For a great door is opened:

THE LEGACY OF

Charlotte Mason

DEÁNI A. NEVEN VAN PELT
DECEMBER 2011
For a great door for effective work has opened to me.

I Corinthians 16:9

Sometimes, very rarely, we are gripped by an unforeseen encounter with a compelling person, provocative idea, or challenging experience, and the rush of life suddenly stills; our equipoise is regained only as we internalize the possible meaning and implications of the occurrence. For a time, we are on sacred ground—a great door into a large room has been opened for us. Whether through a conversation, print or digital media, or a personal or shared experience, we find ourselves examining the numinous encounter again and again.

Charlotte Mason, a nineteenth century British educator, was one of these singular encounters for me. She has attracted and kept my attention these many years as I’ve been a parent, high school teacher, and university educator. I met her following the 1995 Christmas holiday when my oldest child dropped out of kindergarten. In the midst of this very personal (what does one do with a five-year-old dropout?) and professional (my career teaching high school was well established) epistemic and pedagogic angst, a friend shared Susan Schaeffer Macaulay’s 1984 book, For the Children’s Sake: Foundations of Education for Home and School. I have never been the same.

1 KJV version of this epigraph was used by W.G. de Burgh, Professor of Philosophy, University College, Reading, in his address at the Memorial Conference in March 1923 following Mason’s death.

2 For this, I am indeed deeply indebted to Laurie Kenyon of Mitchell, Ontario.
Here, I’d like to peek through that great door at Mason’s legacy. I will begin with a brief overview of Mason’s impressive and lasting organizational accomplishments, then share some of her most compelling and essential ideas, and then conclude with a few thoughts on whether her design for education warrants our continued attention in twenty-first century education.  

**ORGANIZATIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Charlotte Mason (1842-1923), a British educator and activist, had humble beginnings and was orphaned by age sixteen. After she attended one of the few institutions of the day where “teacher” certification might be obtained, Mason taught in a large infants’ school, which took in over 200 children, and then taught in a “teacher training” institution herself. By her fifties, her life was a veritable whirlwind of accomplishments and relationships that even today would be deemed impressive. She wrote extensively, established schools, developed curricula, founded a teachers’ college, built lasting professional and personal friendships, and thought deeply. Mason’s death was marked by a valuable memorial book and a service in London several months later wherein many testified that her presence was an inspiration and her quiet charm remarkable.

Mason’s many writings include three series of works with topics ranging from geography to religion to education. The sales of the five-volume geography set, produced mostly in the 1880s, were modest. Her six volumes on education were frequently republished due to demand, and in 1905 the first five were published as a set under the title “Home Education Series” (Mason, 1886, 1896, 1904a, 1904b, 1905, 1925). Shortly after, Mason published six more works, between 1908 and 1914, mostly written in verse, on the Saviour of the world and the gospels.

Mason’s educational volumes are without doubt the most important contribution to her enduring legacy. The first book in the education series was based on seven “Lectures to Ladies” which she offered (in lieu of a cash donation) in a parish charity event during the winter of 1885-1886. As it turns out, those lectures and the book they inspired were pivotal in her life. Very shortly thereafter, she founded a number of enduring educational organizations, institutions, and periodicals which also contribute substantially to her ongoing legacy.

**Networks of parents.** The first of these is *The Parents’ National Educational Union (PNEU)*, a vast national network of local organizations of parents begun in 1887, following the widespread interest in her winter lecture series. According to biographer Essex Cholmondeley, the goal was to have “an active, outgoing society of parents” that would “bring parents to the front as educators of their children” and a society that would “study the laws of education as they bear on the bodily development, the moral training, the intellectual life and the religious upbringing of children.” Each local branch committed itself to three main goals: first, that there be “a religious basis of work”; second, that “the number of addresses shall be equally distributed to the four parts of education (physical, mental, moral, and religious); and third, that as much work be done with the parents of the working as with those of the educated class.” At the first meeting, eighty members joined; within three years of the initial
lecture series at least thirteen local chapters in England and Wales were established. Many more followed. In 1988, a century after its founding, the PNEU merged with the Worldwide Education Service (WES), a correspondence service that provided support to homeschooling families around the world.

