

‘ With us this afternoon we have Miss Hardcastle, who was herself trained at Ambleside, which is the Training College for P.N.E.U. teachers, and I need not say more than this, that Miss Hardcastle is well qualified to talk to us on “What is Knowledge?” ’

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

By MARY HARDCASTLE.

‘ And yet we have gone on living
Living and partly living.’

So say the women, the scrubbers of Canterbury in T. S. Eliot’s play.

‘ Living and partly living.’ So little living, so much half-living shading into mere existence. Whether we agree or disagree about the necessity, it is odd to think of £1,500,000,000 being spent on re-armament. ‘ Oh, but (the answer comes) the Government has granted £2,000,000 towards physical education.’ And the mind? ‘ Oh well, if our bodies are fit, we shall be so much more alert and quick in mind’ . . . We gaze into the window of a bookshop and see David Copperfield with a large yellow wrapper, on which is written The Book of the Film. We take up one of Hardy’s novels in the nice little green edition of the Scholars’ Library. We find some useful notes at the end of the book giving some useful information. But even there we rub and eyes and wonder. It seems to be necessary nowadays to have a special note to inform scholars that Cain was the eldest son of Adam and that St. John the Baptist was the forerunner

of Christ. And so we go on learning and partly learning, filming and partly filming, slimming and—partly slimming. Are we topsy-turvy or is the world turvy-topsy? That enigmatic question is more nearly related to the subject of this paper, 'What is Knowledge?' than it at first appears to be.

Here is our question staring us in the face. What is Knowledge? I want to appeal to your generosity. Will you for a few moments put aside all those answers to that question which are crowding into your minds and give your free attention to Charlotte Mason's attempted answer to that question? I say attempted because as she says herself Knowledge is undefined and probably indefinable, and she can only give a negative answer to the question—she says that Knowledge is *not* instruction, it is *not* information, it is *not* scholarship, it is *not* a well stored memory. That clears the decks. Fortunately she did not leave the subject with a negation. Although she refused to give a definition, she gives us many affirmations which help us to see the vision of knowledge which she saw.

She speaks of knowledge as mental food. She compares it to a flame which is passed like the light of a torch from mind to mind. She speaks of the knowledge gained through scientific observation. She suggests that knowledge is the source of pleasure. Again and again she refers to the Science of Relations. There is something vital and intriguing about all these affirmations, but they might become isolated clichés if it were not for these words: 'Knowledge is not a store but, rather, a state that a person remains within or drops out of.' At once we are brought down to earth and at the same time enter Eternity. We are not considering an abstract conception, a vague and remote something which we must dutifully consider for the sake of the children in our charge. It is a personal question for each one of us. Are we within that state of knowledge or have we dropped out of it? Certainly if we are not within it, the chances are that our children will never enter it.

Let us take heart and remember what knowledge is *not*. It is not instruction, scholarship, a well stored memory or information. The scholar and the well-informed and well-instructed person with a well-stored memory may be in a state

of knowledge but equally, they may not be and if they are, it is not *by virtue* of these various attributes.

So we may breathe again. We need not necessarily possess the information that would enable us to do the *Times* crossword in $12\frac{1}{2}$ minutes, nor are we all called to be highbrows in the good cause. I would like to make a very short digression about that word highbrow. To my mind the highbrow is the somewhat superior person unduly conscious of his intellectual achievements comparing them slightly with those of others, someone who is certainly not in a state of knowledge, which has to be entered by a humble door. But the word highbrow is so often loosely used in reference to anyone who shows the faintest interest in intellectual things, so much so that some young people are in deadly fear of the word and would rather die than admit that they cared about poetry, history or art or any other activity of the intellectual side of life. The word highbrow lightly and thoughtlessly used may prove an effective stumbling-block in the way of a person's entry into the state of knowledge.

This brings us back to the main issue. What do we mean by the state of knowledge? I think the following words will help us to see more clearly. 'Life should be all *living*, not merely a tedious passing of time, not all doing, or all feeling or all thinking — the strain would be too great — but all living; that is, we should be in touch wherever we go, whatever we hear, whatever we see, with some manner of vital interest.' All living, you notice, not partly living. Not living on the games field and existing through lesson hours, or leading a full life at school and listlessly passing the time in the holidays, or later when schooldays are past, severely dividing the time between work — earning a living — and living. Of course these differences exist, but the child who has learnt to be in touch wherever he goes will look upon them as different sides of life and not as conflicting elements. Wholly living becomes a possibility.

