

# Foreword

Charlotte Mason was a prominent and much respected figure on the education scene in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the context of the history of education in the UK, her educational ideas deserve to be more fully understood than they have been in recent years. But Charlotte Mason's educational ideas are not simply of historical interest. Within her educational philosophy, her emphasis on the individuality of each child and on the entitlement of every child to a wide and personally fulfilling curriculum still has a clear relevance to the continuing educational debate today. In the UK, many of Charlotte Mason's ideas did indeed become thoroughly incorporated into primary school practice in the course of the twentieth century. Her distinctive contribution has been largely forgotten, but as an educationist who was a prime mover in the shift from the Victorian classroom, with its almost exclusive emphasis on the three Rs and payment by results, to the child-focussed philosophy of the modern primary classroom, Charlotte Mason deserves greater recognition. In the USA and Canada today, Charlotte Mason is better known, and her ideas are currently the focus of much re-thinking of what education is about, especially among those who have misgivings about what the state system has to offer.

Added to all this, Charlotte Mason's own life story, from the backstreets of Birkenhead to the salons of Victorian and Edwardian high society, is a fascinating tale. Margaret Coombs has reconstructed the life of Charlotte Mason here in far greater detail than has ever been achieved before. It was, for instance, previously generally accepted that Charlotte Mason was the only child of her parents. She was probably the only child of her mother, who Margaret has shown was a Roman Catholic, but Margaret has also shown beyond any shadow of a doubt that Charlotte was most certainly not the only child of her elderly father, Joshua Mason, who had a long and colourful history before he fathered Charlotte. Joshua was a Quaker, in his younger days a successful member of the Quaker community of south-eastern Ireland, and descended from Westmorland Friends who set up schools in Ireland. All this was totally unsuspected before Margaret, through her painstaking and detailed

research, discovered a whole new dimension in Charlotte's personal history. The implications of this – Charlotte's Quaker connections, the sad death of her father and mother while she was still a teenager, Charlotte's half-brothers and half-sisters in Ireland – have been a major part of Margaret's research. This research has explained much of Charlotte's later beliefs and attitudes.

I first met Margaret about thirty years ago, when I was principal of Charlotte Mason College, and since then we have corresponded about her research, and from time to time have met, usually among the Charlotte Mason archives held in the Armit Library in Ambleside. Thus I have seen Margaret's investigations develop, often from a mere hint in the records, into a coherent and detailed analysis of Charlotte Mason's history.

It is probably true to say that most biographers find that there are areas of their subjects' lives that are particularly difficult to piece together, either because the subject of the biography has for whatever reason left little trace, or because other sources, relatives, friends or even other biographers have been economical with the truth, or even deliberately misleading. Margaret was faced with all these problems in good measure. Charlotte herself, for reasons that Margaret analyses very thoroughly, had little to say about her early childhood or family. But perhaps even more problematic was the fact that the archive materials available on Charlotte Mason have been through multiple vicissitudes; various parts have been lodged in different locations, brought together only in the 1990s. It is now known for certain that some materials were destroyed. What remains is still a considerable archive, but Margaret's researches have gone far beyond the archive in Ambleside. She has investigated archives in Liverpool, Birkenhead, Lisburn in Northern Ireland, Dublin, Waterford, Kendal and at leading Quaker libraries and the Bodleian, as well as hunting down sources on the internet.

The result is an objective analysis of Charlotte Mason's life, family connections, educational thinking and personal motivations, as she progressed from her childhood on Merseyside to college in London, and then to teaching in Worthing and lecturing at Bishop Otter Memorial College in Chichester, followed by teaching again in her friend's school in Bradford, during which time she established the PNEU as a national organisation to disseminate her educational ideas, and finally to the setting up of her own House of Education in Ambleside to train governesses, many of whom later taught in PNEU schools. In the process, Margaret presents us with a kaleidoscope of the personalities who influenced education and social attitudes, amongst whom Charlotte Mason found her niche.

Margaret Coombs has not only provided a lively account of Charlotte Mason's life, but has also placed it firmly within the social and educational context of the Victorian and early twentieth century periods.

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