

MCGUFFEY'S READER

In the early days of the industrial revolution, American educators (church leaders, and later on, politicians) saw education as a means to foster morality, patriotism and citizenship. Education itself was primarily moral, and so the textbooks, the lessons, and the teaching methods were designed to carry out that primary intention. Early books were designed to teach basic reading, but more importantly, Christian doctrine. In one example, the *New England Primer* was characterized by heavy religious platitudes: "In Adam's Fall We sinned all." or, "The idle Fool Is whipt at School". Soon, these readers began to shape the standard for American grammar school education. There was rarely a page which did not address itself to some moral problem from the standpoint of Protestant Christianity and Victorian ethics.

The original McGuffey's Reader was developed by William Holmes McGuffey in the early 1830s and soon would have a profound influence on public education – and the culture of the United States. McGuffey was a professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and a Presbyterian minister when he was asked by a publisher to compile a series of graded readers. As a young schoolmaster, McGuffey had used the eighteenth-century Puritans' *New England Primer*, Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book*, and the Bible. His *Eclectic First Reader* and *Eclectic Second Reader* were published in 1836, the *Third* and *Fourth* in 1837. They contained stories of widely varied subject matter appealing to youngsters and taught religious, moral, and ethical principles that reflected both McGuffey's personality and society at the time. McGuffey's brother Alexander produced the *Fifth Reader* in 1844, a spelling book in 1846, and a *Sixth Reader* in 1857.

In subsequent decades the books evolved to match newer cultural ideas. They began to move away from promoting the Calvinist values of salvation, righteousness, and piety and began to reflect the morality and cultural values of a much more diverse American society. By 1879, 60 million copies had been sold, and, by 1920, over 122 million. As late as 1978 they were still in use in some school systems where they continued to teach millions of Americans “a middle-class, conventional, paternalistic morality”, reflecting the values of a traditional religious orientation. (Commanger, H.S. 1962) A copy may be found in the MJC Library, or, take a look online: <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/t/text/text-idx?c=nietz&view=toc&idno=00ach0331m>. What do you think would be the major differences between today's elementary school reader and a McGuffey's Reader?