Very likely this all sounds vague, idealistic and unpractical, claptrap or fuzzi-buzz. I can hear people say, 'My business is to give my child a good education, a thoroughly good start, so that he has every chance of climbing to the top of the tree.' What tree? The Army tree, the scholastic tree, the clerical

tree, the Varsity Blue tree, the matrimonial tree, or — the tree of life?

I can hear another criticism: the P.N.E.U. always goes in for a smattering of subjects, the work is very superficial. They never study all round a subject. Well, you see, if you are in the state of knowledge, you don't study subjects, *you are beginning to know objects, i.e.* knowing things and persons objectively. You know your friends and neighbours, you know your children, your brothers and sisters, you know Henry VIII, Rameses II, Ulysses, Elizabeth Bennett or Shylock, to take instances at random from history and literature. You know Tibet, Mount Erebus, Arabia through the minds and eyes of great travellers, you know your horse, your dog or your Austin Seven; you know ice and snow, earth and mud from contact with it, and so you could go through all the Benedicite.

I need hardly say that there are degrees of knowing, the state of knowledge implies advancing from lesser to greater knowledge. In the seventh book of the Republic, Plato gives us an allegory. He asks us to imagine an underground cave with one end open towards the light. At the far end of the cave are human beings facing the wall with their backs to the light, their legs and necks chained so that they cannot turn round. Between them and the opening of the cave a fire is burning, and in front of that is a raised way along which people are passing carrying strange objects. The shadows of these figures are cast by the light of the fire on the wall in front of the prisoners, who, in spite of their chained condition, are wrangling and fighting with one another about the shadows. The prisoners represent the people of Athens of that time — a motley collection of farmers, artisans, teachers, sophists, governors. They are disputing about the shadows of political power and worldly success, fighting for the prizes of the world of affairs in the dim light of opinion. Then Plato in a wonderful passage speaks of the necessity for intellectual conversion. He pictures one of the prisoners being released from his chains and turning round to face the light. The process, which is a painful one, is a turning round of the whole soul from darkness to the light of being. After this comes a long Pilgrim's progress in knowledge which

we cannot follow now, but the essential point is the turning round. When that has happened, then it is possible for each person to go as far as his capabilities allow. He is in the sphere of knowledge and is leaving behind him the darkness of opinion.

This turning round process is not necessary for children led from the beginning into the state of knowledge and who remain within it, they are facing the right way already, but we know of many others for whom it is necessary and no one will disagree that there is far too much playing with shadows in the educational world of to-day.

Perhaps these two points can be established from the illustration just given. That entry into the state of knowledge means turning away from preoccupation with the worldly struggle for success and power. Of course, these things are not wrong in themselves, they are sometimes added unto us, but they should never be aims; and secondly, advance is always implied. We can't sit down and say I know such and such people fairly well, and I am very fond of Browning and have read most of his poems, and so according to this theory I am in a state of knowledge. We can't say that unless we are continually trying to get to know and understand those people better, or unless we are continuing to read and enjoy Browning, digging deeply into the riches that are there. That which we have learnt in the past will be continually *used* if we are in a state of knowledge. The well-stored memory is of infinite value, but it is not in itself knowledge. Often it happens through circumstances that we find we are not able to make advances in certain directions, we are obliged through lack of time perhaps to let some contact lapse. Then memory will help to keep the way open—for a time at any rate—until we can meet the old friends again.

