

McGuffey and His Readers

McGuffey's Readers (7 vols.)

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McGuffey and His Readers (by John H. Westerhoff III)

By Dr. G. James Jason

Those of us who favor "basic education" in opposition to "progressive education" get used to hearing our opponents disparage our view by saying, "All you want is to bring back McGuffey's Readers!"

The joke may be on the so-called "progressives." Mott Media (1000 East Huron Street, Milford, Michigan 48042) has reissued the original McGuffey's Readers (the 1837-8 edition), along with a delightful commentary by the Reverend Doctor John H. Westerhoff entitled *McGuffey and His Readers*. Anyone interested in the fundamental issues in education ought to read these books.

Dr. Westerhoff is well qualified, indeed. He is a Professor of Religion and Education at Duke University Divinity School, has published fifteen books and a number of articles, and is the editor of *Religious Education*. He holds graduate degrees in theology, anthropology and education from Harvard and Columbia Universities.

As Dr. Westerhoff shows us, the real McGuffey—as opposed to the strawman some people have set up—was one of the finest educators this country has ever produced. William McGuffey was born in 1800 to a devout Scottish Presbyterian family, and learned early on in his life what hard work was about. His mother was the major force behind his desire for learning. While still quite young he began studying with a minister, the Reverend William Wick, and by age *fourteen* began his teaching career.

Sometime later McGuffey met a second minister, the Reverend Thomas Hughes, who assisted McGuffey in getting further education at the Reverend's private academy. From there McGuffey went on to Washington College, and eventually wound up at Miami University of Ohio. He spent his most productive years there as a Professor of Ancient Languages. In the mid 1830's he began writing, and soon the Professor produced the first of the readers which bear his name.

And what readers they are! Consisting of two primers, one speller and four "eclectic" readers, they are challenging and effective teaching instruments. The Third Reader—which would be read by children in the equivalent of our fifth and sixth grades—includes many selections from American and English essays (including selections from Bacon, Milton, Byron, Scott, Webster, Jefferson, Rousseau and Shakespeare) as well as lessons from the Bible (including the Sermon on the Mount). Just try to imagine a contemporary sixth grader—say, a Valley Girl—reading Bacon or Milton!

The Fourth Reader was even more amazing. It was intended for elementary school, but included selections of high school caliber—I mean, of *then* high school caliber! It had essays by Johnson and Bacon, poetry by Byron and Milton, and more selections from Shakespeare.

In all of the readers, each selection was followed by a vocabulary list, rhetorical tips (on pronunciation and elocution), and questions for discussion.

The readers contained strong expressions of value, such as would throw the modern student into consternation (or perhaps secretly comfort him). These lessons centered around piety, patriotism, and personal integrity. One sample (p. 285 Fourth Reader):

Let the American orator frown, then, on that ambition, which, pursuing its own aggrandizement and gratification, perils the harmony and integrity of the union, and counts the grief, anxiety, and expostulations of millions, as the small dust of the balance. Let him remember that ambition, like the Amrta cup of Indian fable, gives to the virtuous an immortality of glory and happiness, but to the corrupt an immortality of ruin, shame and misery.

These moral lessons were not, however, simplistic. Consider these two quotes on war and peace (the first from p. 192, the second from p. 150—note also the beauty of the prose):

(1) Though the whole race of man is doomed to dissolution, and we are hastening to our long home; yet at each successive moment, life and death seem to divide between them the dominion of mankind, and life to have the larger share. It is otherwise in war; death reigns there without a rival, and without control.

War is the work, the element, or rather the sport and triumph of death, who here glories not only in the extent of his conquests, but in the richness of his spoil: In the other methods of attack, in the other forms which death assumes, the feeble, and the aged, who at best can live but a short time, are usually the victims. Here they are the vigorous and the strong.

It is remarked by the most ancient of poets that in peace children bury their parents; in war, parents bury their children; nor is the difference small. Children lament their parents, sincerely, indeed, but with that moderate and tranquil sorrow, which it is natural for those to feel who are conscious of retaining many tender ties, many animating prospects.

Parents mourn for their children with the bitterness of despair. The aged parent, the widowed mother, loses, when she is deprived of her children, everything but the capacity of suffering. Her heart, withered and desolate, admits no other object, cherishes no other hope. It is Rachel, weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, because they are not.

(2) I am no advocate for war. I abominate its spirit and its cruelties. But to me there appears a wide and essential difference between resistance and aggression. It is aggression, it is the love of arbitrary domination, it is the insane thirst for what the world has too long and too indiscriminately called glory, which lights up the flames of war and devastation.

Without aggression on the one side, no resistance would be roused on the other, and there would be no war. If all aggression were met by determined resistance, then, too, there would be no war; for the spirit of aggression would be humbled and repressed. I would that it might be the universal principle of our countrymen, and the determination of our rulers, never to offer the slightest injury, never to commit the least outrage, though it were to obtain territory, or fame, or any selfish advantage.

Those who hold multi-media presentations on the horrors of nuclear war appear as imbecilic next to such clear wisdom.

Any student who learned from these readers had to really *think* along the way. After Byron's poem entitled "Rome," the following questions are asked:

1. Why does Byron call Rome "my country?"
2. Who was Niobe, and what was her story?
3. How is Rome the Niobe of nations?
4. Upon what site was Rome built?
5. What "double night" rests upon Rome?
6. What ancient Grecian exclaimed "Eureka," and why?
7. What great men of Rome are mentioned in verse 5?
8. What is narrated of Sylla in verses 6 and 7?
9. Is Rome a mere mass of ruins? or are these, descriptions of parts of the city?
10. In verse 10 what moral is drawn from the rehearsal of the past?
11. What is the beautiful metaphor in verse 11?
12. What is said of the imperial urn, and what fact referred to?
13. What is said of the Forum?
14. What was the Forum?
15. What was the Tarpeian?

Is challenging your students to think and articulate so very unprogressive?

McGuffey wrote few articles on his philosophy of education—the poor fellow would not have gotten tenure at your average Education Department. But the few pieces he did write (which are included as appendices in Dr. Westerhoff's fine book) reveal a mind that truly understood what education is about.

For one thing, McGuffey was by no means a believer in rote memorization. He believed that the role of the teacher is to challenge, question, even provoke the students.

In fact, McGuffey as a true progressive educator, as opposed to the sham progressives so common today. First, he believed that almost everybody can master the essentials of knowledge. Second, he believed that discipline was essential to learning. The Socratic method only works when the participants have discipline enough to stick to the inquiry. Third, McGuffey believed that certain basic values—honesty, patriotism, diligence—are truly valid, and should be inculcated.

One question does come to the fore in reading these admirable books. They are very definitely oriented toward Christian—indeed, Protestant—faith. How can values be inculcated without adding a specific theology—so hard to do in a pluralistic society? The Readers furnish no answer; however, they do make the question very clear.

I urge you to buy and read these books. The next time someone laughs at the phrase "back to McGuffey's Readers!" ask whether he has read them. The chances are that he hasn't.

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