

CHARLOTTE MASON: HER CONCEPT OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR ALL

(by Bruce McNeice)

Do you find the times in which we live, to be a little perplexing, even somewhat scary when considering how so many non-sensical and morally dangerous ideas are propagated through mainstream media and social-media? Even more perplexing is the large number of people falling under their spell with no logic to their arguments.

The words of Paul the Apostle seem to ring in our ears: *“Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of the age? Hasn’t God made the world’s wisdom foolish?”*

Christian apologist, David Noebel suggests we are currently engaged in an all pervasive battle for the minds and hearts of our young people, which will have eternal consequences. (Noebel, D. 2012, p. 2).

This is one of the reasons we desperately need a renewal of a Christian classical education in Australia.

The goal of this article is to introduce you to the ideas and concerns of a Christian classical educator whose unique philosophy and methods of education have and are positively transforming thousands of children in liberal arts schools and homeschools around the world.

Charlotte Mason, a British educator, philosopher, and reformer; was actually the first classical home-education consultant on record. In 1896 (over 120 years ago) she wrote a book called ‘Home-education’; and she promoted a concept of using rich literature (‘living books’) and real-life experiences as a foundation for learning.

Charlotte Mason stood against the tide of schools based on the Prussian model, where the purpose of education was primarily economic and pragmatic. The real goal of the conventional education system of her day (as it still is today), was to create a compliant workforce. Whereas Mason was concerned that the best education designed to nurture the leaders of the nation, was only available to the upper-class elite. She wanted that education to be accessible to all children. She advocated for *‘a liberal education for all’*.

During twenty years of homeschool advocacy, and five years as a school principal, one of the problems, the author (Bruce McNeice) has increasingly noticed, is that the disdain for academic, philosophical and cultural pursuits is often unconsciously handed down through careless words from generation to generation. The author cringes when he hears parents say things like: *“What’s the use of advanced maths, or the fine arts, literature, history and philosophy – a cultural education. Will it help them get a job”* - as though that’s what education is obviously for. While these parents dismiss pursuits that they perceive as associated with impractical, useless, snobby culture, they don’t even realise that if they continue to think and talk this way, then they are subconsciously training their children just to be content to take their place in the compliant workforce, never aspiring to a higher vision of life.

The author recently conducted a survey of the highest performing schools in Australia (often they were the Grammar schools); and a surprising number of them used this term a 'liberal education' or the 'liberal arts' as part of their core philosophy. Now- people who have heard of the term liberal arts, often associate it with just the Humanities and Arts subjects; but the original classical liberal arts had a much broader meaning, including science, mathematics, music, physical training, philosophy, theology, history and literature. It was a well-rounded formation of the whole person. The concept of a 'liberal education' was a wholistic education that prepared the student with all the practical skills, intellectual, cultural and social skills essential to live well. This term also came from the Latin word 'liberalis' which meant – "of or pertaining to freedom, generous, bountiful, ample".

'Liberalis' meant the education befitting a man of free birth, rather than a slave, it had the connotation of all that was dignified, gentlemanly, courteous and honourable. The education befitting nobility, and for preparing those who would become the leaders of the nation; an education quite different from that given to the servants and the common masses.

Interestingly, whereas the Christian churches had been providing education for the poor to help them rise out of their poverty; in the late 1800s, it was the powerful industrialists who funded and controlled the politics behind the establishment of a compulsory mass education system. In their view, it was most beneficial for the sake of the economy, that the masses should receive just a basic education- to help them be more productive, while only the minority ruling classes received this high-quality broad cultural education.

In the tradition of the Christian liberal arts education, the students are taught to enter into what was called 'the great conversation' with the leading thinkers, the great cultural minds of the past. These elite students, who were often taught at home by tutors and governors, would become the thinkers and leaders of society.

On the other hand, it was seen to be appropriate for the rest of the masses to just get the basics. In order to develop a compliant workforce, the commoners should be taught to sit in rows, be told what to think and believe, and work to the clock or bell. Then, through the manipulative power of competition, grade-scores, and prizes – to be most concerned with performing for the test, rather than to learn for interest sake or to feed one's mind, heart, and spirit.

Therefore, two separate classes emerged – the elite being groomed for leadership and great responsibility, versus the common folk trained to become a compliant workforce. Now, to give the illusion of upward mobility, and to further help them understand their place in the class structure, even in the commoners' education there were class divisions, such that those who did not show much academic or clerical ability were streamed into trade courses; and those with academic ability were directed towards the more clerical white-collar type occupations.

Charlotte Mason was abhorred by this practice of streaming (which is still a very prevalent mindset today). Her concept of '*a generous liberal education for all*', meant that she wanted all children to have a broad cultural and academic education on the

one hand; and to also have a real-life, grounded practical hands-on learning experience on the other. In her network of schools and correspondence students, she focussed on encouraging the love of learning, and provided time and space to reflect, to think and to problem-solve. She inspired students to look for 'living ideas' while also learning practical life-skills and good character habits. She was careful to train the children's 'loves', (the love of God, love for others, love for literature & culture, and a love for the created universe). She also gave trained their 'tastes', giving them a taste for an abundant life through the appreciation of all that is good, true, and beautiful.

Often, school programs try to fit in too much information. However, by lingering on a topic, taking more time to explore a topic through well-written books, Miss Mason allowed the students to build a personal relationship with the ideas and people in living books. Also, by allowing time for hands-on exploration and observation of things in the natural and man-made world, the students developed their own personal relationship with the world around them. The students didn't use dry textbooks, memorising facts and figures, dates and events to cram for the test and promptly forgetting it afterwards. She brought history to life with classic literature from the period, and well written stories of interesting people, places and events. Captivated by far-away places and times, the children lingered on one historical person for weeks at a time through a whole book; long enough to form a personal relationship with an author, a philosopher, a great leader, or an artist or composer.

