

Charlotte Mason and the ‘Real Learning’ approach

Charlotte Mason: here’s a name which seems to be ‘doing the rounds’ in Catholic home schooling circles at the moment, so I thought a brief look at the subject might prove useful. What is it that parents are looking for which they find (albeit imperfectly) in the ideas of an Anglican teacher writing about education in the early twentieth century?

If you ask most mothers who talk about CM what it is they like about her, they will usually say something along the lines of, *‘Well, she has a very relaxed approach, with the emphasis on lots of reading aloud, lots of nature study and not too much writing. It is about trying to really get the children to love learning rather than just work through textbooks; it’s about the children learning for their own sake, rather than just because they have to.’*

Such mothers are keen to follow a more relaxed approach because they sense that a heavy emphasis on textbook work (including the obligation to complete a certain amount of work in a set period of time) often leads to a lack of real interest and eventually to burnout (for both mother and child) whilst also giving the child a habit not so much of ‘learning’ as of passing tests, or ‘jumping through hoops’ (something CM observed with dismay in her first few years teaching in a conventional school). As parents, they are instinctively drawn to her attitude to dealing with children in all areas of life, not just education, e.g. to treat the child more as a person than as a receptacle for information; to work with the child in discovering the world, rather than delivering to him a pre-packaged bundle of facts; and to concentrate equally on all aspects of his development (spiritual, moral, physical as well as intellectual), something they often feel is missing from a ‘school-like’ approach to education.

These impressions are often based on the book *‘For the Children’s Sake’* by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, which seems to serve as most mothers’ introduction to CM ideas, and concentrates mainly on CM’s advice as to how children should be treated by adults. There’s no space here for a full review, but suffice to say that this book does have some genuinely solid observations about how adults might improve their working relationships with children, advice particularly apt for those of us who home-school. The book also (surprisingly to me, given my initial concerns that it espoused a ‘let the children do as they please’ sort of attitude) stresses the absolute importance of instilling perfect obedience in children in order that such ‘real learning’ as CM advocated can freely take place. CM herself wrote as follows:

“Tardy, unwilling, occasional obedience is hardly worth the having.....to secure the habit of obedience, the mother must exercise great self-restraint; she must never give a command which she does not intend to be carried out to the full.” And again, *“The mother often loses her hold over her children because they detect in the tone of her voice that she does not expect them to obey her.”*

It is within, and only within this context, that the ‘freedom’ of learning so praised in a CM style education can be allowed, and be fruitful. It is a far cry from ‘un-schooling’!

A brief look at almost any general articles on CM will point out three main characteristics of her approach:

- 1) she eschewed the use of materials which were of an inferior nature, i.e. those which contained worthless content, which she called ‘twaddle’.

- 2) she emphasised the use of what she termed ‘living books’ (e.g. in history this might mean actual diaries and biographies rather than textbooks) and recommended the practice of ‘narration’: i.e. the close retelling of a story read or listened to, rather than the working through of textbook exercises and set questions.

- 3) she stressed the importance of short lessons and plenty of time spent outdoors, which has given her the reputation of encouraging a more ‘gentle’ or relaxed approach to education.

I’ll admit that at this point I was wondering whether CM wasn’t simply echoing common sense, and saying nothing particularly original: most mothers are adept at eschewing ‘twaddle’ and getting out of doors a lot, and many instinctively employ a wide range of good, ‘living’ books to supplement textbook work. Some (myself included) already use narration as a tool for younger children and reluctant writers as recommended by that Classical Curriculum guru, Laura Berquist. Moreover (although this may have been due to the ever-present rosy picture of an Edwardian mother reading to her daughter which seems to accompany EVERY text on CM) I felt sure that it was all a bit twee and really had nothing to offer my rowdy little bunch of soldiers. Expressing this opinion somewhat rashly to one UK CM expert provoked a reply which stoutly rebuffed my assertions of tweeness and girliness and sent me back to the books, determined to solve the mystery.

Delving a little deeper into the books, I noticed certain quotations frequently repeated and presented as key to her method:

1. Children are born persons and should be respected as such;
2. Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life (a definition attributed to the poet Matthew Arnold); and
3. Education is the science of relations.

