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Papa Lyman Remembers —
The McGuffey Readers

by Lyman Newlin (Book Trade Counsellor) <broadwater@wnyp.net>

Editor's note: On March 24, 2000, my family celebrated my father's 80th birthday amid much festivity in Richmond, Virginia. My father had requested a copy of the McGuffey Readers for his birthday present. So, who did I contact, but the incredible Papa Lyman who had mentioned the Readers to me more than once. Next thing I knew, I had received a beautiful set of seven McGuffey Readers from the incredible John Chambers of John Wiley! My father was thrilled and thinks that librarians are miracle workers. So don't tell him my secret, okay? — KS

When Katina suggested I do a Remembers column on the McGuffey Readers, I readily accepted. Immediately all sorts of memories flooded my mind. It was going to be one of the easiest essays I'd ever undertaken.

To begin with, I had made many visits to Oxford, Ohio, as a textbook buyer representative of Wilcox and Follett's College Division. Oxford is the site of Miami University, whose Edgar W. King Library includes the William Holmes McGuffey Library and Museum, the Edgar W. King Collection of Children's Literature, and the Walter Havighurst Collection of American Literature. I was fortunate to have had Walter Havighurst frequently stop by my buying stand in the Purity Cafe for a talk about current publishing. I can readily put hands on my autographed copy of his Long Ships Passing (MacMillan, 1946). It is my favorite book about my favorite waters: the Great Lakes.

Edgar King was librarian at Miami in my day and was always gracious to all of us book peddlers. It goes without saying that Miami's library was not yet named for him.

Beyond academic recognition, the word "Miami" has been a covenbury among journalists, especially sports writers. Confusion is frequent between the two Miami's. The one in Coral Gables, Florida (The University of Miami) has been around for three quarters of a century. Ohio's Miami University was opened 101 years earlier in Oxford. Soon after Miami Oxford opened with twenty students varying in age from twelve (yes 12) years to 20, William Holmes McGuffey was hired, in spite of his not having yet earned a degree, as professor of foreign languages. Thus began the ten-year tenure of a native of the backwoods of the Western Reserve of Ohio, born September 23, 1800, whose name was to become one of the most widely known in American education. Like many pioneers, his early schooling consisted mainly of reading the Bible, which was the only book in many homes. Circuit riding preachers and teachers were the infrequent and only instructors. Calvinism was so thoroughly implanted in young McGuffey that much of its philosophy which guided his action was born to seep into his writing. Although he actually wrote only a few of the readers which bear his name, a brother and several other teachers were added to the series so that McGuffey Readers, with their emphasis on hard work, truthfulness, and loyalty to family, church, and state were responsible in great measure for the "American Way of Life" as it was known for the latter part of the nineteenth century and still widely used until World War I. But even that was not a complete demise. John Wiley and Sons, the current publisher, keeps the seven volumes of the "revised 1879" edition in print. Thus the latest edition is now over one hundred...
Wilcox and Follett College Department employees who traveled to colleges at semester end to buy used textbooks. The now gigantic Follett College Store chain already had stores at Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan and Purdue. Ohio was one of my states and my favorite buying school was Miami. Few of us buyers had automobiles; we traveled by train or bus. Miami was always my first stop. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad ran a spur from Chicago to Cincinnati primarily to transport students from their home towns along the line to their colleges. I don’t recall the names of any except Miami U. The train “set off” a Pullman car in Oxford and thus early on the first day of semester-end exams, I would set up in the Purity Cafe on High Street ready to buy books from students. My main competition would always be a buyer from Long’s College Book Company, in Columbus who worked out of Frasers’ Book Store, a few hundred yards closer to campus. Folletts had the last laugh, however; Frasers’ became an early acquisition after Folletts began intensive chain expansion. I used to stay at “Thelma’s,” which was a semi-motel, as yet an uncommon word for an uncommon substitute for hotels. Oxford was “dry” but one of the College Book reps knew where a local bottled beer was obtainable in a nearby Indiana town. Book-buying entity was soon forgotten after a cold bottle.

Now back to McGuffey. A surprising piece of knowledge came to me from reading McGuffey and His Readers by John H. Westerhoff III (Abington, 1978). Westerhoff warns his readers that the “influence of William H. McGuffey must be distinguished from the influence of McGuffey’s Readers.” The author then proceeds to write a succinct brief on this difference. This information was fortified in my phone conversation with the very helpful Beverly Bach, curator of Miami University Art Museum, which works with the McGuffey Museum on special programs and displays. I learned from Ms. Bach that McGuffey should be regarded as the “compiler” rather than the “author” or “editor” of the Readers. She also confirmed that W.H. McGuffey was actually responsible only for the compilation of the first four Readers—and only for the editions before 1858.

Before signing off I’d like to acknowledge factual information to some of the hearers responsible for my memories of Henry Ford’s influence on public interest in McGuffeys in the first half of the twentieth century. Those memories prompted some phone calls to the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. Richard J. Staples, Executive Assistant, has furnished me with excerpts from three publications quoting several of Ford’s allusions to the Readers and their merit. In his Greenfield Village, Ford had the author’s birthplace recreated and built a one room “McGuffey School” from logs originally from a barn on property of the original which is in what is now Washington County, PA. Mr. Staples points out that Ford made no public statement during his last years. He suggests that perhaps Clara, Ford’s wife, may have continued with the Ford interest in McGuffey. Geoffrey C. Uphard, in his 1980 profusely illustrated A Home for our Heritage, tells us that by the late 1930s Ford had collected some 406 copies of 145 different editions—amazing one of the world’s three best collections. Uphard tells us that this collection began when Clara could not find in their house a single copy of the books (McGuffey) which had educated both her and her husband. Henry inquired among friends and then “if necessary, among book stores to find a copy.” Uphard writes that the search started with this “fairly insignificant incident in 1914.” I am bold enough to opine that this was the beginning of a myth that was still current when I began working at Follett Library Book Co. thirty years later—and was still around even after the Fords were laid to rest.

In conclusion I would like to urge my readers who are not familiar with McGuffeys Readers to examine at least one of them. They are to be found in many libraries and are individually available for less than a dozen dollars from Wiley. I make this suggestion out of fear that these books may be replaced by the artifacts of past generations by Harry Potter. I take personal umbrage with Ms. Rowling for defiling the Potter name which comes down to me from my mother’s family, direct descendants of Captain John Potter who crossed the Delaware Christmas 1776 with General Washington.

Bibliography


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* The McGuffey Spirit (Video Recording, 19 minutes), United Telephone Co. of Ohio, 1990.

McGuffey, William H., L.L.D. McGuffey’s Newly Revised Eclectic Fourth Reader Containing Elegant Prose and Poetry revised and improved. Cincinnati, Winthrop B. Smith & Co., no date. This obviously early edition carries the following blurb on its half title page: “I commend this series to the Christian, the Teacher, and the Philanthropist” by the Rev. Dr. Lyman Beecher. This copy is in the rare book collection of the Niagara Falls Public Library to whose Linda Reinhaghi I am indebted for much help in my research.


* Above are from the Miami University Bibliography (over 35 items) available from Lyman New on ATG.

Thanks also to Richard J. Staples, Research Assistant, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village for suggesting McGuffey references in the following books: Young Henry Ford by Stanley Olson, Nevins: Ford and the G.C. Upward title mentioned above.

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