The Need for a Liberal Education[1]

HOW IT MAY BE GIVEN.

BY H. W. HOUSEHOLD.

FEW people see the truth of things, or really try to find it. They are contented to hold opinions which are rooted in prejudice. They believe this or that because their fellow employers or fellow workmen believe it, or because their favourite newspaper so teaches. They cannot make an impartial study of burning questions. They have no power of judgment. They accept the herd view, taking their principles ready made. They pass their lives in a mental atmosphere that distorts all facts and hides the truth. Most children begin life with a desire to find the truth, a wish to know. They take a joy in learning, until we kill it in our schools. They have a natural capacity for mental vision, but it is not developed. Therefore, as they grow, it atrophies, and when they reach maturity they can no longer see the truth, except at those rare moments when some tremendous shock sweeps away the distorting media, and for a short time (probably too late) reveals to sight the naked facts.

This paralysis of mental vision affects all classes, though in varying degrees. Its consequences none know better than the leaders of Trade Unionism. They are tragic. Let us reconstruct the story.

These leaders are men of great natural ability, but they have had to fight for opportunity to develop it. They have seldom had a good education and they are still unversed in

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affairs, untrained in judgment and dangerously susceptible to the herd view, when as young men they attract attention to themselves by preaching extreme opinions. As yet they can see only one side of a case, one set of facts; and they are facts which, seen isolated from all other relevant facts, can hardly fail to inspire extreme opinions. What they believe they present with all the vehemence of youth, and with a rare ability; for the men are born orators, and their natural gifts have been trained and developed in a school of experience where none but the fit survive. The gospel, a hot gospel, is highly acceptable to those who hear it. It is what they wanted to hear, what they are predisposed by their circumstances and their herd sentiment to believe. That way, they say, lies the millennium, and they put the young orator at their head to lead them to it. But directly a man becomes a leader he is forced into contact with other facts, other men, other views. His outlook widens. He is lifted into a larger world. He sees the old facts from a new angle. He reads more books, and comes under the influence of greater minds. He gains experience in affairs and learns what things are possible and what are not; by what means the possible may be achieved, and how intemperate zeal defeats its ends. The millennium, which once seemed so near, recedes to a greater distance, and the real path of approach is found to start in quite another direction from the path along which he once set out so confidently.

Then there comes a moment when he must tell his followers the truth. With great courage, risking everything, he does so. He turns about, and tries to arrest the surging onrush (which in earlier days he had set in motion) before it reaches the abyss which all too late he has espied ahead. He tries in vain. His followers cannot see the abyss. They are only exasperated

when he says that the gospel of his youth was folly. When he was wrong they thought him right; now that he is right they think him wrong. Then comes the fifth act of the tragedy. They say that he has been bought, or that he is losing vision and faith and heart as his years increase. They thrust him from them, and take for their guide a younger man, who has his way to make, and his lesson still to learn. And ever the abyss grows nearer, ever the onrush harder to arrest. Unless we
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educate our people, both those who shall lead and those who shall follow, it will never be arrested; the abyss will swallow us.

The folk lack knowledge and judgment. Therefore they must misuse their power. The past is full of lessons, but they have never heard of them; the present is full of warnings which they cannot interpret. They want (naturally enough) to see in their own life-time the new heaven and new earth, of which they have heard so much. They will not believe that only if they are industrious and thrifty will it ever be won at all, or accept the hard truth that they must devote themselves for the sake of their children's children, toiling for a reward which they are not to share. It is useless to tell truths so hard to an uneducated people; useless to demonstrate that the purse of the State can only be full if they fill it; that if they will not work, if they diminish output, if they force up wages till profits go, they cripple trade, cause unemployment, empty the State purse, and make it impossible for any Government to give them and their children what they want, and what indeed they ought to have—a liberal education, better houses, adequate pensions, public recreations, all that an improved standard of living means. Discipline may teach a man to die for his country, but only a liberal education can teach him to live for it, or equip him with the knowledge and intelligence without which there is no sound judgment.

But here is a vicious circle. The worker cannot judge rightly or act wisely until he is educated; yet there will be no money for his education until he has learned so to judge and act. The circle must be broken.

