English Literature and the Teaching Methods of Miss Mason

in the Elementary Schools of Gloucestershire.

BY H. W. HOUSEHOLD, M.A.,
Education Secretary for Gloucestershire.

ONE is continually saddened by repeated proofs that of the people who count in the public eye there are very few who really understand or have any wish to understand what education means. Labour may know, but Capital as a rule does not. Capital, for the most part, is only concerned with technical efficiency; it would teach people how to win a livelihood. Labour knows that, if we would avoid disaster, we must teach them how to live. To Sir Eric Geddes anything beyond the three R's is educating children for higher positions, educating them deliberately for removal from their class; whereas it must be the aim of education to lift the whole class. No mere beggarly elements of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic can avail for that. But Sir Eric Geddes has potent allies in the Press. The *Sunday Pictorial* is one. Only a fortnight ago it quoted him thus with high approval:—

"Only a one-eyed visionary, says Sir Eric, would educate children for higher positions when in the very doing of it he is destroying by taxation their future means of livelihood."

This pestilential doctrine is wide-spread. If it did not find willing ears one may surmise that the *Sunday Pictorial*

would not be so ready to propagate it. When you must compete for circulation—which is life—you do not lightly assume an unpopular role. Those who find this sorry stuff acceptable—the very best of them—are fairly represented by an intelligent manager of a country school to whom I remarked the other day that he and his fellow managers had recently appointed two very inexperienced Supplementary Teachers as its two assistants and that the Head Master might find himself in difficulties. "Ah, well," he said, "after all we must remember that the children are only going to be farm hands." "Not *only* farm hands, even those who stay with you," I said; "they will be citizens and masters of our fate."

One had hoped that such people, from Sir Eric Geddes downwards, would have learned wisdom from the appalling fate of Russia, from the disappearance of capital and destruction of credit, the collapse of industry, the judicial murder of tens of thousands, the death by starvation of some 20,000,000 people in a single year. That is what happens when a people take a hand in government, who have not had the education necessary to enable them to do so with judgment and discretion.

In these times of upheaval those who are anxious to maintain something like stability should be lavish rather than niggardly in their expenditure on education. Ignorant or half-educated people are ready dupes for the extremist. Every plausible theory sweeps them off their feet. Teach them to think and they can weigh opinions. They can play their part in the government, central and local, of a democratic country. Deny them the education that alone can fit them to play that part, and you convince them that you do not intend them to have any part to play. They will believe that repression is to be your policy, and if they get that notion well into their heads there will be trouble.

They ask us to educate them, for they know the need. Three years ago, two years ago, it seemed that we really were about to make something like adequate provision. But the great extension of Secondary and Higher Education then promised will not take place, and we must fall back once more upon the Elementary Schools, and call into alliance the new champion whom we have found—Miss Mason.
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Pestalozzi and Froebel and others of her illustrious predecessors dreamed dreams of what education should do for the children of the people; but the schools of their day had no money. Pestalozzi and his pupils lacked food and clothes. Books in abundance, and an adequate staff of efficient teachers he could never hope to have. It was the same here. Those who established and administered Elementary Education in this country had no conception of its true aim.

Stevenson somewhere makes play with a good lady who commended a prospective bride to her brother because among other happy qualities, she had "about as much religion as my William likes." The sentiment is eloquent of the days when it was the general hope that the world would sing not only in harmony but in unison, and that education would teach it to do so. Public education had its origin in the days of authority, when it was conceived to be all important to teach people—not to think, that were far too dangerous, but—to believe; to dress them out in those suits of opinions which authority had inspected and passed as safe. The opinions of the world at large, and especially of the 'lower orders,' must be formed with care. There were facts of religion, facts of science, facts of industry, social facts, political facts. They were not to be enquired into; they were to be accepted. Authority playing the part of "my William" selected and interpreted them. There never would be happy union within the State, unless the mass of the people would accept opinions carefully prescribed for them, unless they had "about as much religion as my William likes," and avoided free enquiry like the plague.

Now "my William's" views are those of his circle. Their universal adoption would secure the safety, the prosperity, the happiness of William—of all the Williams. William's ideal dispensation requires that other and much wider circles shall surrender their individuality to him and his fellows; that they shall 'think'—if one may use the word—think, and work, and live as best accords with his advantage; submit themselves to governors and teachers of his choice; order themselves as desired to all their betters. So long as they accept William for the type of
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their betters all is well—in William's eyes. But what if in the course of time they cast off William and choose a master and teacher from within their own circle, one who shall put their interest and advantage first? They will still take their opinions ready made. There will still be 'facts' to be accepted, but they will be poles asunder from William's opinions, William's 'facts.' When in due time this comes to pass, and some young Trade Union leader sits in the high place that once was William's dealing out oracles, William is distressed. When he sat in the high place and voiced authority he did not ask that folk should examine; they were to believe. Now that another speaks they should no longer believe, they should examine. Because they do not (and he never gave them the education for the task) at once they are blind; they cannot see reason; their credulity will ruin them—and him. It did in Russia. Precisely. Those who are not soundly educated will believe anything. Some of them believe the *Morning Post* and the Duke of Northumberland (for an English Public School does not always teach a boy to think), some Mr.

