The Educational Philosophy of Charlotte Mason

3. The Child's Environment

THE Teacher's Handbook for some recently produced material on Environmental Studies states in its preface: 'The world around us in this technological age becomes increasingly specialised, demanding experts in a great number of limited but intricate fields. This demand for specialised knowledge, guided by syllabuses for external examinations, tends to filter further and further downwards through the school. The dangers of this are oft-repeated and obvious—especially the risk that the true meaning of education may be lost in a welter of isolated "subjects". If it is accepted that the aim of education should be to help one overcome one's fear of the environment, then it is of paramount importance that the environment should be understood. It follows inevitably that the only true approach to this is through integrated studies, in which many subjects lose their identity and in which all children, including the less able, can play a vital part.'

Whether or not one approves of integrated studies it is impossible to approve of such a limited idea of education. It is much too negative to think of it as helping the child to overcome his fear of the environment. In fact in many of our modern cities the teacher must take up where the parents leave off and spend a great deal of time trying to implant a healthy fear of the material environment in the young child, since, without it, there is very little chance that he will live to be an adult. Traffic and machinery are an occasion of wonder to him just like everything else he meets and he cannot be expected to understand how fragile the human body is when it comes into contact with them in an untimely way.

This is not to disparage Environmental Studies. They are a part of education but most emphatically not the whole of it. The story of mankind is one continuous illustration of the fact that the human mind cannot be confined by the walls or hedges of the neighbourhood.

Charlotte Mason gave *the atmosphere of environment* equal place with the discipline of habit and the impact of living ideas as one of the three educational instruments. These three were for her the only means open to a teacher; to make use of any other would mean denying the child his full rights as a person.

The use of the whole atmosphere of environment as a means of education is not the same thing as applied Environmental Studies. To the Masonian way of thinking the difference between pure Environmental Studies, where the environment is studied for its own sake, and applied Environmental Studies, where it is used as a learning tool, is of minor importance because the whole question is seen in a wider context. Charlotte Mason preferred to use the word *atmosphere* rather than environment because it conveys this wider meaning. It seems a vague word yet everyone would understand very clearly what was meant if

it were said of some school that the surroundings were grim, the building itself in a dreadful condition, with everything in short supply, yet the atmosphere was wonderful. It would be unnecessary to go into details about the excellent relationships between staff and pupils, the skilful use of whatever means were available and the air of happiness about the place. All this would be understood.

It is the whole environment that is to be one of the three educational tools and this

takes in far more than the neighbouring streets, factories or fields. It is everything the child comes into contact with in his daily living. A failure to grasp this can cause the enthusiasts for Environmental Studies to go round in circles, exhausting themselves in the process.

L. C. Taylor, the Director of the Nuffield Resources for Learning Project, states the dilemma very plainly. 'If children are to work more actively,' he says, 'then the objects in the learning environment must not only be permanent but comprehensible. Reluctantly, even the most ardent exponents of learning from the natural environment concede the need for some interpretation. But here we must be wary. The ample, more or less continuous interpretation of the world around us, and of books describing that world, is precisely what we mean by teaching. We shall be back where we started if the physical constituents of our environment have to be uniformly dissolved into a teacher's words before we can learn from them. Generally it is the world and the books that must speak to us, not the teacher. For a shift from teaching to learning to occur, then, the resources should, for the most part, not only by material and accessible, but such that the learner does not need to be led through them point by point by a teacher.'

The environment needs to be interpreted for a child. This interpretation will involve teaching and by so doing will defeat the whole purpose of the exercise, which was to make it possible for the child to learn for himself. This is a very real stumbling block when an attempt is made to use the environment as a learning tool, but to shift the emphasis from the material surroundings to that more subtle environment which we may call atmosphere means that the teacher is relieved of this need for interpretation. A child—or an adult—lives and breathes an atmosphere. It does not need to be explained in any way, and just because it is accepted as naturally as the air that is breathed it can have an enormous influence on human development.

It might be objected that this shift in emphasis really means that an impossible task has been substituted for a difficult one. Instead of an environment from which the child will learn, more or less well, there is to be an atmosphere, presumably produced by the teacher, which is to work some sort of magic.

