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Christina de Bellaigue

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Charlotte Mason, home education and the Parents' National Educational Union in the late nineteenth century

Christina de Bellaigue*
Exeter College, Oxford, UK

This article examines the work of educationist Charlotte Mason (1842–1923) to explore the practice of home education in the late nineteenth century. Mason's work reflected and responded to the particular circumstances and concerns of her clientele. She provided a way for parents to compensate for the practical deficiencies of contemporary educational provision, while engaging with current pedagogical theory. In the process, she demonstrated the enduring appeal of a strand of pedagogical thought resistant to the dominant educational models, but not hostile to institutional education per se.

Keywords: *Charlotte Mason; home education; PNEU; professionalisation; motherhood; progressive pedagogy*

Charlotte Mason (1842–1923) is today best known in the United States. There, she is cited as an inspiration for the home-schooling movement (Andreola, 1998; Levison, 2000). In Britain, by contrast, she has largely been forgotten, and is neglected by historians of education concerned with institutions and policy. At the time of her death in 1923, however, Mason was considered by *The Times* to have had a 'personal influence probably more widespread than that of any educationist of her time' (Obituary, *The Times*, 17 January 1923, p. 13). In her numerous publications—including *Home Education* (1886)—and through the Parents' National Educational Union (PNEU), she developed an educational philosophy which proved popular in late nineteenth-century Britain. In the early twentieth century, her approach was disseminated more widely as families throughout the British Empire took up her correspondence course, and as Mason's ideas were adopted in private schools and even in some maintained elementary schools (Behlmer, 1998, p. 159).

*Exeter College, Oxford OX1 3DP, UK. Email: christina.debellaigue@history.ox.ac.uk

Mason's work has received some scholarly attention. Stephanie Spencer argues that Mason was ahead of her time in developing a liberal curriculum that was to be offered to boys and girls, irrespective of class, in a period when educational provision was highly class- and gender-specific (Spencer, 2010). Other scholars have focused more on the PNEU (Behlmer, 1998; Musgrove, 1959; Woodley, 2009). Behlmer and Woodley emphasise the way that the PNEU sought to respond to contemporary parental concerns. However there has been no sustained analysis of the reasons why Mason and the PNEU appealed so widely and to whom. This article seeks to fill that gap. It is based on the analysis of Mason's early work, on articles in the journal of the PNEU between 1890 and 1900, and on the papers preserved in the Charlotte Mason Archive in the Armitt Library. It sets Mason's ideas in context and examines the social origins and motivations of those who followed her in the period 1886–1900 when the PNEU was being established (after which its focus shifted more towards the Empire and towards promoting Mason's ideas for adoption in schools). In the process, this article sheds light on the practice of home education at a time when institutional education was increasingly considered essential. It argues that while Mason represented her work as modern, she also drew on long-established traditions of advice literature and educational writing. At the same time, it demonstrates that contextualising Mason's thought and practice reveals the extent to which it developed specifically in response to the educational landscape of late nineteenth-century England rather than as a philosophy of home education.

I. Charlotte Mason, *Home Education* and the origins of the PNEU

Little is known about Charlotte Mason's early life. What we do know, however, situates her firmly within the movement to develop teacher training. Born in 1842, in 1860, she enrolled at the Home and Colonial School Society (HCSS) Training College in London (Cholmondely, 1960, p. 6). This establishment trained teachers, mainly for elementary schools, along Pestalozzian and Froebelian lines (emphasising child-centred approaches to teaching and learning) and was an important influence on many of the key figures in women's education (Bellaigue, 2007, Ch. 2). From there, she became the head mistress of an infant school, and then joined a teacher-training college in Chichester as lecturer in hygiene and physiology and tutor in practical pedagogy. In 1878, however, a serious breakdown led to her moving to live with a schoolmistress friend in Bradford. There, in 1885–1886, she gave a series of lectures on the role of parents in education. Her lectures were published as *Home Education: A Course of Lectures to Ladies* in 1886. As this chronology makes clear, it was in her capacity as a professional educator, and trainer of teachers, that she addressed the 'Ladies' in her title.

