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Source: *The Reading Teacher*, Dec., 1986, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Dec., 1986), pp. 263-269

Published by: International Literacy Association and Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20199380>

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The McGuffey Eclectic Readers: 1836-1986

These reading texts introduced pedagogical innovations and provided moral themes that are still valued today.

Gerry Bohning

The *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* are considered to be the most famous reading textbooks in the history of American education. They constitute a phenomenon in schoolbook use and influence exceeded only by the Bible and *Webster's Dictionary* (Commager, 1962; Graney, 1977; Mosier, 1947; Sullivan, 1927). More than half the school children of America from 1836 to about 1920 learned to read from the *McGuffey Readers*; during that time over 122 million copies were sold (Livengood, 1947; Sullivan, 1927). They served as the main reading materials, confirmed moral values and truths, and shaped the literary tastes of American children.

As a significant part of American reading textbook history, the *McGuffey Readers* have left a legacy of reading textbook features, innovative then, commonplace today. Their remarkable staying qualities are apparent by the fact that they are still in use 150 years later.

A set of graded readers

William Holmes McGuffey was in the right place at the right time. The right place was Ohio; the right time was 1834. Truman and Smith, a Cincinnati firm, wanted to publish a series of readers to compete in the schoolbook market and asked the eminent educator Catherine Beecher to write a set. She was too busy and suggested William Holmes McGuffey (Ruggles, 1950; Smith, 1963; Westerhoff, 1978).

McGuffey (1800-1873) was born, raised, and educated on the Ohio frontier. At the time he was contacted by Truman and Smith, he was a professor of philosophy at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. His credibility as a scholar, popular Presbyterian preacher, and able lecturer on educational subjects was well established. As a former rural schoolmaster, he had long been dissatisfied with children's textbooks and had already started to compile two readers. Thus, he quickly reached an agreement with Truman and Smith (Ruggles, 1950; Wertheim and University, 1972; Westerhoff, 1978).

The *First* and *Second Readers* were published in 1836; the *Third* and *Fourth Readers* followed in 1837, as did the *Primer*. It is reported that McGuffey's wife, Harriet Spinning McGuffey, wrote and compiled the *Primer* but had it published under her husband's name to give it prestige (Smith, 1963). McGuffey compiled the volumes from a collection of his own writings and clippings from periodicals, borrowing also from the *Bible* and other school books and literary sources of the time (Minnich, 1936; Westerhoff, 1978). The word "eclectic" that appeared in the title was a fad word meaning the choosing of materials from many sources, embodying all the valuable principles from previous systems (Pittman, 1982; Smith, 1963).

The books quickly became popular and sales soared. A copy of the *Primer* cost eight cents and other *Readers* a few pennies more (Smith, 1963; Tebbel, 1972), but McGuffey made little money from them. His contract called for 10% of the royalties up to a thousand dollars with his rights terminating thereafter (Goode, 1966; Murphy and Murphy, 1984). In 1863, the publishers voluntarily arranged an adequate pension for McGuffey that enabled him to live comfortably during the last years of his life (Tebbel, 1972).

William McGuffey gave little input after the initial compilations that hold his name. His younger brother, Alexander Hamilton McGuffey, compiled the *Fifth Reader* in 1843 and the *Sixth* in 1857. Editors made minor revisions of the set in 1844, designed uniform covers, and issued them as a graded set of schoolbooks. Substantial revisions were done in 1859 and 1879 (Vail, 1911) and minor revisions in the early 1900s; it is these copyrighted editions that are available today and quoted in this article.

A legacy of innovative features

The *McGuffey Readers* rapidly became "the schoolbooks for the millions" (Pittman, 1982). What did they offer as schoolbooks?

They were a vast improvement over other texts of their day. They were among the earliest schoolbooks to introduce vocabulary gradually, use word repetition, and control sentence length (Nietz, 1961; Smith 1965; Vail, 1911). Words in the *Primer* and *First Reader* are mostly of one syllable and "Longer and more difficult ones are gradually introduced as the pupil gains aptness in the mastery of words (*First Reader*). It is the *McGuffey Primer* that introduced controlled vocabulary with the familiar selection "The cat has a rat. The rat ran at Ann. Ann has a cat. The cat ran at the rat."

