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Looking backwards to move forwards: Charlotte Mason on history

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It has been suggested that the new National Curriculum for history in primary schools should focus on content and on knowing the dates of English kings and queens rather than on the process of historical enquiry, in order to promote a shared sense of identity. Charlotte Mason was a very patriotic, nineteenth-century British educationalist who saw learning history as not Anglocentric and as an active engagement with primary and secondary sources, in order to interpret the past through retelling, role play and art. This article collates her thoughts about history education scattered throughout six volumes of her writing.

Keywords: Charlotte Mason; constructivist; history education

Current dilemmas

The Conservative government's National Curriculum for history (DES 1991) recognised that, in history, content and the process of enquiry are integrally linked and that children must be actively engaged in learning this process, from the beginning. This was endorsed in the revised version (DfES/QCA 1999). The programmes of study set out the knowledge, skills and understanding pupils must apply to investigating the content, the 'breadth of study', and this included asking and trying to answer questions using historical sources. Questions involve chronology, concepts of cause and effect of events, changes and motivation, and similarities and differences between periods. From their enquiries pupils must learn to construct and communicate accounts of the past and so understand why accounts may differ. Children learn the processes of historical enquiry used by historians, in embryonic and increasingly complex ways, for there is no single, correct view of the past; it is multi-perspectival and dynamic. It is important that children understand this if history is to be inclusive and to prevent it being politically manipulated.

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This is a constructivist approach. For example, Bruner (1963) stated that it is essential that children learn to engage with the key questions, concepts and processes of enquiry at the heart of a discipline, through a spiral curriculum (1966), and that the youngest children can do so if they are presented in appropriate ways. Vygotsky (1962) emphasised the importance of discussion, trial and error in concept development. However, concern has been expressed by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government about the approach to history education embedded in the existing National Curriculum for history. The Secretary of State has said that he is:

> an unashamed traditionalist when it comes to the curriculum. ... Most parents would rather their children had a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, reciting the names of the kings and queens of England. ... That's the best training of the mind and that's how children will be able to compete. ... History is a narrative. (Thomson and Sylvester 2010)

Many history educators (Coltham and Fines 1971; Rogers 1979; Fines 1981a, 1981b) whose analyses of the discipline of history and the implications for history education were translated into research and practice over the last 40 years would be dismayed by this. As papers in the *International Journal of History Teaching, Learning and Research* demonstrate, the work they initiated on constructivist approaches to learning history is now emulated worldwide.

Charlotte Mason

It is surprising to find that Charlotte Mason (1841–1923), an innovative nineteenth-century educator, took a constructivist view of history education long before Bruner's and Vygotsky's work on constructivist learning theory. Charlotte Mason, who had been a head teacher and a lecturer at Bishop Otter Training College in Chichester, created the Parents' Education Union in 1887. This distributed her distance learning materials to home educating parents throughout the British Empire and published the *Parents' Review* magazine. In 1892 Mason opened her House of Education in Ambleside. Her writings have been collated in six lengthy volumes, *The original home schooling series* (Mason 1993), available at http://www.amblesideonline.co.uk; Mason's philosophy and methods remain very influential, particularly among home educating parents in North America.

Mason's work is permeated by traditional Victorian values: patriotism, duty, self-discipline and Christianity. But she rejected a behaviourist, utilitarian and mechanistic approach to education. The educational philosophy she developed and the methods which she

practised are described, piecemeal, throughout *The original home schooling series*, volumes 1–6. The references below are indicative. She believed in intrinsic motivation (vol. 6.6, 98) and that learning is 'assimilated' through observing and interacting with the environment (vol. 1, 24; vol. 3, 21), creating individual mental maps and building on what was previously known (vol. 6, 39). She encouraged learning through direct experience (vol. 1, 179) while teaching 'the principles of a discipline' (vol. 2, 127). She insisted that children are individuals, 'persons' (vol. 6.1, 18). She saw the role of the adult as providing enthusiasm and stimuli (vol. 1, 79) and 'scaffolding' to support the learner, through encouraging questioning, forming hypotheses and making connections (vol. 2, 181–5). The purpose of this article is to investigate how, within this philosophy, Mason approached history education.