**Monthly journal.** Another important piece in Mason’s continued legacy was the “vitalizing organ,” the monthly periodical of the PNEU, The Parents Review: A Monthly Magazine of Home Training and Culture begun in 1890 and published monthly, and later termly, for ninety-nine years. In biographer Essex Cholmondeley’s words:

The aim of the Parents’ Review [was] to raise common thought on the subject of education to the level of scientific research, and to give parents grip of some half-dozen principles which should act as enormously powerful levers in the elevation of character. The object of this monthly magazine [was] to keep parents in touch with the best and latest thought on all those matters connected with the training and culture of children and young people.

From the very beginning, the Parents’ Review attracted the written contribution of leading educators of Mason’s day. Several full sets of these volumes exist today—ripe with potential for further exploration and study.4

**System of schools and curriculum.** Mason, with members of the PNEU, also began The Parents’ Review School, first named for the periodical, then renamed in 1907 the Parents’ Union School (PUS), and later called PNEU schools. The PUS originated as a kind of umbrella Programme for home schoolrooms of individual families, generally taught by parents, and later by graduates of Mason’s teacher training college. It provided a curriculum with final examinations for home-school classrooms and to foster among parents and students (as Cholmondeley says) a “knowledge that their home schoolroom was part of a larger, wider school.” Sixty-five families were active members in 1892 and small “cottage” schools supported by neighbouring families were also established as part of the PUS movement. As well, whole schools, or “certain classes” of schools, later chose to follow the PUS Programmes. At the time of Mason’s death in 1923, some forty thousand students had been privately educated through the Parents’ Union School Programmes and 150 elementary schools were working on the programmes of the Parents’ Union School. Today these Programmes (which were updated annually), many samples of which are in the Armitt Library and Museum archives, provide excellent exemplars into the practical application of Mason’s educational philosophy during her times.

**Teacher’s education institute.** The House of Education, later the Charlotte Mason College and eventually part of the faculty of teacher education of the University of Lancaster and then of the University of Cumbria, began training

---

4 Early volumes will soon be available online through the Charlotte Mason Digital Collection.
its first cohort of governesses and teachers in 1892, again founded on the ideas offered in the winter lecture series given by Mason six years earlier. Almost twelve decades later, it continues as an outdoor and environmental studies education centre with plans for continued expansion in the near future.

**Other courses and magazines.** Through these initiatives—the writings in the *Home Education Series*, the *Parents’ National Educational Union*, the *Parents’ Review* periodical, the *Parents’ Union School* educational Programmes, and the *House of Education*—Mason’s contribution to education in Great Britain and beyond in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was significant. Other initiatives, including the *Mothers’ Education Course*, a three year correspondence course for mothers, discontinued during the Great War in 1915. The *L’Umile Pianta*, the official publication of the Charlotte Mason College Association, was started in 1893 by a group of the first House of Education students with Mason’s encouragement, has been going ever since, [and is now] one of the oldest “old” students’ association’s magazines in the UK.

Furthermore, Mason’s ongoing correspondence with leading educationalists of her time (much of which is stored in the Charlotte Mason Collection at the Armitt Library and Museum in Ambleside, Cumbria, UK) also contributes to Mason’s legacy. Indeed, many of Mason’s ideas, especially those related to the focus on the needs and the development of the child, were embraced by educators in her time and became part of the primary education mind-set in the UK.

In Memoriam: Charlotte M. Mason (PNEU, 1923) is a beautiful testament by more than fifty contributors in over 200 pages of tribute to Mason’s legacy as already identified at the time of her death. Cholmondeley’s (1960) *The Story of Charlotte Mason (1842-1923)* provides an affectionate and detailed account of Mason’s biography, her work, her friendships, her ideas, and her daily life. Some biographical details are currently in question, while others have been validated by the careful and extensive ongoing work of Margaret Coombs, articles about which are currently being published in the *L’Umile Pianta* and elsewhere.