In the first edition of *Home Education*, Mason set out her key ideas on the role of parents—and more particularly mothers—in the nurture and instruction of children. She drew inspiration from current psychological theory, reflecting a contemporary interest in scientific approaches to children's development that would lead to the emergence of the Child Study movement in the 1890s (Behlmer, 1998,

pp. 136–146; Shuttleworth, 2010, Ch. 14). Citing William Carpenter's *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874) and the work of Herbert Spencer, amongst others, Mason argued that parents needed to understand child physiology and psychology if they hoped to educate their offspring effectively. This she presented as a self-consciously modern approach: 'Hitherto' she argued, 'children have been brought up upon traditional methods mainly', but in the wake of the new science 'the traditions of the elders have been tried and found wanting' (Mason, 1886, pp. 2–4). Now, mothers must master a 'science of education' and direct the instruction of their children accordingly. The principle means advocated by Mason in this process were 'atmosphere', 'living ideas' and the cultivation of habit. By 'atmosphere' she meant that children should be exposed to a wide range of influences. Her notion of 'living ideas' (and 'living books') was that young people should be offered a generous curriculum which drew on the best of literature and thought, rather than being tailored specifically to children, again referring to contemporary theories of mind to explain her strategies (Mason, 1886, pp. 131, 127). Her final emphasis was on the importance of cultivating habits to counter 'that weakness of will which is the bane of most of us', and here once more, she referred to contemporary science to underline the importance of early training and habit formation: 'the actual conformation of the child's brain depends upon the habits which the parents permit or encourage' (Mason, 1886, pp. 70, 84). In *Home Education* then, Mason developed a conception of education, and specific pedagogical strategies, which highlighted the important role mothers and fathers should play in their children's development. These she presented as derived from new scientific theories of mental growth.

Significantly, *Home Education* was not a manifesto for domestic instruction. While Mason asserted that education in the home was almost always preferable for younger children, she did not recommend home education for older children: after the age of nine, 'the discipline of the school is so valuable that the boy or girl who grows up without it is at a disadvantage through life' (Mason, 1886, p. 214). The last part of *Home Education* then, advises parents on how to support children at school, and how to support girls after school.[1] It is written with the confidence of a professional who had expert knowledge of contemporary educational practice, and with a sympathetic understanding of the situation of young middle-class women who, living with their parents while waiting for marriage 'want scope, and … the discipline of work' (Mason, 1886, pp. 203–207, 276). Presenting her approach as distinctively adapted to the modern age, she set out her vision of the ways in which advanced and educated mothers should provide for their children's physical and intellectual growth, and for their moral development. They would do so first through the home schoolroom, and then by acting as auxiliaries to trained schoolteachers.

For all her emphasis on the 'modern' character of her strategies, Mason was writing in a long tradition of advice literature for parents, dating back to the seventeenth century (Hilton, 2007, pp. 22–24). Even the emphasis on scientific principles was not unprecedented, with authors like Caroline Southwood Hill advising mothers in the 1840s to adopt scientific principles in caring for their children (Southwood Hill, 1865). Mason acknowledged her debt to earlier educators,

referring frequently to Rousseau and the Edgeworths, and echoing their emphasis on the value of allowing children to learn for themselves from nature (Mason, 1886, pp. 107, 151; *Parents' Review* [hereafter *PR*], I, 1890, p. 514) and frequently evoking a pastoral idyll as the ideal location for children's learning. At the same time, she offered very practical advice. *Home Education* included detailed instructions on meals and nursery furniture and drew analogies between aspects of knowledge and the rituals of middle-class life. Thus, in recommending that children keep a nature diary to record observations of animals and insects, she commented that 'there is hardly a day when some friend may not be expected to hold a first "At Home"' (referring to the contemporary practice of regularly being 'at home' to receive visitors) (Mason, 1886, p. 41). Her writing exemplifies the hybrid character of many treatises of this period—blending science, literary allusions and analogies with daily life: writing in a way that evoked a long-standing pastoral tradition of progressive education, Mason developed an educational philosophy with considerable contemporary appeal. *Home Education* was generally well received and favourably reviewed in *The Scotsman* and the *Manchester Guardian*, and *The Academy*, which emphasised its reasonable and sensible approach (Spencer, 2010, p. 117; Woodley, 2009, p. 269). A second edition was published in 1896.

The most significant impact of *Home Education*, however, was in galvanising support for the PNEU. This began in Bradford when, 'a few persons met in a neighbouring drawing room to discuss a scheme for a Parents' Educational Union' whose purpose was to educate parents as to 'the Laws of Education' (*PR*, I, 1890, pp. 69–70). In 1890, the first volume of the association's monthly periodical—the *Parents' Review*— appeared. Mason, who had moved to Ambleside in the Lake District in 1891, and set up the headquarters of the PNEU there, was the editor. In 1892, apparently prompted by parental demand, Mason set up the Parents' Review School (PRS), an innovative correspondence course which provided specially tailored curricula and schedules to families, with examination papers at the end of each term. It was aimed principally at children under the age of nine, but also catered for 'girls of the professional class, living in the country' and 'girls of the highest class' who were not always sent to school (*PR*, II, 1892, pp. 308–317). In the same year, the association adopted a federal structure and declared themselves a national body—the Parents' National Educational Union (PNEU). By 1897, the PNEU counted 31 branches nationwide with a total of 1615 members and the prospect of new branches being established in Belgium, India and South Africa. Local branches organised lectures on education and nurture for parents, brought children together for specialised teaching, and provided various resources (*PNEU Report*, 1897).