The process of historical enquiry

Historical enquiry, at the level of an academic historian, involves interpreting sources, that is, any evidence that remains, which can give us information about the past. Sources may be artefacts, sites or buildings, images or writing. The historian must deduce or infer what sources can tell us about the people who made and used them and how this influenced their lives. Then the historian combines sources in order to create an account of changes over time, or similarity and difference between different periods. Accounts are interpretations; there may be more than one equally valid interpretation, depending upon the time in which it is written, the interests of the historian and other factors (Collingwood 1938, 1939, 1942, 1946).

Historical imagination is necessary because sources are often incomplete and it is necessary to 'fill in the gaps'. Historical imagination is not free-floating but is based on what is known of the period, whether it is likely and whether there is any contradictory evidence (Collingwood 1939; Kitson Clarke 1967; Elton 1970; Ryle 1979). Similarly, historical empathy is necessary in order to attempt, based on what is known and on our common humanity, to understand the thoughts, feelings and values of people in the past who had a different knowledge base and beliefs from our own. Children are able, in an embryonic way, to engage with this process (Cooper 1991).

The prospect of a National Curriculum for history (DES 1991) gave rise to spirited debates. After two rounds of eight regional conferences held by the Historical Association (in 1987 and 1988) it was agreed that, for all of the above reasons, content and process in history are inextricably linked, that history is dynamic and that within the story of the past there are many different perspectives. If

children are to learn history with integrity in an open society they must, from the beginning, learn the processes by which we find out about the past.

Investigating Charlotte Mason's approach to history education

The aim of this investigation was to elicit to what extent and in what ways Mason applied her constructivist approaches to teaching and learning to what is now recognised as the discipline of history, although this had not been so defined during her lifetime. Volumes 1–6 of *The original home schooling series* were read online. All the passages relating to history education were highlighted. These were then colour-coded according to the aspect of historical enquiry to which they related: sources (with subordinate codes for each type of source), time and chronology, historical imagination/empathy and historical interpretation.

Overview of Mason's ideas about history teaching

Ignore books of facts, dates and romantic stories

Mason advises that all history books, overviews and abstracts written for children are ignored. Books of facts, dates and romantic stories with little coherence are especially to be avoided. 'What is he to get out of the miserable little chronicles of feuds, battles and death which are presented to him as a reign?' she asks. In her view, blundering through a chatty book which describes the reigns of successive kings will simply fill a child with 'crude notions' and 'narrow prejudices'. She is particularly critical of history books which have a moral or religious tone. Although she concedes that moral education is a dimension of history, she says that this involves decisions based on fair and reasonable discussion which is beyond the scope of such books and the capabilities of young children. With increased maturity children should progress from the specific and graphic details of a few periods of time to a more general understanding, and in the meantime, should not be given ready-made opinions (vol. 1, 281). She believes that what children need is detail about events and persons, on which their imaginations can work. Opinions, she says, tend to form themselves by degrees as knowledge grows (vol. 1, 228)

Not just kings and queens and English history

Mason continues that children should learn about all classes of people and about the histories of other nations. And she does not take a Whig

view of continuing progress, or an Anglocentric view. She thinks that children should be introduced to the history of other countries from an early age because learning English history alone 'is apt to lead to a certain insular and arrogant habit of mind' (vol. 6, 175). She says that a child who comes to think that people in another age or another country may be better than we are is so much the better for thinking so (vol. 1, 282).

In Mason's view it is essential to our sanity to learn, from the very beginning, that we have a great deal in common with other peoples, that in some ways we share their history, but also to understand that other countries have their own poets, literature and 'national life' (vol. 6, 178).