Lansbury and the *Daily Herald*. The marvel is that many more do not believe the latter pair. It speaks well for our elementary schools and their devoted teachers that there is so much capacity for sound independdent [sic] judgment among the workers. There is no Russian debacle ahead of us. But there will be many a rash experiment, great losses, and much suffering unless our people can be taught to take wide views, to interpret the past, to look far into the future, in a word to judge.

In an elementary education that ends at 13 or 14 years of age there must always be much waste. Cheap teaching, cheap books may succeed in putting a small and resolute minority upon the difficult path of self-education, unguided and often with ill-chosen aims, but the majority will never make much use of what they cease to learn so soon. They forget much, misuse much, and are a ready target for the gibes and sarcasms of the unbeliever who discourses now from the Bench, now to a Chamber of Commerce, now even within the House of Commons itself.

Our Elementary Schools have never made the use that should be made of books in education. They could not make it, for they never had them. Good books, the work
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of master minds, were not for them. Such books as they had were very poor in quality, compilations written down to the supposed level of the Worker's child. And there were few enough of those. There are many teachers still at work who had no more than three books in the year for each class, and there are those who can remember when, besides the Bible, there was only one. Under such conditions the voice of the teacher was necessarily the medium of instruction. The child was too often a passive listener. In many a school he is a passive listener still. The Training Colleges aimed at turning out teachers who could lecture, question, and use the blackboard, in such a way as to hold the attention of the large class. Training College and teacher alike were in the position of those who must make bricks without straw. By a miracle of ingenuity they did it; they made bricks—of a sort. Unfortunately having made them they are apt to think them good bricks after all, bricks perhaps equal to the best. So the importance of the technique of teaching, the place of method, the part of the teacher have been vastly over-estimated. We have crowded, all of us, into a blind alley, where we jostle confusedly, and are irritated because we get no further. But during these last few years Miss Mason has shown us that we must come back and start again with the open road before us. Instead of the class as unit, she gives us the individual child; for the endless talk of teachers she substitutes the book—a real book of literary merit, not a publisher's class-book—for all the multitudinous tricks of method she teaches us to use narration. It sounds very simple. It is immensely simpler than anything that hitherto we have been taught to do. But behind it lie a philosophy and a faith to which we have been strangers. Now we know, for Miss Mason has taught us, that the child must do its own work on the book (there is no mental digestion unless it does); and we are persuaded of the right of every child to a liberal education, and of its power to respond to the teaching of the world's great writers. We have learned, too, that the children of Labour are not inferior in brain power to the children of Capital, that their average of capacity is at least as high; and we have proved that, given the opportunity, they show a greater eagerness and will to learn. The best brains of a Secondary School
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will generally be found among those who have come there with free places.

The inadequacy of the text-book, and the supreme value of the method of narration had both been pointed out before, and both by the same man—Dr. Johnson.

"I dined at Langton's with Johnson," said Mr. Longley, the father of the Archbishop; "I remember Lady Rothes (Langton's wife) spoke of the advantage children now derived from the little books published purposely for their instruction. Johnson controverted it, asserting that at an early age it was better to gratify curiosity with wonders than to attempt planting truth before the mind was prepared to receive it, and that therefore Jack the Giant-Killer, Parisenus and Parismenus, and the Seven Champions of Christendom were fitter for them than Mrs. Barbauld and Mrs. Trimmer."

Perhaps we may bring the doctor up to date, and claim his authority when we suggest that the Age of Fable and Sigurd the Volsung and the Morte d'Arthur are fitter than Science for the Schoolroom or Footpaths of Literature for Children and the like, prepared for publishers by those who believe that children like sections of truth and fiction dealt out to them in numbered paragraphs and labelled "for children only." "Babies do not want to hear about babies," said Dr. Johnson on another occasion (Mrs. Thrale is our authority); "they like to be told of giants and of castles, and of *somewhat which can stretch and stimulate their little minds*." There is no need of the play way now, the child resents it. Miss Mason has shown us how more than right Dr. Johnson was. The child does like to have something that can stretch and stimulate his mind. Madame Montessori cumbers him with much unnecessary help; one need not always approach his mind by the way of sense impressions.