**Recent attention.** Although the majority of the institutions and programs established by Mason quietly continued throughout the twentieth century, a notable rediscovery of her ideas has occurred in recent decades such that her ideas are, once again, being studied and practiced around the world. Schaeffer Macaulay (daughter of the famed mid-twentieth century Christian philosopher, Dr. Francis Schaeffer) played an important role in this rediscovery; she especially stimulated the interest of North Americans in Mason, particularly attracting the attention of home-educating parents. By her own account, as reported by Diane Lopez in her book *Teaching Children* (Crossway, 1988), Schaeffer Macaulay wrote *For the Children’s Sake* when, after a decade of searching for a “satisfactory school” for their own children, she found...
“a small one-room private school in the back of a cottage in southern England. . . . It was like watching a desert that had had the first rain in ten years.” Once Schaeffer Macaulay discovered that this school was following Mason’s design for education, she sought out and read Mason’s original works. Schaeffer Macaulay, again as reported by Lopez,

realized that not only were the C. Mason books out of print, but as a society we had so changed our homes, our communities, and our aims that her methods could not be implemented in small changes. If anybody else was interested, they’d have to go back to the beginning and think everything through again . . . In answer to [many] pleas [from others] I wrote For the Children’s Sake . . . We called the whole approach “Child Light.”

Child Light added two other books (Wilson’s Books Children Love and Lopez’s) to its series in an attempt to extend the rediscovery and reinterpretation of Mason’s ideas begun by Schaeffer Macaulay. While Schaeffer Macaulay’s initial contribution was written with the aim of introducing the reader to Mason’s “wisdom” and methods and is interspersed with many touching personal anecdotes, Wilson’s is primarily an annotated bibliography of children’s books intended to support Mason’s educational approach of engaging children with “living books.” Lopez’s book is a subject-based curriculum guide based on Mason’s principles.

As it turns out, I was not the only reader deeply influenced by Schaeffer Macaulay. She has been recognized by many authors and speakers both anecdotally and in academic writings as introducing Mason’s design for education.

Dissertations and scholarly papers written in the last three decades are also building a small body of scholarly work attesting to Mason’s contribution. Included are those by Coombs (1984), Smith (2000), Beckman (2000, 2004), Ney (1999), Van Pelt (2002), and Bernier-Rodriguez (2009). Others are in process. In Charlotte Mason: ‘A pioneer of sane education’ (1999), Ney attempted, for example, “to demonstrate the educational philosophy of Charlotte Mason and [to demonstrate] the anticipation, in [Mason’s] work, of many of the educational theories advanced in this century, especially those of Piaget, Erikson, Dewey, Conant and Whitehead” (Introduction). Other important pieces include Charlotte Mason reviewed: A philosophy of education (King, 1981), Charlotte Mason College (Inman, 1985), and When children love to learn (Cooper, 2004).

Many other writers, especially those in the 1990s, had a more practical, popular audience in mind (for example, see Andreola (1998), Gardner (1997), Levison (1996, 2000) and Rackliffe (1998)). These nevertheless undoubtedly played a role in the current appetite for more analytical and scholarly probing of Mason’s educational ideas.

Recent grants, collections, conferences, schools, support networks, and curricula. Dialogue among some participants in this emerging community of scholars resulted in receipt of two Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council grants (Van Pelt, Smith & Beckman, 2008; Van Pelt, Smith, Beckman, Thorley, Cadora & Coombs, 2009) and they have provided the foundation for the establishment of the Charlotte Mason Digital Collection (Redeemer University College, 2009), a virtual database of much of the Charlotte Mason Collection held at the Armit Library and Museum in Ambleside, England. Today conferences are being held. Schools—private, charter, protestant, Catholic, and others—are being established (see for example, Heritage School, Cambridge, UK 6 Although published in 1999 (eight years after Ney’s death), Ney’s book was based on her Master’s thesis, completed at Hofstra University in 1981.
at www.heritageschool.org.uk; Ambleside Schools International at amblesideschools.com; Red Mountain Community School, Birmingham, Alabama at redmountaincommunityschool.com; Willow Tree Community School, Boiling Springs, North Carolina at wtschool.org; Gillingham Charter School, Pottsville, Pennsylvania at gillinghamcharter-school.org; and Child Light Schools at childlightschools.com). Networks and support groups are being birthed. Curricula are being developed both online and in hard copy (for example, see amblesideonline.org). Books continue to be written. Rich networks of relationships are being developed all over the world as educators gather around Mason’s ideas in our times (see, for example, Ambleside Online at childlightusa.org; Mater Amabilis—A Charlotte Mason Style Curriculum for Catholics, Pennsylvania at materamabilis.org; and Mother of Divine Grace School, California at motherofdivinegrace.org; and Wayside Academy in Peterborough, Ontario. All give testimony to Mason’s influence on education today and to the need for further exploration.

EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

The brunt of Mason’s impact lay in the institutions she established and in her commitment to work with and through parents. Yet they hung together around several central ideas which, in 1904, in response to an organizational identity crisis, she succinctly fashioned into twenty points, her educational synopsis. What then did Mason see and expound in her conception of education? What was it that I—as a parent of a child who knew she was not being nurtured, nourished, and stimulated in school—found so attractive? From an era when the rights of each individual to equality of educational opportunity was being discussed and in a time when both home schoolrooms and schoolhouses were commonly dismal places of boredom and restriction, what was Mason proposing for education that could still be of interest in our times?

Mason’s initial appeal often includes her practical strategies. In A Charlotte Mason Education (1996), Levison, for example, sums these:

[Mason] advocates a liberal (generous) education . . . Children should be educated by the humanities. [Mason] wants them to have a love for learning and for [the teacher] not to kill that love. We are leading them to self-education through direct contact with the best books, and the [masterly inactivity] of adults...We rely heavily on narration [verbal, written, modeled, demonstrated] instead of comprehension questions or workbooks to verify knowledge. Examinations are done with a view to see what the child does know, not to expose what they don’t know . . . Short morning lessons [cover] a large variety of subjects . . . minds are invigorated by switching subjects . . . at fifteen-minute increments . . . all afternoon and evening [are] free to enjoy being a child, to pursue hobbies, and to read [and be outside].

Mason’s motto for parents and other educators—“Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life”—also appeals. Atmosphere, habit formation and life setting are seen as the only things an adult may manipulate in a child’s life. Other trinkets, such as stickers, extrinsic rewards, and even marks and grades are considered manipulative, unfair, and improper for an adult to administer.

At the risk of becoming too focused on technique or method, I must admit that I was warmed initially by the notion that I could trust my child’s judgment and my child’s own important, central role in her own education; yet on inspection, there was so much more.
Mason explains that her *Educational Synopsis* (now printed in the preface of most republished versions of her educational volumes) embodies the “articles” of her “educational faith,” and as such provides, I believe, the best basis on which to reconstruct an overview of her design for education. I have imputed seven themes onto the synopsis; this is my attempt to distill the essence of Mason’s design for education. They provide key theoretical assumptions integral to any attempt to either understand or apply Mason’s teachings. In my view, the seven themes below form the heart of Mason’s education legacy.

**View of the child.** Children are born as persons but born neither good nor bad, with possibilities for good and evil. They are to be respected, and neither hindered, offended, nor despised through committed or omitted actions of adults.

**Educational instruments.** Although the child’s obedience and the parent’s or educator’s authority is natural and necessary, and thus a fundamental principle, adults may not encroach upon the child’s personality through fear, love, suggestion, influence, play upon natural desires, or any other means. Only three instruments in education can be used: natural atmosphere, discipline (intentionally developed habits of body and mind), and life (sustenance of the intellectual, moral, spiritual, and physical).

**Mind and curriculum.** The mind is not a receptacle or holding sac for finely prepared morsels of ideas, but is a spiritual organism, capable of digesting and assimilating a diet of all sorts of knowledge—in fact, the mind feeds on ideas and becomes malnourished if not properly fed. While in many systems the burden of education lies on the teacher, and thus the child may receive “much teaching with little knowledge,” and it matters less what a child learns than how he learns it, it is here proposed that the child must be given a full and generous curriculum (a liberal education), and all knowledge that is presented to him must be vital, that is, facts must be presented with their informing ideas.

**Nature of education.** Education is the science of relations. The child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts. Affinities that are wide and various must be established through all his training, out-of-door experiences, and through the child accessing many living books (up-to-date books by knowledgeable writers using a literary tone). Education is not about teaching all about anything, but is rather about establishing relations upon which future meetings will bring a thrill of recognition, a basis on which to develop further knowledge.