Intellectual growth more important than time wasted on the '3Rs'

In volume 3, Mason repeats that knowledge should not be diluted but offered to children with some substance and vitality in it. 'Children can cover large and various fields with delight, in which the teaching is more than the knowledge, in the time that is usually wasted over the three Rs' (vol. 3, 224). Mason makes a distinction between information and knowledge. Knowledge, she says, is the product of the vital action of the mind on the material presented to it. 'It is power and implies an increase in intellectual aptitude in new directions, and always a new point of departure' (vol. 3, 224).

Mason's suggestions about using sources

Artefacts, buildings, sites

Mason gives an interesting example of how children can generalise from specific examples and so generate their own knowledge based on personal experience. Children are shown two windows, one early Gothic with mullions (1180–1275) and another late Gothic perpendicular with decoration (1475–*c*. 1550). Having observed the key features of each, children can collect their own examples from buildings of these periods and fit them into their existing knowledge of the period (vol. 1, 291). She suggests that children should be given some basic information about a building, for example St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey. Then, when they visit the building, they can identify the people and events commemorated in it. In volume 6 (174) she observes that, although one would not think that Donne would be of great interest to children, passers-by found it illuminating to watch a party of young children in St Paul's Cathedral who were very excited to find the marks of the Great Fire on Donne's

monument. (It had originally been placed in Old St Paul's Church before the fire.) She concludes that for children to become familiar with a monument commemorating a great event is an excellent way of developing in them the kind of patriotism which is, 'sane and serviceable'.

In volume 5, Mason suggests that families take a vacation exploring one, previously unknown, English county and, after pleasant evenings pored over maps, the family fixes upon six centres. For example, in Hampshire, 'you may explore a dozen churches with fragments of the original Norman structure in the course of one day's walk and get new ideas of what Norman conquerors did in scattering centres of light throughout the land' (vol. 5, 133). For children older than six, she thinks that the secret of a successful holiday is, 'that the mind must be actively, unceasingly and involuntarily engaged with fresh and ever-changing interests' which will compel them to think new thoughts (vol. 5, 132).

Images

In volume 2, Mason stresses the importance of pictures by great artists. She says that through engaging with great art children are able to internalise accurate and glorious images. She sees this as transformative (vol. 2, 211).

Written sources

Mason suggests that children should, with judicious support, read contemporary texts which 'get the spirit of the age into them' because they were written by someone who 'saw and knew something of what he wrote and did not get it second hand'. Such a writer can talk to you directly about a great event, make you feel familiar with great people and friendly with the ordinary people he writes about (vol. 1, 282–3). A child should first be introduced to a period, not through a modern historian or writer but through writers from that period (vol. 1, 286).

Mason suggests children read extracts from, for example, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, William of Malmesbury's *Chronicles of the Kings of England*, the *Chronicles of the Crusades* or Asser's *Life of Alfred*, which he wrote from both personal experience and eyewitness accounts. These chronicles are suitable because of their simple and direct style, although Mason recognises that mothers must use discrimination because chronicles are not always reliable. Mason's recommendations are based on long experience and observation,

although she does not give us examples of children's responses to the written sources she suggests.

However, there is evidence that young children are able to ask questions and make deductions and inferences from such sources. For example, classes of eight-year-old children studying Roman Britain (Cooper 1991) were given a short extract from Strabo (Book 4.5, 253) listing products which were exported from Britain. Children's written responses included:

'Did one family or place have a monopoly of exports?'

'Who sold the things to Strabo?'

'What did they import?'

'We know how far their boats could go . . . '

'They must have had ports.'

'They exported cattle and corn so they farmed and lived in one place.'

'They probably had thatched roofs because they grew corn.'

'They probably had ploughs.'

In group discussion children said: 'We know they had metals so they probably made most of their tools.' Others wondered how the metals were mined and transported and whether they took turns at different jobs, or asked, 'Did they have just one job?' Also, 'How long after the Romans came could Iron Age people write?'

Children, Mason says, need specific but limited information from which, with increasing maturity, they can gradually form their own generalisations and views (vol. 1, 188).

