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## McGuffey Readers

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## **MCGUFFEY READERS**

With over 122 million copies sold since 1838, the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* taught more Americans to read than any other textbook. Initial publication coincided with a unique period in United States history as the West was settled, newly arrived immigrants assimilated, and the common school movement gained momentum. At this time, the nation was at a critical point of forming a distinct identity. These phenomena created a demand for textbooks that would not only meet the practical need for curriculum in developing schools but would also extend prevailing American values to both children new to the frontier and those new to the nation. The McGuffey Readers proved to be, to a much greater degree, to the 19<sup>th</sup> century what the *New England Primer* was to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century.

The success of the Readers could be credited as much to the astute business tactics of Cincinnati publisher Winthrop B. Smith as to the authors and compilers themselves. Smith observed the dominance New England publishers held over the growing textbook industry and determined the need for a graded series of readers marketed to the burgeoning West and to the South. He first sought the assistance of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who declined his offer but recommended her friend William Holmes McGuffey. A professor and Presbyterian preacher, McGuffey had already begun work on such a project. Smith contracted him to compile a primer, four readers, and a speller. His compensation would be ten percent of the profits not to exceed \$1,000. Though a great sum at the time, it was not representative of the vast proceeds publishers brought in and hardly compensated McGuffey for the impact his work had on the nation.

The first and second readers were published in 1836 with the third and fourth following within the year. McGuffey had compiled and written the material to be age appropriate. To establish which material best suited particular ages, he experimented with his own children and those in the community, teaching them in his home as well as outdoors on logs. Incorporating the element of competition, he reserved the largest end of the log for students who recited their lessons most accurately. He documented the effect of the content on various age groups and made necessary adjustments before submitting the final work. Typical in many ways to other graded readers of the time, the primer began with the alphabet and phonetically taught single-syllable words. Not as successful as the series that followed it, the primer was pulled from publication shortly after its introduction. The content of the first reader moved on to more difficult words and introduced simple sentences. The second reader progressed to multi-syllabic words, and the stories grew more complex as the book progressed. Comparable to the level of junior high school material, the third and fourth readers taught thinking skills and included selections from authors such as Irving, Byron, Jefferson, and Shakespeare. Two particular characteristics made McGuffey's work distinct from other readers of the day. First, it included more illustrations than was common for school books at the time. Second, it was a complete language arts curriculum integrating spelling, speech, comprehension, and word studies.

Though it was common for readers to include selections from various authors, McGuffey's Readers initially drew criticism from Samuel Worcester, a Boston author, for "over-imitation" of material. Citing 10 identical pieces in both his and McGuffey's Readers, Worcester filed suit against McGuffey and his publishers for violation of copyright laws. Whether it was a legitimate case or not, the conflict reflected the intense rivalry between New England and Cincinnati publishers over the growing market for schoolbooks. Nevertheless, after only two

years in print, the McGuffey Readers underwent a redaction, ridding them of any selection that could be considered an infringement of copyright. The plaintiffs agreed to settle out of court for \$2,000. The looming lawsuit brought about the first and most sweeping of many revisions to come.

In the 1840s, William H. McGuffey's younger brother Alexander added a Rhetorical Guide, which was later developed into the fifth and sixth readers. Literary selections in these volumes were comprised of portions of the Bible and the works of Longfellow, Dickens, Addison, and many others. In addition to the variety of literature, these higher level readers incorporated elocutionary exercises and lessons on such broad topics as farming, science, history, and biography. The instruction in elocution was deemed necessary because of the increasing number of immigrants learning the English language. These final books of the series have been credited for determining America's taste for literature and for exemplifying themes foundational to the American experience.

Although a forerunner to the 20<sup>th</sup> century basal, the McGuffey Readers were distinctly different. Their selections were much shorter, were intended for oral rather than silent reading, and were more culturally and morally monolithic. Unlike modern basals conceived and produced by publishers, 19<sup>th</sup> century readers like McGuffey's were largely written and compiled by a single author—normally a clergyman or schoolmaster. While they were not as stern in moralizing as the *New England Primer* had been, the McGuffey Readers clearly taught a Calvinistic ethic that both reflected the moral tone of the time and proliferated it into the fabric of American society. The *New England Primer* included a greater degree of religious content and emphasized eternal damnation in hell as punishment for wrongdoing, whereas McGuffey's Readers focused on practical consequences children might experience here on earth for lacking

in kindness or productivity. Like the modern basals, McGuffey's stories resonated with what children found interesting, such as fables about animals and play.

William H. McGuffey was born in Pennsylvania in 1800 before his family moved to Ohio during his infancy. A prodigious child, he was issued a teaching certificate at 14 years of age and served as an itinerant teacher. He graduated from Washington College with a degree in ancient languages in 1826, was ordained as a Presbyterian minister three years later, and wrote his Readers while teaching at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He continued to contribute to revisions of the Readers while he was president of Cincinnati College and later when he returned to Miami University as president. However, in 1845 when he left Ohio to serve as professor of philosophy at the University of Virginia, his input into further editions ceased. The most popular edition was published in 1879, six years after his death. Although remembered primarily for his series of readers, McGuffey was a popular professor and an outspoken advocate for the common school movement in both Ohio and Virginia.

Other than the first revision in 1838, which was conducted to avoid copyright infringement, all other revisions of *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers* were completed to make the books more visually and conceptually appealing to a changing society. The flourishing magazine industry of the 1870s, with its improvements in pictorial images, influenced an overhaul in the quality of the Readers' illustrations. Religious content was gradually diminished over time, but the high moral tone was retained.

Among critics of the McGuffey Readers was Horace Mann. While he agreed with McGuffey in promoting the spread of free public schools throughout the nation, Mann vociferously argued that much of the content in the Readers was inappropriate for children's textbooks. Other critics have pointed out omissions. For instance, though moralistic about many

issues, including cruelty to animals, they did not address the injustice of slavery as the textbooks of New England had. Also absent are mentions of Jefferson, Lincoln, Twain, and such events as the California Gold Rush and the Oregon Trail. Only cursory mention is made of the Civil War. Political critics indicate that these oversights reflect the pro-Whig Party leaning of the compilers and an effort not to offend consumers in the South. Other concerns have existed over anti-Semitic references, identification of Native Americans as “savages,” and the limitation of women to domestic roles.

Three books ubiquitous in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century schools and homes, particularly in the West and South, were the Bible, Webster’s dictionary, and the McGuffey Readers. Along with Webster’s Blueback Speller, the McGuffey Readers helped to standardize English language usage in the United States. They not only reflected the moral values of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also shaped them. Since the first publication in 1836, they continue to be in print and to sell tens of thousands of copies each year. They are mainly popular in the home-school movement, but are also implemented in a few school systems.

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See also: Calvinist Schools, Common School Movement, Home Schooling, Horace Mann, New England Primer

#### **FURTHER READINGS**

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