1. **Personhood:** this axiom presents no new revelation or difficulty to the Catholic mother who already believes as CM did that children are created by God in His own image and are endowed with an immortal soul. Her advice to parents and teachers on the need to prepare *themselves* as educators (rooting out their own defects) before they can approach the teaching of children is sound enough and is reminiscent of that given by Maria Montessori and to a lesser extent by St John Bosco with his preventive method. However, from a Catholic perspective, the criticism has been made that CM gives too little credence to the doctrine of original sin, and seems to believe that children are born with a general propensity for good rather than ill. I am not sure this is true, as she does state that children 'are born neither good nor bad, but with possibilities for good or evil', and, as we shall later see, she is very clear about the need for guiding children into discipline and good habits, but the point might, nonetheless, be borne in mind..

2. **Atmosphere:** creation of an environment in which the child is treated with kindness and gentleness and breathes in an atmosphere of things 'lovely, honest and of good report', is, CM asserts, the duty of *parents* in at least the first six years of the child's life (CM did not, incidentally, advocate any *formal* learning for children under 6 or 7). Listed amongst practices which militate against the infusion of a healthy atmosphere are: moralism (e.g. explicitly drawing a moral from some text rather than letting the text speak for itself to the children); the use of guilt, competition, and comparison and the overuse of testing and evaluation. Interestingly, CM maintained that, in a good school, the atmosphere would closely resemble that of a good home; it would be in fact an atmosphere in which learning would take place naturally without the need for such incentives, under the gentle guidance of a loving mother/teacher.

Discipline: CM believed that lack of consistent discipline lay at the heart of failures in education. During her first years as a teacher she lamented that although the children behaved reasonably well and did the work which was set them well enough (i.e. well enough to make it to the next grade!), they made little if any improvement in their faults and weaknesses. To counter this, she made discipline - or, the training of the will - a central tenet of her schools' philosophy. She identified a series of 'habits' which any good education should endeavour to instil in a child: intellectual habits (attention, concentration, thoroughness etc.); moral habits (obedience, truthfulness, reverence etc); physical habits (self control, self discipline, fortitude etc); religious habits (reverence, devotion, thought of God etc); and, generally, good manners and orderliness. Few mothers would disagree that these habits are desirable ones to cultivate in a child! She stressed, also, the essential role of *parents* in helping their children form such desirable habits rather than leaving such formation to the schools.

Life: For CM, the role of an educator is to place before the child the daily nourishment of ideas by way of living books that promote 'living thought.' The purpose is not merely to pass on information to the child, but to put the child in touch with ideas as expressed through nature, poetry, paintings, music and the lives of people. Her belief was that such ideas would stir a person to right thinking (conscience) and right action (good will), but that these ideas must be presented directly to the child rather than in 'pre-digested' (i.e. textbook) form: mind must speak directly to mind, as 'ideas are living concepts which we get chiefly as we convey them to one another'. She felt that a day in which the child received no new idea was a day wasted, and indeed taught that 'the chief responsibility which rests on them (the children) as persons is the acceptance or rejection of ideas'.

She asserted, in short, that living ideas are as essential to the mind as food is to the nourishment of the body.

3. **Science of relations:** This principle is really a summary of the three preceding ideas inasmuch as an education which aims to provide a 'learning' environment (atmosphere), habits leading to self control (discipline) and the plenty of food for thought (life) will hopefully make for an environment in which the child will realise and relish the relations which exist between himself and the world around him (with God, family, teacher, nature, literature, art etc.) CM asserts that the educator has two concerns in this area: '... *first to put him in the right way of forming these (proper) relations by presenting the right idea at the right*

time, and by forming the right habit based upon this idea, and secondly, by not getting in the way and so preventing the establishment of the very relationships we seek to form.' As one CM commentator writes, 'If the circumstances are such that the child is viewed as an empty vessel...if rules and control are the methods for obtaining good behaviour, and if the vitality of education is strangled by rote learning, workbooks and drill, then the result may be...that learning will be meaningless, incoherent, and disconnected.' (Jack Beckman, "When Children Love to Learn.")

This is necessarily a brief and imperfect summary of CM's ideas, but it gives us a broader basis from which to look again at the question of the attractiveness of a CM education, and ask also perhaps whether the method is likely to live up to the expectations surrounding it.

