

Charlotte Mason and Susan Schaeffer Macaulay
Mentors of the Modern Homeschool Movement

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Next year will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Susan Schaeffer Macaulay's book *For the Children's Sake: Foundations of Education for the Home and School*. Neophytes to home education back in the early 1980s (as most of us were) found in Macaulay's book a call to a model of education that resonated with something deep in the human heart - something most of us only had inklings of. Macaulay was the first voice to articulate the teachings of Charlotte Mason in a way that was challenging, inspiring, and reflected many abstract thoughts circulating about education but not yet formed into a cohesive paradigm. A quarter of a century later, Macaulay's work is visible in nearly every quarter of the homeschooling world, where the legacy of Charlotte Mason is seen in countless ways.

How did the work of Charlotte Mason, as revitalized by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, shape the grassroots home education movement as it emerged in the early 1980s? While it is difficult to quantify their vision and impact, I think there were three very distinct ways in which these two women impacted the education of hundreds of thousands of young children and by extension their parents. The first was a call to a sense of the intrinsic value of the child as an individual. Mason stated that "children are born persons" and challenged parents and teachers to really get to know, study, and respect the children God has put into their lives.¹ Elaborating on this point, Macaulay noted that:

"Charlotte Mason not only said she treasured the minds of children, but she acted upon that belief, [she] enjoyed sharing the good things of life with the eager minds of children. She dealt with them on an eye-to-eye level . . . delighting in introducing them to all aspects of reality with a positive joy. She delighted in their separate individuality."²

I remember distinctly how these thoughts impressed me - a busy young mother with four little ones under 6. Never having seen this kind of parenting modeled growing up (where the motto was "children should be seen and not heard"), I hung on every word and labored to implement delight and joy into mothering and educating my four.

As I learned to see my little ones with an eye to their individual gifts and intrinsic uniqueness, Mason and Macaulay taught me how to love my children better and how to relish the gift of life expressed through each of them. When Macaulay pleaded: "Where are the friends and lovers of children? Who will open up the wonderful windows into the whole of reality and let their capable minds be stimulated?"³ I knew that I was the one to do that for my children. Mason and Macaulay gave me a vision of nurturing motherhood that was fresh, challenging, and consistent with a Biblical worldview.

It required energy, passion, intelligence, and devotion, but promised the gratification and satisfaction of exploring the wonder and beauty of God’s world alongside my children. We would become fellow pilgrims journeying together in a great adventure of learning.

Mason and Macaulay didn’t just inspire with an idealistic call to an illusive goal; they offered practical advice on how to implement what some might view as lofty aims. In this pursuit, Mason coined a phrase that became *de rigueur* in the first decade of the popularization of home education. That was the “twaddle-free” course of study.⁴ Both women lamented what they viewed as the watered down, uninspired, pedantic nature of so much that passes as educational curriculum. The very nature of institutionalized education spawned the birth of curriculum designed to keep classes of children engaged eight hours a day. Macaulay decries this approach to education, noting:

“How colorfully and scientifically our generation talks down to the little child! What insipid, stupid, dull stories are trotted out! And we don’t stop there. We don’t respect the children’s thinking or let them come to any conclusions themselves! We ply them with endless questions, the ones we’ve thought up, instead of being silent and letting the child’s questions bubble up with interest. We tire them with workbooks that would squeeze out the last drop of anybody’s patience. We remove interesting books and squander time on “reading skill testing,” using idiotic isolated paragraphs which no one would dream of taking home to read.”⁵

Ruth Beechick, in her book, *You Can Teach Your Child Successfully*, echoed this notion by pointing out that presenting our students with information that is “predigested, pre-thought, pre-analyzed, and pre-synthesized . . . depriv[es] children of the joy of original thought.”⁶

The cultural critic Neil Postman, who was most popularly known for his book titled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, suggested in his book, *The End of Education*, that often knowledge is presented as the accumulation of facts, dates, times, places—trivializing the pursuit of knowledge to the extent that:

“There is no sense of the frailty or ambiguity of human judgment, no hint of the possibilities of error. Knowledge is presented as a commodity to be acquired, never as a human struggle to understand, to overcome falsity, to stumble toward truth.”

Sadly, in the current trend toward academic rigor there is often a neglect of works of quality and enduring value for the “convenience” of books that contain neither literary beauty nor canonical status in the world of children’s literature.

What Charlotte Mason insisted upon rather than “twaddle” was a course of instruction rich in classical, historical, and biographical literature. Young children should have a diet

full of folk and fairy tales, oversized picture books beautifully illustrated, Bible stories and tales of talking animals.

Even Shakespeare could be introduced to young children of third grade in a book such as Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. Literature should never speak down to children, but rather should engage them intelligently and respectfully. The best books for children do this naturally.

From the moment a child enters the primary grades, the choices for a course of study rich in historical, biographical, and classical literature are unlimited. No young child should grow up without the wonderful works of award-winning authors like Meindert de Jong, James Daugherty, Arnold Lobel, Ruth Krauss, Alice Dalgliesh, Robert McCloskey, Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, William Steig, Virginia Lee Burton, Beatrix Potter, A. A. Milne, Brinton Turkle, Marguerite Henry, Munro Leaf, Marguerite de Angeli, and many others. In my view, Mason's and Macaulay's promotion of "twaddle-free" curriculum was their second most salient contribution and one that birthed an entire industry of rich literature-based programs.