Mason claims that children should be in touch with Beowulf, 'our English Ulysses, the legend of our nation's youth' (vol. 2, 142–3). There is evidence (Cooper 1991) of children's ability, given an extract (lines 824–38), to engage with this text. They discuss the language used. 'I think ''made good his boast'' means he boasts for a reason, to be popular, to get support for his next encounter.' They explore the significance of the legend to people at the time. 'It could have been a lesson to people and had a meaning.' They consider its level of truth. 'It was probably based on a famous warrior. It could be partly true. It could have been set in a real place. It came from Denmark and was passed around settlements. The monster is not true . . . ' They reflect on the feelings, values and attitudes of the society which produced the tale. They wrote of courage, fear, bravery, pride, the supernatural, power, beliefs and vengeance. 'They could have been scared. I guess they wanted more land for their crops so they moved to a new place. I guess it was a symbol for fighting and bravery. Was Grendel a monster or just an enemy? Beowulf liked vengeance. He fought evil.'

For older students Mason says that plays, novels, essays, 'lives' and poems are all pressed into service and, where it is possible, the architecture and painting of a period (vol. 6, 178).

Historical empathy; historical imagination

'We cannot be at Home in History without Imagination,' Mason says (vol. 4, 38). She explains that we: 'must read history and think about it to understand how these things can be. Seeing and writing is not of much use to us unless … we think of things and figure them to ourselves, until at last they are real and alive to us.' Historical imagination requires active learning. We read written sources but then we figure them out ourselves. Mason believes that children want to understand the thoughts of people in the past. 'Let him … linger pleasantly over the history of a single man, a short period, until he thinks the thoughts of that man, is at home in the ways of that period.' In volume 3, Mason states that education should 'aim at knowledge touched with emotion' (vol. 3, 221).

Children want to 'get at the living people behind the words' (vol. 1, 283). Mason suggests that *Plutarch's Lives* (Frazer 2010) are a good introduction to Roman and Greek history and that Alexander is more than just a name to a child who has read the story she quotes, of Alexander offering to pay £2500 for the wild horse Bucephalus, if he could not tame him, and how he did this by recognising the horse was frightened of his shadow.

In a section called 'Open Sesame' (vol. 3, 174–5) Mason says that she thinks we should have a great educational revolution – once we realise that we are people and that we can get in touch with other people of all sorts of conditions at different times, past and present, and in different countries.

In volume 4, Mason gives the example of a letter from a small Egyptian boy of four thousand years ago telling his father that he will not be good or do his lessons unless his father takes him to a great festival which is imminent (vol. 4, 37). This, she says, immediately makes him real and understandable to a contemporary child.

Time and chronology

Mason is critical of the way in which history was presented to young people as: 'outlines of dates and facts or collections of romantic stories with little coherence, that an amplified chronological table has been made to do duty for history' (vol. 1, 291). She suggests, instead, that children should build their own chronological mental maps, using paper divided into a column for each century, allowing the pupil to add, in the correct column, the people or events he comes across. She says that at this stage

we do not need to bother with specific dates because the child is creating a memorable, visual panorama.

Accounts/interpretations

Retelling

Mason recognised that children need books as well as primary sources. She developed a process she calls 'narration'. This requires the child to review what is read (or heard), then reading/hearing another short section, only once. The child retells the new section in his own words, discussing any questions arising. This, Mason claims, enables a child to internalise what he has read and to combine it with his own experiences, thoughts and ideas, so that he creates a personal interpretation. The child's thinking is stimulated. The same process can be applied to studying, then recounting an interpretation of a picture (vol. 2.22, 245). She says that what a child digs for in books is his own interpretation, not simply a memorisation, whereas what 'is poured into his ear, without being interpreted, floats out as lightly as it came in' (vol. 3, 12). Mason explains that children retell accounts, not as the author did, but through their own personalities and experiences. Children should be allowed to narrate an account in their own ways. The account is original in that the child's own mind has acted on the information it has received (vol. 1, 289).

