



N. Webster

Noah Webster's Conservative Radicalism

The myth of the American Spelling Book

The name of Noah Webster has long carried an unusual weight of authority in American culture, of which one symptom is the tendency for any Dictionary not to sell in the States unless that name is on the cover. Did he come out of the Ark with this great book under his arm? As Tomkins shows, however, it was his earlier Speller, not his Dictionary, that acquired for him an almost legendary status as a dynamic contributor to the sense of American nationhood as it grew throughout the 19th century, a period during which in successive editions the Speller remained the symbolic representative of literacy in the experience of every U.S. citizen. Its history as a great commercial success that became part of the national heritage was due, as she shows, not so much to the nationalist fervour of its preface as to the workmanlike arrangement of its contents, which were anything but revolutionary. So it became a symbol, stirring one's feelings without upsetting anyone's conventions. As Tomkins locates with deft precision the book's actual influence, effects, and status, we come across interesting explanations of such traditional American phenomena as spelling-bees, wilfully wrong pronunciations of English place-names, and the unexpected uniformity of speech across the entire Continent.

Noah Webster (1758-1843) wrote broadly in many fields, but he has been recognized primarily for his contributions to education and lexicography, which were inextricably intertwined in his thought. Much has been made of his educational philosophy during the years after the American Revolution, especially of his plan for a uniquely American system of education based on the power of language.⁽¹⁾ This philosophy is only of intrinsic interest, however, except where attempts to implement it may be traced. Webster's only contribution in this regard was the authorship of school texts, of which by far the

most famous and influential were the American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) (2) and the American Spelling Book (1783). Each is generally regarded as an expression of Webster's fervent cultural nationalism, insistence on "American books for American children", and concurrent rejection of British antecedents.(3) Richard Rollins has demonstrated the fallacy of this assumption with regard to the Dictionary, for, as he effectively documents, Webster lost his early buoyant nationalist confidence and became pessimistic about the rationality of man and the excesses of American democracy. He never lost his faith in the power of education and language, however, and the Dictionary was ultimately a highly conservative document, which actually found more favour in England than in America, and was designed as an instrument of social control (Rollins, 1976, pp.415-31 and 1980, chapter 8). This revelation makes the study of the American Spelling Book (hereafter the Speller) all the more pertinent, as it was the true product of what might be termed Webster's "optimistic" period.

The Speller is also worthy of study because it was generally the most widely-used text in nineteenth century America. In 1880, its publisher claimed that it was, next to the Bible, the best-selling book in the world, and conservative estimates place its total sales by 1890 at 100,000,000 (Shoemaker, 1936, p.89). During Webster's lifetime and considerably beyond, it was much more widely used than the Dictionary. In these terms alone its potentially enormous impact is evident, yet it remains only vaguely examined or understood. The common view, held even by Rollins, maintains that the Speller was a "revolutionary broadside" which proposed drastic reforms to create a uniquely American culture and especially language, which Webster believed was a necessary bond to unite the young republic (Rollins, 1980, p.35). It is proposed that, in fact, the Speller was a conservative and pragmatic document which owed its fantastic success to its very conservatism and pragmatism. The present purpose is to examine and assess the nature of the Speller in this regard; to determine the basis of its enormous success; and to assess its importance and influence in the light of this new understanding.

The causes of the widely-held misconceptions regarding the Speller are basically twofold. First, as Rollins' work indicates, Webster's thought evolved a great deal throughout his long life, and it is a mistake to apply indiscriminately his philosophy and writings of any one period to another. For a time, Webster did advocate drastic language reform based on entirely phonetic spelling (Rollins, p.64). This was a short-lived idea which attracted much criticism, but it has been given disproportionate attention and appears to have been (mistakenly) associated with the Speller. The second, more important, cause of confusion has been the Speller's preface, which was indeed revolutionary in its rhetoric. In his often-quoted "declaration of cultural independence", Webster stated that

"This country must, in some future time, be as distinguished by the superiority of her literary improvements, as she is already by the liberality of her civil and ecclesiastical constitutions. Europe is grown old in folly, corruption and tyranny ... For America in her infancy to adopt the present maxims of the old world, would be to stamp the wrinkles of decrepid age upon the bloom of youth and to plant the seeds of decay in a vigorous constitution. American glory begins to dawn ... We have the experience of the whole world before our eyes ... It is the business of **Americans** to select the wisdom of all nations, as the basis of her constitutions ... to diffuse an uniformity and purity of **language**, - to add superior dignity to this infant Empire and to human nature".(Webster, 1783, pp.14-15)

