

# The Value of Charlotte Mason's Work for Today

*By Susan Schaeffer Macaulay*

Until a few years ago, the name of Charlotte Mason was largely forgotten. It almost seemed as if the vast educational network that had grown out of her ideas had disappeared like an English early morning mist when the sun rises. If she was mentioned, educators and parents would look blank.

This unfamiliarity seemed curious to me. But as I reflected on recent trends in education, I saw why her innovative philosophy, based on Christian values and faith, had declined. In English teacher training colleges over the last decades, A. S. Neil was read assiduously, and his one school, Summerhill,<sup>1</sup> was held up as an example. "Progressive" education became the vogue. It was seen as liberating the child from the past constraints of a sure framework of knowledge and moral behavior. It was a sustained attack on the whole system of Western education. This ideology began to capture the minds *not* of the elementary school teachers, who were far too busy teaching classes of sixty or more, but rather of the educational establishment—teacher training colleges and the school inspectors. "Progressive" education developed in the wake of a change in teacher training from the apprentice-in-the-classroom model to a lecture-based course in colleges. Many of the new liberal ideas became the educational gospel that spread into primary schools in both Britain and the United States. The effect of these ideas has been cumulative; as we begin the twenty-first century, we see widespread results.

I was a young parent in London when the walls came down figuratively and actually in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time primary school teachers (for ages five to eleven) were discouraged from using any structured teaching

## 20 \ When Children Love to Learn

at all. Textbooks were out; so were quiet "lessons." Teaching phonics or multiplication tables was definitely frowned on as being as passé as a dunce's hat or children working in rows on slates. Tables were pushed together with little groups sitting around them working on worksheets or projects, either as a group or individually. A hubbub of unfettered chatter made listening or concentration difficult for all except the most naturally "schoolish" child. This confusion was exacerbated as new schools ceased putting in classroom walls. The "open plan" was the liberated design.

In the various schools I visited, chaos reigned. As classes were large (between thirty-five and forty-two children), it was not surprising that parents were concerned. One of my friends was teaching five-year-olds who were meant to learn to read. She followed the liberating ideas that were *de rigueur*<sup>2</sup> but felt guilty that no one in her class was learning the rudiments of reading by osmosis as the theorists had promised. She sat her class around her on the floor and started teaching them sounds and words as she had been taught as a child. These little sessions lasted fifteen minutes, and the children enjoyed them. They liked learning, they appreciated having the code cracked, and they did not seem to mind the order and discipline of sitting listening together. All went well until the headmaster walked by and caught her at the shameful act. She was soon called into his study to be strongly told: "I never want to see you with all the children listening to you again at the same time. They should not be taught any particular sequence of skills."

At that time one of my friends, a professional woman, became concerned that her two bright, eager girls, twins, had reached the age of eight without any literacy or numeracy rubbing off on them in spite of long days at school. She visited the teacher of their class, who paused trying to remember the children in question. "Mary? Rachel? I'm not sure that I know which of the children they are. This class is so noisy that I don't know the children, and it really is too confused to teach them specifics. They'll be able to learn when they move up next year."

In this context my husband, Ranald, and I began a search for an educational philosophy. Surely one existed that did not crush or brainwash children and yet would actually teach them certain things they needed to know step by step. Was it not possible that they could enjoy knowledge, books, and discovery? We didn't know it, but we were looking for Charlotte Mason and the historical PNEU schools that grew out of her philosophy of life and education.

When we did discover her, the ideas and the school did not seem extraordinary. For us, encountering the PNEU was like finding and recognizing a friend. Many others since have had the same experience. When they read about Charlotte Mason's ideas, they find that she has articulated many of their own thoughts and given form to their experiences and their children's. This has been as true for parents as for professional educators and others intimately concerned with children's lives.

People are often amazed at the apparent simplicity and yet clarity of this educational approach and think, *Why, yes, of course*. Elsie Kitching (1870-1955)<sup>3</sup> put this quality of Miss Mason's philosophy into words for me. She talks of the Wise Men finding Jesus in "a most unroyal place" as an example of finding the truth in an unexpected place:

[W]hen they had arrived they had no doubt. They recognized the truth when they found it.

When we meet the truth, we notice I think, three things. First, that like a jigsaw, the pieces fit into place unexpectedly. Lesser truths dawn, and are seen to be connected; it all ties up. Then, we shrink in size as we see ourselves and our problems from a different and strange angle and like those algebraical numbers with recurring indices, more and more dawn on us. This might be a depressing process but it is not so because truth is always bigger than man and independent of self.

Yet—and this is what strikes me most—although alien in this sense, strange and surprising, truth is always a friend; the stranger is recognized, the surprise is joyful. An old acquaintance!<sup>4</sup>

This quote emphasizes a key point in what was happening in the "freed-up" education of the 1960s and 1970s. Our culture has abandoned the framework that had undergirded our shared view of the human being and life. Our Christian-based heritage gave us a worldview in which people acknowledged certain truths. They did not *hope* that there was a reasonable pattern to life; they knew it.

This framework meant an assured infrastructure for educational thought and practice. Certain facts were true. To understand reality, children and students needed to know these facts. Students were equipped to pursue various fields of knowledge by acquiring the three R's first of all. In European educational history, this meant knowing Latin and possibly Greek so as to have

access to the heritage and culture shared by all European scholars. Latin was the *lingua franca*, much as English is becoming today.

In the past, academics were a small number of the total population. Most children were not considered academically inclined. Responsible growth into adulthood resulted from living with adults who taught them the code of behavior and accomplishments in different areas of a civilized society. For most children this process took place in the home and then the village or town—a rich enough tapestry of life. They developed discipline, skills, and self-esteem as they were handed a small area of knowledge and/or expertise to master. Usually their learning had a direct bearing on what they would do as their work for the rest of their lives. Everyone agreed that there was one true moral code that could be known for sure. They all agreed that it is wrong to take life, to steal, and to commit adultery. Even nonreligious people felt guilt, shame, and possibly remorse. Things were right or wrong, true or false, a duty or a waste of time. It was accepted that God existed in truth, not as a personal projection or hopeful fantasy. This clear outline gave a map for life.

Children were loved dearly or cruelly treated—as they are today. Human beings have always been much the same. Some are good and love and serve the children in their care; others are indifferent, harsh, dictatorial, and hand out unfeeling punishments. In all centuries some people have treated children as things rather than as unique persons—adults seek to make use of them.

Most of the progressive schools wanted really good things for children. But it is impossible to achieve such aims without the realism of the truth, at least to a certain extent, as a framework. Ideals cannot be reached by wishful thinking alone. Again and again in history hopes have been disappointed because people have not faced reality.

For instance, you cannot give people of any age the license to do whatever they feel like doing, even though it is right and good for them to make free choices. The constraints of what a person ought to do and should do may not be removed. Also knowledge fits into a hierarchy according to what is most worthwhile to know. It is reckless to destroy the distinction between the worthwhile and the trivial, to lose what is of enduring quality. As the century progressed, doubt prompted an exodus from the infrastructures, the core, that held our society together.

