

Our Christian Educational Heritage: McGuffey and His Readers

By Robert A. Peterson

From no other source has the author drawn more copiously in his selections than from the Sacred Scriptures. For this, he certainly apprehends no censure. In a Christian country, that man is to be pitied who, at this day, can honestly object to imbuing the minds of youth with the language and the spirit of the Word of God.

-William Holmes McGuffey

In the year 1928 Henry Ford personally issued a reprint of the books through which he had been taught to read. Reflecting on their significance in his own education, he wrote:

Most youngsters of my day were brought up on the McGuffey *Readers*. Most of those youngsters who still survive have a profound respect for the compiler of the *Readers*. The moral principles Dr. William Holmes McGuffey stressed, the solid character building qualities he emphasized, are stressed and emphasized . . . today even though the McGuffey's *Readers* themselves are not "required reading."

Nearly sixty years have passed since Ford wrote these words, yet interest in McGuffey's *Readers* show no signs abating. Between 1836 and 1920, over 120 million copies of McGuffey's *Readers* were sold. Since 1961, they have continued to sell at a rate of some 30,000 copies each year, and a new edition of the original McGuffey's *Readers* recently published by Mott Media promises to generate even more interest in the *Readers*.

With the exception of the Bible, McGuffey's *Readers* probably did the most to shape American values and morals in the nineteenth century. Yet far too little is known about the man who compiled them. Such a state of affairs is unfortunate, for William Holmes McGuffey was and educator's "man for all seasons," truly, a "schoolmaster to a nation."

McGuffey was descended from a deeply religious family. His grandfather, a farmer-cobbler named Billy McGuffey, was a Scottish Covenanter who came to America to seek a new life. No summer soldier or sunshine patriot, he served his adoptive country for seven years during the War for Independence. After the war, he moved to Washington County, Pennsylvania, where a group of like-minded Scots had established a religious community. Here McGuffey's father, Alexander, grew up, working at his father's side; and here Alexander took his wife Anna Holmes, a pious, serious, and intelligent woman. William Holmes McGuffey, the second of eleven children, was born on September 23, 1800.

Like other farm boys who grew up on the frontier, young William had a "liberal education in the way of chores," as one of his *Readers* would later put it. Yet, unlike some other farm families, McGuffey's parents did not neglect his book learning. When he was old enough to go to school, his parents sent him to Reverend William Wick's subscription academy. Reading late into the night by the light of the hearth, McGuffey laid a good foundation for his

career as an educator. When he could not afford to buy books, he borrowed them and carefully copied by longhand their entire contents. In later years, when McGuffey compiled his *Readers*, more than one story was based on the theme of a poor boy working his way to the top through sheer determination and persistence. As one story in the *Fourth Reader* later pointed out, “The best seminary of learning that can open its portals to you can do no more than to afford you the opportunity of instruction. It must depend, at last on yourselves, whether you will be instructed or not, or to what point you will push your instruction.” By his fourteenth birthday, he was awarded a certificate and told that he was able to make his way in the world as a roving teacher.

Thus, at the age of fourteen McGuffey began his career as an educator. McGuffey’s first position was in Calcutta, Ohio. For fifteen weeks during the winter months, young McGuffey taught forty-eight students for eleven hours a day, six days a week, trying to cram in as much as possible before his students would be needed for spring planting. It was a grueling task, and, although there is no evidence that the experience was a complete failure, it was enough of an eye-opening experience that McGuffey decided to return to school for more training. The next year found him at The Old Stone Academy in Darlington, where he was taught by the Reverend Thomas Hughes.

For the next four years, McGuffey worked his way through the Academy. His various responsibilities included serving as a sexton in Hughes’ church and doing chores around the Hughes’ home. Completing all that Old Stone had to offer by 1820, McGuffey then went to Washington College, a Scottish Presbyterian school that had been founded in 1806. While at Washington, McGuffey lived with the president, Reverend Andrew Wylie, who took a liking to him and made sure that William became a good classicist. His funds ran low, though, and with one term remaining, he left Washington and set up a private school in Paris, Kentucky. Classes were held in the only available building—a smokehouse—with the Bible and the New England Primer as his basic textbooks. McGuffey did not have all of the equipment and facilities modern educators think are so necessary, but he had all that was necessary for a good education—the Word of God. The Bible, after all, is the book which undergirds Western civilization. Alfred Lord Tennyson once remarked that “Bible reading is an education in itself.”

While McGuffey was in Paris, laboring under the idea that he would eventually be able to go back to Washington College, the president of Miami University, Robert Hamilton Bishop, passed through town. So impressed was he with McGuffey’s erudition and teaching ability that he asked him to come and teach languages at Miami. McGuffey sought advice from both his mother and Alexander Wylie. His mother approved, after he promised her that someday he would get ordained, while Wylie told him, “I wish you to be where you will be most useful and happy.” By virtue of his teaching experience and new status, he was awarded his degree from Washington without having to go back to the final term.