If Mason underlined the domestic, drawing-room origins of the PNEU, she also continued to argue that those caring for children needed training, and in 1892 she embarked on two ventures intended to professionalise the care and teaching of children in the home. The first was the Mothers' Education Course (MEC) intended to encourage women to prepare themselves more effectively for supervising their own children's education. It ran until 1915. The second was the House of

Education in Ambleside, which offered a year's training and was aimed at 'earnest and well-bred women who are looking out for good work' usually as governesses (*PNEU Report*, 1897, p. 53). By 1897, it had trained 85 young women and was being recommended in periodicals like the *Monthly Packet*, a journal aimed at young middle-class women (Green (1895)), and to mothers in search of governesses through journals like *Hearth and Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen* ('Answers to correspondents', 1900).

The fact that Mason's activities centred on Ambleside was significant. There, she was in close contact with Selina Fleming—a friend from the HCSS Training College. Fleming had taken over a school previously established in Ambleside by Anne Jemima Clough, the first principal of Newnham College, Cambridge. Clough also had connections to the HCSS, and supported teacher training, and Mason consulted her on how best to manage the PNEU (*PR*, VIII, 1897, p. 51; Sutherland, 2006, p. 47). While supporting education in the home, Mason thus shored up her connections to the movement to develop teaching as a profession, situating herself within a cluster of forward-thinking educators. Indeed, in all her ventures, Mason cultivated and was supported by a growing network of very able teachers and parents and made good use of her contacts with some of the key contemporary figures in education. Emily Shirreff (co-founder of the Girls Public Day School Trust and leading Froebelian), Michael Sadler (later Director of the Board of Education) and Oscar Browning (principal of the Cambridge Day Training College) amongst others, all contributed to the *Parents' Review* and participated in the formation of the Union. By the mid 1890s, the PNEU was established as a forum where key figures in education might share their ideas with a growing group of active and interested parents.

As this rapid overview reveals, Mason was a successful educational entrepreneur as well as an educational philosopher. By comparison with other contemporary educational organisations, the PNEU was not large. In the 1890s, the University Extension Movement was attracting in the region of 20,000 students; by 1906, there were 13,052 members of the National Home Reading Union (Goldman, 1995, p. 61; Snape, 2002, p. 103). In the 1900s, the PNEU gained strength particularly in the colonies (a subject which requires further research[2]), but in the 1890s, its membership was not huge and its ambitions were more limited. Yet Mason was effective in her efforts to recruit, and by 1899, 80 women had enrolled on the MEC (Kitching, 1923, p. 139); in 1900, there were about 300 families registered for the PRS (Woodley, 2009, p. 253). By 1907, there were 2300 subscribers to the *Parents' Review* and by 1913, the central office of the PNEU was processing between 12,000 and 13,000 letters per year (*PNEU Report*, 1907, p. 15, 1913, p. 19). Mason and the PNEU were also attracting attention more widely. The establishment of the PNEU was reported in the national press (not always favourably—*Macmillan's Magazine* ran a critical piece describing it as a demanding and unnecessary intrusion into the life of the 'poor breadwinner' ('Cry of the parents', 1890). Local branch meetings and lectures were covered in the regional papers, and Mason used articles in the national press to publicise and develop her ideas

(Spencer, 2010, p. 109). What this press interest, the growing numbers of participants in Mason's various programmes, as well as the rapid dissemination of her ideas suggest is that she was answering needs widely felt. Through the correspondence course, the lectures and services provided by the PNEU branches, the MEC, the House of Education, Mason was influencing the work of parents in 'home-schoolrooms' nationwide.

II. The 'children of educated people': the clientele of the PNEU

In the period between 1887 and 1900, the families joining the PNEU were largely drawn from established land-holding families, professional families and the upper middle class more widely, while there was also a steady stream of members from lower down the social scale. This recruitment pattern is partly explained by the contemporary institutional context.

Formal schooling was on the rise. In the second half of the nineteenth century institutional provision for the education of children and adolescents steadily expanded. From the 1870s, new legislation led to the gradual emergence of a national system of free schools. These, however, were elementary schools, intended for the working class, and catering for children between the ages of 5 and 10. A range of secondary schools catered for better-off children between the ages of 8 and 18. These too were expanding their provision and numbers; but this very expansion threw into relief the need to provide for the earlier education of middle- and upper-class children, whose parents would not contemplate sending them anywhere near elementary schools (Sutherland, 1990, pp. 141–152). Private 'preparatory' schools, aimed at such younger children, had been growing in number since the beginning of the century, but were still only available to a minority (Leinster-Mackay, 1975). By offering a structured programme for the education of younger children at home the PNEU was filling an obvious gap in the middle- and upper-class market.