**Behaviour of the mind.** The mind requires sustenance, and knowledge will be that sustenance. It must be various and mainly conveyed in literary form. The mind assimilates knowledge only when it reproduces it or narrates it back. The mind is capable of great power of attention and therefore single readings are insisted on.

**Moral and intellectual self-management.** Children should be introduced to the two “secrets of moral and intellectual self-management”—the “Way of the Will” and the “Way of the Reason.” In the first, they are taught to distinguish between “I want” and “I will.” To will “effectively” they should turn their thoughts from their desires, distract or divert themselves for a while, and then the will will return to its work refreshed and vigorous. In the second, children are taught that reason can be fallible and that its purpose is to give logical demonstration of mathematical truth and of ideas initially accepted by the will. Reason will confirm whether initial ideas are right or wrong.
Thus the child’s chief responsibility is “the acceptance or rejection of initial ideas.” The student will be aided in this by the principles of conduct, that is the formation of habits, and a wide range of knowledge.

**Role of the divine Spirit in intellectual and spiritual life.** Intellectual life and spiritual life are not separate—as Mason said, the “divine Spirit has constant access to their spirits and is their continual helper in all the interests, duties and joys of life.”

These seven ideas are Mason’s most profound gift to us and may be very briefly summarized as follows: Children are persons, born neither good nor evil; individuals to be respected and nourished by judicious adjustments of, and only of, the natural atmosphere (learning context), discipline (to inculcate good habits), and the properly sustained life. Because the child’s mind is capable of assimilating all sorts of knowledge, especially when presented initially in a literary medium that gives life to thought, mind, and soul, and because the essence of education is forming and reforming relations between a wide and multifarious range of things, curriculum must be generous and liberal. Moral and intellectual self-management must be scaffolded so that children come to control what they actively will and recognize the fallibility of reason. Child and adult are in constant communion with the divine Spirit; thus the spiritual life cannot be lived separate from intellectual and practical life. A goal of education is to form a wealth of relationships to develop the ability to manage self and to recognize the helping presence of divine Spirit so as to be prepared and able to accept or reject initial ideas. This was Mason’s vision—the essence of her, may I say, brilliant educational legacy.

**TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TENABILITY**

In my own journey as a parent and as an educator I have been deeply moved by Mason’s example. Both her theoretical and practical accomplishments remain impressive—and given her gender and her times, they are outstanding. As a parent and teacher peering for the first time through the great door that has been opened, I have found the coherence and “simplicity” of her proposals to answer a deep, unsettled feeling I’ve had about education in our times. Three of the points made above have become particularly meaningful to me as I have been involved in raising and educating my own children and as I work with teacher-education candidates. First, Mason’s assertion (in 1885) that the child is a person, separate, sacred, responsible, capable, hungry, and eager to delight in knowledge was a radical claim (note, for example, that women in Canada were declared to be “persons” only as recently as 1929). If we have ears to hear, I believe Mason’s (1923) words still resonate:

> our crying need today is less for a better method of education than for an adequate conception of children . . . all action comes out of the ideas we hold and if we ponder duly upon personality we shall come to perceive that we cannot commit a greater offence than to maim or crush, or subvert any part of a person.

Second, Mason’s assertion that the Divine Spirit cooperates in the unfolding of all of knowledge is part of her early thought and yet came together in 1893 in her Great Recognition. When reflecting before the Florentine fresco, The Descent of the Holy Spirit, she mused:

> The great recognition that God, the Holy Spirit, is Himself personally the impartor of knowledge, instructor of youth, the inspirer of genius, is a conception so far lost to us
that we should think it distinctly irreverent to conceive of the divine teaching as co-operating with ours in a child’s arithmetic lesson, for example. But the Florentine mind of the Middle Ages went further than this. It believed, not only that the seven liberal arts were fully under the direct outpouring of the Holy Ghost, but that every fruitful idea, every original conception, whether in Euclid, or grammar, or music, was a direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit, without any thought at all as to whether the person so inspired named himself by the name of God, or recognized whence his inspiration came. All these seven figures [seated on the thrones representing the trivium and quadrivium] are those of persons whom we would roughly class as pagans, and whom we might be lightly inclined to consider as outside the pale of divine inspiration. It is truly difficult to grasp the amazing boldness of this scheme of the education of the world which Florence accepted in simple faith. (From Parents and Children: A Sequel to Home Education)

Third, Mason’s resolve that an important means for educating, given the anthropological and epistemological foundations of the two points above, involves the generous presentation of ideas to students through a large banquet of living books that will give life to our thought, our feeling, and our soul—books that will normally have been written by those who have given original thought to the topic under consideration. “Ideas must reach us directly from the mind of the thinker and it is chiefly by means of the books they have written that we get in touch with the best minds”—the child must enjoy the book, and the ideas must make a sudden, delightful impact upon his or her mind.