For quite a long time educators and theorists naively assumed that the fruits of a “decent society” would continue to grow on a tree whose roots had been cut away. This is romanticism. How can fruit be produced without

roots, a trunk, branches? As the infrastructure becomes an increasingly dimly remembered idea, lawlessness and antisocial behavior have resulted. These problems in turn trigger the demand for stronger and stronger measures of control from governments and any in authority. We are trading in freedoms for controls that threaten to bring on the nightmare envisioned by George Orwell: “Big brother is watching you.”

We have all seen how the promise of law and order will gain votes. As predicted, precious freedoms are being exchanged for surveillance and control that try to promise a certain safety.

This trend has also been evolving in schools. Without a framework—an inner skeleton of truth, knowledge, and moral “bones”—and a clear aim, society is trying to rescue the younger generation by slapping on an exoskeleton. Through rapidly increasing iron-fisted rules, regulations, and proscribed behavior requirements, some people think we can resolve the difficulties.

As we have passed the millennium mark, we exhibit a confusion of educational ideas perhaps never before seen in history. Who is the child? *A person in a life and reality created by God*—or an accident in a cosmic, computer-like machine that itself developed entirely due to random chance?

What are the aspirations that still beat in the human heart? Are these mechanical and an illusion as so much of the twentieth-century literature suggested? Can we know anything for sure? Does anything matter? Is there anything worth living for? These are the questions most people have no answers for. The general atmosphere weakens even those who do think they know.

Education must have an aim, a focus, a *raison d'être*. Many now seem to have settled on education for utilitarian reasons only—that is, when you get to the bottom line, how much money will the student be able to earn later, what status will he or she be able to achieve? Below that, for society's underclass, we simply would like to condition them to law-abiding lives.

Complicating the educational picture are several problems. The decrease of family stability (another fruit of that societal tree), disappearing communities with strong neighborhood relationships, and fears about safety hinder children's healthy development. Then families who aren't secure tend to either overregulate children or to lack clear boundaries at all. This situation has brought confusion and pressure to bear on schools and teachers. They used to be able to begin with a few hours of teaching the three R's. Cultural extras were thrown like lettuce and tomato into this sandwich. This method

worked because the family and community actually directed and nurtured its children.

The situation has now changed right across the socioeconomic spectrum. Children arrive at school without breakfast, sometimes pulled out of bed before they are awake. It is not unusual for parents to go to work before the school bus comes. Rarely do children enjoy the comfortable ease of a short walk to school in their own neighborhood.

Children arrive at school lacking more than a good breakfast and a warm send-off hug. They may never have been consistently taught how to live according to a "root-trunk" system of morality. As we now say, "values" differ. A teacher of five-year-olds is typically confronted with children who have not learned to listen or concentrate. No one has treated them with much respect, and they don't respect each other. It is typical to find them at war with any authority at all, with no idea of cooperation or obedience. They may be glassy-eyed because they've emerged from hours and hours parked in front of a TV set.

And there are other difficulties. As marital stability declines, in the average group of children a high proportion suffer emotional turmoil, pain, and confusion. This state of mind obviously affects the quality of their lives and hinders their education.

We don't have the space here to consider all the problems teachers face. More and more children come to school whose parents did not read to them regularly. Many are no longer part of a family that even has a routine of eating daily meals together. When both parents work, stressful schedules may exclude the leisurely conversations so dear to a little child's heart and so necessary for their thoughts and language development. Older children often never experience a discussion of ideas. These things are a great loss. Children emerge all too often undernourished both emotionally and mentally. They have not been given the basic tools of education: language, self-expression, questioning and answers, exploration and discovery, stories and imaginative development. They aren't used to listening to others or having anyone listen to them. Often they've also been deprived of free play in the beautiful outdoors. Their eyes are closed to the wonder of the world around them, and they have missed the joy of being drawn into a lifelong love affair with nature. They may lack exploratory curiosity and initiative. Such children are hard to teach. Some professionals feel depressed about it all. There is such a gap

between the romanticism and ideals in some teacher training colleges and the reality teachers face every day in the classroom.

These are some of the reasons I believe we need Charlotte Mason's educational insights more than ever before. Those of us who have discovered her, and then seen fruits in actual children's lives, experience the "ah-ha" moments of enlightenment. And then the "of course, that makes sense. Yes. This is right." I would add, "This is truth." These are insights about who the child actually is, how he or she learns, why and what is worth learning, and the purpose of it all. Like a tree with sound roots in rich, watered soil, here is an educational theory and practice that has a clear, strong infrastructure and that allows for individuality, creativity, cultural differences, technological advance, and historical development.

Miss Mason's educational philosophy is not about what someone thought as a Victorian; it is not tied into the past, as if trying to hark back to a golden age. (That is why it is inappropriate to illustrate materials about Charlotte Mason with exclusively Victorian pictures.) These ideas, being true ones, have an unchangeable underlying pattern (form) and yet give freedom for individual life and practice. When the Christian worldview gives this form, there is much stability and also freedom for appropriate adaptation. That is what makes this way of educating children so exciting.

Charlotte Mason, and those like Elsie Kitching who worked with her and carried on after her death, used the canon of Western cultural heritage with an English perspective as the core of educational content. That was appropriate, for they were educating mainly British children from nations that were part of this stream of history.

However, even while Charlotte Mason was still living, other peoples recognized that they could use the core ideas while developing their own educational applications. Japanese aristocratic families sent a gifted teacher to Ambleside to study at Miss Mason's college. The principles then and now remain adaptable. Some Jewish students used many of the educational insights. Charlotte Mason's books were translated into German.

The Ambleside books by her on education were sent out to India to Amy Carmichael, who founded the Dohnavur Fellowship. She too recognized in the writings the "roots and trunk" she was looking for as she cared for and educated Indian children. Amy Carmichael was ahead of her time in that she tried not to impose British culture on the community. She respected India and wanted the children to be Indian. She quite rightly saw that as long as the

"roots and trunk" were in place (which one cannot, must not change), then she could adapt the detail, the "foliage," so that it was truly Indian. For instance, instead of using English nursery rhymes or tales, she wrote amusing poems in Tamil about local subjects such as insects ("bugs") and flowers.

In England itself at that time, educational practice was almost as socially stratified as the Indian caste system that Amy Carmichael rejected. The British upper class educated its younger children and girls mostly at home. Boys went off (and still do) to fee-based boarding schools at about thirteen years of age. These "public schools" had been developed and influenced by great educators and produced strong leaders, but the schools were far from perfect.

The subject of educating the working class was a troubling one. Christians started Sunday schools to teach the rudiments of reading, writing, and math to children who worked during the week. There were some creative educators who did great work establishing farm and/or craft-based schools and better primary schools for ordinary working-class children. A few people even thought these children could appreciate folk dancing, stories, and art plus nature study (these children were persons too, not clods).

However, most of the ruling class wanted the working class to be kept firmly in its place. The upper classes feared that workers would get ideas "above their station." This fear led to strong feelings that split educators into factions. Some wanted to keep an ossified status quo. Others believed that all people should have access to their cultural heritage and be enabled to develop skills. Still others were starting to believe in broader opportunities related to one's ability. Such pioneers were unhappy with a mechanistic control of individuals and society as "it should be."

Things are entirely different now, but there are new reasons to fear that a person may be treated like a cog in the machine of society. As we go into the third millennium, new and horrifying social controls abound: genetic manipulation, the extermination of "undesirable elements" in society through selective abortion, and chemicals to control the mind and personality. Our forebears' eyes would widen in horror at all the tyrannies scientific technology has made possible. We cannot look back at their prejudices and practices with one crumb of complacency.