The answer to this objection is that it is not magic but common sense that is to be used. The atmosphere surrounding the child is to be that of reality. Charlotte Mason has no time for those educators who would make an artificial child's world, sprinkled with rose-water and cushioned against reality where the education would consist of 'colour schemes, harmonious sounds, beautiful forms and gracious persons' exerting their charm on the young pupil. She calls this not atmosphere but 'a set of artificial relations carefully constructed' and points out
[p 100]
that it prepares a child for life as little as a plant carefully grown under glass is prepared to weather the cold wind and rain when it is taken outside.

The teacher is not asked to cast spells. She is asked to see reality for what it is and work with the grain of life instead of trying to go against it.

When our essential physical wants are satisfied there are still cravings that are just as deeply felt, just as much a part of the human person as the need for food and air. We do not die so soon when they are not met but the failure to satisfy them will leave us mental or spiritual cripples, if not worse.

First, we need to have an identity, to know who we are and how to value ourselves. Then, knowing this, we must live in a state of healthy tension between two longings that

appear to be in opposition, our need for security, for some point of contact from which we can draw strength, and our need for adventure—stimulation—new experiences to challenge us—whatever name we give to the elements in our lives that prevent boredom creeping in to take the colour out of living.

If a child can learn how to satisfy these needs then he is in a condition for making something fruitful of his life, just as someone in good physical health is in a fit state for coping with work that calls for strength and sustained effort. He will be in condition for doing so but, of course, whether he does it or not will be a matter of his own free choice. The other two instruments of education, the discipline of habit and the impact of living ideas, are concerned with this use of the power to live. The influence of atmosphere is concerned with providing a child with what might be called the raw materials of that power.

The atmosphere is to be that of reality and here we must differentiate sharply between what is basic reality and what is merely the fashionable idea or the current catchword. A fashionable idea can be utterly false and the very limit of unreality. The criterion should be, not whether some view is in vogue or not, but whether it is true or false.

On all sides we are told that this is a permissive age but it is worth remembering that there are still no permissive art galleries or museums—or, for the matter of that, banks. People are not permissive about anything they value. It is a pity that human artifacts and property should be prized higher than people themselves.

Plain speaking is an excellent thing but deliberate obscenity is not. The current fixation on sex and violence in the arts and the mass media, the impatience with human reason and the superficiality of so much that passes for human living, all present us with a problem of spiritual pollution as serious as that posed by the pollution of our material environment.

Anyone charged with the responsibility for bringing up children has an obvious duty to protect them from both these forms of pollution; not to pretend that such a state of affairs does not exist but to point it out and explain how we should act to deal with it. Nobody in his or her senses would allow a child to go swimming in a stretch of sea scummed with oil and sewage but too many people are nervous of interfering with a child's freedom of choice where films, books and magazines are concerned. Both situations call for the same reaction and it is not enough to prevent the child from being contaminated; he should be encouraged to take the positive

attitude of looking for a solution to the problem.

Any solution will involve realising the value of the human person. A Christian can put it shortly by saying that the least of us is worth what the blood of Christ is worth. The erosion of human dignity in both life and literature is in no way an expression of truth and it should not be presented to children as such. How it should be treated will be covered in more detail in the fifth article where the influence of living ideas is considered. It is enough now to say that it should be constantly reacted against by giving children every possible opportunity to form the concept of man as he is, 'a rational animal capable of laughter' with all that this implies.

If a child is to get to know himself, to know who he is and what he cares for, he needs to be unafraid of silence and this is an area of life where the school has duties as never before. Inner silence is essential for the flowering of personal identity and exterior silence is nearly always a pre-requisite for the other. The modern concern for identity and the widespread sense

of alienation in life and the arts is not helped by the seepage of noise into so many places where it need not be. More and more of the world is wired for sound and too often a transistor is carried like a talisman to ward off the danger of silence. Its unheeded chatter and music give the illusion that some human contact is being made while the insight and vision that grow in silence cannot even begin to stir into life. It is ironic that people driven by the need to find peace will head for the mountain, the forest or the sea and then switch on the radio to reassure themselves that the background noise is still there. It is in childhood that we can best get a taste for silence and the school has a duty to provide this quiet growing time. There are occasions when a happy din of activity is desirable but if it becomes the norm the child will be damaged.