Role play

Children also create interpretations through role play. Mason recounts how they dress up, act out scenes and tableaux from their history lessons and make speeches, finding endless ways to express themselves. But she warns that imagination needs the stimulus of 'meaty' history and good literature related to it, not an 'insipid diet' of children's story books. Given this a child will live out, in detail, a thousand scenes inspired by only a little basic information, without any intervention by an adult.

Drawing

Mason also encourages children to create interpretations of history through drawing. She gives examples of the diversity of interpretations of nine-year-old children, after hearing an account of Julius Caesar. She found their drawings psychologically interesting because they showed what varied and sometimes obscure points appeal to children and also because they showed that children, just like cultivated adults, enjoy thinking in terms of ideas and possibilities (vol. 1.9, 292).

One girl drew Julius Caesar conquering Britain, showing a soldier planting an ensign bearing the Roman eagle in the distance and hand-to-hand combat between a Roman and a Briton in the foreground with 'other figures variously employed'. A slightly older girl drew Anthony making a speech after the death of Caesar which included facial expressions and the architecture of the street. A 14-year-old child showed emotion through body language, as Calpurnia begged Caesar not to go to the Senate. Mason finds that the variety of children's images of the past, inspired by great literature and shown in their drawings, allow a glimpse into their minds, which convinces her that imagination is not stirred by the simple, diluted books they are too often given (vol. 1, 294).

Recent research has explored the visual interpretations of historical scenes and events by pupils in Turkey, which validates and develops Mason's examples (Yapici Dilek 2010). The images were constructed interpretations based on written primary sources. The drawings showed that the pupils used historical thinking and disciplined imagination to describe women as agents of change in their role from the Ottoman Empire period to the era of the Turkish Republic. They added captions and used metaphors to describe past times.

Conclusion

Mason lived at a time when history was a new subject in schools, at a time when the process of historical enquiry had not been defined and the pedagogy of how to teach it had not been addressed. Yet the approaches she advocated involved making deductions and inferences about primary as well as secondary sources, arguing that children are capable of dealing with challenging written sources and that they can create valid and knowledgeable interpretations through retelling, art and role play. Moreover, she recognised that if children learn in this way their learning is transformative, not 'bolt on'. At a time when most educationists advocated moral and national stories about the past and memorisation of facts and dates, she saw learning history as a process which is truly transformative.[1] It is remarkable that a nineteenth-century educator should have such an enlightened view of how and why history should be taught, based on experience, which was subsequently developed by research and policy.

It is important that pupils should build up a grasp of the 'big picture' of British and world history. The Historical Association's *Primary Survey* (2011) and the Office for Standards in Education's *History for All* (Ofsted 2011) show that children have a good grasp of the events, characters and periods they have studied and, from the foundation stage onwards, they are increasingly able to ask questions, research evidence, investigate, form hypotheses using a range of historical sources, make

comparisons between periods, draw conclusions and communicate them. They enjoy history because 'it makes us think' (Ofsted 2011, 10). Removal of gaps in the periods studied in the curriculum is all that is needed to reveal a coherent 'big picture'. It is, therefore, a matter of concern that the Secretary of State for Education proposes to reject this long tradition by appointing two historians with particular viewpoints and no pedagogical knowledge to advise on a curriculum which emphasises a received narrative of facts and dates, in order to: 'ensure that history is taught as a proper subject so that we can celebrate the distinguished role of these islands in the history of the world' (Hansard, 15 November 2010).

Note

1. Mason recognised that children need secondary as well as primary sources. From the few books available for young children at the time she recommended H.E. Marshall's *Our Island Story* (2005; 1st ed., 1905, Vol. 6, 174). It is ironic, given Mason's criticisms of a 'dates and kings and queens approach', that on the frontispiece the publishers thank the readers of *The Daily Telegraph*, 'whose generous support made this new edition possible'.

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