From the 1880s to the 1930s, when Charlotte Mason was in her zenith, there was a general educational ferment, resulting in controversies over different methods and goals. Many tried to pigeonhole girls' education into a prescribed "slot." Working-class girls, like boys, were expected to roll up

their sleeves and get on with the business of life. (Many working-class girls had a robust preparation for a satisfying life.) The working young often gained much of their mental nurture in Christian church services or open air preaching meetings. They usually had the Bible to read and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with maybe one or two other books.

Aristocratic boys received a traditional classical education. The girls often languished in home schoolrooms with a limited and weak curriculum along with feeble expectations and stringent social protocols. Although we admire their embroidery, life must have seemed a pretty tiresome business for many a bright young woman. There were notable exceptions—for instance the Oxford and Cambridge families often gave their daughters a substantial education with discipline; there was plenty of interesting conversation and a wide range of books to read. In fact, before the women's colleges burst on the scene, they existed in embryo on cleared-off breakfast tables in academic homes. Here daughters could be educated and develop their mental ability.

Charlotte Mason was not a product of any privileged minority. She represents one of the fortunate men and women whose good minds were educated mainly at home, in ordinary conditions, as interested parents read through a rich range of books with their children.

However, she did live just at the time that women were generally beginning to seek an education. The great innovators of girls' education, Frances Buss and Dorothea Beale, were active in that same period:

Let a girl's education be as serious as a boy's. You bring up your girls as if they were meant for sideboard ornaments, and then complain of their frivolity. Give them the same advantages that you gave their brothers. Teach *them* also, that courage and truth are the pillars of their being. There is hardly a girls' school in this Christian Kingdom where the children's courage and sincerity would be thought of half so much importance as their way of coming in at a door. And give them, lastly, not only noble teachings, but noble teachers.<sup>5</sup>

A new wind was stirring. It seemed suddenly that girls should not be merely prepared to be genteel adornments but vigorous human beings in their own right. It was a flowering of the New Testament teaching that men, women, slaves, free, Jews, and Gentiles are all on one plane as persons: "there is no difference." To Charlotte Mason this meant that *all children* had wonderful minds that should be fed and developed, just as all children needed



wholesome food for their bodies, sleep, and loving care. In other words, we are all more similar as persons than different. She believed in a generously rich curriculum for all.

She knew the great shining truths of Christian belief and teaching. One of the features of her work is that for her these truths were an infrastructure, an underpinning, a solid framework of unchangeable reality that each successive generation could build on. But these truths were not a cage, and that is a huge difference from those who would legalistically impose truths on others.

Many educational theories and prescriptions confine education and childcare practice to a closed box. "It has to be like this or that," depending on the theory espoused. One theory holds that the child must learn by memorization for so and so many years—all facts. *Then* students read essays and debate them. Other educators thought that students should sit at desks facing a chalkboard. Still others explain that the "best education" conveys American or British culture. Nowadays some educators try to turn the clock back to a fictitious rosy bygone age. They believe that all will come right as long as we don't use computers, do use Victorian readers, and have students chant times tables. "Let's not do this or that . . . and then we'll get it right" is the mentality.

Charlotte Mason's ideas are remarkable because all people in all times *are alike in certain ways*. The reality is that we all share the inner framework of truth. No race is "more human" than another. No gender is higher than another. No culture is superior in itself. (For instance, whether we sit at a table to eat or around a fire on the floor does not matter much.)

If we look at this exceptional woman's ideas, we see that we can use "living books" that are American, English, Australian, German, Swedish, Russian, Senegalese, Malian, Ugandan, Indian, Chinese, Korean, Brazilian, Guatemalan, or Cuban, and so on. If the "roots" and "trunk" of Christianity are our firm infrastructure, we can use a plurality of cultural literature and histories to "leaf out" what is learned. (All children who live in countries with a link to Europe and the United Kingdom need to know this historical, literary, and religious background as well as more local content.)

All of us need to examine pagan mythological origins of our culture's literature and decide what to use (or not use). The facts that go into a child's education can thus be indigenous and related to the surrounding culture. However, with a Christian understanding of truth, all of us share the knowl-

edge and light based on the biblical explanation of reality and who we are. So there will be a profound unity, just as all trees are trees, not ever confused with jellyfish. But at the same time, just as there are palm trees, oaks, and birches, so there can be a wonderful variety too. In philosophy this reality/necessity is expressed in the phrase "unity and diversity."

Culturally and educationally, this phrase has definite implications. All believing Christians can enhance their cultural identity. If the biblical worldview is indeed reality, we can be self-confident as men and as women, whether we are Anglo-Saxon or Asian, African or Native American. We can also fit in with our historical period—no need to try to make a school or home turn back the clock. It would be a disservice to children to bring them up as Victorians with a misty idea that they'll live in a rose-covered cottage in a friendly, safe village, for instance.

We were told to be "in the world, but not of the world."<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Mason thought that schools and educational programs had a duty to keep up with the thinking of their times.<sup>7</sup> No use fighting battles fifty years old! What do these children face today? What will they face tomorrow?

Some educational theories depend on one curriculum for all—and for all time. Charlotte Mason would disagree. It was intrinsic to her philosophy that a curriculum would stay relevant to a child's background and up-to-date while not ditching old treasures.

She was broadminded in a good sense. While never wavering on the infrastructure of truth—our relationship with God through Jesus as set forth in His Word—she was not narrow in vision. She was magnanimous and cultured. To her the mind of a miner's child was just as hungry for the best educational nourishment as a child of the royal family. In the same way, she did not differentiate between the minds or persons of boys and girls. All were to be given the tools of literacy so they could be nourished at the fountain of the greatest minds—right across all disciplines. Not for her the nonsense of girls being deprived of the classical world, literature, history, the great art, music, scientific thought, or languages. In her view of childhood, girls climbed trees, learned to swim, and ice-skated just as boys did. Girls were to enjoy unfettered freedoms and challenges in the great outdoors. All were to notice and appreciate nature.

God's Word had the central place, not namby-pamby sentimental or moralistic talks or booklets. It was typical of her open search for the best ideas to develop a full life that she pounced on Baden-Powell's Scout Handbook<sup>8</sup>

designed to train soldiers. I doubt that any other Victorian educator saw the potential in that book even for boys, let alone for the demure little girls with their governesses.

Charlotte Mason not only saw potential in it, but she immediately purchased quantities of the handbooks and included them in the PUS (Parents' Union School)<sup>9</sup> curriculum. These she sent to aristocratic homes for the Charlotte Mason-trained governesses to use, to the PNEU schools, and to home schools taught by mothers. Thus while other children were kept indoors to have endless facts crammed into them, these fortunate children had every afternoon outside. One afternoon a week was for "scouting": tracking, noticing wind direction, learning to set up camp, and enjoying a truly hands-on education that thrilled and energized them. These children took part in the beginnings of the great scouting movement! It led to much good in the lives of boys and girls around the globe. Very few people realize the impetus given to the movement at Scale How, the building where Charlotte Mason had her House of Education for training teachers.

People like Charlotte Mason are rare and vital. They contribute both stability and continuity as they maintain the clear infrastructure of truth in their work; yet life bubbles up in them with freshness. Their response to actual life and persons creates a relevance and newness to their work without sacrificing the roots. This approach contrasts with a more usual trend toward a deadening legalism that squeezes out new ideas.