Life is all living. The truly living person is in touch wherever he goes with some vital interest. How vividly that idea is presented in the best thought of the day. We find it again and again when our minds are sufficiently untrammelled to reach it. I am not thinking of magazine thought which is generally here to-day and gone to-morrow, useful for the moment but not much more. I am thinking of modern literature. Underlying much that is written, poetry especially, we find that idea. We want

air to breathe, they say, we want leisure to think. We want to *know* people and not be content with acquaintanceship. We want to know those cypresses and those gentians and see their relation to Eternity. It is not a new idea. Wordsworth knew the philosophy of relationships. We find it in the Prelude (and we have glimpses of it all through the ages). But the thought has grown. Underneath all the extravagances of thought to-day we find a vivid realisation of *otherness* which is the basis of all contacts, and a reaction against intellectual gossip which is learning *about* things. Living means contact of one person with another, not only mind to mind, but the whole self with the other's self. Or it means contact of the person with the other *thing*. Either the half-mystical contact of the poet with the flower or the mountain, the dynamic contact of the mountaineer with the mountain, or the searching contact of the scientist with things as facts of the universe. All this we find to-day mixed up with sentimental excrescences and often nearly smothered with the litter of excessive organisation and standardisation. In the dim future this age will only be remembered for what it is really worth. Dictatorships will have fallen, empires have disappeared, all surface arrangements and oddities will be buried under layers of time. *We* cannot tell what will be left for posterity to see, but I am convinced that the idea of relatedness, the living contact of person with person and person with thing, which produces the state of knowledge, will shed its light — on the condition that all those who see this truth now, keep it clear. Charlotte Mason saw it far in advance of her generation, and unlike others she did not stop at seeing it; she applied it and made the ideal into a practical possibility. As I said at the beginning of this paper, she speaks often of the Science of Relations. This is the way of entry into the state of knowledge and the means whereby we remain there. We believe that children come into the world with all their powers, ready to form relations with innumerable things and persons. For the first six years of life, the child should be left free to make what relations he wills — with his rattles and his balls and his fairy cycle, with the plumber and the butcher boy, his rabbit and his knitting, with fairies and heroes of the past through story books, with walking, jumping and running.

Only it is our business to see that he has the opportunities for beginning the most important relationships, and most important of all with God.

Some people, who are sometimes rather misleadingly considered to be advanced thinkers, believe that children only need to form relations with that which is around them. They say, let children learn to live in a community, let them live out of doors and flit about and sunbathe to their heart's content. Let them have plenty of material, linen, wood, clay, leather on which to exercise their creative powers (a curiously limited conception of creation). The three R's are given a conventional attention to satisfy the school inspectors.—Now all this is true up to its limited point, but what a narrow field! And the boundaries of that field are marked out and limited by grown-ups. A few autocratic human beings take it upon themselves to decide what relations the young human beings in their charge should make. Who cares for the past, they say, the present is all that matters. (Another school of thought says just the reverse, the glory of the past is everything.) They may think that—but why should the poor unfortunate children in their power have to think the same?

No, when a child reaches the age of six it is our business to widen the field of relationships, to throw open the universe to him, to enable him to be in contact with the past as well as the present. Matthew Arnold gave a three-fold classification of knowledge proper to mankind, knowledge of man, knowledge of the universe and knowledge of God. We will come back to this in a minute.

Although it is not in our province to limit the sphere of knowledge, the child can make no advance without order, and there we have to do much to help him. There must be history and geography lessons, a time for painting and a time for arithmetic.

To be in a state of knowledge is to be in Eternity, but whilst we are here on this earth, it must always be in that part of Eternity which we call time. There must be the leisure of Eternity but no *waste* of time.

Here I would like to remind you of Miss Mason's other affirmations about knowledge which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. 'Knowledge is the food of the mind.' In

order to be in a state of knowing the mind must be fed regularly with the food of ideas and facts. Miss Mason goes so far as to say that if a child receives no new idea in a morning's lessons, that morning is wasted. Again, 'Knowledge is as a torch passed from mind to mind.' There is a flame-like quality in the contact of the mind of a small girl in Form I with the mind of John Bunyan, for instance. 'Knowledge gained through observation of facts.' The universe cannot be known without facts, nor can man for that matter or God. The state of knowledge implies all these things.

To cut a long story short, every child should be given not only opportunities of forming relations with the human beings around him, but also with the great minds of the past through history and literature, citizenship. This knowledge must come through books, living books and plenty of them. Then there is the knowledge which comes through seeing and hearing great works of art, the creations of great persons. His knowledge of languages will enable him to be in touch with minds of other nations. He should be at home in the Universe, through his actual contact with earth and water by rowing and swimming, walking, running and riding; through his handling of material in making things. He should form relations with beasts and flowers, the wonders of the sky, and try to grasp the laws which underlie the facts he perceives.