It is Mrs. Thrale too who tells us of the use that Dr. Johnson would have us make of the method of narration. "Little people," he said, "should be encouraged always to tell whatever they hear particularly striking to some brother or sister or servant immediately, before the impression is erased by newer occurrences. … It was to that method chiefly that he owed his uncommon felicity of
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remembering distant occurrences and long past conversations."

There is the germ of the method of narration, which many teachers will tell you that they use, but few use rightly. They had not thought any more than Dr. Johnson of exciting interest by the use in school for teaching purposes of English books of literary merit (and no others) or of ensuring attention and concentration by always (not sometimes but always) requiring narration after a single reading. That is Miss Mason's method, the method by which our children are being taught in nearly 70 schools in Gloucestershire. Of the results you shall judge presently by sample for yourselves. Let us call another witness, who has no case to prove, no theories to fortify. "As a child of five," says Mr. Robert Blatchford, "I fell into a habit of repeating to myself in a soundless whisper whatever I heard spoken or read. In this way, without knowing it, I trained my memory and observation so thoroughly that as a young man I could repeat a long conversation, lecture or a speech, almost verbatim after one hearing … Such a practise holds and trains the attention. … That is one reason why I want … good English literature read to young children in schools by good readers."

The faculties which this habit of narration developed in Mr. Blatchford are being developed in some thousands of Gloucestershire children. I do not wish to impose any interested testimony of my own. There are excellent people who would reject it as that of a mere crank. There is abundance of testimony less suspect. The Secondary Schools admit that

they can pick out the children from a good Parents' Union School, because they have learned to work independently, and can concentrate their attention and grasp readily the meaning of what they read. Examiners comparing their papers with other papers are struck by that same power of grasping the meaning of passages that others find difficult, by the familiarity with much good literature, the store of knowledge, the rich vocabulary. Teachers who visit our schools in a steady stream write afterwards telling the same tale, adding sometimes that if they had not seen the books, heard the narration and watched the amazing composition written by rapid pens before their
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eyes, they would not have believed that such work could be done in an elementary school. Labour on the County Council, always in touch with the schools, has borne testimony to its value. As I have said I will give you samples later.

We have of course been curiously slow in every type of School to admit English literature, freely read, as a medium of education. Latin, yes, and Greek, but not English. Only very slowly are we emancipating ourselves from old tradition. Because at one time no man could be anything or do anything without Latin; because the sixteenth century thought that it could not know anything without Greek; because English was once but a shifting barbarian dialect and even when stabilised by printing had but the beginnings of a literature, English must be for ever a Cinderella among languages in the teacher's eyes. It is long since the school boy learned Latin because he could not hope to be a statesman, diplomatist, ecclesiastic, theologian, lawyer, doctor, or so much as a barber surgeon without it. Then he spoke the tongue, and thought in it. English could not help him. The books he wanted were in Latin. Now the position is exactly reversed. Latin is no longer indispensable; for the purposes of professional life it has no practical value; its books are useless; it no longer lives in speech and thought. A man may achieve almost any position without it if the schools will let him. English on the other hand a man must have. And it opens to him a wealth of philosophy, science, history, great poetry, great fiction, great drama, such as neither Latin nor even Greek can offer. Yet in our schools it is Latin and Greek that we still put first, with the result that many a boy, and I fear many a girl, never learns what English literature has to give, and is never fired with any love for it. In the schools that Miss Mason has inspired English has come into its place.

Many of those present know the nature of Miss Mason's programmes. The literature course each term is built up round the history. Children of nine years of age (some of them are only eight) read with ease, and with the pleasure that a sense of power imparts, that hard Arnold Forster's History of England. This term it is the story of the Danish invasions and the Norman Conquest. They are reading
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the same period in the history of France, and they come across the now familiar tale, the historic personages and the great events, in the pages of Hereward the Wake and Harold. In their ancient history—remember that they are to have a liberal education—they are learning something of the great tale of Rome; therefore what more natural than that they should read Shakespeare's Coriolanus, and side by side with it Plutarch's Life? But I cannot enumerate all of the many and most astonishing books that they read, these children of eight and nine and ten, and year by year until they are fourteen, and leave our schools. They are as our own children are, when they have the best teaching—that is if they escape the deadening influence of the

untimely drudgery over the elements of Latin at a Preparatory School. They are as our own children are, but in some ways amazingly, almost incredibly more competent. But of that you shall judge for yourselves in a few minutes.