She pointed out the limitations of a set curriculum plan as well as its value. Every year new books are published, and they need to be considered. Children in various countries benefit by some of the same books and yet need others that relate to their own culture and prepare them for life in it. However, many treasures are common to us all. All of us share in the knowledge of truth set forth in God's Word. In every era and culture, children are persons; they should be served with respect. They are not parts in a machine. Not only does each have a name, but each is different from another; each has strengths and weaknesses; each will appreciate and relate to the richness of life in individual ways.

In Tokyo, Moscow, Chicago, Toronto, Mombassa, Calcutta, and Beijing, huge areas of life are the same for all persons. All of us are under the same Creator God's authority. All of us fall short of His perfection. All of us have an inner hunger for love, justice, and life. Everywhere babies smile and make sounds in response to the caring people around them. All parents experience

glee as a child develops; everyone feels proud as the toddler staggers off on two feet for the first time.

All healthy little children learn to speak.<sup>10</sup> Children everywhere enjoy songs and stories. All explore their surroundings and ask questions. All will pet furry animals with delight unless the harsh example of cruelty and indifference has contaminated their tender hearts.

Children in all cultures enjoy imaginative play. All count and can learn to read. All have a spiritual hunger; they think metaphysically as well as factually. All appreciate loveliness; beauty speaks to all.

All respond to goodness, to fairness. Children are profoundly moral and literal. They have a lot of common sense, and it is hard to put over fanciful theories on them. They are like the little boy who saw that the emperor had no clothes on; they will often see through pretense or ideas contrary to reality. They ask down-to-earth questions. They think up new ideas.

Children love running, climbing, and swimming. They play, using their own fertile imaginations. The world over, they fight and need adults to teach them how to make and have peace in their lives.

All children enter into relationships with people. They smile back, shyly show you a treasure, imitate other people's actions and personalities, and have great curiosity. Differences are not a barrier for children; they will follow a warm, full-of-fun person who doesn't speak their language, comes from another culture, or is from an older generation. They try to communicate—copy sounds and point to objects, saying the word in their language. What they are sensitive to are harsh attitudes and people who don't appreciate them or enjoy relationships with them. Children recoil from cold, judgmental legalism that is only interested in crushing out their vitality with rules and regulations. Pride and arrogance will send them running out of the room or retreating into an inner remoteness, as does sarcasm that humiliates or ridicules them. These attitudes are terribly wrong and do much harm to children.

A damaging form of abuse to children is expecting them to be something, they are not. For instance, a school system or a parent penalizes a child for not being academically oriented. (Or in reverse, the systems or parents that have nonacademic goals for a child penalize the intellectually gifted child.) We read of gifted musicians who were under a father's wrath and disapproval for wanting to play and study music. Different cultures and generations have imposed a variety of expectations or limitations that were wrong for particular children or for children in general.

Sometimes I'm asked what I think Christian education is. I think it is education that has due regard for the individual child. Children's differences in makeup are tenderly taken into account. No children should be kept in, sitting on a chair, anywhere in God's world because someone has decreed that they, even though not developmentally ready, have reached "the age" when they *should* learn how to read. However good a curriculum is, however much it has the "roots" and "trunk" of life, however worthy and living are the books, however rich the spread of subjects, children are abused if their developmental stages and abilities are not taken into consideration. The child is, after all, a whole person.

As an example, consider the PNEU program devised at Scale How by Elsie Kitching in cooperation with Charlotte Mason. Say it suggested the reading of a particular book in literature or history to children of a particular age. Imagine a teacher or school using the educational plan for a group of children new to it all. Perhaps they've never been read to aloud, certainly not out of literary books. They shift uneasily in their seats. They have poor attention, limited vocabulary. The teacher should be looking at the entire program to choose something to read that will grab their attention and interest.

On the other hand, a class of children has been using these programs from the time they started school at six years of age. By nine they *are* ready for the Shakespeare play or a substantial chunk of a narrative history. A key idea for Charlotte Mason was that the source material should be enjoyable. Thus, in using the plan, it is important for children to enter at a level they can understand and enjoy. It is better to start with smaller, easier chunks and let a child progress from there.

To jump in at the deep end may end in disaster or could surprise and delight the class. Teaching is an art—and we learn through mistakes. When students are not "latching on," sooner or later we cast around for a different choice or arrangement. Perhaps it is only that we are attempting too much of a good thing. Maybe we need to cut back on the quantity of educational offerings.

We'd never think of buying the same size of shoes for all six-year-olds! No, we take a child to have his feet measured and see what fits. In the same way, we try to fit the program to where the child is developmentally and experientially within the limits inherent in different teaching situations.

I've known teachers who apply Charlotte Mason's methods with children and teenagers in some of today's toughest schools. If these teachers are care-

ful to choose books that catch the children's interest and imagination, they and the class are well into accomplishing their goals. Slavishly following a set curriculum if it doesn't fit a class, situation, or child is legalistic folly. Get "shining eyes" *first*, and the coveted question, "Can't you read more?" will come. This question shows that what you are doing is succeeding. As children become interested, chapter by chapter, they will form new habits. It won't seem like work at all! They like listening, imagining, thinking. These activities are satisfying.

If children are given a diet of dry facts, and information is read to them from books they cannot understand, if they are overworked and stressed, they will simply switch off. They may become discouraged ("I'm dumb") or decide "It's boring," or just be tired and lose interest and motivation.

One of the beauties of a curriculum based on "living books" is that nothing is twaddle. Living books have literary power; they have "soul." The writers have put their hearts into these books. As vital thought touches our minds, our ideas are vitalized, and out of our ideas comes our conduct of life. These must be books that children enjoy. The ideas they hold must make that sudden, delightful impact upon children's minds, must cause that intellectual stir that marks the beginning of an idea. These books induce in children thoughts about the world, nature, people, music, art, and the God who created it all.

In Charlotte Mason schools lessons end for younger children at lunchtime, and they are raring to go the next morning. They are neither underfed or overfed educationally. Older children naturally can do more, but still they are not under stress. They have a broad, interesting "diet" for their minds in the mornings, with afternoons a contrast including play, picture study, acting, or nature walks. Charlotte Mason did not want homework given out either. Life itself is too important to crowd out with busywork.

Contrast that with a school that has a schedule of work set in concrete for every child, whatever his or her learning style. One little boy never has to learn correct spelling. As he reads, it sticks in his memory. As he writes, he simply asks how a word is spelled and usually never has to ask again. Another child, a girl of the same age, just cannot remember the spelling words. She may concentrate so hard that sweat rolls off her furrowed brow (literally). After a day in her impersonal school (and sadly all too often), she may be found tearful and tired at suppertime, still being "helped" by a despairing mother or father. Is this "Christian" or "education"? Neither—in my mind. We should not expect the same from different children. It would make as



much sense as grading two-year-olds for language skills! (Can't you see it? Johnny gets a D for a vocabulary of forty basic words. Susie has an A because she uses a large vocabulary and speaks in sentences!)