Simultaneously and paradoxically the expansion of formal school provision for elite children was enhancing the importance of home provision, enabling it to be seen as complementary in crucial ways. It could ensure that children were well-prepared for entry into an institutional framework after the age of eight. It could also run in parallel with an intermittent sampling of institutional provision, much more marked for girls than for boys. In the 1850s the average stay of boys at one school was just 2.6 years (Roach, 1986, p. 62). Of a sample of 44 middle-class girls born between 1800 and 1860, 43% spent fewer than four years at school (Bellaigue, 2007, p. 139).

This was beginning to change in the second half of the nineteenth century, but slowly and unevenly. Already in 1868, 98% of the 2403 students—all male—then at Oxford and Cambridge had spent more than two years in school (Woodley, 2009, p. 260). In a study of 131 elite families by Mark Rothery (2009), 67% of sons of the cohort of 61 born during 1880–1889 had been sent to school, yet 60% of the daughters in his 131 families, and 33% of the 1880–1889 cohort of boys,

were being educated entirely at home. Similarly, Janet Howarth found that in the early 1880s, 15% of the students at the new Oxbridge colleges for women had been educated at home or 'privately' (Howarth, 1985, p. 62).

Even in the last decades of the century, institutional schooling was far from universal in elite families, especially for daughters; and encounters with it might form only one part of a diverse and varied educational itinerary. But this increasingly high profile of institutional instruction underpinned the appeal of Charlotte Mason's work. The PNEU and its associated activities offered a way of ensuring that middle-class and elite children educated at home in part or in whole need not be at a disadvantage in relation to those taught in school. In the context of the class-stratified expansion of institutional instruction and growing educational competition, an organisation offering guidance on the management of home learning and instruction could thrive. These growths were inter-twined.

Mason herself initially clearly assumed and sought to target an audience with a degree of economic security; she also frequently aimed her writing explicitly at women (see below). Thus, she expected that her 'lady' readers would have a governess, and with any luck, a trained governess, to work with. She assumed that the families she was working with were part of 'Society'. In 1890, a meeting of the executive committee of the PNEU was delayed till October, so that it would be convenient for families 'returning to town for the Winter Season' (*PR*, I, 1890, p. 639). She also made much of her patrons among the landed gentry and aristocracy. The Countess of Aberdeen became president of the society in 1892, and titled new members were made vice-presidents of the Union (*PNEU Report*, 1897, p. 2). This was good publicity, and may have been part of a strategy intended to appeal to parents with social aspirations, but it did also reflect a significant audience for the society, judging by the registers of the MEC for 1892–1907, and indeed Lady Aberdeen was a very active and engaged member of the Union (AL, CM 22, Mothers Education Course, 1892–1907). Of the 120 women who took the course between 1892 and 1907, a sample of 27 have been traced in civil records. Of these, four were the wives of peers or upper gentry, four were married to large-scale businessmen and manufacturers (ship-owners, textile manufacturers) and three were married to high-ranking military officers. Only three had husbands in lower status white-collar occupations. Many had homes in London and in the countryside (as would be expected if they followed the Season), and they had an average of 3.5 live-in servants. Eight had resident governesses, and 15 had a resident nurse. These were clearly women of considerable means and social standing.

However, the PNEU was also attracting attention lower down the social scale. The MEC correspondence, and letters to the *Parents' Review*, reveal a steady flow of members from provincial cities and rural areas, who clearly struggled to keep up with the work that the course involved whilst juggling many other responsibilities. In about 1903, Ethel T. Matthews wrote from a vicarage in Monmouthshire to say that she could not take the MEC exam. She wrote:

> I think you will realise a little of my difficulty when I tell you I have 3 little children the eldest 4, the baby 16 months. I have only a young nurse—which means a great deal of the care of the children falls to me—then after I have done their sewing of an Evening—or when I can fit it in—so many [tasks] for the vicarage … & one finds no spare time to oneself. (AL, PNEU II/29/38, Matthews to Mason, nd. [c.1903?])

Similarly, in the first issue of the *Review* a letter from 'Mater', the mother of four children aged between one and seven asked 'how is a mother to fulfill her duties?'. She described her day in detail, recording her many activities—arranging meals, dusting, teaching the children in the mornings, making them practise their instruments, making sure they took their afternoon walk, putting the babies to bed, making the children's clothes, as well as her need to 'keep abreast of the times', and 'social duties' (*PR*, I, 1890, p. 77). The letter indicates how home education in this period need not imply informality or lack of regime, and also suggests the pressures that this might put on some mothers. Responses to 'Mater' from other parents in the next issue suggested early rising, employing a very cheap seamstress, and better self-government. Such letters indicate a wider audience for the PNEU than Mason's references to 'the Season' suggest. These readers were not impoverished, but they had to manage a middle-class family and middle-class cultural aspirations on a limited income and in circumstances unlike those of the wives of peers who also appeared in the MEC registers.