What has become an oft-repeated tale in the current trend of academic rigor is a neglect of the tremendous wealth of young children's literature. At a recent speaking engagement I was dismayed to hear from numerous parents of young children who knew nothing of the above authors, not to mention Charlotte Mason.

Following an educational trend, they were missing one of the greatest joys of parenting—the vast treasury of glorious children's books! The beauty of Mason's philosophy was the freedom she allowed parents and teachers to embrace the child in their tender years with literature suitable for innocent minds and hearts. Rather than imposing education from without - following a predetermined scope and sequence set by others - Mason trained us to see education as a matter of the spirit. The world of knowledge is brought to the child through gradually expanding circles of understanding.

In other words, the simplest fairy tales, folktales and picture books for the young one, then stories of our country for the primary child - and gradually moving on to the stories of other lands and places as they mature in understanding and scope. As we explore the beauty and wonder of God's world with the child, we nurture the spirit, validate the individuality of each young person, and respect the unique gift that every child is.

Two decades ago, those who implemented Mason's paradigm discovered wonderful benefits in family life. Since most of us were products of traditional classrooms where textbooks comprised the bulk of our education, the opportunity to immerse ourselves and our students in a world rich with literature afforded us an opportunity that enhanced our personal lives dramatically.

We became passionate about literature; we read books we had always wanted to read; we

journeyed to other times and places in our imagination; we walked in the footsteps of others and understood better their joys, sorrows, and triumphs. In the process of doing all of this our hearts were enlarged, our relationships with our children were strengthened, and we learned empathy and compassion for others. C. S. Lewis referred to this process as the “baptism of the imagination”—an apprehension of that which is pure, true, and beautiful, and ultimately holy.⁸ Ruth Sawyer, the children’s author and critic, said the best children’s works are:

“Stories that make for wonder. Stories that make for laughter. Stories that stir within, with an understanding of the true nature of courage, of love, of beauty. Stories that make one tingle with high adventure, with daring, with grim determination, with the capacity of seeing danger through to the end. Stories that bring our minds to kneel in reverence; stories that show the tenderness of true mercy, the strength of loyalty, the unmawkish respect for what is good.”⁹

Finally, Charlotte Mason and Susan Macaulay emphasized the profound importance of play in a young child’s life. When a child is nurtured and fed upon the best books, the natural outcome is a rich imaginative life.

From the treasures of imagination comes the delight of play - free, unstructured, play-acting of the stories lining the shelves of the mind. The importance of this cannot be overstated. In our hurry-scurry world it is often free play that gets pushed out of the schedule in our endless shuttle to soccer games, violin lessons, church choir, youth group, gymnastics, ballet, etc. etc. Added to that, even the homeschooled child may have play squeezed out in pursuit of academic excellence. Pity the childhood sacrificed on the altars of scholastic achievement. Of this pitfall Mason warns:

“There is a danger in these days of much educational effort that children’s play should be crowded out [or what is the same thing] should be prescribed for and arranged until there is no more freedom of choice about play than about work. We do not say a word against the educational value of games (such as football, basketball, etc.) . . . but organized games are not play in the sense we have in view. Boys and girls must have time to invent episodes, carry on adventures, live heroic lives, lay sieges and carry forts, even if the fortress be an old armchair; and in these affairs the elders must neither meddle nor make.”¹⁰

The rapidity with which children can pick up and play, anywhere and everywhere, is a testament to this wonderful God-given impulse in human nature. I have often been distracted from my homeschooling lessons by an important phone call, an email message, or an unexpected visitor.

In every case my children disappear from their “assignments” and can be found donning dress-up clothes, building playmobile cities, or dancing across the kitchen floor.

While in former times I found this irritating, I now understand how wonderful it is. Play's caprice is something we ought to delight in and embrace. It is a fruit of children who are loved in their homes, nurtured by a steady diet of rich literature, and secure in the love of their family and their God. It is a reflection of the God who made us, a God who delights in joy, and who made us for His pleasure.

The three important foundations of learning fostered by the work of Charlotte Mason and brought to a new generation through Susan Schaeffer Macaulay are truths that stand the test of time and bear sweet fruit. Nurturing our children's individuality, providing them a twaddle-free curriculum, and allowing them the gift of play, are as peaceable and easy to entreat as they are simple and sensible. A quarter of a century after their clarion call was sounded, their reverberations continue to ring true with all who are childlike at heart.

Endnotes:

1. Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, *For the Children's Sake: Foundations of Education for Home and School*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1984, p. 12.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
6. Ruth Beechick, *You Can Teach Your Child Successfully*, New York: Arrow Books, 1988, p. 297.
7. Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, New York: Vantage Books, 1995.
8. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956, pp. 179, 181.
9. Ruth Sawyer, *The Way of a Storyteller*, New York: Viking Press, 1962, p. 157.
10. Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, *For the Children's Sake*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1984, p. 21.

Biographical Information

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Rea Berg, a homeschooling mother of six, loves discovering classic children's books (especially with cappuccino in hand), organic gardening, and dance. She has homeschooled for nearly twenty-five years. Rea graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in English from Simmons College and recently earned a master's degree in children's literature at the Center for the Study of Children's Literature in Boston, where she was named a Virginia Haviland Scholar. She resides with her family in San Luis Obispo, California. Rea Berg founded Beautiful Feet Books (www.bfbooks.com) in 1984 and has written numerous study guides on a literature approach to history.