Miami University, located in Oxford, Ohio, was a frontier college. Felled trees were still lying around when McGuffey arrived in 1826, and even fast-growing English ivy had not had enough time to climb the walls of the main building. Yet, in spite of its newness, it was already an exceptional school. Bishop wanted to make Miami the “Yale of the West.” In the pursuit of that goal, he had led in instituting innovative courses in both modern languages and applied

mathematics, and in building one of the country's earliest observatories. But it would be McGuffey, not Bishop, who would put Miami on the map with his famed *Readers*.

Soon after arriving in Miami, McGuffey met Miss Harriet Spinning, sister of Charles Spinning, an Oxford merchant. He fell in love, but before he proposed, he wrote once again to Wylie for advice. Wylie wrote back to him, "I have no advice for those who contemplate matrimony, for they are usually bound to commit it." The marriage took place on April 3, 1827. Eventually, five children would help to fill the McGuffey home.

Little is known about McGuffey as a father, but what is known indicates that he was concerned for his children's salvation as well as for their character development. In a letter to his son Charles he wrote,

Let me remind you of the importance of industry and a careful observation of every duty, not even neglecting your personal habits. Everything depends upon habits formed in youth. This you know, but we are liable to forget it.

And then on another occasion he wrote:

Remember my dear son to read a portion of the Bible every day and do not forget daily to pray to God to keep you from the evil and to prepare you for the duty of life and for the hour of your death. Think of your mother and often ask yourself how she would advise and what she would think of any course you are about to pursue.

His daughter, Henrietta, wrote, "We had been brought up to such perfect obedience to our parents that nothing but submission did we ever think of."

In the classroom at Miami, McGuffey was a master teacher. Reports indicate that he was adept at explaining complex ideas with concrete illustrations. Moreover, he kept a disciplined classroom, and always looked for new ways to teach old truths. He was a doer as well as a teacher. Not only did he teach public speaking and debate, but he went out and actually engaged in debates. In 1829, for example, he debated two Universalists, and was accorded the victory. He preached on Sunday in various churches, and encouraged his students to go out and do the same. Calling attention to the many pulpits that were open to his students, he said, "There you can prove your elocution and learn to put your thoughts into simple sentences that the illiterate can understand." Since there was no speech teacher at Miami, McGuffey donated his time to meet with the boys before breakfast each day.

In spite of his busy schedule as a teacher, elocutionist, debate coach, preacher, lecturer, and librarian at the college, he found time to serve as the advisor to the college's literary society, the Eradelphians, and to launch and edit its literary journal, *Literary Focus*, to which he contributed a number of short stories. From 1830 to 1837, his articles appeared in other magazines, such as *The Western Monthly Magazine* and *The Illinois Monthly*. McGuffey was also one of the earliest members of the Western Literary Institute, an organization that was set up to promote the "sacred institution of education." Banding together for mutual aid and

improvement, McGuffey and the other members exchanged ideas, educated the public as to the importance of education, and generally sought to elevate the character of teachers.

McGuffey's most important work outside the classroom was the experience that led to the *Readers*. As early as 1830, he was gathering neighborhood children on his porch where they listened to him read stories from the Bible and from the American and British classics. As McGuffey read, he took note of which stories were the most readable and the most appealing for each age group. As the year passed, using this method, McGuffey painstakingly put together his first reader and large portions of the next three. By 1833 he had completed the *First Reader*. By 1837 all four *Readers* were completed and published by Truman and Smith, a small Midwestern publishing house based in Cincinnati.

McGuffey's *Readers* very closely reflect his own Christian beliefs. In 1829, McGuffey had been ordained at Bethel Church by the Oxford Presbytery and had become one of the most popular preachers in Ohio. But it was through the *Readers* that he preached to the nation. As one historian pointed out, "McGuffey's *Readers* read more like a theology textbook than a children's elementary schoolbook." McGuffey himself said,

From no other source has the author drawn more copiously in his selections than from the Sacred Scriptures. For this, he certainly apprehends no censure. In a Christian country, that man is to be pitied who, at this day, can honestly object to imbuing the minds of youth with the language and the spirit of the Word of God.

His basic philosophy of what to include was summed up in the preface of one of his early *Readers*: "A mischievous error pervades the public mind on the subject of juvenile understanding," he wrote. "Nothing is so difficult to be understood as 'Nonsense.' Nothing is so clear and easy to comprehend as the simplicity of wisdom."