You see, education shouldn't be about passing the test so as to place the child in the right box, and to sort out which kind of job they can get. For Charlotte Mason, education was a search for living ideas, and it was about learning to live well. The children developed practical life skills, good character habits, and also became familiar with the great works of art and music, and the very best literature from the best minds through the ages.

After Mason's death in 1923, her organisation, the Parents National Education Union continued for many years; but the richness of a liberal education with a Christian worldview went out of fashion in the 1960's such that British schools that had been so influenced by Charlotte Mason's ideas, abandoned them because they were seen to be too Christian in flavour.

The universities were also changing. In past eras, the great universities were traditionally places to think and ponder the essential questions of life. They provided time and space to acquire wisdom by learning from the great minds of the past, and by researching and reflecting on the great philosophical questions of life. Questions of origins, morality, meaning, and destiny. In the Modern era, Darwin and Nietsch's ideas supposedly set people free from such questions, no longer necessary in a naturalistic or mechanistic cosmos.

In the age of modernity, science and technology promised to provide all the answers we needed. Because of this shift, most universities are no longer places to think and reflect on life; but are primarily technical-career colleges, focussed on training people to get a specific job. So now this pragmatic economic goal of education – the provision of a compliant workforce – had even taken over the universities.

In contrast to this, the world's top universities that have educated the most world leaders (ie. Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, The College of William and Mary, etc) each have had a strong liberal arts tradition. These and other liberal arts universities, (including Campion College, Sydney and the Millis Institute in Brisbane) tend to spend the first two to three years in a broad cultural and wisdom focus, and then they specialise in a narrow profession only in their final year or two, or maybe not until the Masters level. Liberal Arts Degrees have a long history in England, Europe and the U.S. for producing great leaders, statesmen, captains of industry and government, and community leaders.

"In fact", according to USA Today, "more than half of the Fortune 500 CEO's have a degree in the Liberal Arts" (USA Today 24 July 2001).

Now there are two kinds of Classical Liberal Arts programs – a secular classical tradition has its roots in Greek humanist thinking, where man is the central reference point; and then there is a Christian liberal education based on a Hebrew way of thinking, where God is acknowledged as the first cause, and the child's personal relationship with their creator is encouraged. In fact from the Middle Ages until the start of the Modern Era (1100-1750AD) the Classical Liberal Arts education tradition in the European monasteries and universities considered Theology to have the most noble position of all the Arts and Sciences (van den Brink 2019).

But a Christian Classical Liberal Arts education is not just for those aspiring to leadership. One of the men most responsible for the revival of classical education in the last century was Robert Maynard Hutchins. For Hutchins, classical education was no elitist affectation of the upper classes. Rather, he suggested the liberal arts – taught by 'The Great Books' of all ages – would offer precisely the kind of education necessary to a democracy. Every citizen, he believed, needed to be equipped with the intellectual tools for self-government, personal success, and – in the original sense of the 'liberal arts' – freedom." (Veith & Kern, 2015, p. 31)

The central concepts of a liberal arts education are the character training of virtue and humanity, and the love of goodness, truth and beauty. These are worthy goals that transcend social class and elite status. All children should benefit from these goals.

Although the majority of schools and universities had drifted away from their philosophical roots, there is a renaissance of schools and universities that are returning to include a Christian Classical Liberal Arts emphasis that leads to greater civility, lasting relationships, stronger families, successful vocations, and a more fulfilling abundant life.

Regarding the current emphasis on STEM subjects in State education, it is interesting to see statistics revealing that although the fields of technology and IT are still growth industries, there has been a shift, where the top management levels of most of the big Tech companies are now seeking liberal arts graduates because of their broader perspective, their understanding of society and human nature, plus their ability to think, problem-solve and communicate.

Another interesting research outcome is that ‘wealthy and influential’ people don’t prioritise “getting a job”. Typically having higher aspirations, the wealthy and influential have learnt to invest in themselves, to understand the times in which they live, and to know how to live well. Looking beyond mere job security, they will tend to find some area of passionate interest, and then make a plan for how they can make a real positive difference in the world. Students who have this higher vision for their own education, will still be able to ‘get a job’, but that won’t be their focus.

For example, back in 1990, millionaire Robert Kiyosaki wrote a book called ‘If you want to be rich and happy, don’t go to school’. Then in a later best seller ‘Rich Dad, Poor Dad’, he advised people not to look for a job for the money or status or financial security; but rather, apply for an employment position for what you can learn, to invest in yourself in the areas that will be beneficial for your future, while maintaining the areas of life that really matter most.

Similarly, Charlotte Mason had a focus on learning for life. In the early 1900s, Mason had a live-in training college for teachers, nannies and governesses called the ‘House of Education’. Often when a new young lady came to her college, she would ask “*Why have you come? What do you hope to get out of your time with us?*”

The new student would often say something about coming to learn to teach, or to be mentored by a master teacher. Then she would say “*No. Not at all. You have come to learn how to live!*”

After 26 years of education consultancy, it is the contention of the author that Australian parents and children desperately need a transformed and transforming education that a Christian classical education can provide. Australian parents need to truly invest in themselves and their children, so they too can not merely help the children with their schoolwork; but help them to truly learn to live well. Then their children won’t just be preparing to ‘get a job’; but will have a purpose and a calling, a destiny to fulfil that leads to abundant life.

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