The *Readers* firmly established the concept of the graded format (Carpenter, 1963; Freeman, 1960; Minnich, 1936; Vail, 1911). McGuffey would gather neighborhood children of different ages at his home. He sequenced the stories by trying them out with the children to learn which ones were best suited for different ages and interests (Smith, 1963; Westerhoff, 1978; Vail, 1911). The *Primer* acknowledges that the "Greatest possible care has been taken to ensure a gradation suited to the youngest children."

McGuffey was also the first to popularize the use of numerous illustrations related to the content of the lesson (Minnich, 1936). The *Second Reader* suggests to teachers that “Many of these pictures will serve admirably for lessons in language, in extension and explanation of the text.”

The *Readers'* content was substantive and reflected selections of moral and literary merit (Nietz, 1961). McGuffey referred to the selections as lessons. The *Fourth Reader* introduced great literature—Hawthorne, Alcott, Longfellow. The *Fifth* and *Sixth Readers* contained world literary selections and were early examples of the popular school literature anthologies of today.

Teachers of McGuffey's day were relatively untrained and depended on the textbooks for what to teach and how to teach (Cremin, 1951; Nietz, 1961). The *Readers* offered suggestions and aids to the teacher. The Preface, a forerunner of the teacher's guide, advised teachers to “First teach the elementary sounds and their representatives.” Aids for the teacher included short, manageable lessons, numbered paragraphs for oral reading or memorization, slate practice copy drills, the script alphabet model, and a listing of new words to be studied for each lesson. The *Fourth Reader* began the practice of including questions at the end of the lessons for oral and written work.

The *Fifth* and *Sixth Readers* included a lengthy Rhetorical Guide prepared by Alexander McGuffey. Since books were routinely read aloud as entertainment during McGuffey's day, mastery of effective oral reading was a major concern. “Whenever a word is imperfectly enunciated, the teacher should call attention to the sounds composing the spoken word” (*Third Reader*). To McGuffey, reading and oration were bound together (Smith, 1963).

Taken together, the *McGuffey Readers* offered a systematic way in which children were guided in the process of learning to read. A graded format, controlled word repetition and sentence length, pictures related to content, meaningful moral and literary selections, teaching suggestions, exercise aids, and the rhetorical guides—all were innovative features of the time, predecessors to features commonplace in the reading textbooks of today.

Printing and marketing the readers

The *McGuffey Readers* offered improved educational features for reading textbooks. They were an excellent product that reflected the values and tastes of the age. But mechanical improvements in the printing industry and the aggressive and skillful marketing strategies of the publisher made the books available as the schoolbooks for the millions (Carpenter, 1963; Lehmann-Haupt, 1952; Nietz, 1961; Tebbel, 1972; Vail, 1911).

Major mechanical innovations between 1825 and 1850 resulted in great changes in book printing and binding. The invention of the cylinder press, advances in automatic typesetting and typesetting machines, improvements in continuous roll papermaking, and the invention of paper cutting, trimming, and binding machines resulted in the almost complete mechanization of the whole process of textbook printing (Lehmann-Haupt, 1952; Tebbel, 1972). The new mechanical inventions and the *McGuffey Readers* enabled the firm of Truman and Smith to become the most successful textbook publishing company of the 19th century (Livengood, 1947).

Wintrop B. Smith and William B. Truman owned a small publishing company when they first approached McGuffey in 1834. The firm successfully promoted the *Readers* from the start. However, disagreements devel-

oped between the two men and in 1841 Smith wanted to buy out the partnership. It is reported that he made two stacks of books. In one stack were most of the firm's publications and all the cash. In the other were a half dozen books and the *McGuffey Readers*. Smith told Truman to pick whichever stack he wanted; Truman chose the cash and numerous publications (Nietz, 1961; Vail, 1911). Smith became the sole owner of the *Readers* until 1852. Partners came and went, the firm's name changed several times, success continued, and in 1890 the firm merged with other publishers to form the American Book Company.

