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McGuffey Readers: Elementary School Reading Books

Samuel J. Smith

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McGuffey Readers

McGuffey Readers, formally ***McGuffey's Eclectic Readers***, series of elementary school reading books that were widely used in American schools beginning in the 1830s. Compiled by educator William Holmes McGuffey, the McGuffey Readers helped to standardize English language usage in the United States and not only reflected the moral values of the country in the 19th century but also shaped them. With more than 122 million copies reputedly sold by 1925, the McGuffey Readers taught more Americans to read than any other textbook.

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Cover of William Holmes McGuffey's fifth school reader.

Origins and early editions

The initial publication of the McGuffey Readers came at a critical point in the formation of a distinct identity for the United States and coincided with a unique period during which the West was settled, newly arrived immigrants assimilated, and the common-school movement gained momentum. These phenomena created a demand for textbooks that would not only meet the practical need for curriculum in developing schools but also extend prevailing American values both to children new to the frontier and to those new to the country. In the emerging textbook industry, McGuffey Readers reformed the content of America's textbooks and the way that content was presented to students.

The success of the McGuffey Readers owed much to the astute business tactics of Cincinnati, Ohio, publisher Winthrop B. Smith. Although publishers in New England dominated the growing textbook industry, Smith saw the need for a graded series of readers marketed to the burgeoning West and to the South. He first sought the assistance of fellow Cincinnatian Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, in addition to her literary endeavours, was a schoolteacher. Stowe declined Smith's offer but recommended her friend McGuffey, a Presbyterian preacher and member of the faculty of Miami University, in nearby Oxford, Ohio, who had already begun work on a similar project. McGuffey contracted to compile a primer, four readers, and a speller. His compensation was to be 10 percent of the profits—not to exceed $1,000. Although a great sum at the time, it paled next to the vast profits realized by the publishers.

McGuffey, oil painting by an unknown artist; in the collection of Ohio University, Athens
Courtesy of Ohio University, Athens

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 his community. Typical in many ways of 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 it was introduced.) The content of the first reader moved on to more difficult words and introduced simple sentences. The second reader progressed to multisyllabic 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 Washington Irving, Lord Byron, Thomas Jefferson, and William Shakespeare.

Although it was common for readers of the time to include selections from various authors, Samuel Worcester, a Bostonian, sued McGuffey and Smith for copyright violation, citing 10 pieces in the McGuffey Readers that had already appeared in Worcester's own reader. The looming lawsuit brought about the first and most sweeping of many revisions to come, a redaction that rid the McGuffey Readers of any selection that could be considered an infringement of copyright. The conflict (which was settled out court for $2,000) reflected the intense rivalry between New England and Cincinnati publishers over the growing market for schoolbooks.

Two particular characteristics made McGuffey's work distinct from other readers of the day. First, it included more illustrations than was common for schoolbooks at the time. Second, it was a complete language-arts curriculum integrating spelling, speech, comprehension, and word studies.

Content and moral tone

In the 1840s McGuffey's younger brother Alexander added a Rhetorical Guide, which was later developed into the fifth and sixth readers. Literary selections in those volumes included portions of the Bible and the works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Charles Dickens, Joseph Addison, and many others. In addition to the variety of literature, those higher-level readers

incorporated elocutionary exercises and lessons on broad topics such as farming, science, history, and biography. The instruction in elocution was deemed necessary because of the increasing number of immigrants learning the English language. Some observers credit the final books of the series with determining, at least for a time, mainstream American taste in literature and with exemplifying themes that were foundational to the American experience.

Although a forerunner to the basal readers of 20th and 21st centuries, 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, which are conceived and produced by publishers, 19th-century readers like McGuffey's were largely written and compiled by a single author—normally a clergyman or a schoolmaster. Although 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 wove 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 the McGuffey Readers focused on practical consequences children might experience 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.

Other than the first revision in 1838, which was constructed 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 McGuffey Readers' illustrations. Religious content was gradually diminished over time, but the high moral tone was retained.

Critical response

Among critics of the McGuffey Readers was educator Horace Mann. While he agreed with McGuffey in promoting the spread of free public schools throughout the country, Mann vociferously argued that much of the content in the McGuffey Readers was inappropriate for children's textbooks. Other critics have pointed out omissions. For instance, though moralistic about many issues, including cruelty to animals, the readers did not address the injustice of slavery as the textbooks of New England had. Also absent are mentions of Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, and such events as the California Gold Rush and the Oregon Trail migration. Only cursory mention is made of the American Civil War. Politically oriented critics have indicated that these oversights reflect 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.

Since the first publication in 1836, the McGuffey Readers have continued to be in print and to sell tens of thousands of copies each year. They are mainly popular in the homeschool movement but are also implemented in a few school systems.

Samuel James Smith The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica

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