

## ***MCGUFFEY'S ECLECTIC***

**By Michael Ventura**

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The volume was purchased for only six dollars in an odds-and-ends store in Los Angeles. Its cover was water-damaged and faded, so you could barely read the title; the cover's illustration was impossible to make out; but all its 224 pages were intact, though stained, and its paper and ink had been of such high quality that the print was still clear and easily read and its once-white pages hadn't faded much -- they were a light beige; the binding was badly cracked, but because of the old practice of binding not only with paste but with high-quality string, the pages still held in place and were easily turned. (The string, amazingly, hadn't rotted at all.) You could, with effort, make out the title: *McGuffey's Eclectic Second Reader*.

The inner title page read, in more detail: McGuffey's Newly Revised Eclectic Second Reader: Containing Progressive Lessons in Reading and Spelling. Revised and Improved. By Wm. H. McGuffey, LL.D. Cincinnati: Sargent, Wilson, & Hinkle. And on the next page: Entered, according to Act of Congress, in the year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Three.

On the inner side of the cover, two names were printed in pencil in a child's hand: "Irene K," "Louisa Van Waters." On the next page, in an only slightly more mature child's script: "Louisa Van Waters, May 30th 1860."

From its first edition in 1836 (the year of the Alamo), *McGuffey's Readers* were the standard textbook (often alongside the Bible) in America's schools for the next 100 years -- in every part of the continent, my reference book says, except New England (no reason for New England's rejection is given). You can see, or rather hear, the successful application of McGuffey's methods and curriculum in Ken Burns' documentary *The Civil War*. Burns' narration consists largely of quotes from letters written by all classes of society and from all regions of the country. The language is alive, clear, vivid, and utterly absent of jargon. The grammar is sometimes fanciful and colloquial, but always rooted in experience; the usage is rhythmic with local inflection but, North and South, lower- and upper-class alike, black and white, you hear a shared American written language that is marvelously expressive. Most of these letter-writers, from the wives and soldiers and runaway slaves to the aristocrats and officers, would have had little formal education by modern standards; and most would have learned to read and write through a *McGuffey Reader*. Nothing like that had ever been accomplished on such a wide scale before.

McGuffey's enthusiasm and care for education is transmitted on page eight in his "Suggestions To Teachers": "The great object of the intelligent teacher should be to awaken the attention of the pupil to the subject of the lesson he is reading. The conversational mode of imparting instruction, and of training the young mind, is believed to be the true and only means of attaining this end ... Let the teacher be assured that the hour of the reading lesson is one in which he must tax his powers to the utmost, if he expects success. It requires no ordinary application on his part to fix the *attention* of the pupil; to enable him fully to *understand* what he reads; and to make this exercise more a *pleasure* than a task. The teacher, who devotes himself to the attainment of these objects, will be more than repaid for his own labor and exertion, by the rapid progress of his pupils."

On every page you see McGuffey's conviction that reading is an explicitly moral act. That is, he saw reading not only as a means to impart and learn morality, but as an act through which morality is fixed, rooted, and stored. I would define morality as a fundamental respect for the rights and needs of others. The best expression of this, for me, is Rabbi Hillel's, early in the first century: "Do not do to others what you do not want done to you." McGuffey would agree, though his instruction is steeped in the assumptions of his era: religion -- specifically, Christianity -- is worked into many of the *Reader's* lessons; so is imperialism, sexism, a classification of Native Americans as "savages," and a glorification and idealization of (white) American history. It was McGuffey who invented the tall tale of young George Washington's cherry tree, which was still taught as fact (and in McGuffey's version) when I was a boy. But for all the objections I have, it would be perversely politically correct not to admit the idealism, however flawed, that is implicit in every line and in the book itself. For McGuffey had created a textbook for a "public education" -- the education of the general public -- in which largely working-class children, who had never been taught on a mass scale before, would be given the tools to open any book of any kind in their language. With decent instruction, anyone could master McGuffey's highly entertaining *Reader*. Educationally, its standard was high: Anyone who successfully learned *McGuffey's Reader* could read anything. Obviously, the teaching methods of today are not nearly as successful.

The very last lesson in the book is the Ten Commandments, as usually listed in America; but McGuffey adds, as an unnumbered 11th commandment, the same words from the Torah that Jesus cites as the most important commandments, and that are not usually included in America's 10; it's the last sentence in the book: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind: and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

No, I'm not advocating re-instituting McGuffey's blend of education and religion into public schools. His *Reader* helped establish education as we know it (or knew it); but for most of his students it didn't inoculate against committing genocide, slavery, Jim Crow, child labor, the suppression of women, bigotry of all kinds ... the list goes on and gruesomely on. I believe it is not only legitimate but necessary to expect education to be at least an antidote to, and a means to fight, atrocity and oppression. Yet it is also true that most of the people who learned how to fight these immoralities, from the 1830s into the 1930s, were people who developed, in large part, through reading; and who had, in effect, learned to read at McGuffey's knee, as part of an educational movement, unique in history, of which the *Reader* was a crucial element. And this result was implicit in the *Reader* from the start. McGuffey was a mixed blessing, to be sure, but a blessing nonetheless.

Hannah found the book in a dingy antique shop. When she gave it to me and I read the copyright date, 1853 ... and saw the child's script: "Louisa Van Waters, May 30th, 1860" ... I thought: This book was published three years after *The Scarlet Letter*, two years after *Moby-Dick*, one year after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the year of its publication, Congress authorized the survey for the first transcontinental railroad. One year later, *Walden* was published; and a year after that, *Leaves of Grass*. Not long after little forgotten Louisa wrote her date, Lincoln was elected and the Civil War began. The Native Americans west of the Mississippi were still strong. Commerce and farming in America were still largely individual and comparatively free enterprises -- more free than anywhere else in the world. America had yet to be conquered by corporations. Reconstruction had yet to fail so miserably, so disastrously. America didn't yet require a

large military. We had committed the ineradicable sins of genocide, land theft, and slavery, but it was not yet too late to expiate and even correct those sins; those sins weren't yet so deeply ingrained into the structure of America that we could never escape them. There was still time to be just to the tribal peoples of the West. There was still time to free the slaves and give each his 40 acres and his mule, which every slave had more than earned. There was still time for America to be America ... to be more like the America of *Leaves of Grass* than the America of *The Wall Street Journal*. The volume was printed, and Louisa wrote her name and date, at a hovering, transitional, all-important moment when there was still time ... a moment that Whitman understood, and Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass, and a precious few others ... aptly, as I write, the tune playing happens to be Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young: *Find the cost of freedom ... Buried in the ground ... Mother earth will swallow you ... Lay your body down.*

Louisa, Louisa ... Louisa Van Waters ... who were you and where were you? Were you perhaps 10 years old in 1860, when America still had half a chance? Did you live to be, perhaps, 70? Were you finally allowed to vote before you died? By 1920, a hypothetical year of your death, we were a world power on a technological binge that has yet to spend itself. I hold the book you held. I'm a citizen of an America that never was. It's the only America I care about. I live in two Americas: I confront the America that is with the America that could have been. That confrontation is, now, what it means to be an American.

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