The *McGuffey Readers* appeared just as the free public school, or common school, movement was spreading across the country (Cremin, 1951; Pittman, 1982; Wertheim and University, 1972). The uniformly bound, graded series coincided with the needs of the common schools in the Midwest that were being increasingly differentiated by graded classrooms. Increased production, better quality, and lower prices brought about by mechanization enabled publishers to meet the textbook demand for the common school market.

Intense competition resulted among publishers for the new markets (Lehmann-Haupt, 1952; Tebbel, 1972). The energy and talent of the Smith firm (and later with partners) maintained a commercial edge. Book agents went from school to school selling the *Readers*; it is said that these traveling salesmen were the best in the nation (Nietz, 1961; Pittman, 1982). In the 1860s some states implemented the statewide adoption of textbooks; usually the *McGuffey Readers* were selected. At one time they were the basic texts in 37 states (Tebbel, 1972). Book fairs in large halls were instituted in 1868 and the *Readers* were prominently displayed and enthusiastically sold.

Fierce competition reduced textbook profits, causing the major firms to combine their resources and merge as the American Book Company (Pittman, 1982; Tebbel, 1972). Among them was Van Antwerp, Bragg and Company, the publisher of the *McGuffey Readers*. Thus, in 1890 the American Book Company held the copyrights and printing plates to the famous *Readers*, and since the company had 93% of the textbook business, the *Readers* had a distinct marketing advantage (American Textbook Publishers Institute, 1949) that held them in a dominant position until after World War I.

The *Readers* did not create great ideas, but they did distribute great ideas (Friedenberg, 1972). The historian John Tebbel (1972) notes that between 1836 and 1920 "When one considers that, according to expert estimates, at least 10 pupils must have studied each Reader before it could no longer be used, one arrives at the almost unbelievable figure of 1,250,000,000 human beings who at the very least held a McGuffey's *Reader* or *Speller* in their hands and read from it."

Changing demands of the curriculum, a suspicion of anything old, and changing values and needs of society brought a decline for the *Readers*. However, they were down but not out. They continued to sell between 10,000 and 30,000 copies a year, then the back-to-basics movement began boosting annual sales. In 1985, 217,000 copies were sold (Murphy and Murphy, 1984). The *Readers* are used today in a few hundred school systems (Graff, 1961; Murphy and Murphy, 1984; Smith, 1984; *Time*, 1961). Most of the schools are located in small, rural communities or are private or church sponsored. The *Readers* are usually not the main text; instead they are used as supplemental reading material (Murphy and Murphy, 1984).

The Readers' staying qualities

What has given the *McGuffey Readers* their longterm staying power? An excellent product, innovation in the printing industry, and energetic marketing strategies accounted for the early supply, sales, and distribution. And the revisions made by the editors did reflect changing American society. But it is the piety and moral themes of the lessons that have provided staying qualities, then and now (Elson, 1964; Mosier, 1947; Parker, 1980; Robinson, 1930; Sullivan, 1927).

Society of McGuffey's day saw the *Readers* as a way to instill piety and mold strong moral character as well as to teach children to read. Today the books are used for the same reasons (Graff, 1961; Graney, 1977; Murphy and Murphy, 1984). Advocates feel there is nothing old-fashioned about setting standards of honesty, hard work, and kindness, as well as teaching children how to read. The major themes in the *McGuffey Readers* focus on God and nature, the value of work, standards of personal behavior, and standards of social conduct. These themes are reflected in the lesson content.

God and nature. William McGuffey, growing up in a deeply religious pioneer family, studied his early lessons from clergymen schoolmasters and attended local Presbyterian academies. Later he became a Presbyterian preacher as well as a university professor. It is not surprising to find God and nature as dominant themes in his lessons (Elson, 1964; Johnson, 1904; Parker, 1980; Westerhoff, 1978). McGuffey was passing on his convictions to the next generation.