Now a proper response to these realities is to adapt a learning plan to different children. The little boy who doesn't need to learn spelling is listening to the same interesting books being read, but perhaps he starts writing his narration while the girl tells it to a scribe. She then draws a picture of the same story. At another time she has simple dictations at her own level. She writes little bits creatively too. But in discussion she is far ahead! With flaming eyes she vividly retells the story that was read. She may ask the most interesting questions of all!

In a PNEU classroom, many activities are shared by all. Everyone listens together as the Bible selection is read. Literature is read aloud to all the children, as is history and poetry. They occasionally listen to each other's narrations, or each draws a picture of the same story. However, many children move at their own speed through math, spelling/writing skills, and some language work. In other words, they do not compete against each other but enjoy steady personal progress. This way all the children's minds are nourished together while the differences in children are recognized and helped appropriately. A combination of the benefit of individual work and the stimulation and enthusiasm of a group works well.

The one-size-fits-all method of teaching children is not the only danger in educational practice today. Frequently children are not treated with respect, as friends. They may be shouted at, driven to tears, or bored stiff. Their minds, eager for interesting matter that stirs the imagination, may be fed the dry sawdust of irrelevant facts. Of course, they choke on it. To add insult to injury, they may be in a system that requires them to be constantly tested on how much information has been stored. They don't need teachers who are casual pals, although they do like friendly adults who lead clearly and with assurance. Children can be turned into students who are eager to listen, glad to tell back the narration as they remember it, stressing what mattered to them.

Together teacher and child are under a higher authority. The child should not be asked to be good to please a parent or teacher. Children and the adults both must choose to obey God. Both are learning how to be better people, and both children and adults are interested and learning from books, nature, art, music. Ideas are discussed. Thought is important. Children have amaz-

ing ideas! They grow in proper self-esteem as they are listened to and allowed to be themselves.

Too many of us treat education as a competition, with some idea of success as the objective. This approach is bad for the "winners" and bad for the "losers," who only see themselves more or less as failures. Such a narrow focus ignores children's strong points, their gifts. For instance, taking a rather extreme example, a child has Down's syndrome, and yet her personality shines with love and loyalty. What family, group, or community can do without these valuable qualities as an example for others? We have turned into fools when it comes to appreciating what is really worthwhile in life—proud fools with no understanding of what God treasures. We live in a worldly generation that encourages a blind pride.

What would happen if everybody planned for their children to be business executives, lawyers, scientists, or academics? Where would we be without the honored homemakers, craftsmen, artists, and musicians? Where are those who are good at pastoral care? Who will care for community needs—tend the sick, plow the fields, and, yes, collect the garbage? (Garbage collection, water purification, home construction, and similar activities are arguably more valuable to our human community than the work of many of our CEOs and star entertainers. Salary and educational attainments mean nothing in themselves.)

Charlotte Mason's educational ideal was not to remove us from the ordinary but to enrich us, each one, with the best possible relationships—relationships with God, with people in our family and community, with others through their books, art, or music, and with God's creation.

So one great educational mistake is the aim of "success." It seems to mean that everybody is expected to be able to climb an academic ladder of some sort or another. In Asian cities it is all too usual for such pressure to result in youth suicides or adults ashamed of their "failure" and letting down the family. There after-school "cram classes" use up the few moments left after homework is done.

Before we in the West feel complacent, consider a familiar scene. There are plenty of children who shed tears over being expected to master something that is beyond them in their "excellent" school. Perhaps they'd be fully stretched mastering English reading and writing, but this school and pushy parents expect Latin too (like C. S. Lewis's education). Another child is penalized for not possessing a photographic memory. Such children are too often

left to wither without any interesting educational stimulation, creativity, or vitality. In such cases their minds atrophy, their spirits wilt, and they lose self-confidence. A common way of describing their plight is to say that they are like square pegs in round holes.

Children do perk up, like watered plants after a too-hot day, when they are interested! They forget fidgeting; their minds are stirred.

One "sin" today is a failure to lead children into full-length living books. There is something about reading one chapter, the next, and then the next that grounds a person's thinking and builds a pattern that holds together.

Sometimes children learn a bit of this, and a bit of that, and there is no continuity. Fragments of knowledge float around with nothing to connect them. Charlotte Mason would have detested "literature" classes that read a few chapters here or there or used workbooks. She would not call that education. Fragments seem meaningless and don't make an impression. What happens as a result of such dry and fragmented teaching is described by some as cultural illiteracy. Some children of fourteen in England cannot identify Paris or even France on an unlabeled map. Some children in the United States don't know Canada's location. No, we cannot rest on our laurels. Children who can't tell who Abraham was—his story—are typical. Others don't know what crossing the Rubicon refers to or what a flying buttress is and much, much else.

And so the pendulum swings wildly too far in the opposite direction. If a little learning is good, then let's cram every moment full. Surely that will be even better.

This attitude is a chief danger, and it increases by the year. Children are in danger of being force-fed (or overfed) with a very real possibility that they will reject everything—vomit up all their education, so to speak. (Beware. There is far too much information around.)

For some reason or other, Americans bear the dubious reputation of overkill if they are aiming too narrowly at an excellent education. First of all, the educational vision is too frequently factual information alone, rather than ideas or a big general picture. Look at tests from third grade to postgraduate education. *Facts. Facts. Facts.* And so teachers and children cram, cram, cram (and forget, forget, forget). Too often children discover that they learn merely to pass a test, get a grade, and then no one cares.

This approach is a profound contrast to Charlotte Mason's. In PNEU schools the learning—real learning—happened when a child was interested

in the material (and interesting material was made available). It stirred their imaginations. They told what they learned back in their own words. They drew pictures too—putting in details from the stories. Yes, they learned the all-important skills—fifteen minutes of structured reading a day at six; times tables practice at seven when ready, along with French vocabulary or Latin—but all in short, focused lessons. Nothing wearied a child. That way they could give real attention and become used to not having their thoughts wandering or their little bodies fidgeting because they needed to move and play. A truly child-friendly schedule includes afternoons free to play outside, enjoy walks, or develop skills in crafts.

People today are making a colossal pedagogical error. They are rather like an uneducated person who thinks that if one spoon of medicine will do good, then ten are even better! Many children are being given far too many hours of instruction per day—sometimes in schools, sometimes in home schools. No one can do everything that would be worthwhile. The best of curriculum guides must be guides, not absolute directives. What you choose from should be the very best available and "living." And that is why the time, experience, and effort that go into using a well-chosen curriculum guide are so valuable. Teachers and individual schools do not have the time to spend hours reading history or literature books, for instance.

The schools and classes that used the old PNEU programs used to await the yearly program with interest and enthusiasm. Old favorites and classic books from our heritage are included from year to year. But then a Baden-Powell writes a scouting book, and that opens new avenues. A new book on planets, engines, or medieval castles arrives and is chosen. The curriculum guide in this book attempts to offer a similar service today.

Not everybody using this book can or should do everything suggested in it. One child or class has quite enough to keep busy and fed with "skills education" such as twenty minutes of math, twenty minutes of reading aloud, then a story to listen to out of history or legends—followed by a good long time to play, sing, and experience life-giving activities such as art, picture study, or dressing up and acting out plays or spontaneous ideas. Then there are crafts—weaving, sewing, crocheting, knitting, embroidery, wood-working, wire/metal work, puppet-making, creative productions from clay to cardboard and papier-mâché. PNEU schools typically required children to bring waterproof boots and coats to school, and the children had ample

time for outdoor play whatever the weather. They'd use their imaginations for hours.

