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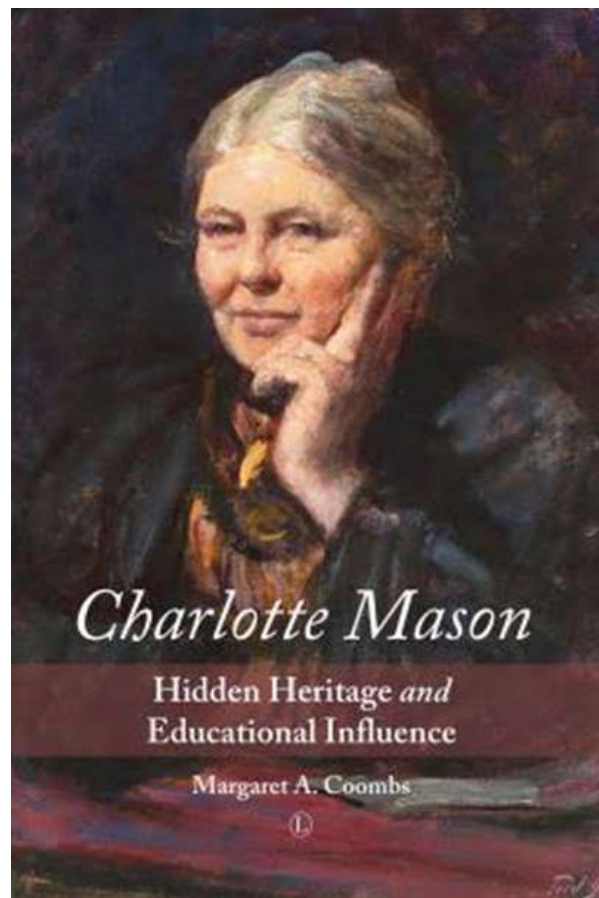
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Sociologist and social historian Margaret Coombs' biography of Victorian educator Charlotte Mason accomplishes much: it provides an extraordinarily thorough account of Mason's life, and at the same time corrects some fundamental misunderstandings about Mason's background. *Charlotte Mason: Hidden Heritage and Educational Influence* (2015) establishes Coombs as the authoritative biographer of Charlotte Mason, replacing an earlier prominent biography.

Charlotte Mason rose from a humble background to become a major figure in her own time, affecting the training of in-home governesses and eventually teachers on a broader scale. Her educational philosophy focused on the basics of reading, writing, and math, the use of high-quality academic materials for other subjects, real-life experiences such as nature walks and museum visits, and training in the formation of good habits and religion. She had an early goal of improving the education wealthier children received from their in-home governesses and from their parents, which led to the formation of a network to promote her ideas, the



Parents National Education Union (PNEU), a publication, *Parents Review*, and eventually a teacher training college. Having established a worldwide network of organizations dedicated to helping parents and teachers to educate children, publishing numerous works on educational theory and practice, and running a teachers training college for years, Charlotte Mason died in 1923. After WWII, the PNEU, seeking to preserve Mason's legacy and the organization itself, called for a biography of Mason to be written. *The Story of Charlotte Mason* by Essex Cholmondeley was published in 1960, and republished in 2000. Coombs writes:

Until now, Cholmondeley's biography has been the main source of information about Charlotte Mason's hidden early life. When the book was re-issued in 2000 for a wider, transatlantic audience, Eve Anderson, a former student, stated unequivocally, "It is an accurate account." New evidence, presented here, disproves this assertion (p. 11).

In an extremely detailed chronological account based on extensive archival work, Coombs traces Mason's life, beginning generations before she is born in 1842, through her death in 1923, and the legacy of her work shortly thereafter. The book documents Mason's life year by year, but over its course it addresses both her "hidden heritage" and "educational influence."

Hidden Heritage

Coombs' biography provides an important correction to Cholmondeley's assertion that Mason was an orphaned only child. Coombs documents Mason's ancestral Quaker roots in Ireland and how she was her father's 13th child, by his third wife.

Coombs traces Mason's family history beginning with her great-grandfather, a Quaker who lived in and around Dublin, Ireland. In fact, the lives of many of Mason's ancestors are explored, their business dealings,

moves, and status within the local Quaker groups and society at large provided in great detail. Family members have business successes and failures, they enter and leave various Quaker communities, and several lead or teach in schools. Eventually, we learn about the circumstances of Mason's own birth and why her heritage may have been "hidden" for so long.

Having already lost two wives, Charlotte Mason's father, Joshua, seems to have had an affair with a much younger woman, Margaret Shaw, and then left with one of his sons to find fortune in Australia. Upon receiving word that Margaret was pregnant and alone (now in Wales), Joshua returned and married her. The exact path this new little family followed is not entirely clear, but it is known that by about age 16, Charlotte Mason's parents had both died. Her illegitimate beginnings, as well as the fact that Margaret was Catholic, likely led to Charlotte Mason, who was trying to climb the ranks of society in Victorian and Edwardian England (and succeeding), seem to have led to the hiding of her heritage, both by Mason's own reticence to discuss and in others to protect her eventually valuable image.

At least the first half of this biography is dedicated to following Mason's story from her ancestry, through her studies as a pupil teacher and her various school posts. Readers will get a sense of how Mason's health issues affected her at various points, how her friendships and professional relationships developed, soured, and recovered over time, as well as great detail about her circumstances at each post, and how those posts led to greater and greater responsibilities for her.