McGuffey's *Eclectic Primer*, which was designed to precede the *Eclectic Readers*, is filled with the nuts and bolts of reading. The strong Christian worldview is not so evident in the early chapters, as space is given over mostly to teaching alphabet and words like "dog," "cat," "hen," and "boy." In these early lessons in reading, pictures take up nearly half the space on each page. By the time a student reached the end of the *Eclectic Primer*, he was receiving heavy doses of Christian teaching. The last story in the *Eclectic Primer* contains this passage:

God sees and knows all things. He sees me when I rise from my bed. He sees me when I go out to work or play, and when I lie down to sleep. If God sees me, and knows all that I do, He must hear what I say. Oh, let me speak no bad words, nor do any bad act; for God does not like bad words or bad acts.

The *First Reader* gives one of the clearest Gospel presentations outside of Holy Scripture: "All who take care of you and help you were sent by God. He sent His Son to show you His will, and to die for your sake." At the same time, the smaller details of life, such as caring for books, were not neglected: "When I have read my book, Ann, I will lend it to you, and

I will read to Jane. I dare say it is a nice one. I am sure you will take care of it. Ann says, that no one but a bad girl will tear or soil a book.”

The *Second Reader* begins with a section entitled “Suggestions to Teachers” that gives us some insights into McGuffey’s educational philosophy. “The first object of the intelligent teacher,” wrote McGuffey, “is to awaken the attention of his pupils. This can be accomplished in no other way so well as by asking him questions. The questions found at the end of the Lessons, are intended merely as hints to the teacher, of the way in which he may exercise the mind of the learner on every subject that is brought before him.” Above all else, McGuffey felt that teachers needed to be excited about what they were teaching, and that it should exercise their own minds:

...Let teachers be assured, that any method of teaching, even the alphabet, which does not exercise their own minds, so as to give a pleasurable excitement of thought, will not be successful in securing the object which every instructor ought mainly to propose to himself, namely, the interest and improvement of his pupils.

The stories selected for the *Second Reader* are filled with Scriptural admonitions and good advice. In Lesson II, students are reminded to have morning devotions: “Never forget, before you leave your room, to thank God for His kindness.” At the end of the story, one of the questions is, “Did you say your prayers this morning?” Hard work was also encouraged, along the lines of the encouragements and admonitions given in the Book of Proverbs. In Lesson III, a little boy tries to get first a bee, then a dog, and then finally a horse to play with him. But each in turn replies that it has a job to do. The boy then says to himself, “What, is no one idle? Then little boys must not be idle.” Properly rebuked, the young man went to school and became a diligent scholar. Although it is impossible to judge a story by its title, the titles of many of the rest of the stories in the *Second Reader* are revealing: “The Love of Brothers and Sisters”, “The Diligent Scholar”, “Praise to God”, “About Doing Good at Play”, “True Courage”, “Emulation Without Envy”, and “The Ten Commandments.”

The Introduction to the *Third Reader* reiterates McGuffey’s belief in the importance of Bible selections:

For the copious extracts made from the Sacred Scriptures, he makes no apology. Indeed, upon a review of the work, he is not sure but an apology may be due for his not having still more liberally transferred to his pages the chaste simplicity, the thrilling pathos, the living descriptions, and the overwhelming sublimity of the sacred writings. The time has gone by, when any sensible man will be found to object to the Bible as a school book, in a Christian country; unless it be purely on sectarian principles, which should never find a place in a system of general education. Much less then, can any reasonable objection be made to the introduction of such extracts from the Bible as do not involve any of the questions

in debate among the various denominations of evangelical Christians. The Bible is the only book in the world treating of ethics and religion which is not sectarian.

And, of course, all the passages were taken from the beautiful and providentially preserved Authorized Version of 1611.

One story in the Third Reader that would probably be barred from most schools today is entitled “The Advantages of Industry.” After reviewing the fine habits of young Charles Bullard, who experienced success on every hand because of his diligence, the author concludes: “Perhaps some child who reads this asks, ‘Does God notice little children in school?’ He certainly does. If you are not diligent in the improvement of your time, it is one of the surest evidences that your heart is not right with God [emphasis added]. You are placed in this world to use your time well. In youth you must be preparing for future usefulness. If you do not improve the advantages you enjoy, you sin against your Maker.”

The “Introduction” to the Fourth Reader gives us some insights into McGuffey’s teaching methods. “Let the teacher sometimes read aloud a lesson to his class,” wrote McGuffey, “having previously removed every means of taking notes while he reads—and then let him require each pupil within a given, but sufficient time, to render in writing and from recollection, an abstract of what he had read.” Among other things, McGuffey felt that this exercise would improve students’ attention, improve their writing ability, and increase their fluency of expression. Many of the selections in the Fourth Reader present a thorough Christian view of history and human thought. In “Henry Martyn and Lord Byron,” for example, Lord Byron’s character traits of infidelity, rebelliousness, and inconsistency are brought out in sharp contrast when compared with the life of Henry Martyn, a missionary who disciplined his “Byronic” temperament by yielding his will to God. Despite Byron’s fame as a Romantic poet, the reader is left with no doubt in his mind that it is undesirable to be like Byron. Martyn, not Byron, is the hero of the story.