All this may seem a very negative approach to the use of atmosphere as a means of education but it is simply a reminder that what is needed, for bodily and spiritual development alike, is a healthy atmosphere. When it is unhealthy it is the clear duty of parent and teacher to protect the child from it until he is of an age to take his own precautions. It is not that the polluted environment we live in is to be treated as some horrific nightmare but it has to be taken into account.

All that is sane and healthy in the atmosphere is a child's birthright and the teacher will open as many doors as possible but should not try to push a child through any of them.

The Masonian method, with its deep respect for the person, realises that the formation of character is not a teacher's job. The child's character is his own affair. We are all different and meant to be so. In fact it is impossible to form someone else's character—short of brainwashing and conditioning which results in a sub-human product rather than a person—but it is possible to persuade children to act a part that runs contrary to their tastes and inclinations.

The better the teacher the greater the danger of this and to combat it Charlotte Mason continually stressed the detachment a teacher must have. She must be so sure of her own identity as a person that she has no craving to express herself through the children she is dealing with and distort their growth in the process.

[p 102]

She is in a position where she can exercise influence but her ideal should be what is described in the Masonian method as 'masterly inactivity', putting the child in touch with the things and the books he will learn from, being available when needed, being in command of the situation, in the sense that her records of the stage a child has reached are up-to-date and accurate, but wary always of the danger of spoiling things by too much explaining or pointless questions.

In this atmosphere a child has elbow-room; the quiet growing time that is needed for a sure sense of personal identity. He knows who he is because he has had time to ponder it. He is not expected to conform to a set pattern and can be himself with simplicity and sincerity. This firm foundation of personality is light years away from the fashionable insincerity of consciously projecting an image of oneself to impress, or mislead, other people.

With his sense of identity, of not feeling just one of a faceless crowd, a child is well prepared for learning how to strike a balance between the need for security and the urge for adventure.

Again nobody spells it out for him; the knowledge is breathed in with the atmosphere. He learns to do it by doing it, which is, after all, the most effective way of learning anything.

He senses that there are people who can be relied on. They have their off days and sometimes they get cross but these are the ripples on the surface. They do not change from day to day so that there is no firm ground anywhere. What is right today will not be wrong tomorrow. Right and wrong are fixed stars and cannot alter. In Charlotte Mason's words 'the strong may not lay their burdens on the weak; nor must we expect from children that effort of decision; the most fatiguing in our lives, of which the young should generally be relieved'.

Growing up is a full-time job. It throws a terrible burden on a child to expect him to improvise his own code of ethics because his parents or educators, out of a mistaken idea of freedom, refuse to set out guide lines of behaviour. Deciding to do right or to do wrong is his privilege, as it is of any free being, but having to decide what *is* right and what *is* wrong is to deprive him of the security that is his right while he is a child in the care of his elders.

He has enough to do in learning how to cope with his feelings. Sentimental claptrap about the sunny bliss of childhood has nothing to do with real children. They are people subject to grief and fear and jealousy and everything else that can cloud life. Just because they are young and time moves at a different pace their sorrows can blot out the sun completely.

It will help a child to begin hearing the traditional myths and stories as soon as he is able to listen to them, and this means long before he is able to read them for himself. They have spread throughout the world and lasted down the ages because they answered a deep need. We cannot delude ourselves that technological man differs so radically from his ancestors that he is able to dispense with this supporting framework for his emotional and imaginative life.

Of course when considering the human need for security it is totally unrealistic to talk as though it could be found ultimately in the people we meet or the world we live in. They are real but still only relative to Reality itself. If we try

[p 103]

to divide the creation from its Creator the result is disaster. In William Law's words: 'In all the possibility of things there is and can be but one happiness and one misery. The one misery is nature and creature left to itself, the one happiness is the Life, the Light, the Spirit of God, manifested in nature and creature. That is the true meaning of the world of our Lord.'