The large number of clergymen and missionary wives among the correspondents of the *Parents' Review* and those enrolled on the MEC raises the question of religious background. Mason herself seems to have been from a Quaker background—interesting given the Quaker tradition of parents providing a 'guarded education' at home for their children, in order to preserve the purity of Quakerism (Leach, 2002, p. 49). In adulthood, however, she emphasised spirituality and reverence, rather than specific beliefs (Spencer, 2010, p. 110). And while she stressed the importance of religious education for children and cultivating their sense of the spiritual, what she advocated was non-denominational; she was critical of 'believing parents' who relied only on the Bible for guidance, arguing that the sciences of education were also the 'laws of God' and must be studied (Mason, 1886, pp. 27–29). This meant that her ideas might have inter-denominational and even inter-faith appeal. While the elite members of the PNEU were likely to have been members of the Church of England and the Vice-Presidents of the society included many prominent Anglican bishops, one of the most dynamic organising secretaries—Henrietta Franklin—was from a prominent Jewish family and a notable advocate of Liberal Judaism. The PNEU thus not only recruited across a wide social range, it recruited across religious divides.

Mason's emphasis on education and expertise helped the PNEU to draw together this rather socially disparate group of parents. While she sometimes played up 'Society' connections, she more often described those she was seeking to provide for as 'the children of educated parents'. In the longer term, this way of constituting the community allowed Mason to broaden the appeal and reach of the PNEU, since it was increasingly the case that it was not only the parents of the middle and

upper classes who might be described as 'educated'. In the 1890s, however, this language was specifically intended to appeal to those in the middle and upper classes and the *Parents' Review* was represented by Mason as a publication addressed to an educated elite, noting that 'it is not what is called "popular literature", and does not appeal to the many' (*PR*, March 1892, p. 77). The language of education, expertise and exclusive sophistication was central to the appeal of the PNEU.

Significant too, was the focus on mothers and the 'ladies' addressed in the full title of *Home Education*. While the *Parents' Review* was explicitly dedicated to parents rather than mothers, and fathers represented a fair proportion of its correspondents, as well as being permitted to join the PNEU, in Mason's account of the origins of the Union she records that it had been agreed only 'after protest' that fathers should be allowed to join (*PR*, II, 1890, pp. 69–70). We have no knowledge of who made this protest or on what grounds, but it is clear that Mason—at certain times—did have a specifically female audience in mind. Thus, in *Home Education*, Mason explicitly couched her advice as responding to the needs of women, who, as they became more educated, also became more aware of their responsibilities as mothers. She predicted that in the process, mothers would take up child-rearing 'as their profession—that is, with the diligence, regularity, and punctuality which men bestow on their professional labours' (Mason, 1886, p. 2) (the parallel with medicine, the law and other male professions providing another indication of the social level at which her advice was pitched).

Evidence from the archives and correspondence in the *Parents' Review* suggests that this approach bore fruit, and that it was principally to mothers and particularly to those women who were benefiting from expanding opportunities for female secondary and higher education that Mason's work appealed (Holcombe, 1973, pp. 21–34). The women who joined the PNEU also shared a demographic profile. These were the mothers of families acting out wider patterns of middle- and upper-class family limitation. For elite couples marrying between 1880 and 1899, family size dropped to around 2.23 children, though there were regional variations in the patterns of decline (Rothery, 2009, p. 677). Similarly, in the 72 families enrolled on the PRS in 1891, the average family size was 2.2 children (Woodley, 2009, p. 278). For the 27 women in the MEC registers sample, the average number of children was slightly larger at 3.1, but well down on the average of 4.5 children born to landowners' families for the cohorts marrying between 1825 and 1849 (Rothery, 2009, p. 679). At the same time (and not unrelated), the mothers enrolled on the MEC seem to be women who were starting their families relatively late, with an average age of 30 at the birth of their first living child. It may be that, as older mothers they were less able to draw on the expertise of the previous generation, and were particularly attracted by the advice that the PNEU might offer. Whatever the truth of this, these figures suggest that the PNEU was attracting women of a certain social status whose work as parents was focused on a limited number of children.