Educational Influence

The bulk of the book at this point follows Mason's efforts (along with allies including Elsie "Kit Kit" Kitching, Lienie Steinthal, and especially Nettie Franklin) to establish the PNEU, to define its philosophy, and to spread Mason's ideas about curriculum and methods through the training of in-home

governesses and eventually through teachers in public schools. Much of this discussion involves the inner working of the PNEU's Executive Committee, and the internal politics Mason faced in navigating those relationships.

Moving from an orphan "pupil teacher," to several teaching positions, to founding a nationwide and, indeed worldwide network of parent associations, as well as Mason's struggles to get her educational practices an entrance into England's public schools, Charlotte Mason certainly had a large influence on educational practices of her time. Mason's first major published effort was an illustrated history book about England, titled *The Forty Shires*. Once she surpassed this hurdle, many works followed, both practical (such as her *Geographical Readers*), and more philosophical (including *An Essay Toward a Philosophy of Education*).

Several of the PNEU's conflicts are catalogued in the later chapters of the book. Finances (including *Parents Review* subscription issues, real estate, and more), branch expansion and control, and executive committee struggles are prominent. Tension often arose among the leadership about whether their efforts were meant for (wealthier) home educators, or should be pushed more broadly to include efforts to train teachers in schools for poorer children. Another constant struggle is Mason's desire not to be seen as someone simply following education fads, but really working out a new method of education. Various editions of Mason's influential book *Home Education*, first published in 1886, included or excised educators whose thinking had influenced Mason's, such as John Locke, Herbert Spencer, and Johan Pestalozzi. By the early 1900s, only Spencer's name remained.

A few later chapters are devoted to Mason's concept of a "liberal education for all." Unfortunately however, this biography does not pause to elucidate Mason's philosophy much, except in passing. It assumes some knowledge of her theories, and actually spends its time describing how Mason

maneuvered them into practice through the PNEU and her training college. The story is more of the process of the implementation of her ideas, rather than a presentation or discussion of the ideas themselves and how exactly they fit in the larger context of the time. Allan and Jackson (2010) provide a good summary of "Charlotte Mason education":

Mason's basic approach was to teach basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills and then expose children to the best sources of knowledge for all other subjects. This included nature walks, visiting art museums, reading real books with "living ideas" (books which made the subject come alive rather than textbooks). Children are involved in a broad spectrum of real-life situations and given ample time to play and create. They are also taught good morals and habits. Children are encouraged to "tell" what they have learnt through writing, art, and performance (p. 57).

This is an accurate picture, and several of the activities noted by Allan and Jackson are discussed in Coombs' biography, but a reader without prior knowledge will need to piece it all together. Coombs does include an appendix with a short excerpt from *An Essay Toward a Philosophy of Education*, which was meant to distill Mason's thoughts (and was published posthumously, in 1925), and which lists a short synopsis of Mason's ideas.

These conflicts over whether "Charlotte Mason education" was a fad, and how exactly to define it, come up repeatedly in the book, even after Mason is established in her final position leading her House of Education at Ambleside. Though Mason certainly valued habit training and some practical skills, she also trained her teachers to promote a sense of wonder and appreciation for the world, and greatly valued religious education. Still, writer G.K. Chesterton, when visiting the PNEU office in London (to court his future wife, who worked there), would call it "The Parents' National, highly rational

Educational Union” (p. 206). And on the other hand, Mason herself had severe misgivings about another educational giant of the time, Maria Montessori. According to Coombs, in a letter to *The Times Educational Supplement*, Mason wrote,

The Montessori Child...sharpens a single sense to be sure at the expense of a higher sense but there is no gradual painting in of the background of his life; no fairies play about him, no heroes stir his soul. God and good angels form no part of his thought; the child and the person he will become are a scientific product” (p. 229).

These conflicts—between Mason and Montessori (at least in theory, not in person), and whether a true, solid definition of Mason’s educational philosophy exists—are not quite ever resolved.

A few other omissions are noteworthy. Despite Coombs’ thoroughness regarding events in Mason’s life, some potentially interesting stories are left hinted at but untold. Florence Nightingale is described as Mason’s “heroine” more than once (p. 77, p. 121), but particular reasons or statements of admiration—perhaps from a letter Mason wrote to some friend (of which Coombs cites many)—are not given. Additionally, Coombs

cryptically mentions “Sapphic tendencies” (p. 262) in one paragraph near the very end of the book, but any specific hints or accusations are unmentioned. Given the detail other events receive, as well as Mason’s rise in the English society of the time, some exploration of these stories might have been interesting.

Conclusion

In *Charlotte Mason: Hidden Heritage and Educational Influence*, Coombs has put together an extremely detailed look at the life of a major figure, especially among home educators. Mason’s influence on education in her time, as the PNEU and its publications spread across the globe, cannot be denied. She was an iconic figure at her House of Education, with students and visitors looking at her in awe, even as her health was extremely frail near the end of her life. (Elsie Kitching, who had been with Mason for years, was buried in a small, plain grave at the foot of Mason’s own, much grander resting place). Those seeking an introduction to Mason’s ideas and methods will still need to look elsewhere for a complete picture of her philosophy and practical advice, but this book corrects a major misconception about Charlotte Mason’s upbringing, and her fans will find it enlightening.

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