Even the directions that McGuffey gives for reading certain pieces in the Fourth Reader reflect his Christian worldview and his lofty view of God: “These names of the Deity are seldom pronounced with that full and solemn sound that is proper. . . . If the pupil can learn to speak the three words, O-Lord-God, properly, it will be worth no little attention. Every pupil,” he added, “ought to be exercised on these words till they pronounce them properly and in a full and solemn tone.”

All the Readers contain stories about great men, holding them up to schoolchildren as examples to follow. The late Dr. Max Rafferty once said that today’s teachers and textbooks “debunk the hero, and elevate the jerk.” Rock stars who lead immoral lives or corrupt politicians are given prominent places in history, while George Washington, who served without pay during the War of Independence, is accused of padding his expense account. The problem with this teaching method is twofold. First, it leaves children with no models after which to pattern their

lives. Second, it is usually historically inaccurate. The character sketches in McGuffey's Readers, however, give young people ideals toward which to work. Even if children never attain the stature of a George Washington or a Robert E. Lee, at least they have been exposed to greatness and challenged by their example.

McGuffey's Readers were "more than a textbook," wrote historian Robert Wood Lynn. "They were the portable school for the new priests of the republic." Lynn here was referring to the truth that a textbook can have such a powerful influence that it is like a school itself. When a student is outside of school, his textbook may still be with him. And if he goes to a school where textbooks are purchased by parents, as has been the case through much of American history, the textbooks will become part of the family library. Ten years after the child who used the textbook graduates from school, some other family member or a guest may pull the volume down from the shelf and begin reading.

The 1836 edition was the only one which was actually compiled by McGuffey. His brother Alexander compiled the Fifth and Sixth Readers. Through successive editions, the essentially fundamentalist values that the McGuffeys put in the Readers were diluted by Unitarian influences. Although there were plenty of references to God, there were few to Christ. After the publication of the Readers, McGuffey's influence as an educator grew, particularly in the West. Yet, ironically, while his national influence was growing, his influence at Miami was on the wane, primarily because he stood in opposition to the trends toward social progressivism, theological liberalism, and lower discipline standards. McGuffey also felt that President Bishop was giving the students too great a voice in running the university. McGuffey's conservatism was symbolized by his dress: long after they were out of style, McGuffey continued to wear knee breeches, and as well as a dark clerical tie and to carry an ebony cane. The disagreements between McGuffey and the Miami administration became so serious that McGuffey resigned in 1836 to assume the presidency of Cincinnati College. Unfortunately, the farmers in and around Cincinnati saw little value in higher education, and McGuffey was never really accepted as part of the community. After four unhappy years, McGuffey resigned and took a position as professor of classical languages at Woodward College. Two years later, McGuffey was called to be a professor of philosophy at the University of Virginia. Twice during his days at Virginia he was offered the presidency of Miami College, but each time he refused. His wife died in 1850, and he remarried the following year. One child who came from this union, died at the age of four. On August 4, 1873, McGuffey died and was buried at Charlottesville, Virginia.

As a teacher, McGuffey apparently had few peers. Thomas Millikin (class of 1838) wrote that McGuffey was "a model teacher studiously dignified and polite, elegant and accomplished in social life, critical and exact in knowledge, with unusual capacity to impart knowledge to others." The Reverend B. W. Childlaw (class of 1833) said that "he was a born educator" and that "he inspired us with the love of knowledge and taught us how to think." Despite his success as a teacher, it is for the Readers that he is chiefly known today. Historian Mark Sullivan said that for this achievement alone he ought to be ranked with George Washington or Abraham

Lincoln. Hugh Fullerton, writing in the Saturday Evening Post, wrote that the McGuffey's Readers were second in influence "next to the Bible." Even his detractors have grudgingly acknowledged their greatness. Today, 150 years after their first appearance, interest in the Readers continues to grow. In 1982, for example, 150,000 copies were sold. In one public school in Bristol, Virginia, reading supervisor Evelyn Murray said that "it's amazing to see the change in the students' attitudes. When the McGuffey's Readers were adopted as a supplement," she continued, "the children seemed to be wanting something like this. They take the books home. They have a McGuffey Day, and they look forward to it." Even though the books were written over a century and a half ago, children seem to be more attracted to McGuffey's Readers than to modern readers that take thousands of dollars and a team of artists and experts to produce. Thus, even today, McGuffey continues to serve as a "Schoolmaster to a Nation."

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