These older mothers were also women who might have had several years of independent activity, even professional experience (see Holcombe (1973) on the expanding range of careers open to middle- and upper-class women in this period). Mason had written with particular sympathy of the situation of young women living at home and of their need for serious activity. Her work might well be expected to resonate particularly with women who saw Mason's approach as supportive of an active and engaged life for educated women before and after marriage, and it does seem that several of those enrolled on the MEC had pursued further education and their own careers before marrying. For example, in 1898, Agnes Kinnear wrote from Dundee to enquire about the course noting that she had a BA from the University of London and taught for three years before her marriage (Kinnear to Mason, 17 November 1898, AL, PNEU II, AL, PNEU II/29). Such women were like those identified by Sian Pooley, who aspired to a wider variety of roles than their mothers and whose desire to preserve their independent activities influenced fertility strategies among elite families (Pooley, 2013, p. 91). In this context, it seems relevant that both the letters from Matthews and 'Mater' quoted above refer to a desire for 'time for oneself', a theme that was also the subject of numerous letters to the *Parents' Review*, prompting mothers to write in with advice on how to ensure that their time would not be interrupted (*PR*, I, 1890, p. 225). The families of the PNEU were headed by a new generation of educated women, who both expected to devote considerable time and energy to their children, but also considered their own time as valuable. The PNEU appealed to their sense of themselves as 'professional' mothers, expert in the raising of children, but also answered a need reinforced by the expansion of female education, for some personal autonomy.

In the years up to 1900 the PNEU brought together middle- and upper-class families seeking to provide for the education of their children in the context of a class-stratified institutional framework. While a significant minority of elite children received the entirety of their education in the home, the number of middle-class and gentry families who expected to send their children to school for at least part of the time was growing. Mothers of markedly different levels of wealth, but with a similar sense of distance from the working class, with similar family structures, and a similar belief in the importance of their work as mothers, were united by their desire for support in the instruction of their children in a period when institutional education had yet to become universal but was already setting the agenda.

III. 'The hurry of the age': the appeal of the PNEU

Mason's emphasis on educational qualifications and professionalism of mothers was echoed by her belief in the notion of parenthood as requiring training. Using the language of profession to characterise motherhood was nothing new. It had been a common theme in advice literature since the end of the eighteenth century (Bellaigue, 2007, p. 15). As we have seen, earlier authors had also advocated adopting a scientific approach to child-rearing. What was distinctive, however, was her

insistence on training, and particularly scientific training. This was one way in which Mason emphasised the modernity of her 'new departure', and tapped into the contemporary currents of thought of the child study movement (Shuttleworth, 2010).

The PNEU clearly situated itself within this movement, and responded in part to parental demand for more knowledge and understanding of the new sciences of childhood. Local branches organised lectures on 'The psychology of attention' and 'The anatomy and physiology of the skin in relation to children's clothing' (*PNEU Report*, 1897, pp. 20, 26) and the *Parents' Review* explicitly presented itself as an organ which would disseminate such expertise. In the first 10 years of its existence it published at least 16 articles on hygiene, alongside articles on the psychology of children in the nursery, discussions of diet, physical exercise and the scientific principles on which the curriculum should be designed. Many members saw themselves as improving on the approach taken by earlier generations (*PR*, VII, p. 26). Indeed, the push by women to redefine motherhood and parenting in the second half of the nineteenth century may partly have reflected a general sense that their own experiences were unsatisfactory (Peterson, 1998, p. 107).

The MEC provides further evidence of the desire for scientific approaches to parenthood, and particularly motherhood, since scientific study was a key part of the hefty programme of reading and examination it involved. Undertaken over three years, the course required reading about 100 pages a week for 10 months each year, followed by a stiff examination. Many subscribers failed to complete their examinations, yet the registers do record a steady stream of mothers receiving favourable comments on their papers (AL, CM 22 'Mothers Education Course, 1891–1900, 143). There was evidently considerable appetite among mothers of this generation for the kind of professionalised training for parenthood that Mason offered.

This demand for advice and training might also be fuelled by the anxieties that awareness of the new sciences of childhood might foster. One of the most frequently recurring themes of mothers' letters, evident in the letters already cited, is a concern about the demands of domestic life, and the letter-writer's lack of time, expertise or ability to provide adequately professional parenting. Thus, in 1890, EAD wrote to the *Parents' Review* asking for Mason to consider setting out a scheme of education to help mothers plan schoolroom life. Such a scheme, she argued:

> would very much help many a young mother who has to buy her experience at the cost of many failures, through ignorance. We want a little practical instruction as to how best to map out the day—so as to give the children the best advantages for their growing bodies—combined with minds so well furnished that they will be able, having been thoroughly and correctly grounded, to take a good place at school. (*PR*, I, p. 318)

These were mothers who were deeply aware of the new ideas circulating about education in society, and also of the importance of preparing their children to succeed in school, but who felt inadequate to the task. Such anxieties and concerns

reflected in miniature a broader sense of uncertainty articulated by many contributors to the *Review* and by many of Mason's correspondents, and which shaped a major concern of the PNEU—the relationship between home and school.