As expressed in the preface, Webster had a dualistic view of language: in itself, an "American" language, based on common usage rather than a British standard, would provide a unifying bond; and it would serve as a vehicle of social change through the dissemination of ideas (p.5). The above quotation reveals that Webster did not advocate a wholesale rejection, but demanded that Americans be selective and ascetic in their importation of European culture. Most fundamentally, however, the preface is an anomaly in relation to the text of the Speller. As Rollins documents Webster's increasing conservatism regarding the Dictionary, so can this development be traced through editions of the Speller (4). The change was one of emphasis rather than premise, however, as the Speller was basically conservative from its first printing.

This is not to suggest that the Speller was without innovations, but they were pragmatic changes of a non-radical nature. Its organization and structure represented substantial improvement over the most popular English texts - Thomas Dilworth's *The New Guide to the English Tongue* and Daniel Fenning's *The Universal Spelling Book* (Shoemaker, p.67) - presenting words in a logical progression, (i.e., "Easy Words of Two Syllables, accented on the first", "Easy Words of Two syllables, accented on the second", etc., while Dilworth's word tables were organized under such headings as "Words of five, six, etc., letters, viz.: two vowels serving only to lengthen the sound of the former, except where it is otherwise marked".)(5) The pronunciation guide was also simple and effective where other texts incorporated a bewildering array of dots, dashes, and symbols to indicate the spoken word (Nietz, 1961, pp.15, 22). Irrelevancies, such as Dilworth's "Abelbethmaachah" and "Berodachbaladan", were omitted, and lists of American place-names replaced British ones (Shoemaker, p.72). This was virtually the only original content, however; the spellings were all orthodox, and generally Webster's Speller was a revision of, not a departure from, British texts in use before the Revolution.

Webster was innovative in his secularization of the Speller. Although a deeply religious man, he feared that over-familiarity with God would encourage a casual attitude. This change is

THE
AMERICAN
SPELLING BOOK,

CONTAINING
THE RUDDIMENTS
OF THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE

FOR
THE USE OF SCHOOLS
IN THE
UNITED STATES.

BY NOAH WEBSTER, ESQ.

THE REVISED IMPRESSION, WITH THE LATEST CORRECTIONS.

MIDDLETOWN, CONN.
PUBLISHED BY WILLIAM H. NILES.

1831.

evident in comparison with the Dilworth speller:

Dilworth: No man may put off the law of God
The way of God is no ill way
My joy is in God all the Day
A bad man is a Foe to God.

Webster: No man may put off the law of God
My joy is in his law all the day
O may I not go in the way of sin
Let me not go in the way of ill men. (p.73)

The effects of this development are open to speculation, but it was a change of degree rather than direction. Webster's Speller remained firmly within what M.V. Belok calls the "courtesy tradition" in American texts (Fall 1968, pp.313-4). It was highly moral and sought to inculcate the values of virtue and honesty which would produce good citizens:

"A good child will not lie, swear, or steal. He will be good at home,... and make haste to school; he will not play by the way as bad boys do". (Webster, pp.102-3)

The Speller was thus well-prepared and organized, but it did not introduce changes in content in keeping with the rhetoric of its preface. In fact, the original title of the book was "A Grammatical Institute of the English Language, Part I"; the "American" element was introduced later. Also, while extolling the "living language" as the basis of American culture, elsewhere Webster identified Elizabethan English as the desirable ideal (Boorstin, 1958, p.280). Finally, it is clear that, by his own account, Webster originally intended the Speller for a local Connecticut audience (Webster, 1843, p.173). This is borne out by the fact that the new place-names referred to above stressed the local area. These considerations support the view that the revolutionary nationalist rhetoric of the Speller's preface was anomalous with regard to its traditional content. Rollins is correct in stating that Webster "advocated drastic reforms" in the Speller; he did not, however, attempt to implement them.