But, you will say, how can this be done in a little country school? Some teachers are willing to believe that it may be possible in the large town schools, with a classroom and a teacher for each class; but in a school of 40 to 50 children ranging in age from 3 or 4 to 14, and with only two teachers, they will not believe it to be possible. I can only say that it is. Not only is it possible, but sometimes the work is better done, Miss Mason's influence is more surely felt, than in the larger schools. The class teacher finds it harder to abandon the old practice of constant exposition. He cannot efface himself; he will still dominate the class, will have one pace. You can see here examination papers written by the children of little country schools—for every term there is an examination, in which children and teachers delight; an examination not prepared for; that one reading followed by narration has been sufficient.

Of course in these little schools it is not always easy. Genius finds a way (and the amount of teaching genius to be found in the Elementary Schools often astounds and humbles me)—genius finds a way, finds different ways, and the rest of us follow the leader of our choice.

I was lately in such a little school, where the master has three forms to teach of all ages from 8 to 14. They were working busily by themselves (one class was in the playshed
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far from the teacher's eye); they were hearing their own reading, their own narration; making their own criticisms and corrections and keeping their records of the pages read and the work done by each member of the form. The Master would tell you that he cannot teach three classes at once by himself, therefore he chose this way. The children consult him when they want him. He knows all that goes on. From behind the scenes he shapes the course, but he does not dominate. He does nothing for any child that the child can do and should do for itself. A year ago, when he went there, that school was almost inefficient. In a single year—with Miss Mason's help—he has made of it a miracle of activity and intelligence, made it a school to which I can send from far and near those who would learn what a Parents' Union School can do and how it does it. I rejoice to say that we have no inconsiderable number of such schools.

But, you will say, how in these times of difficulty, of severe economy, and estimates curtailed, how can we afford the books? When we began nearly five years ago with a tiny group of Schools I will confess that the cost was heavy. There were Schools that were costing 15s. to £1 per child each year, and more in the initial year. When I tell you that Arnold Forster's History costs 8s. 6d. a copy you will not be surprised, though one set of books were made to serve two classes. But again the genius of the teachers has found the remedy. We no longer provide 30 copies of any book, unless it be a play of Shakespeare, for a class of 30 children. Probably we shall not send more than 10 of any; of some it will be 8 or 6. Of course when a book lends itself especially to reading aloud we send but one. So a class is always broken up into a number of groups; the teacher passes from group to group, and the time table is exceedingly elastic. In a school so worked you will seldom come across a History *lesson*, but at all sorts of times you will find children reading, learning, history. Once more what might seem inconvenient has been attended by sheer gain. The teacher cannot dominate.

Other schools follow what is really very much the Dalton plan. The class has its work mapped out ahead for a certain period; the books are on the shelves and the individuals of the

class make division of them. And so long as they get through the pages prescribed in the allotted
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time all is well. This method of course is more common with the older children.

By breaking up the classes into groups, and taking advantage of other devices we are rapidly lowering the cost. In 1920–21 the County average cost per head of books and apparatus (excluding Needlework) was 6s. 1d., and the average cost of the P.U. Schools was 9s. 10½ d. In 1921–22 the County cost was 4s. 6½d. (prices were falling) and the cost of the P.U. Schools 6s. 7½d. This year with the group system fully working (it was not until last November that I explained it to the schools) the difference will be very much smaller. The initial cost was at one time very heavy, but it has been greatly reduced and need now alarm nobody. The two last joined schools have just had their books. In one, with 58 children, they cost 3s. 5d. per head, in the other of 190 children 3s. 6d. It will be understood that I personally keep a very close watch over the requisitions. I make suggestions, and alter some of them freely, and I always send the Head Teachers of newly joined schools to see a school that has solved successfully this unfamiliar problem in organisation.

There is much else that I should like to tell of, the effect upon the teachers and the children, and the enthusiasm of both; the marvels that have been achieved with backward children, who respond in a wonderful way to the method of narration; the sudden discovery of children that they can write good prose, and sometimes verse of surprising merit; the disappearance of the old difficulties with spelling, of that purposeless drudgery with dictionaries, of those terrible little books on the use of words and aids to composition. But I must forbear. I have another task more useful and more pleasing. I will read to you from two exercise books that I have selected from among the many that I have carried away from Schools and kept to show to those whom I would convince of the supreme value of the work that Miss Mason's methods and English literature are doing in our Schools. I will tell you the ages of the children afterwards.[1] After a single continuous reading of Baldur's Dream in the Heroes of Asgard, the first child has condensed 17 pages of print into 7 of MS., fluent, beautifully written, almost perfectly expressed and spelt.

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[1] The first child was 8 8/12 and the second 6 7/12.