Too many Christians seem to feel that, however fashionable plain speaking may be, to be plain-spoken about this truth on which everything else depends is to do something that is in rather bad taste. It is suggested that it is on a par with talking to somebody in a language that a third party who is present does not understand; at the very least a failing in manners. This half-hearted attitude is not going to provide any child with an atmosphere where he will learn to live. If the first Christians had shown such excessive good taste they would never have left the Catacombs.

D. H. Lawrence, no exponent of Christianity, expresses the tragedy of so much of modern life when he writes: 'We are cut off from the great sources of our inward nourishment and renewal, sources which flow eternally in the universe. Vitally the human race is dying. It is like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves again in the universe.'

It might be better if those sections of the human family who know themselves to be securely planted in the universe and in touch with the sources of life and renewal did not try to impersonate clumps of shrinking violets.

To be sure we ought to give a child the security that comes from a proper valuation of

himself, from a sense of the mastery of the tasks he attempts and from the human heritage passed on to him in the form of knowledge of truth and the arts. All of them will be points of contact from which he can draw strength when he needs it but they, in their turn, draw their strength from the Good on which they depend. To know this and not really to take it into account is shortsightedness far worse than that of the man who took off his glasses because he felt he could see just as well without them and then fell over a cow.

Sitting in security will not content a child and, for that matter, it is no life for any healthy member of the human race. We all need adventures, though in sober age we may talk about challenges or new experiences instead of adventures.

This is a side of education where most modern schools feel confident. They go to great trouble to provide interest and excitement and for the most part they have a good audience. Children have limited experience so most things that happen are new to them and will capture their interest. Weighing the guinea pig, feeding the hamster and making a survey of the traffic going past the school gate can all be of absorbing interest.

D. G. Watts, in his book 'Environmental Studies', remarks that this active study of the surroundings is 'part of a reaction against deskbound teaching techniques; no longer looking at buttercups in textbooks, but going out and examining them in the park; no more drawing diagrams of meanders on the Mississippi, but sketching the course of the local stream.'

Since the very beginning of the PNEU the children in its care have been studying growing buttercups and anything else that took their fancy in their Nature Walks. They
[p 104]
have been painting them in their Nature Diaries and adding any remarks they felt like making about their discoveries.

From the first they were happily engaged in fieldwork in History and Geography as well as Nature Study and, since as wide a sweep as possible was the aim, they have combined this active work with making diagrams of the course of the Mississippi—too far away to visit—and exploring reference books to find out more about the creatures and plants seen on the Nature Walks.

The adventures of climbing, skating and swimming, not to mention the adventure of dealing with weather and learning to enjoy it, have combined with the adventures of the mind, the joy of meeting an author who speaks one's own inner thoughts, the exhilaration of poetry and music; all these have multiplied the child's chances of forming those natural affinities that enrich life and form the human personality.

In a calm unhurried atmosphere there has been no suggestion that other pupils are enemies one should defend oneself against if progress is to be made. Current educational thought is beginning to see that Charlotte Mason was wise in refusing to make use of the competitive spirit in children. It is seen at last that when one child helps another not only is progress made but there is a development towards genuine social living. The inability to form good relationships with other people vitiates life completely.

Because of the balanced attitude to life there is no danger of harming by too much stimulation. Nowadays it is not hard to find examples of this. The child who has too many toys at home, or the child at school who is presented with too many experiences and has too much contact with a teacher who over-directs, will become difficult to deal with, through no fault of his own. The adult feels a need to take refuge in unspoiled countryside to renew himself and is

annoyed if this is made difficult for him. The child should have an equal right to withdraw to his own particular wilderness when he has in the true sense of the word, ‘had enough’ for the time being.

In the serenity of an atmosphere that accepts reality in all its aspects the child knows himself and finds the things and the experiences that give him joy. He sees too that other people are different from him in many ways and feels no need to try to impose his own pattern on everything he meets. With respect for himself he learns respect for the others. The use of the other two educational tools help him to use his freedom with responsibility and his intellectual and emotional powers to the limit of their capacity.