As noted above, Mason was explicit in her preference for school instruction for older children. Her intention for the home-schoolroom in fact, was explicitly intended to mitigate the dangers of home education. These she identified as precocity, dilettantism and what would now be understood as a failure to fully socialise the child (*PR,* III, p. 279). Significantly, Mason believed readers would share her perspective on the value of schooling. Thus, in 1893 for example, she sought to reassure 'those parents who regret deeply their inability to send their children to school that our experience in connection with the PRS tends to show that the average home-taught child may keep well abreast of the school-taught child' (*PR*, III, p. 279). The clear assumption here was that parents would prefer to send their children to school. Evidence from the PRS correspondence course and from the MEC correspondence suggests that this was indeed the case, and that the correspondence school was used principally for the education of younger children. Thus of 160 children enrolled in the course in 1891, the average age of the boys was around eight, and for girls it was around nine (Woodley, 2009, p. 278). Similarly, at the point at which mothers in the MEC sample joined, the average age of their eldest child was 4.3. The correspondence suggests that the decision to do so was sometimes partly prompted by the inadequacy or inaccessibility of the schools available to them (AL, PNEU II/29 F. Sharp to C. Mason, 19 July 1897). For all the evidence of significant numbers of elite children being educated at home, the dominant force in education was assumed to be the school.

Yet many articles and letters in the *Review* reveal that the relationship between home education and school instruction, and between parents and teachers, could be tense and anxious. These relations were thus the subject of at least 20 articles between 1890 and 1900, and 'harmonising home and school training' was one of the stated objects of the Union. That parents and home education were on the back foot, however, is apparent from the repeated emphasis that a home-educated child, if properly trained, would not fall behind a child sent to a kindergarten or secondary school, or even the working-class children in elementary schools. While Mason and the PNEU sought to support parents in the education of their children, it was schools that were setting the agenda. The *Parents' Review* provided an arena for parents to negotiate this new relationship but did not fundamentally challenge the growing dominance of institutional education.

Anxiety about how best to prepare children for school, and which schools to choose, reflected a more general sense of uncertainty about prospects for middle-class children. Thus, in September 1890, one mother wrote to 'Notes and Queries' to ask for advice on the best books for little boys, commenting that 'teachers in National Schools have their lines laid down most clearly step by step, but we are left to pick up wisdom as we can' (*PR,* I, p. 557). The 'National Schools' she referred to were those publicly-funded elementary schools for the working class which were, by then, chiefly staffed by teachers who had received at least some

training.[3] Her comment hints not only at a sense of inadequacy in the face of professional teachers, but also at a sense of social competition, not only with other middle-class families, but also with the working classes who now benefitted from such instruction.

This sense that elite children might face new challenges, and anxiety about the future, was apparent in other letters. It also explains the series of articles in the *Parents' Review* between 1890 and 1900 on the subject of 'Our Sons' or 'Our Daughters', providing detailed information about careers in the navy, the law and journalism for boys, and in education for girls. These articles explained to parents how to ensure their child's success in each field, and gave details of the cost of training and the likely rewards in relation to the investment required. Articles like this, and the emphasis on the need to keep up with children in schools, particularly working-class children, reflected the impact of social changes in the late nineteenth century which were undermining the traditional dominance of the landed elites. The family limitation strategies adopted by middle-class and gentry families in the 1880s and 1890s were, in part, a response to the contemporary reduction of incomes and the collapse of aristocratic wealth as a result of the declining value of land (Rothery, 2009, p. 683). In the context of increasing professionalisation, elite and families were newly conscious of the need to provide for their children's education and training (Perkin, 1989; Cannadine, 1990, Ch. 5). The PNEU and *Parents' Review* seemed to provide a way for middle-class and elite parents to safeguard their children's futures in a world which was increasingly competitive and challenging.

What Mason offered was a way to engage with contemporary scientific thought on childcare, whilst bolstering the authority of parents by respecting their expertise —there were 11 articles between 1890 and 1900 which claimed to be 'by a mother', echoing long-standing tropes in advice literature for parents. Older progressive pedagogical traditions also provided ways to dramatise the positive contribution that parents could make to their children's education. Articles on the Edgeworths, Froebel, Rousseau and Mrs Barbauld all emphasised the role of parents in the intellectual and moral instruction of children, and the importance of attention to the individual child. Thus, while Mason sought to distance herself from 'traditional methods' in some respects, she also drew on a long-standing tradition of progressive education, much of which emphasised informal and individual learning in the home, but which was—for the most part—not opposed to school education in itself. This was particularly evident in her relationship with Anne Jemima Clough. In Mason's eyes, Clough 'united in a unique way the old and the new. She understood and believed in parents of the sort who educated their children quietly on the lines of "Evenings at Home" etc.' (*PR*, VII, 1897, p. 51). For Mason, Clough provided a link between the modern world of trained teachers and educated women, and older traditions of parental education exemplified by *Evenings at Home* (a collection of stories by John Aikin and Anna Barbauld published between 1792 and 1796 to be read aloud; see Hilton (2007, p. 102)) which prized parents' role in the development of the individual child. In her affinity with Clough, and in the choice of the educationists she celebrated in the *Parents' Review*—Caroline Herford of the

