

KNOWLEDGE *VERSUS* INFORMATION
A MUCH-NEEDED REFORM IN TEACHING METHODS
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Some years ago there appeared in *The Times* three articles entitled 'Present Discontents,' the theme of which was the parlous state of 'letters.' Their future is precarious, it seems, in a world where 'so many voices are heard exclaiming that literature and art may go hang, so long as material conditions improve and social inequalities are abolished.' All over Europe it is the same. 'A hopeless confusion is growing up in the mind of the average man between information and understanding, between entertainment and knowledge.' The whole tendency of our modern civilisation is 'to spare the mass of the people that intellectual effort which is the only measure of true culture.' The cinema and broadcasting, the platform and the press may flatter themselves that they are educating the people, but 'to educate is not to preach or merely convey information, but to draw out of the individual mind its infinite latent possibilities.' The true standards, 'which require effort, reflection and concentration to achieve,' are being driven out by the false, as sound currency is driven out by debased.

It is strange that the author of this indictment nowhere questions the efficacy of our modern methods of education. He never mentions 'the school.' Yet it is there that the root of the mischief is to be found. The

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adult who says that literature and art may go hang is only what the school has made him. It is the school that forms the lazy mind and imparts the false standards. Change its methods of teaching and you change the mind of the people. Japan, Russia and Germany have demonstrated that. It is time that we did the same thing, but in another way and with another purpose. It is in our power, if we have the will, to excite a new joy in learning, to impart habits of industry and concentration, so rare at present, to provoke an ampler freedom of thought and a thirst for knowledge. We shall not aim, like the authoritarian states, at shaping and directing minds but at awakening in them activity and independence.

But if we would do that we must revolutionise our teaching methods. They are an inheritance from the early days of the elementary school. At that time teachers were few and ill-educated, classes were huge, and the only books, other than the Bible, were a sorry 'reader' or two for a whole year's work. Schools so conducted could not educate. They were not expected to. Their aim was to impart just the crude mechanics of reading, writing and arithmetic: they could not aspire to make readers, writers, thinkers. The main task in the bookless school was to keep large numbers of children occupied and quiet. Order was secured by methods of drill: the teacher of necessity was the principal source of information: the child was passive. It was impossible under the conditions of the time to set the children working independently in search of knowledge, or to encourage self-expression. The individual mind was, and still is, lost sight of in the mass.

It was an unnatural task, and a new and quite unnatural technique of teaching had to be devised to meet it. That was the work of the new training colleges. The intending teacher was trained with admirable thoroughness to give endless oral lessons, and by clever questioning to ensure that the desired information was planted securely in reluctant heads against the day of the inspector's visit. So were born class-teaching methods and the text-book, those banes of

modern education. Devised because nothing better could be done under those impossible conditions, they have by lapse of time become almost sacrosanct. In their early days no real educationist would have touched them if he had been free to choose: now neither training college nor teacher can think in other terms. Though conditions have been revolutionised they still retain them, and defend on principle what a hundred years ago, if they had been free to do what they liked, they would have rejected with contempt.

These methods have gone round the world, and all round the world to-day they stand condemned by every educationist who has not already lost his soul in the rooted tradition of the training college. Almost at the same time as 'Present Discontents' appeared, *The Times* and other journals were giving publicity to the report of a protracted enquiry conducted in Pennsylvania under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. From it we learn that 'lectures and lessons proceed with a flow as steady and inexorable as time.' Yet 'the real reasons for the existence of a teacher [are not] the imparting of information as hitherto understood: ... not to give knowledge, but to turn knowledge into wisdom.' And again, 'Generally speaking it is observation and books, and the casual commerce of mind with mind that brings to the student his serviceable store of knowledge.'

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Similar criticism of our English methods can be found in printed reports issued by the Board of Education. Even the schools of London have had to be told that 'mere knowledge of historical facts is no guarantee of historical understanding.' 'The almost invariable practice in the lower classes is the oral lesson,' says the same report, and 'even in the upper classes the oral lesson is still supreme.' And the text-books in use are condemned as unsparingly as the teaching methods.

It is not only the elementary school that has gone the wrong way. Secondary education, springing from the same soil, and beset by the craze for wrongly planned examinations and certificates, has been infected by a similar blight. There too the cult of information is excluding knowledge. Nor are the public schools immune. One ex-headmaster after another has laid bare his soul. The majority of the boys, they tell us, leave school without any desire to go on learning what they have been taught. A distinguished professor a few years ago appeared to put the blame upon the pupil. 'Our English children,' he said, 'are not consumed with anxiety to learn anything: least of all has it ever crossed their minds that they must learn English.' It is true enough, but the child is not to blame. Dulled by the steady spate of oral lessons and by the meagre fare of text-books written in a classroom language that no one can mistake for English, how should he want to learn? We shall see presently that he is as anxious to learn as any child of Athens if the masters of his native speech are allowed to teach him through their books as Homer taught the young Athenian.