Overcrowding children's schedules deprives them of time to make their own choices for play, being alone quietly or mixing with friends, helping with chores, reading books they enjoy, or pursuing hobbies. This is a serious life-long loss. *Without such times, their inner selves are stunted; they don't develop from the inside first.* If a school's first objective is to produce a star pupil, this idea should be seriously challenged! Wisdom would know that over-filling the daytime hours with prescribed work quenches the bright spark of enthusiasm. It is as if each child is a little plant, and the sunshine, air, and rain have been kept away. The plant dies or becomes limp and languid. Then adults complain that there is a "lack of motivation" or "poor concentration" or that the child "does not try hard enough."

If we want our children to stay hungry for knowledge, remain interested and questioning, enjoy the wonder of discovery, then we must leave them some clutter-free hours for friendship, the great out-of-doors, the rich world of imagination, and the satisfaction of the skilled use of art supplies, music, dance, wood, and clay.

Charlotte Mason tells us rightly that we should see that this is the birthright of a child, just as a plant should have soil, sun, and water. We must not quench the joy of living. Furthermore, a child bonds through relationships.

Here is another Christian principle. The child is a person, not a computer program to be written. It matters not a bit if he or she remembers ninety-nine facts about the country's history or twenty-five. The child is not a machine but a lovely person.

Let children live life to the full until they are six or so. If they do not or cannot enjoy an appropriate secure, stable home where members have fun together, some substitute should be provided. They need to develop naturally at their own pace. Within relationships that matter to them, they'll soak up a great deal before "lessons" start. They love to have all sorts of conversations, ask questions, and listen to stories read again and again. They draw, sing, and help grownups. They should not be without schedules, and this is the time for them to form the habit of fitting within boundaries. That is, they are taught to freely accept what they may and may not do, to listen to what is said to them, and to cheerfully cooperate.

These children are not constantly hounded into too-early academic or

sedentary routines. Some five-year-olds really are ready for reading and writing. They will enjoy twenty minutes or so of personal instruction, perhaps as a game is played. That can be fun, and when the first shadow of inattention flickers across their faces, the "work" is put away. At all times, children's abilities and maturity levels are accepted. They are enabled to feel pleased about their progress as related to "the grain of their wood."

A benefit of the PNEU approach was that although children were allowed to work in a peaceful, individual way as they learned the three R's, when they put down their pencils and notebooks, no one was held up by the level of achievement in these technicalities. A child who struggled with her own reading could relax and become absorbed in a history story such as this one:

One day Elizabeth [Queen Elizabeth I] was passing along the street, and the people as usual came crowding to see her. Among them was Sir Walter Raleigh. The Queen stepped from her coach and, followed by her ladies, was about to cross the road. But in those days the streets were very badly kept and Elizabeth stopped before a puddle of mud. She was grandly dressed and how to cross the muddy road, without soiling her dainty shoes and skirts, she did not know. As she paused Sir Walter sprang forward. He too, was finely dressed and he was wearing a beautiful new cloak. . . .<sup>11</sup>

The children are listening with rapt attention to the vivid word pictures. This is what thrills them; they are seeing the story, interested in the action. They want it read right through to the end of the chapter. In the big history storybook of 547 pages are stories of British history from pre-Roman days to the end of the World War I. The children are not tied up mentally, hoping they will remember the date for a test or quiz. (In the first paragraph of the chapter it has been mentioned, 1598.) Rather, they are drawn into the story, just as C. S. Lewis managed to weave a spell of atmosphere and narrative in Narnia. They will remember far more details for a longer time as these are woven into a pattern/story that they remember as a whole.

~~These stories are the tales the six-year-old children and their older companions will retell with gusto. In the telling back they are not limited by their still stumbling writing skills. They can draw pictures of the tale.~~

With wise planning, their week is so uncluttered that the few good readings they've listened to still stand out in their memories. I have beside me a

tiny sheet of paper in my secondhand copy of *Our Island Story* out of which I've quoted. On it in pencil are the page numbers the six-year-olds were to cover in a term's work—and I am struck by the modest amount planned. In the spring term (three months) of 1953, they were to listen to pages 64-93. That is only ten pages a month! The rule is to give interesting material but slowly enough so that it is absorbed, possessed, not forgotten in the overflow of "too much."

These PNEU children had so much to interest them. They *enjoyed* what they were doing. And they had fresh enthusiasm left to turn to their books for interesting relationships of other kinds.

Let's return to the question of why Charlotte Mason and the respected PNEU schools disappeared and became virtually unknown. Her educational philosophy is based on a Christian view of reality. We saw that as the century progressed, this view was widely abandoned. Furthermore, the idea that we probably will never know a real truth has become widely accepted. Belief is spoken of as almost a personal preference or experience rather than a serious proposition of truth about reality around us, seen and unseen.

Flowing from the loss of objective truth is a devaluation of an objective sense of morality. In today's parlance, Christian values have evaporated.

Lastly, these new views devalue the innate worth of each person. There is no meaning to life in general or in a particular life. It has become permissible to discard unwanted or blemished infants. The only way to see children's education with these views is that they are to be prepared to be cogs in the smoothly running wheels of society. Children's thoughts, ideas, and creativity may well hinder the operation of the machine unless someone controls it all. The choices the planners make are a kind of random selection. There is no ultimate meaning, no right and wrong, no better or worse apart from function.

Not only that, with these views we are unable to assess the relative value of learning one thing as against another. This difficulty has contributed to the cultural illiteracy our children demonstrate. (A cheap, sensational romance or action story will do as well as Charlotte Bronte.)

Then there is an economic factor. Educational publishing really is Big Business. People must be kept buying. Expensive changes and new theories make money. Thus treasured, well-written books are discarded, whatever their value. New books must be purchased. Being "relevant" is a new absolute—though what one is attempting to be relevant to is not discussed. People

must be made uneasy about the relatively simple provision of basic skills books and good "living" classics that can be used for years, with only a few new purchases necessary.

Charlotte Mason's educational methods offer a firm pathway out of our postmodern educational dilemma. Her philosophy is based on a clear view of God, reality, life, and the person. Some things are certain: "We are all under authority." She valued the family, relationships, and life. Her practices are real, workable—yes; and like a friend, the truth. Children educated by her methods thrive happily and carry rich memories into their future lives.

Charlotte Mason had a broad view of education. She believed that if the materials were wisely chosen, children would eagerly listen, thus drinking at the fountain. She knew there were gifted men and women whose works could be that fountain—books, noble deeds, poetry, paintings, music. She knew another, *the* other source: God who spoke in His Word. Charlotte Mason observed how adults got between the child and the Author, the source—whether it was God, His handiwork (nature), or writers from Plato to Shakespeare to contemporary works. She called the refusal to get between the child and the source "masterly inactivity," allowing the child direct contact with and individual response to original works.

Another of her insights shows genius. We all remember a time when, as children, we listened with rapt attention to a story being read. It interested and fascinated us, and then in a "teacher voice" a little moral lesson was tacked on for the children's good. Probably we've been in both shoes, listening as children and teaching as adults. Children stop listening, eyes wander, and they think about a snack. They fidget. The lesson becomes tiresome. The joy and interest evaporates.