The ingredients of success

One indisputable fact about Webster's Speller was its phenomenal success. Most accounts assume that this success was a corollary of its unique, radical "Americanism". In fact, its widespread acceptance was largely due to the extent to which it met existing needs (rather than representing an appeal to the future), and its technical superiority to other texts, as noted above. The combination of its similarity to popular earlier texts, but substantial improvement on them, alone constitutes a considerable basis for its popularity. Its appeal to

morality was also significant (Shoemaker, p.90). In these regards, the Speller served to reinforce existing trends. To some extent, the Speller's success can be traced to nationalistic appeal. Its inclusion of American rather than British place-names was an advantage. Some accounts claim that the Speller incorporated American patterns of pronunciation, for example in revising Dilworth's "clu-ster" to "clus-ter". The preface reveals that Webster simply believed that it was a more "natural division" of the syllables; in any case the differences were slight (Nietz, p.15; Webster, 1783, p.7).

Most importantly, however, the pragmatic condition of American education in the early national period assured the success of the Speller. First, the textbook was much more important in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries than it is today. Characterized by large classes supervised by teachers with little training or qualification and few other teaching aids, textbooks were the focus of the educational experience (Tyler, 1944, p.235). Spellers were particularly important because spelling was viewed as one of, or even the most important skill to be acquired in the brief period of schooling. In 1800 the average time spent in school was 4 months and 2 days, which increased to 10 months and 8 days in 1840 and 22 months, 10 days in 1850 (Elson, p.6.).

Because textbooks were so vital, it is easily evident that the shortage caused by the interruption of trade in the Revolution constituted a particularly acute need.(6) As noted earlier, the Speller was written to meet a local need: "The country (referring to the local countryside) was impoverished, intercourse with Great Britain was interrupted, and school books were scarce and hardly attainable ..." (Webster, 1843, p.173). Webster's initial success lay in that he was the first to recognize and meet this demand; the veritable deluge of texts which followed indicated that the need was widespread and acute.(7)

The continuing success of the Speller lay in its superior preparation and organization. Webster also conscientiously revised his Speller and, as he recognized the national market and transportation links improved, he began to give it a more national orientation (for example, by expanding the list of place-names from its Connecticut base).(8) In a very real sense, the Speller established itself at an early stage and grew with the nation. Webster's Speller was not uniquely American, but in 1783 it was the unique American text in a time of serious shortage.

Thus, Webster's early entry into the market (and, for a time, his virtual monopolization of it), and the importance of spelling in the curriculum, caused his name to be equated with education at an early stage and further perpetuated his success (Nietz, p.42). The growth of the public school movement created more demand for the Speller (Elson, pp.312-16). Even more revealing is the pattern of regional sales. After its early success in New England, it was gradually displaced by newer

texts. Meanwhile, however, it was extremely popular in the frontier West, and its sales peaked in 1866, a phenomenon which its publisher attributed to purchases by emancipated slaves who perceived the Speller as the symbol of education. This supposition is not verifiable, of course, but sales did jump 50% in 1866 and returned to their normal level in 1867 (Sullivan, v.II, 1927, p.28). Daniel J. Boorstin argues that, in becoming such a symbol, Webster benefited from the insecurities of life in a new society (1965, p.279). In any case, it appears that the Speller became almost self-perpetuating.

The view that the success of the Speller was due to the conditions into which it was introduced is borne out by the fact that his Grammar and Reader (Parts II and III of the "Grammatical Institute"), introduced later, never even approached the popularity of the Speller. This is also perhaps a reflection of the perceived importance of spelling in the curriculum. Similarly, the Dictionary, although ultimately more lasting, never enjoyed the success of the Speller in Webster's lifetime. In fact, considerable opposition was voiced against it during its twenty-five years of preparation, and Webster never realized any profit from it (King, 1962, p.18).

Thus the Speller did not contain the means through which to achieve the aims of its revolutionary preface, and its success was based on the pragmatic conditions of acute need and technical superiority. A further anomaly regarding the preface was that it addressed an apparently non-existent need. Many writers agree with Webster's view that uniformity in language is both a symbol of, and necessary condition for, a socially democratic society. This was particularly important in America, which lacked the traditional bonds of Old World nations (Commager, in Webster 1962, p.7). In the early years after the Revolution, however, general uniformity already existed, as Boorstin, with the evidence of contemporary observers, argues. This is not to suggest that it was uniquely "American", but that it lacked the extremes of pronunciation which characterized England's class conscious society. As Boorstin states, "American" English was remarkable at this time for its purity and uniformity, but it contained few original elements (1958, pp.274-6). Thus, although the impact of the Speller was not, and could not be, that envisaged by Webster, it nonetheless had considerable influence, which it remains to examine.