Do we not hear echoing through all these criticisms the same complaint that was made by the men of letters: 'to educate is not to preach or merely to impart information, but to draw out of the individual mind its infinite latent possibilities'? But forty years ago Charlotte Mason, that great educational reformer, was already telling us the same thing, and was expounding and practising a system that did and does produce the joyous effort, the concentration, reflection and power of judgment which the victims of oral instruction and the text-book lack, but which are indispensable if we are to preserve not only our threatened culture but also the democratic institutions that inspire it.

It is now more than twenty-five years since I first introduced a few selected elementary schools in Gloucestershire to the Charlotte Mason methods and the programmes of books issued each term by the Parents' National Educational Union (P.N.E.U.). The amazing results obtained by those pioneer schools carried conviction to all who saw them, and to-day, though no sort of pressure has ever been exercised, there are only thirty schools—not a tenth of the whole number—that do not teach in the Charlotte Mason way.

That way is founded on a philosophy of education which cannot be summarised here, though a few of its basic principles may be briefly outlined. Like all great truths, they have only to be stated to compel assent. Every child, she tells us, is a person with a person's rights. His personality should be respected. It must not be repressed so that he may fall into line with a class, or so dominated by the teacher that he learns to lean upon another instead of thinking, judging and acting for himself. He must have liberty to deal with knowledge in his own way. 'Knowledge,' she says, 'is the aliment of mind as food is of the body.' Therefore each mind must be allowed to react to it in its own individual way. 'Mind

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appeals to mind,' she continues, 'and thought begets thought, and that is how we are educated. For this reason we owe it to every child to put him into direct communication with great minds that he may get at great thoughts.' The oral lesson, the clever questioning, the text-book, all the paraphernalia and devices beloved of training colleges, are swept into limbo. She only admits real books, arresting, suggestive, stimulating; and it is the child who talks and not the teacher.

The range of the books is very wide and the number is considerable. It is a fundamental principle that children want to know, 'knowledge-hunger being natural to everybody.' So children of thirteen will be working on twenty books or more each term. History is no mere matter of a text-book knowledge of an abbreviated period of our island story. It begins, where it should begin, with Egypt, Ur and Babylon, goes on to Greece and Rome, and passes down the centuries on the same generous scale. European history is read side by side with English. Plutarch, Shakespeare and Scott illustrate and give substance to the history, for these children read a play of Shakespeare without any notes each term. The Quennell's books provide a background. So do the great artists and their pictures, for six pictures are studied each term in reproductions. For science Faraday will tell the History of a Candle: for geography Finch will describe the attempts to climb Mount Everest.

There is no doubt about it: children do want to know. They are infinitely curious until we kill their curiosity in school. The teachers have been amazed at the enthusiasm with which they concentrate upon the work in hand, and at the range of vocabulary and the power of expression which are developed by wide reading and the practice of narrating what they have read. For these children are not questioned by the teacher: they question themselves. 'As knowledge is not assimilated until it is reproduced,' says Miss Mason, 'children should "tell back" after a single reading or hearing, or should write some part of what they have read.'

These children 'are educated, not merely prepared,' said the headmaster of a grammar school far away from Gloucestershire recently of the children who came up to him with free places from a school that has adopted the Charlotte Mason way. The grammar schools of Gloucestershire have long known it.

And they will have widely different tastes and live different lives from the children brought up on oral lessons and text-books. For them literature and art may not go hand in hand. I have been at some pains to discover what the effect of this liberal education has been, not only upon the child in the school, but upon the young person who has passed out of it. Out of many scores of reports that I received from teachers I will select a few that are typical.

As for the appeal of the books there is only one opinion. The teachers are unanimous that the interest of the children is remarkable, that they do much more work, and that being always and happily busy they are much easier to control. 'The books,' says one teacher, 'are becoming part of their lives. Discipline has been affected, for the children completely rule themselves. Concentration has been secured. Inattention is unknown.' It sounds too good to be true: yet, as many independent observers have testified, it is literally and exactly true. Many teachers

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tell how books, including history, are borrowed and taken home. 'The parents are keenly interested,' says a representative report. Another teacher adds, 'There seems now to be a pleasure in mastering difficulties.' Our English children, it seems, *are* consumed with anxiety to learn if they are given the chance.