Among the employing class, the capitalists, are many who are almost equally deficient in knowledge and judgment. There are the self-made men whose education has been of the same illiberal character, gained in the same schools, truncated at the same early age, as that of the workers. Like all converts, they are usually the most bigoted champions of their new creed, the fiercest opponents of the men and ideas among which their early years were nurtured. They do not believe in education for the children of the workers. For their own children it is of course a necessary path to social advancement, but for the others
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there is no schooling like that of the workshop or the plough. "My father, sir, put me to work as soon as I was thirteen. See what I am!" Even of those who pass through the great public schools it is but few who attain to judgement. There is much that is wonderfully good in those schools, but there is also much that might be greatly better. Too many boys of average ability pass through them without having felt the quickening fire. They have been trained for muscular but not intellectual development, to act but not to think, to command but not to sympathise. Taste and imagination are very often left dormant, and atrophy as the years go by. The boys go out from school into the world honest but rather stupid and uninformed. They will play the game so far as they understand it, and the rival will always be a friend; but the game brings them into

contact with so few, and the rest have not the playfellow's claim upon them. There is a wide gulf fixed between the sons of capital and the sons of labour. They do not know or understand each other. They have nothing in common. Their aims and ideals tend to be mutually destructive.

Capital preaches to labour the law of hard work and thrift, but thinks itself exempt. It is fond of reminding labour that capital and credit, and therefore work and wages, disappear if banks and business men lose confidence: but it forgets that the workers will not give of their best, and that their output will be low and its cost in wages high, if they cannot be sure of a fair return from their toil and of protection against the effects of unemployment. The confidence of the worker is as essential to the progress of industry as the confidence of capital, and, at the moment, the worker, not without reason, feels no confidence. The aim of the employing class is a wrong aim: for themselves luxury and great possessions, for the worker a bare wage and nothing more.

There must be a liberal education for all; and it should be one education. Then class distinctions and class aims will disappear. The great contrasts that shock thoughtful people, and infuriate the worker, will be smoothed away. The gulf that separates will be narrowed from both ends.

It may be difficult under the financial conditions of today to make secondary education free. The vast building programme and the huge additional expenditure on salaries
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may be beyond our means, though we can afford many things far less necessary and desirable. But we need not sit still and wring our hands. Without an excessive increase in expenditure we can greatly improve the aims, methods, and results of our public education. Let us make a beginning and break the vicious circle.

At the moment, whether in the elementary or in the secondary school (no matter what the type) we largely fail to secure the interest of the pupil. He has to listen too much: he does too little for himself. He does not acquire the habit of independent work, of grappling with and conquering difficulties, of concentration or ordered thought, of free expression, or of what will follow when these are gained—judgment. This is the tale of many teachers, of most inspectors. It is a sorry tale but true.

Yet in our midst there is being conducted an experiment in education which has shown in many schools of many types how the desired end may be achieved. The real greatness of an educational reformer is seldom apparent to his own generation. Recognition comes slow and late. It may be that when we hail the living prophet we alarm the orthodox. If it must be so, so be it. The truth must be told none the less. In the end it will prevail.

Miss Charlotte Mason at Ambleside, during a long life, has shown us (if we would heed) by precept and example what school and teacher should aim at; what any school and almost any teacher can achieve, if they will. Vision and faith are necessary, but even the least of us may win to these. From the beginning she kindles interest. How is it done, this most difficult thing, which so many have tried to do with such small success? How does she banish indifference and inattention, for banish them she surely does?

First of all, she has discovered that children of all ages, and of every class, are eager for knowledge, if only it be put before them in the right form. And the right form is literary form, a good book exact to the last line and letter as it came from the hand and brain of him to whom

God gave the wit to write it. No intermediary is needed, neither the watered compilation so dear to publishers and teachers, nor the obtrusive voice raised in well-meaning lecture that only interrupts. “Given a book of literary quality suitable to
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their age,” says Miss Mason, “and the children will know how to deal with it without elucidation.” The teacher has been mistaken in thinking that they cannot, and that he must interpret between them and the writer. The children greatly prefer to do their work upon his pages for themselves; and in doing it they develop a power with which they had not been credited. They work as individuals, the personality of each respected, not merged with thirty or forty others in that artificial and soulless entity, the class.

“Let the boy read and he knows, that is, if he must tell again what he has read.” Here is Miss Mason’s second discovery. There is only one reading, and it is always followed by oral narration or written report, when the pupil gives back in orderly sequence the substance of what has been read, be it one page or eight or ten. The knowledge that there will be one reading, and that narration has to follow, compels attention, and fixes the content in the mind so surely that, without any re-reading or further preparation, he will face and satisfy a searching examination at the end of term. He “knows.”

That Miss Mason’s methods do what she claims for them has been proved in scores of primary schools. Children and teachers who have used her methods and her books would not for worlds return into the old groove. But we must beware; there are no short cuts, no substitutes.

So much, all too briefly, of the method. What of the books, these books that of themselves unaided, compel an interest that the talking, always talking, teacher so rarely can inspire? It must suffice to enumerate some of those set in Form III, roughly the Standard V., the eleven-year-olds of the primary school last term.