An element of heritage

In terms of being a nationalizing influence, the Speller's chief importance was that, in itself, it became part of the common heritage of Americans. As Mark Sullivan commented,

"More than five generations of Americans learned from it ... The first edition was printed on a hand press, the last on the most modern Hoe; the first antedated the Presidency of

Washington, the last was contemporary with (Theodore) Roosevelt". (v.II pp.125-6)

It has been seen that the Speller was a ubiquitous school material in the nineteenth century, and in later years it was affectionately recalled by many (Shoemaker, pp.87-92). It has even been suggested that familiarity with this common heritage contributed to the popular success of Roosevelt (Shoemaker, p.91). Specifically, his "big stick" policy is seen as reminiscent of the moral of Webster's story "Of the Boy that Stole Apples": "If good words and gentle means will not reclaim the wicked, they must be dealt with in a more severe manner". (Webster, 1962, p.95) Naturally, such claims are dubious, and cannot be viewed as wholesale consequences of the Speller, but clearly it was an element of stability in the expanding society of the nineteenth century.

Much of the influence of the Speller was indirect and more specific. It has been seen that its success was due to its reinforcement of existing trends; a large measure of its influence was to entrench and expand such practices. Not surprisingly, much of this impact was in the field of education, as the lasting success of the Speller perpetuated the "alphabet method" of reading, which consisted of the child's memorizing the alphabet and learning to read by spelling out syllables and finally the whole word. This method was in use long before Webster, but his espousal of it ensured its longevity (Shoemaker, p.95). In the mid-nineteenth century, educational reformers, notably Horace Mann, tried to introduce the "word method", which focussed more on reading comprehension than rote memorization, but were unable to overcome the alphabet devotees (p.101). Webster's conservative role is clear in this case, where he actually inhibited reform. A corollary of the prominence of the alphabet method was the American tendency to literal phonetic pronunciation, and, therefore, to confusion with such English terms as "Worcester", "Warwick", and so on. This concern with accurate spelling and pronunciation contributed to what Boorstin and H.L. Mencken have characterized as the literate, but non-literary, nature of nineteenth-century American society (Mencken, cited in Boorstin, 1958, p.286). In both cases, Webster's role was to reinforce existing trends.

Another aspect of Webster's influence on education was the extent to which spelling became the standard of scholarship in nineteenth century America (Sullivan, p.126). It was already an integral part of the curriculum, and was particularly suited to the nearly universal system of "rote" learning. The success of the Speller was mutually reinforcing with these practices. Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, recalled in his later years that his victory in a school spelling competition was his most significant achievement, surpassing even his political career (Sullivan, pp.123-4). Even allowing for such exaggeration, accurate spelling was clearly perceived as

perhaps the most vital educational goal at this time.

The influence of the "spelling fetish" transcended the classroom to occupy an important social function, especially in frontier life, where group functions were popular and important as a relief from isolation and hardship. The spelling bee ranked among religious gatherings and corn huskings in importance, and was immortalized in literature by such writers as Bret Harte in his short story "Spelling Bee at Angel's" (Boorstin, p.284). Webster's Speller was the "mute umpire" of these matches, although in Harte's account a disputed answer was settled by resort to bowie knives (Sullivan, p.125). A further aspect of the social impact of the Speller was that it was perceived by some to be a civilizing influence. A missionary appeal in 1873 declared that "School books, too, will be missionaries. Webster's spelling-book helped to make this nation. Let something of the kind be made a corner-stone in Burma". (The New York Evangelist (1873), quoted in Shoemaker, p.87) In these developments, the Speller, as in its educational impact, was a conservative, stabilizing force, which confirmed and reinforced existing sentiments.

To the modest extent to which Webster did achieve some spelling reforms, the Speller rather than the Dictionary, was the agent. His "cardinal reforms" were the deletion of the "k" in such words as "musick", and "u" in "honour", and the transposition of "er" in "centre" to "center". These reforms, too, were introduced in later editions, and were not part of the "radical" 1783 edition. It appears likely that the very success of the Speller was one of the factors which prevented the success of Webster's short-lived advocacy of radical spelling reform (although the likelihood of its acceptance in any case is open to question), indicating once again its conservative nature and role.