And then first and last comes the knowledge of God, which must begin from the very first. I am not going to do more than refer to that Highest Relationship as Mr. Christie will be speaking about it later.

How long are we to continue with this enormous programme? It is quite impossible for anyone to keep up all these relationships all through his life. That is true. But if a child has this start in living, he will be in touch wherever he goes with vital interests. He will always be meeting and greeting old friends in later life.

Miss Mason suggested seventeen as the age at which specialisation should begin, and this should be kept as an ideal, although it is not practical at present for the majority of children who leave school at 14 or 15. Another obstacle is often in the

way, the School Certificate, a problem which haunts so many people, but I think most of you will agree with me that the School Certificate cannot be looked upon as a test of whether a person is in the state of knowledge or not, and therefore it does not come within the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that many pupils of P.N.E.U. schools do succeed in passing the School Certificate examination and at the same time remain within the state of knowledge—a great achievement. This is probably the case in many other schools, but I cannot speak with authority about them.

Specialisation is an utterly lifeless word. It makes one feel rather weary to say it. All the more reason that the idea behind it, because there is an idea, should be kept well in front of our minds. When one thinks of specialisation as *departmentalisation* then the idea is very far away. What is the idea? Simply this, that each person is more vitally attracted to certain relationships than to others. That is the work of creation. It would be a dull world if it were not the case. Also that tiresome factor time has to be reckoned with. Circumstances will not allow most of us to make much advance in more than one or two directions. I have said that the state of knowledge implies advance, but that the rate of advance matters little. That is so, *if* we are advancing as far as is possible. Deep-mindedness is even more important than broad-mindedness. What a contribution to the riches of the world can the scholar, the scientist, the musician or the artist give? That is, taking it for granted they are in the state of knowledge and not just specialists with well-stored memories.

There is also a law which is not always grasped by the person who advances in knowledge in one direction only, and that is that depth meets depth and both are increased by this meeting. A person may have a very special gift for music. The temptation is to go all out in that one direction, but by a law which it takes experience to believe whole-heartedly, that person will be able to go further in her knowledge of music, if she goes more deeply into the study of eighteenth century literature or whatever her secondary interests may be. (I refuse to call them 'subsidiary subjects.')

It may be easier to see that an ever-increasing knowledge of Shakespeare, for instance, will help to

deepen intimacies in one's own life. A deep knowledge of God means a deep knowledge of mankind. Baron von Hügel tells us how his knowledge of God was strengthened and increased by his love for and knowledge of geology. He says more than once that if only women especially could devote some time to some impersonal knowledge, one of the sciences or an art, there would be less religiosity and less sentimentality in the world. Personal relationships become so unduly weighty, almost a burden, if unbalanced by any knowledge of things—not the things which are the cares of this world, but the things of the universe which are opened up to us by books of travel and exploration, by simple scientific books, by observation of birds and plants on our own account. The things which are capable of lifting up the heart. 'No time!' Oh yes, we know all about that, but put the idea in your cigarette and smoke it.

Life in the state of knowledge—is it to be a pleasant saunter? You know enough about life and relationships to deny that. No one can enter the state of knowledge or advance an inch without two things, strenuous effort and reverence. Strenuous effort. Those two words cover all the struggles we know so well, all the defeats and failures. All that which goes to the forming of habits, discipline, order, duty. Then reverence, the spirit of wonder which is inseparable from the state of knowing. Strenuous effort and reverence. When these two things are present there is joy and delight. In one of his poems D. H. Lawrence speaks of thought—real thought—as 'man in his wholeness, wholly attending.' I think the state of knowing is man in his wholeness wholly living. There need be no partly living.

What is knowledge? I have skated over part of the surface of this vast question. All I can hope is that I may have shown you another way of looking at it. A topsy-turvy way possibly, but in this turvy-topsy world we may find ourselves the right way up. And so we go on living. Living and wholly living, I hope.