> LITERATURE: Marshall’s *History of English Literature for Boys and Girls*, pp. 581–632. *The Old Curiosity Shop*. *Hamlet* or *The Tempest*. Shelley’s *Poems* (Oxford Classics). Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*. Lamb’s *Essays*.
> ENGLISH HISTORY: Arnold Forster’s *History of England*, pp. 719–726 and 745–806 (1820–1861).
> FRENCH AND GENERAL HISTORY: Frances Epps’s *British Museum for Children*, Chap. 8 (Egypt). Fletcher’s *The Great War*, 1914–1918, pp. 29–66. Creighton’s *First History of France*, pp. 279–290.
> CITIZENSHIP: Miss Mason’s *Ourselves*, Book I. pp. 108–139. North’s Plutarch’s *Lives*, Timoleon. Strachey’s *Social and Industrial Life*, pp. 36–71.]

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> NATURAL HISTORY AND BOTANY: Haines’s *The Changing Year*, April to July, or Furneaux’ *Country Side Rambles*, April to July. Furneaux’ *A Nature Study Guide*. Stope’s *Study of Plant Life*, pp. 72–108. Ruskin’s *Ethics of the Dust*, Lectures I., II., and III.

Some special study is to be followed for out-of-door work, and a Nature Note-Book with flower and bird lists is kept, with daily notes.

GENERAL SCIENCE: *Architecture* (Jack), pp. 24–42. Geikie's *Physical Geography*, pp. 1–46.
READING: Bulfinch's *Age of Fable*, pp. 156–186. Longfellow's *Golden Legend*.

In addition, of course, there are the other subjects of the ordinary curriculum, and one more so characteristic that it must not be omitted, the study of pictures by great artists, a set of six being circulated every term.

This may seem a full bill of fare, but as there is only the one reading, time is saved and more books can be read. Who does not recall by way of contrast how in his own school days he learnt his lessons in "preparation," then had them heard in school to test his industry, and finally got all the books up again with feverish haste for the examination at the end of term? It should be noted in passing what a part is played in this syllabus by "the reading of histories" (which Amyot in his preface to Plutarch's *Lives* called "the school of wisdom") and how skilfully the other books are chosen that they may make the histories live.

The effect of all this reading upon the children is marvellous. To the parent unaccustomed to the methods and results of the ordinary school the tale of it would be beyond belief. What the children become, what they do, must be seen to be believed. It is idle to talk to those who have not seen it for themselves of the freedom of expression, the copious vocabulary, the vigorous imagination, the new wealth of knowledge, the joy and pride in work. After all, the great books are the real educators of mankind. Is it so strange then that they should prove to be superlatively the best teachers of children too, or that the child should love them? "A desire of knowledge," said Dr. Johnson, "is the natural feeling of mankind; and every human being, whose mind is not debauched, will be willing to give all that he has to get knowledge." Johnson, it will be

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remembered, had just been greatly pleased by the declaration of the boy who was sculling him to Greenwich, that he would give all that he had to know about the Argonauts. How it would have rejoiced his heart if he could have seen elementary school boys of ten, eleven, and twelve years of age, who already knew all Jason's story, reading *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night*, and even *Lear* itself, and acting them with joy and spirit, learning, some of them, their parts right through the plays. It sounds incredible, but they do it; and a few months ago seven or eight of them from a school known to the writer, not having the money for the train fare (their all had been spent upon the tickets of admission) tramped stoutly eight miles out and eight miles home again, that they might see acted on the stage *Twelfth Night*, which they themselves had read and acted the term before.

That is the effect of one great book, an effect that will be lifelong, manifesting itself in many ways. And it is only what we should expect. David Grayson has told us why. "The great books have in them," he says, "the burning fire of life." These books so used (the one reading, the immediate narration, the subsequent examination) give a quality and an influence to education, and above all to the education of the primary school, that it has never had before. They point the road and stimulate to self-education, which, because it is a life-long quest, is worth more than all school teaching, though impossible without it; and they give one education to the worker's child and the rich man's child. For the first time we have in England a common education, and the making of a common school. The programme, of which a specimen has been given above, is pursued steadily at Ambleside and in many other schools, as a coherent whole

until the stage of secondary education is completed. The method that is so successful with English is equally successful with foreign languages. The foreign tongue is a spoken tongue from the beginning, and the masterpieces of its literature, read and narrated, impart “the burning fire of life” that is in them.

While the provision of secondary schools remains so utterly inadequate there is the greater reason to encourage the elementary schools to adopt the programmes and methods of Miss Mason, and so to give within their own

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walls a liberal education to those children who stay with them beyond the age of fourteen. Such children would no longer mark time as now, but would progress from term to term through a veritable “school of wisdom.” Such an experiment might even show that the multiplication of different types of institutions and of buildings is not so indispensably necessary as is commonly supposed, and that we might, if we would, make a much more extended and profitable use of what we have. Many an elementary school might develop with success a secondary top.

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