan that should have shown their location had proved to be hopelessly wrong. When they were found and he was asked how he did it he explained as well as he could: 'Partly I think where

I would have put them myself if I'd had the job to do. Partly I look at the lie of the land and think how it might have altered. And partly I just know somehow when I have got to the right place.'

No one can be creative with nothing to work on. We are not using the word in its strictly accurate sense of making something out of nothing. It is used to indicate an ability to make the available material into unusual combinations in the most elegant way and find original solutions to problems. It would seem then that the richer a child is in knowledge the better chance there is for any stirrings of creativity.

Kenneth Richmond remarks gloomily, 'From now on we may expect to see a steady flow of books purporting to deal with the problem of how to teach for creativity. Judging by some of those which have already appeared the advice proffered is at best general and at worst humdrum; and in places the topic is treated almost as if Creativity were a new subject in the time-table'.

The idea is fashionable and those who delight in dividing humanity into categories will be happy to parcel children out into the creative and the non-creative. But Charlotte Mason saw, and tried all her life to help others to see, that this sort of pigeon-holing is not what we need. We are all different; yet we all have the same basic needs. It is only an educational philosophy that takes this into account that can really satisfy us.