Charlotte Mason saw something else. If you read this interesting story and leave it as it finished, the child continues thinking about it. We do all children a massive disservice when we "chew" over the material and "spit the pulp" out for them. People reject the secondhand results of someone else's efforts. No, Charlotte Mason discovered, let the children remember because they took it in themselves. Let them think their own thoughts about it. Let them respond (in narration, with questions, ideas).

A good example of how easily we get all this wrong is picture study. In talking with people from eight to eighty who have had a proper PNEU education, I have found that for them all the love of art is a lifelong joy. They remember picture study with warm enthusiasm. I see the same thing hap-



pening in my own family. Children seem to know so much! One of our little granddaughters, five years of age, has picture study times at home with her PNEU-educated mother. When taken into the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, she came in with the anticipation and expectancy of a connoisseur. No one said anything. Suddenly she cried out with joy, "Oh, look at the Degas!" Her eleven-year-old cousin, visiting the same museum at another time, could not leave the Monet exhibit. She moved up to examine brush strokes. She stepped back to get the general effect. My youngest daughter, when she was ten (and in a PNEU school), took me around the National Gallery in London. After an enjoyable hour she galvanized into action: "We must go see the Dutch works. De Hooch—don't you *love* the way he paints the light?"

What do we see going on? Especially gifted children? No, persons who have responded to great artists without a lecture course getting in between them and the source to spoil it all.

Some well-meaning persons read about Charlotte Mason and decided it was a "good thing to study art"—to make it part of the curriculum. Beautiful art reproductions were made available. These are wonderful, but the course that goes with them gets in the way. The living, wonderful gift of art is spoiled by making it into one more lesson, textbook fashion. The children and teenagers who take this course may pass a test, but rarely will a love affair grow between the child and the art. They must learn more facts, more lists, and never fall in love (as it were) with the pictures that speak strongly to them.

The PNEU-educated children I know love art all their lives. They certainly do become expert in much—in different ways. To some it all means much, others less. Some are interested in the history angle. Others rejoice in the colors, the brush strokes. But all have had their imaginations and hearts stirred.

Some children educated in the PNEU will choose an area of interest to specialize in, either for university or further personal study. This enthusiasm sparks more interest, and these people are likely to remain eager about learning, enjoying the best, for their entire lives.

As in art, so in other areas of study (actually, areas of enticement). In English and American literature books become loved and known friends. Because children love and enjoy their books, they learn more. The habit of reading becomes rooted in them. They are becoming educated persons. I know several historians whose love for and fascination with the adventures

of history began with books such as the storylike *Our Island Story*, which was read to them (or equally Hillyer's *A Child's History of the World*). They were entranced, captivated as children, and that never changed. Unlike Narnia, history is real. Readers can visit the places and read other books that can tell them more.

For Christians, the Bible is God's precious Word, but Bible-reading can easily be "killed stone dead" for children if it is turned into a tiresome continuous churning out of moralistic facts or sentimental pap. And this subject *really* matters. The Bible is so robust! There is plenty of room, of course, for good children's Bible storybooks. Two suggestions: (for five- to six-year-olds) *The Children's Bible* by Anne de Vries;<sup>12</sup> for older children (seven to eight years upwards) *The Children's Story Bible* by Catherine Vos.<sup>13</sup> The latter is a thorough and accurate telling of biblical history in fairly detailed and interesting chronological order. The child needs to be old enough for sustained listening, and even adults who are confused about historical details will find the book useful. Also, deeper aspects of the story and characters emerge. There must be many other good Bible storybooks, but the gem is the Bible itself. It contains stories, poetry, and amazing thoughts, best used by keeping sessions short, pithy, and to the point. A little truth with children listening is better than huge amounts that they tune out.

One of our mistakes is to include *too much* Christian teaching. A child will get indigestion and react, thinking, *I know all this*. I think that it is better to have the PNEU model of a short time for worship, a hymn or two, prayer, and a reading. Then go on to an interesting day of learning that is wholesome, worthwhile, and makes one think.

It will be genuineness of belief and life, along with this simplicity, that impacts children. When they ask a question as they are eating their lunches with their teacher, the answer includes the Christian viewpoint, preferably put in a few thoughtful words. The response should be casual, because if we get too intense and long-winded, we'll see their eyes glaze over. The same kind of lively discussion will be generated in the class after reading a book or while returning from a nature walk. I always sympathized with the little girl who was asked if she'd enjoyed the book about penguins. "Ye-e-s," came the uncertain reply, "but it told me more than I wanted to know."

Children ask probing questions: "If God is good, why are the children starving in Bangladesh?" "But John (in the story) was hungry. Shouldn't he steal?" Children listen, discuss, and perhaps argue when they receive direct,



clear, sensible answers. It is vitally important for them to have well-thought out answers. There are good reasons why "we know God is there although, no, He can't be seen." These reasons must be understood, thought about first and along with children. Children like it when we pause and hesitate, saying (truthfully), "What an interesting question! I've not thought about it before," or, "I don't know an answer to that, but I'll find out."

This way of answering is exactly what Charlotte Mason means by saying we are not *over* the child as the source of all knowledge, but *beside* the child, also learning. We usually teach, but children offer a lot for us to consider and learn. The interaction is mutually enjoyable, and both are developing understanding—the "teacher" and "the taught."

Another powerful way Christian life and truth are communicated is by being with people who live by faith. Francis Schaeffer, my father, used to say, "Faith can be caught, not taught." Children sense the genuine and discard the phony. Prayer is powerful. Children who grow up seeing actual answers to prayer in little and big details of life as people pray, genuinely trusting God, will never forget this.

There is no guarantee that a child will choose to believe or want to live a Christian life later on. *And we must not brainwash them in any way. It will be their choice.* They need to know why and how the Christian faith is believed to be true—to hear clear answers that demonstrate that Christianity fits into reality like a key into a lock.

They need to be introduced to the living person of Jesus, who is a shepherd seeking them, loving them. He is there; this must be no school lesson. It is terrible to turn this amazing person into a lesson. Children must catch the scent, the scene, the wonder of who He is. If they are used to being interested and moved by other stories, the person or persons in this story will reach them more easily. His Word is the best way to learn about God and His way of working in real history. Love is a great attraction for people, and if children are able to understand this "old, old story of Jesus and His love," their hearts often open to the Savior who is the source of love, goodness, beauty, and abundant life. Children love in return. They appreciate mercy. They respond to kindness. They care passionately about fairness. Jesus is all these things and more.

A few Christian books can be successfully woven into a child's general reading. Children should meet a wholesome range of books and ideas and not always sense they are "being got at" for one particular reason or another.

All children respond to Patricia St. John's books, which can be read to them from the time they are seven or eight to ten years old (one at a time, maybe two a year). Children love Narnia and find it interesting—just to read. They should not be instructed to see this or that in the stories; they will respond in their own way. And don't forget *The Pilgrim's Progress*—an important part of our Christian and cultural heritage. Then the lives of inspiring men and women who trusted in God are important to read. Again, these must be well-told stories, interesting to listen to. Teachers and adults need inspiring too.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to consider how children respond to worship. In Charlotte Mason's day, the parish church was Anglican. Children went to a Sunday service where the adults spent much of the time in simple liturgical worship, Bible reading, and prayer. *The Book of Common Prayer* was written in the same century that the King James Version of the Bible was translated (1600s). For lovers of the English language, like Charlotte Mason, both shine out like a gold standard. Their words convey something of the wonder of God's majesty. Too often in churches today children hear only trivial tunes with snappy lyrics that may not stir awe or wonder at all, let alone give them the best of our language.