The lessons do present God as being pleased by good words and good deeds of children. "He delights to see His children walk in love, and do good to one another (*Third Reader*). The natural world is used to prove the existence of God (Urell and Browning, 1976). In

the *Third Reader* a child asks "Who made the stars?" and Mother replies "Twas God, my child, the Glorious One." The poem "God Is Great and Good" assures children that "I know God made the sun to fill the day with light" (*Second Reader*).

The value of work. Work is the most persistent of all the McGuffey themes. "Work, work, my boy, be not afraid; Look labor boldly in the face" (*Fifth Reader*). There are clearly no days suitable for idleness. In the *Second Reader* two girls tell their mother "We feel happy because we have been busy."

There can be no excellence without continued labor. "If your castles get knocked down build them up again" (*Third Reader*). The lesson of "Hugh Idle and Mr. Toil" (*Fourth Reader*) states explicitly that Little Hugh Idle learned that "diligence is not a whit more toilsome than sport or idleness."

Standards of personal behavior. Children are advised in the *McGuffey Readers* to be honest, kind, helpful, and courageous, to go to school, and not to waste time (Graff, 1961; Parker, 1980). When meditating if he should have his brother carry the heavier load, Tom says "I will not do it. It would be wrong, and I will not do what is wrong" (*Second Reader*).

Consequences were sure to follow, swift and painful, if one did not lead the good personal life. "When Ralph found that he could not have the white rose, he began to scream, and snatched it. But he was soon very sorry. The thorns tore his hand" (*Second Reader*). And more directly stated, "George had a whipping for his folly, as he ought to have had" (*Third Reader*). Good is promptly and decisively rewarded. George paid for a store window he had broken. The reward? "As soon as George left school, he went to live with this man, who was a rich merchant. In a few years he became the merchant's partner" (*Second Reader*).

Education is viewed as a serious business and held in high esteem. "If I could only learn to read and write," said he, "I would be the happiest boy in the world" (*Third Reader*). The *Primer* advised that "A good child likes to go to school."

Standards of social conduct. Consciousness for right social living is reflected in the lessons (Elson, 1964; Westerhoff, 1978). Temperance, modesty, good will, and generosity are virtues. Profanity, gambling, and unkindness are evil. In "Emulation" (*Fourth Reader*), generosity is commended for a farmer's son as he "bought all the necessary books" for a poor but intelligent rival schoolmate.

Evil actions are followed by rapid and severe penalties. A man found guilty of stealing was sent to prison. "There I suppose he will die, for he is now old" (*Third Reader*). Reforms are astonishingly swift and complete. In "The Insolent Boy" (*Third Reader*), James pelted a stranger with dirt and stones. As the lesson unfolds, it becomes clear that the stranger was James's uncle. The other children "were loaded with presents," but James received nothing. "James never forgot this lesson so long as he lived. It cured him entirely of his low and insolent manners."

In the story of "The Seven Sticks," seven brothers fight among themselves, jeopardizing the family's well being. As their father shows his sons the strength of seven sticks bound together, he pointedly remarks that "so long as you hold fast together and aid each other, you will prosper, and none shall injure you" (*Third Reader*). So it is that, as a whole, the lessons in the *McGuffey Readers* developed and continue to build traditions of strong moral character. Their content is the medium for teaching the moral lessons, and the moral themes gave and give the volumes their staying power.

A historical profile

History provides a sense of perspective. A respect for the past illuminates the present and links a generation with all others. A history of the *McGuffey Readers* is a kind of collective memory. By studying them, we can better understand reading textbook developments and the events influencing those developments.

When teachers talk about graded basics, new words, controlled vocabulary, effective oral reading, relevant exercises, teaching aids, and pertinent illustrations, they are acknowledging the legacy of the *McGuffey Readers*. When representatives go to schools to sell readers, strive for state adoptions, or set up book exhibits, they are recognizing the promotional strategies used for the *Readers*. And as thousands of copies continue to be printed and distributed annually, the books' remarkable staying qualities are validated. The *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* (1974) continue to be the most famous reading textbooks in the history of American education.

Bohning includes a historical perspective in the foundations of reading instruction courses he teaches at Barry University in Miami, Florida.

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