

THE CHARLOTTE MASON COLLEGE

by THE PRINCIPAL, J. VAN STRAUBENZEE (C.M.C.)

At this time of our Diamond Jubilee we do well to look back over the years and take stock. From the moment when the decision was made to change the name of the college from 'The House of Education' to 'Charlotte Mason College' a new era began to unfold before the anxious gaze of the newly appointed Principal. Hardly had two years in office been vouchsafed her when the war clouds, long gathered darkly overhead, burst upon our peaceful life at Ambleside.

Meanwhile those years 1938–39 had provided plenty of indication that change was needed if the college was to survive. Had not Miss Mason herself declared that her teaching was not static like a crystal but was like a living organism whose growth was effected by feeding [p 129]

with avidity on any fresh idea? Plans, however, had to be postponed as it became clear that our special mission in the war lay in providing the necessary facilities for the education of children from bombed areas. The first waves arrived in 1940, after which there was a constant trickle of evacuated children until the coming of the 'doodle-bugs' in 1944 caused the second inundation in our midst.

As we recall the increasing numbers of children who looked to us to provide boarding accommodation and education, the gallant spirit in which both staff and students strove to meet their needs, whilst the thinning ranks of domestic workers and grounds staff caused a continual decrease of those physical comforts which we had come to regard as our right, we cannot but marvel how wonderfully our endeavours were blessed. With each demand for fresh growth came the means of supply in the form of a house, miraculously close to the school, and always just the one we needed. Thus the Practising School which began with Fairfield grew steadily to include the Annexe, Knoll, Beehive, Springfield and, lastly, the Hilltop. So well did the staff and students rise to their opportunities that there was no exodus at the end of the war corresponding to the influx of 1940. It was soon evident that the children had taken root, and the school quickly adjusted itself from the life of a small group of thirty to that of a larger community of one hundred and forty.

The peace celebrations over, the full attention of the Principal had to be focused on the problems facing the college. A third, optional, year of training had been provided and taken by a few students. The house Low Nook, its grounds adjoining those of the college, was purchased in 1945 so that the college might grow. The staff of the Parents' Union School then moved to Low Nook, and more space was available not only for Miss Kitching and her staff but also for the students, who now had an extra lecture room and a fine reading room in college.

The question of the recognition of the college by the Ministry of Education became ever more acute during these years. As long ago as 1918 Miss Mason had expressed a wish for the recognition of her work by the State. Inspectors soon made it clear that a qualified teacher, having taken a recognised course of training, must be able to teach in any type of school. Nothing less than twelve weeks' teaching practice in maintained schools together with lectures in various methods would satisfy them. Our suggestion that the training should be lengthened to three years, so that students could follow the course indicated by the inspectors whilst

preserving all that was best in the old two years' course, was accepted and provisional recognition was granted.

While these negotiations were taking place, there came into being the Area Training Organisation by which every training college is affiliated to a university. In 1950 we had the honour of a visit from the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester, after which affiliation was granted, and although the probationary period is not yet quite completed, the most difficult problems are, we confidently hope, behind us. This summer our students will be taking the examination leading to the award of the teacher's certificate of the University of Manchester, and already we are enjoying and profiting by the interesting opportunities of contact with the university which our affiliation opens up for the college.

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Although stepping out along untrodden paths, the college still draws its inspiration from the principles of education which it was Charlotte Mason's life-work to establish. All educational problems are fundamentally concerned with persons and personal relationships; our aim is to work out the principle that 'Education is the science of relations,' and our method is that of teaching children to use their own minds. The students in training are stimulated to achieve a personal relationship with knowledge. They follow a curriculum that provides both breadth and depth, the two sectors together forming a unified pattern of experience. The number of subjects in which a student specialises during the latter part of her training, and at what level, depends partly upon her capacity and partly upon her objectives, but the essential principle of wholeness is maintained throughout and breadth of understanding is balanced with more specialised knowledge. Through their work in the Practising School the students are generally quick to appreciate Charlotte Mason's teaching on the subject of *mind*. Miss Mason did not claim to have discovered anything new about mind, but she certainly opened our eyes to its behaviour. A natural indolence contents most of us to use someone else's mind. Three years at Charlotte Mason College convince students of the value of thinking for themselves.

Thought feeds on knowledge and is starved without it; knowledge is a condition of the growth of thought. We have long proved the advantage of training in philosophical thinking, providing a weekly study of Plato's *Republic* from the beginning of the second year. Discussion of the problems presented in this great work lead to questions which happen to interest the individual thinker, and thus the power of reflective thought is developed in the students.

All educational problems are fundamentally concerned with persons. Each person has in him or in her the seeds of greatness. The test by which a community must be judged is not its fame or its power, but the quality of the lives lived by the individual persons who are its members and the capacity of its traditions to evoke their spiritual greatness. The inspiration for noble living comes from the Christian idea on which Charlotte Mason founded her college and which she called 'The Creed of the House.' The vital importance of both the actual practice of religion and the intellectual understanding of spiritual values is realised and opportunities provided for both. The possession of the certificate of the Charlotte Mason College carries with it not only the necessary knowledge of certain principles and methods, but also some clear idea of the vocation of a Christian teacher and the understanding that her work of training and teaching children is dedicated to the service of God. Thus may she help to build up the Christian life of the schools in which she will serve.

At this moment of our history, fraught as it is with new issues, we hope and pray that

our college may be enabled by God's grace to play its part and to make a special contribution to the cause of education in the years ahead.