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The Restoration of America: William McGuffey and the McGuffey Eclectic Readers
By Karla Perry

American children of the mid-nineteenth century were essentially educated by the works of one man, William Holmes McGuffey. The McGuffey Eclectic Readers sold 120 million copies between 1836 and 1920. These sales are comparable only to the Bible and Webster’s Dictionary.1

William Holmes McGuffey [1800-1873] began his educational profession at the age of fourteen after receiving a teaching certificate from his educator, Reverend William Wick. As instructed, he put an advertisement in the local paper that he would begin a four-month session of classes, six days a week, and eleven hours a day on the first day of September 1814. Forty-eight students assembled from the West Union, Ohio community, now Calcutta, Ohio. McGuffey drew his lessons primarily from the Bible.2

A traveling Presbyterian Pastor took notice of McGuffey’s teaching skills and offered to take him to reside in his home while he attended Old Stone Academy. McGuffey did so for the next four years. He then continued his education at Washington College for the next six years, where he worked the farm to pay for his education, taught, and studied. When he couldn’t afford to buy his books, he copied them longhand. Before completing his degree, he was offered to become a professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He accepted this position which he held for ten years before moving to Charlottesville, Virginia, where he would be a professor at the University of Virginia for twenty-eight years. Moreover, the Oxford Presbytery ordained him in 1829 as he loved to preach and demonstrated a superb ability to “communicate extemporaneously.”3

2 Ibid. pgs. 32 –33
3 Ibid. pgs. 34 –40
McGuffey believed that children’s textbooks were lacking efficiency in training children to read. Therefore, he began to assemble young children on his porch to experiment on how to best teach them to read. He used newspaper clippings and other collected writings in his efforts to develop a curriculum best suited to their development. These sessions were the beginnings of what would become the Eclectic Readers.4

McGuffey’s Readers focused on reading, elocution, rhetoric, and memorization. He accomplished this by instructing the child to read the provided story aloud, and retell the story in his own words either verbally or by writing it down. Then the child would demonstrate his understanding of its meaning by articulating the lesson learned or the moral of the story.5 The Readers compiled reading material, prose, and poetry from American and English religious leaders as well as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Milton, William Shakespeare, Lord Byron, and Noah Webster to name a few.6

Bible stories and passages of Scripture were prominent throughout the Readers for salvation and righteousness were central themes. Secondary themes were piety, kindness, and patriotism.7 McGuffey adeptly weaved the values of loving God, your neighbor, and your country throughout his textbooks. Children were continually being taught honesty, obedience, industry, cleanliness, forgiveness, gratefulness, cooperativeness, curiosity, self-control, meekness, independence, courageousness, frugality, punctuality, truthfulness, perseverance, responsibility, and honesty.8

The Preface of the Fourth Eclectic Reader states:

From no 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 spirit of the Word of God.9

The Preface to the Third Eclectic Reader states:

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 on purely sectarian principles, which should never find a place in systems of general education.10

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4 Ibid. pg. 45
5 Ibid. pgs. 57 –58
6 Ibid. pg. 59
7 Ibid. pgs. 91 –92
8 Ibid. pg. 94
9 Ibid. pg. 61
10 Ibid. pg. 62
And;

The Bible is the only book in the world treating of ethics and religion, which is not sectarian. Every sect claims that book as authority for its peculiar views.\textsuperscript{11}

It was normal at the time of that writing to infer to America as a Christian nation and to consider the Bible the authority on educating in matters of morality and religion. The concern in that era was only to avoid promoting one sect over another but central to all was the Bible. It was this idea that provided the stable foundation for America for centuries. It is a wholly modern American idea that the Bible ought to hold no position in the public education of children.

The original Readers were replete with biblical instruction; however, William McGuffey was only responsible for the original editions of the first four Readers. The fifth and sixth Readers were written by his brother, Alexander McGuffey. Until 1941, the Readers were simply titled, Eclectic Readers. It was not until later editions that they bore McGuffey’s name in the title.\textsuperscript{12} Nonetheless, the name did not signify continuity of content. Later editions contained revisions that greatly decreased the biblical and God-centered content of the original works of McGuffey.\textsuperscript{13}

The greatest revisions are found in the 1879 edition which is still available in print today. These books are furthest from the original McGuffey content. Just the same, I own an 1865 printing of McGuffey’s Third New Eclectic Reader, and it is dramatically altered from the original 1837 printing. Where the original edition has essays on the Character of Jesus, The Bible, More about the Bible, The Goodness of God, Gospel Invitation, and the Character of Martin Luther, the 1865 edition is lacking these entries.\textsuperscript{14} The 1865 edition does contain The Lord’s Prayer and A Child’s Prayer.\textsuperscript{15}

The later editions continued in the flavor of moral and civic responsibility instruction while significantly decreasing references to God and the Bible. Many Americans that were educated by the McGuffey Readers have fond recollections. Henry Ford reprinted the 1857 edition personally in 1928 due to his cherished memories of their use in his 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

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. pg. 62
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. pg. 21
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. pgs. 17, 19, 104 – 107
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. pgs. 136 – 137
\textsuperscript{15} McGuffey, William H., McGuffey’s New Eclectic Third Reader. Ohio: Hinkle and Wilson, 1865.
emphasized, are stressed and emphasized . . . today even though the McGuffey Readers themselves are not required reading.\textsuperscript{16}

In addition, the \textit{Saturday Evening Post} in 1927 ran an article on McGuffey authored by Hugh Fullerton who wrote:

\begin{quote}
For seventy-five years his [McGuffey’s] system and his books guided the minds of four-fifths of the school children of the nation in their taste for literature, in their morality, in their social development, and next to the Bible, in their religion.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

In kind, Ralph Rush in his book, \textit{The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier} wrote concerning McGuffey:

\begin{quote}
Upon the generations immediately succeeding the pioneer period, the influence of McGuffey may well have been greater than any other writer or statesman in the West. His name has become tradition not yet extinct.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

McGuffey provided the formative curriculum for the new nation in the educational spirit of the Founding Fathers who were greatly desirous of school teachers educating youth in biblical morality and patriotic civic responsibility. They believed that the success of this nation depended upon a well-educated populace capable of governing themselves and participating in the governing of the nation. McGuffey, in his essay titled, “General Education,” thoroughly evinced this necessity, “No thought is more true, and no truth more important, than that general intelligence is the only palladium of our free institutions.”\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{16} Westerhoff, John H. III. \textit{McGuffey and His Readers: Piety, Morality and Education in Nineteenth-Century America}. Milford, Motts Media, Inc. 1982, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. pg. 15

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. pg. 16

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. pg. 164
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