The superlative excellence of the written work is commented upon by every visitor who enters the schools, and they are many. Those who conduct expensive preparatory schools would be happy indeed if they could get such work on the English side from their boys of similar age. If those boys were taught in the same way they would.

Even the dull and backward child, who is usually condemned to struggling with books little better than infant readers, and is never read aloud to, finds pleasure and stimulus in the new methods, which ensure that all children shall hear good books read aloud. And so it comes about that school after school sent in reports of which the following are typical: 'Children,' says one teacher, 'who under other methods would probably have been classified as dull and backward throughout school life, take great interest in the reading by the teacher and in narration; and finding that they can shine in one way often work exceedingly hard with corresponding improvement.' And another representative report says: 'They become more interested, and consequently *much happier*.' Surely this is a message of hope for the dull and backward, and for those who teach them too if they would but listen to it.

Most interesting and suggestive of all, perhaps, were the replies that I received when I asked what these Charlotte Mason methods have done, which the conventional methods would not have done, for the young people who have passed out into the world. Have they, I asked, affected tastes and habits? Here are a few typical passages that I have taken from them.

The headmaster of a small country school writes: 'When charabanc trips commenced ten years ago the chief spot visited was the inn. To-day churches (architecture), picture galleries, museums and historical spots claim the attention of the majority.' He adds: 'Shakespeare's plays are eagerly listened to on the wireless, and visited whenever opportunity occurs. Two old scholars take their Shakespeares with them to work and read them during dinner time.'

Another in a mining area sends this: 'It is quite obvious that there is a far higher standard of culture among those adults who have been trained in a P.N.E.U. school. Personal contact with them has convinced me that they are able to more than hold their own in

conversation on almost any subject.' And he instances, with examples, India, Ancient History and Archaeology, and the Arts. He also tells how at mining classes in the evening the old P.N.E.U. students stand out from the rest. 'Old P.N.E.U. pupils,' he says, 'come with a keen desire to learn. At the close of the class, whilst students trained on the old lines were anxious to be away, they would remain to discuss with their teacher items of topical interest. These talks revealed over and over again that the work done in the school under P.N.E.U. methods was very deep-rooted.'

'I have noticed,' says an old scholar of a country school, 'that those who were fortunate enough to be brought up in its (P.N.E.U.) atmosphere have quite a different and happier outlook on life.'

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A headmaster on the Cotswolds says that his old P.N.E.U. pupils 'talk freely and intelligently about matters which come within their ken: no doubt as the result of narration and wide reading. This is the exact opposite of the mumbled unimaginative conversation of the youth that I found here when I came fifteen years ago.' He adds that they 'are voracious readers.'

Another headmaster says that Sunday Schools have to give an altogether different type of book as prizes to meet the change of taste. Several teachers mention the gentler manners, the joy in nature and the new kindness to bird and beast. And this comes from another: 'One notices a more mature judgment in P.N.E.U. lads and girls than in others, and a quiet restraint, especially in their acceptance of the matter conveyed in the sensational press.' Yet another tells how they are 'more capable of reading their newspapers intelligently, of considering questions from every point of view and forming their own judgments, and of finding interests for their leisure.'

Of course, it is not always easy for teachers, who have been trained in the conventional methods, to adjust themselves to a new method that, in the words of one of them, 'turns our old training college methods upside down.' 'We hear her voice going for fifty minutes in every hour,' said the headmistress of a large senior school to me one day of a clever young graduate fresh from a modern university, who was only doing what she had been trained to do, and knew she could do well. The training colleges do not like this turning upside down. As the principal of one of them wrote, 'What little I know of it [the Charlotte Mason method] has led me to regard it as the negation of teaching and the elimination of the teacher.' That, of course, is nonsense. The teacher has more to do than ever, and the better the teacher the better the result. But the teacher's mission is no longer to display his own ability and impress inspectors by the excellence of his oral teaching or the ingenuity of his questioning and the forest of uplifted hands which respond to it. He is content to be judged rather by the spontaneous activity, the intelligence, knowledge and power of self-expression exhibited by his children.

One more illustration—it is a very charming and typical one—of the difference between the Charlotte Mason methods and those which are usually followed in our schools. The distinguished head of an Oxford college told the company assembled on the occasion of the jubilee of the P.N.E.U. how he had heard his two daughters, who had been educated at home according to Miss Mason's principles before passing on to school, discussing their experiences together. 'I heard them talking the other day,' he said, 'and using the words "lovely" and "thrilling." I asked the youngest, who was twelve, why she thought the P.N.E.U. "lovely," and

she said, "We did literature there." I asked, "But don't they do literature at most schools?" To that she replied, "Oh, but we loved it." In that artless and simple remark you get great tribute to the method under which they were brought up.'