PROS: Certainly for those seeking a less textbook based 'pass the test' approach - one that aims to set the child on the path of absorbing, reflecting and acting upon the noble ideas of real people - this approach seems ideal: CM seems to eschew formal testing of any sort (a stance which contributed greatly to her never being given any official accreditation) Again, for inspiration and ideas on an education aimed at forming the whole person rather than focussing almost exclusively on academics, and for practical tips on forming desirable habits in children, CM certainly delivers. For myself, I find narration a very useful tool: it can help to draw out ideas and expressions which a child limited either by his own difficulties in writing or by a rigid comprehension style exercise might never otherwise express. Overall, I think her insistence on placing 'inspirational' subjects (art, music etc.) on a par with disciplinary subjects is quite liberating, since the former subjects are so often shoved into a corner or neglected altogether, both in school and home-school, as we strive to ensure adequate coverage of 'the essentials'. And her advice to allow children as much time outdoors as possible ("One should never be indoors when one can be out") seems wise enough to me: even if you're not doing nature study, perhaps your children are getting that all-important time, so often lost, to *reflect* on what they have been studying.

CONS: There is one particular area where I think the mother attempting to implement a CM approach might be disappointed and where, in a sense, the 'dream' falls down: when one gets down to the nuts and bolts of a day's learning, there is nothing very *relaxed* about it! A typical timetable in one of her schools would see, for example, children aged 8-9 covering perhaps eight subjects before lunch, albeit in short 20-30 minute sessions, and even though the disciplinary subjects (e.g. grammar and maths) are interposed with inspirational subjects (e.g. literature, nature study) what you are looking at is still a pretty rigorous trawl through a very wide variety of subjects in a fairly short space of time. For the average H/S mother, especially one with several children, this looks rather daunting to me; and I think most parents, in adopting the 'relaxed' aspects of this approach, might have to forfeit some of the rigour, and therefore not produce quite the same results. In like manner, if you have not managed to get the 'perfect obedience' in place by the time you start formal education, you are going to find it tricky to manage steering your children efficiently from one subject to the next (though, personally, whilst I agree in principle with keeping lessons short for the sake of attention spans, one does want to give the child time to 'run with a subject' if he is inspired to do so. It all seems a bit 'choppy' to me, and is in almost total contrast to a Montessori approach which emphasises absorption in one particular activity for an almost unlimited length of time as being crucial to a child's educational development).

I do also have reservations about a few of her practical approaches to some subjects, principally in the teaching of reading and writing. She seems to advocate what really amounts to a 'sight reading' method of teaching reading. In one book she describes how the child is encouraged to 'look at' words until he 'knows' them, then identify the same words in a piece of text, then read the words. She did not, apparently, expect a child under nine to read for himself. I'll admit I was very surprised to find her advocating what is essentially the 'look -say' as opposed to the phonetic method, given how we have seen the former discredited over the past few decades. Similarly, with regard to spelling, she is of the opinion that the child will learn to spell simply through reading, by taking 'a photograph' of the word. *'This picturing of words on the retina appears to me to be the only royal road to spelling.'* Again, this contrasts with the analytical, phonetic approach to spelling which has been proven to have more effective results over a broader range of children. Finally, when it comes to writing and composition, it is taken for granted that exposure to great literature will have provided the child with adequate models for his own writing, so that with little or no formal instruction he will arrive at the age of ten already writing exceedingly well, and needing only a little extra guidance. Up until nine or ten, all compositions are delivered orally and written by the teacher: a child of ten, CM writes,

‘...has learned nearly all the grammar that is necessary when he knows that when we speak we use sentences and that a sentence make sense’. I can’t quite decide whether I find that sentence reassuring or terrifying!

All in all though, and bearing in mind the obvious omissions arising from the fact that Miss Mason was not writing from a Catholic perspective, she does have enough to offer us to warrant some attention, even if the only result is that we look again at our understanding of what we are trying to achieve in educating our children. She points us to a more noble end than cramming them full of the information they need, so quickly forgotten, in order to jump through those hoops which seem to constitute the greater part of our conventional school system. As home-schoolers, (and moreover as Catholic home-schoolers with the full force and beauty of the Church’s expansive views on the education of children to inspire us), we have the freedom to jettison those aspects of the ‘system’ which ultimately contribute so little to ‘real’ education . If Charlotte Mason can aid us in doing that, then she’s earned a place on my bookshelf!

Refs: “For the Children’s Sake” by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay (Crossway Books)
“ *When Children Love to Learn*” edited by Elaine Cooper (Crossway Books)