There is absolutely no avenue to knowledge but knowledge itself, and the schools must begin, not by qualifying the mind to deal with knowledge, but by affording all the best books containing all the sorts of knowledge which [they want to know]. We have to face two difficulties. We do not believe in children as intellectual persons nor in knowledge as requisite and necessary for intellectual life. (Mason, 1925, p. 348)

It is tempting at this point to list favourite history, art, and nature books that have shaped my children throughout their years in a Charlotte Mason-inspired education, but I’ll leave that for others more experienced and qualified in this area.

I am convinced Mason offers us still a coherent, comprehensive strategy for the education of children. She correctly asserts that there are few instruments of education available where educators observe the right of children to have their mind-hunger satisfied and their personality respected (and not undermined). The instruments that can be legitimately invoked are atmosphere, discipline, and life—that is the
natural environment in which a child lives his or her daily life, the habits they are guided to form, and the physical and mental sustenance offered to the child. Within such a framework, the teacher is to be a guide, philosopher, and friend; the student to be self-educating; the family charged to restore itself (where needed) to function as a miniature society or even nation; the parents to function as inspirers, revealers of God, schoolmasters, trainers, instructors in religion, teachers of morals, that use the senses and feelings; the curriculum to be generous and wide and mostly presented in literary garb; the administration to support and equip parents; the schedule full of outdoor hours, with academic pursuits in the mornings, and afternoons for experience in handicrafts, nature study, field-work, drawing, music and physical (sports) pursuits, and evenings for reading and discussions.

What then is Mason’s legacy? This peek through the door reveals—in theory and in practice—a coherent, conceptually integrated scheme with practical applications consistent with its informing ideas. As we reconsider education in our times, it seems to me that we ought to think about how to value the student more robustly as central to all learning and education, that we ought to direct some of our attention to the central epistemological thought that all fruitful ideas and every original conception finds its source in the Spirit of God, and thus ought to ask: “what forms will . . . [educational plans and strategies] take if there is true reciprocity and cooperation with the Spirit’s enabling, sustaining, and developing power?” Finally, we ought to spend outrageous amounts of time and energy in creating the most nourishing educational environments possible and on writing, publishing, and celebrating the finest living books possible such that our next generation will be inspired to behave in certain ways—with generosity, resourcefulness, initiative, serviceableness, happiness, intelligence, magnanimity, self-dependence, self-orderliness, insightfulness, imagination, enthusiasm, sympathy, admiration, sound judgement, integrity, stability, attentiveness, reverence, and delight—and will be interested in a wide variety of ideas, topics, and pursuits—with an understanding of the inter-related aspects of life, the departments of knowledge (God, man and universe), and the subjects of thought.

Glimpsing through this great door has awakened the desire of educators across the world to re-imagine the vision for education in our times. Mason’s remarkable personal and
professional legacy demonstrates that with clarity, vision, energy, and community, much is possible. And so, in the unsettling moments when we observe the quiet grief of a “starving” five year old or recognize the hushed pain in our students’ eyes and know that something is terribly amiss in the educational nourishment we are providing, Mason’s legacy offers the courageous a compelling way forward.

Acknowledgements: Insightful comments by Laurie Bestwater, John Thorley, Jennifer Spencer, and Carroll Smith improved the content and accuracy of this paper. Their reviews are sincerely appreciated.

DR. DEANI A. NEVEN VAN PELT is Associate Professor of Education at Redeemer University College, where she serves as Director of Teacher Education. She authored an award-winning thesis, Charlotte Mason’s Design for Education, and together with colleagues has recently released the Charlotte Mason Digital Collection.
REFERENCES