progressive Ladybarn School, Edward Thring of Uppingham—Mason was identifying herself with an educational tradition which stood somewhat apart from the dominant influences of the 'great' public schools. By referring to these educators, and indeed by holding the first London meeting of the PNEU at the headquarters of the College of Preceptors—an organisation which sought to implement some of the progressive pedagogies developed by Froebel—Mason highlighted her affinities with a strand of progressive pedagogical thinking that did not necessarily reject schooling per se (Bellaigue, 2004).

While the expansion of institutional instruction was calling into question the legitimacy of other forms of education and giving rise to parental anxieties about the need to keep up with schools, Mason and the PNEU continued to articulate a concept of education that emphasised personal influence and individual learning. They also did provide a forum for parents who called into question some of the dominant orthodoxies of late nineteenth-century education. Thus, in 1890 'IJ' responded angrily to an article by a respected teacher on punishment and discipline. It was very wrong, 'IJ' contended, to suggest that young children should be severely disciplined, and particularly criticised the notion that a child under the age of one might be branded a 'thief' for taking something they had been told not to take (*PR*, I, 1890, pp. 479–480). Similarly, in September of the same year, HD Pearsall of Orpington in Kent wrote to criticise the paper by the Headmaster of Bradford Grammar School, asserting that classical training remained 'the best curriculum'. Pearsall objected fiercely and defended the value of scientific inquiry for moral and intellectual development (*PR*, I, p. 557). Such examples demonstrate that while the elite and middle-class parents of the PNEU were increasingly expecting schools to provide instruction for their children, and anxious about competition and standards, formal provision was not being accepted uncritically.

IV. Conclusion

Charlotte Mason's work, her thinking on home education, and the organisations she established, are best understood as responses to the very particular social and intellectual context in which she was operating, rather than as a philosophy of domestic pedagogy. The contours of educational provision in the period after 1850 meant that there was a demand for the practical advice that Mason was offering. That demand was additionally fuelled by contemporary intellectual and social movements which drew attention to the role of parents in their children's education, and suggested a need for specialised and scientific training. In addition Mason articulated an educational vision which appealed to parents—and particularly to mothers—by emphasising their continued importance in cultivating their child's intellectual and cultural development, drawing on long-standing tropes in progressive pedagogical theory, as well as on new theories of psychology and physiology. The social background of the families who joined the PNEU and associated organisation, their letters in the *Parents' Review* and the Mason archives, reveal a cohort

of mothers and fathers who sought actively to engage with current educational thinking and also claimed their own expertise as parents. At the same time, these parents' letters and the publications they read reflect a wider anxiety about their children's futures in a new world of educational and social competition.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Mason would work hard to extend her influence into secondary and elementary schools, focusing less on the role of parents in their children's training and more on the need for all children to receive a liberal education as 'the basis of national strength'. The Parents' Union School would thrive throughout the Empire, eventually transforming itself into the World Wide Education Service that still exists today (Spencer, 2010, p. 109). But in its early decades, the work of Charlotte Mason and the PNEU exposed the ways in which, by the end of the nineteenth century, formal institutional education was so dominant as to ensure that home education was understood as ancillary and auxiliary to what was provided in schools. At the same time, however, the experiences of the families who made up the PNEU reveal how, even then, the lines between formal and informal and institutional and home education were still blurred. They also point to the continuing appeal of a strand of progressive educational thought, not entirely aligned with the dominant educational orthodoxies, that valued the individualised and informal instruction and training that might be provided in the home.

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Notes

1. She developed these subjects more fully in *Home and School Education: The Training and Education of Children Over Nine* (1905).
2. By 1907, there were four branches in Australia and branches were also set up in Ceylon (*PNEU Report*, 1907, pp. 49–51). Figures from the PNEU reports suggest that there were subscribers to the *Review* throughout the empire (*PNEU Report*, 1914, pp. 16–17). It would seem that it had a particular appeal for families who wanted to keep their children with them with the colonial branches echoing the imperial academic networks studied by Tamson Pietsch, and giving a new connotation to the understanding of 'home education' (Pietsch, 2013).
3. The correspondent was using 'National schools' as a generic term, to encompass both the new Board Schools established under the provisions of the Forster Act of 1870, and the schools provided by the Anglican Church of England.

Notes on contributor

Christina de Bellaigue is Associate Professor in Modern History at Exeter College, Oxford. She is the author of *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800–1867* (2007) and has published on female education, comparative education and the history of reading.

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