The words of the Bible and our great hymns can express the majesty and beauty that link us with past generations of believers throughout history. Of course children's attention wandered in the past and wanders today. But they can be helped to follow the readings, and the words of Scripture and the hymns sink in for life.

Beauty strikes into a child's awareness. It is a mistake to reduce all the vocabulary and expressions to a simplified childish level. No, children love the sounds, even the mystery of unfamiliar language (and yet faintly familiar too). They are stilled by the atmosphere of worship and prayer. Slowly as time passes, the words gain meaning, come into focus. A child asks, "What does seraphim mean?" and the answer enlarges their language and their vision of reality.

The beginning of the *Te Deum Laudamus* ("We praise thee, O Lord") is:

*We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.  
All the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting.  
To thee all Angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers therein.  
To thee Cherubin and Seraphin continually do cry,  
"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth;  
Heaven and earth are full of the Majesty of thy glory. . . ."*

These words have been said or sung in worship for more than 1,500 years. They are part of an early hymn. The child is surrounded by a stream of words and light from long ago. She is part of it now and knows that after her death, Christians will still say and believe the same words—as her grandchildren grow up.

Historical education is not just about dates, treaties, and governments. This sense of a historical stream of believers gives children the perspective that their lives are part of something larger than themselves or their present surroundings. The same benefit is derived from singing hymns that range from the present back into centuries past. We sing with one voice—in the Psalms right back to those who looked forward to Christ before His first coming! A child almost becomes giddy with the distances of time. And yet we all join in the same faith, believe the same truths, sing to and trust in the same God.

This sort of worship and life is not a lesson, although much is learned. Worship tingles with life, hope, and faith. In it we are part of the continuum of believers. It is a precious part of the child's heritage. Ease with the historical usage of language liberates people from feeling at home only in their own narrow century and gives them access to many original texts. They are not even aware of the process, just as a toddler is not aware of learning the complexities of speech. It seems natural.

Worship also includes contemporary expressions of a culture, for it encompasses the *present* as well as the past. It is harmful if we worship only in a way that seems archaic to the person in the street. Not only is our Lord God the God of today, but He is the God of tomorrow as well. Children will enjoy what is current too. The child is aware of the changes in the language but is an educated person and at ease with a variety of historical styles and vocabulary.

Worship inspires creativity. Children enjoy writing, singing, and acting out ideas of their own in response to God's love.

In Marion Berry's PNEU school the children had simple prayer together in the morning, as I've described. They also had about ten to fifteen minutes for memory work at the beginning of the day—a short few minutes to proudly learn until the poem or psalm was known by heart. They enjoyed this time. Memorizing is another way children can possess knowledge and beauty. They respond to the cadences, the words, the thoughts.

Is this sort of educational experience only successful for unusually gifted

or privileged children? No, Charlotte Mason is right. All persons respond to this "rich banquet" of a broad curriculum. Of course, like snowflakes, each individual is different from another. But with all the variety in the curriculum, different aspects will strike different children in a variety of ways. This factor demonstrates a relationship. A child has bonded with music or wonderful words. It is as if the child has looked into the eyes of the composer or writer and danced away down a path by the side of that person.

When Marion Berry retired from the school where she was headmistress, she was able to go on educating children. The students in the school had been from families that could pay a fee—a more privileged group. Marion Berry offered to have children from a nearby residential facility come into her home after school for individual help. These at last were the very children she'd most longed to teach! They had a greater need to have the doors into an abundant life opened than the children in the school. (Marion had been wisely told earlier that *all children* needed nourishing—all "are hungry.") Here were your typically less educable children indeed! They had had unhappy experiences previously and were in institutional care. Many were behind in schoolwork. Was the PNEU ideal too high and the material too hard for them? Could it reach them at all? Absolutely. We hear of them responding to her and the hospitality in her home.

She writes in her book:

I can still see people in my cozy sitting room: Stephen ensconced in a small fireside chair utterly entranced with *Watership Down*. I did most of the reading and he took up the final two paragraphs of each chapter, managing passably well. Sometimes the whole hour was spent like this; sometimes I sensed one chapter was enough. On one occasion, "What next?" brought the answer, "Game of Scrabble with 'Moonlight Sonata' on the record player." Once they had got to know my range I let them choose what to do. I can see Alex on the floor by the fire making up her mind which song to have, "Sur le Pont" or "Au Clair de la Lune," singing softly to herself as she puts on a record. And Jimmy streaking in at the front door, and by the time I've turned on the hall light he's got two chairs drawn up to the fire with a copy of *101 Dalmatians* on each. We read the statutory chapter in the usual way. He snapped the book shut and went to the bookcase saying, "Now poetry. Two each," handing out large anthologies. We rearrange ourselves at the table and get on

with the choosing. He seemed a bit stuck. "What's the matter? Can't you find one?"

"The trouble is I've got THREE."

"We could have an extra, you know." And we're off, sometimes a verse each, sometimes each reading the whole of our chosen poem. Later on he took to *A Puffin Book of Verse*.

"Page 273," he said. "It's really good."

And what did I find on page 273? Psalm 23. By the last few weeks he'd decided we must stop this haphazard choosing and go straight through.<sup>15</sup>

There are several wonderful things about this account, which is a window into a PNEU-type teacher and child relationship. The atmosphere is personal and homey. In this case, it *is* Marion's home, and she gives ample time to these needy children. There is a lot of warmth as she enjoys the different personalities. She's thrilled as they make progress and shares her own enjoyment with them. They have a satisfying time together, rather than just another "lesson" for backward children. They looked forward to coming. Notice her response to the child when he has taken in enough of the story. She does not force-feed him when his appetite is gone.

Her example is a shining one. The very best should not be for an elite. *Those who have been neglected, not nourished with life's richness, need the PNEU approach.* In order to serve their needs, Marion Berry responded to them individually and with experienced sureness. She won them over to a new world—the joy of books, poetry, music, French, and Latin too (appropriately offered for one at least: "No answer needed beyond the radiant face with huge navy blue eyes"). They enjoyed copying beautiful writing patterns. They enjoyed Marion and trusted her. Marion enjoyed them.

Another PNEU distinctive can be identified in Marion's work as headmistress. A unique feature of her school was that it was part of her home. She lived in a few rooms in a large house surrounded by lawn and trees. There was a kitchen where fresh food was cooked every lunchtime, and children ate with teachers joining them around set tables.

In a school like this, the children belonged to a sort of family. They were continually in relationship with each other and the teachers. This is wonderful, simple, and yet precious. The relationships endured—there was real caring and the atmosphere of a community that lives, plays, enjoys, and learns together.

Now we can celebrate the fact that many people are trying to set up schools where this human, personal, and effective approach to education can flourish—a sense of committed folk, parents and teachers, wanting to "pass on the baton" to succeeding generations of educators and children. It is in this spirit of trust and adventure that we invite you to search diligently in the rest of this book for a way forward in teaching the children you know and are responsible for—a thoughtful way forward in the clamor of today's educational world with its competing aims, promises, and techniques.