Two of the most important effects of the Speller were its most indirect. In the upheavals of the period in which the Speller was first published, Webster realized the need to secure a copyright, and petitioned the Connecticut legislature to enact such a law. As the success of the text spread, he approached the governments of several other states. His efforts culminated in the federal copyright law of 1790, which was replaced with an improved law in 1831, also on Webster's initiative (Webster, 1843, p.173-8). The development of copyright law was inevitable, of course, and once again Webster's chief distinction was in being first in the field, but his sustained efforts for the 1831 law reveal his devotion to the cause. Somewhat related to the copyright law was the link between the Speller and the Dictionary. In purely pragmatic terms, Webster was able to support his family entirely from the Speller's royalties during the long preparation of the Dictionary. He received \$40,000 for selling the rights to the Speller in a single territory (Black, p.83). Secondly, the Speller paved the way for the Dictionary by establishing Webster's reputation, and making spelling an important value. It was particularly important when one

understands that shortly after the Dictionary's publication, Joseph Worcester brought out a rival volume. Webster's lasting success in the subsequent "war of the dictionaries" (Leavitt, p.53) stemmed in large measure from the popular reputation of the Speller.

It has already been suggested that linguistic uniformity generally existed in the 1780s. In this regard, the Speller, by its widespread use, perpetuated the uniformity which it claimed to inaugurate. In this capacity, it was perhaps significant in guaranteeing America's linguistic integrity a century later, when immigrants of many ethnic and linguistic groups were absorbed into society (Commager, in Webster, 1962, pp.6-7). The extent to which uniformity was ever threatened is open to question, but Webster's influence, in numbers alone, suggests a unifying factor.

A role in expanding Americanism

Many accounts suggest that Webster's Speller included many "Americanisms", but, as noted above, in the 1780s such distinctions were relatively rare. It was, rather, in the nineteenth century that such uses developed. Although it has been argued that Webster gave the nation the confidence in its language to develop such forms, a more compelling and pragmatic cause was the territorial expansion of the nation. Until the Revolution, America was a relatively closed society, restricted to the area between the Atlantic seaboard and Appalachian mountains. It was the new society of the West which developed "Americanisms". (Boorstin, p.276) Similarly, Webster was not significantly influential in the defense of American language which was articulated against its British ancestor. In the original edition of the Speller, he criticized the "corruption" of London cockney pronunciation. Later in the nineteenth century, John Russell Bartlett argued that "... the English language is in no part of the world spoken in greater purity by the great mass of the people than in the United States". (Webster, 1783, p.70, Boorstin, 1965, p.278) Since similar claims were voiced before the Revolution, however, (Boorstin, 1958, pp.274-5) Webster was in the mainstream of this development rather than in the vanguard. In both of these instances, therefore, the Speller played a supportive, rather than a revolutionary, role.

Thus Webster's Speller had considerable influence on nineteenth century American education and society, but most of these effects were conservative, tending to reinforce and entrench existing practices. The failure of Webster's stated aims stems from three basic causes. First, as has been seen, the Speller was not an effective vehicle through which to implement the rhetoric of its preface. Secondly, uniformity was not a realistic goal, in part because, in general, it was already in existence, and, within this uniformity, local variations would

continue to exist (Cremin, p.269). Furthermore, there was an inherent tension between Webster's championship of local American usage and his own ideal of Elizabethan English. Thus the development of Americanisms and slang was at once a fulfillment of Webster's vision, and a deviation from his goal. Finally, as Lawrence Cremin states, Webster over-estimated the power of language, both as a national bond and a vehicle of social change (p.269). He believed, for example, that by defining slavery in morally repugnant terms he would convince the South to renounce its "peculiar institution" (Rollins, 1976, p.424).⁽⁹⁾ The ultimate failure of Webster's belief in the power of language was the outbreak of the Civil War (Cremin, p.268).

The fact that the Speller was fundamentally conservative is not meant to denigrate it, but to correct the common assumption that it was revolutionary. Webster obviously performed a great service by anticipating and meeting the demand for texts in the 1780s, and his Speller shows considerable improvement over its forebears. The root of the confusion lies in the divergence between the radical rhetoric of the Speller's preface and the conservative nature of its contents. Ruth Elson (1964) argues that textbooks are successful to the extent that they reflect the values of society (p.301). Early American society was clearly disposed to the traditional values of the Speller. In addition, the acute need for texts in this period and the pragmatic improvements of the Speller respectively guaranteed its initial and lasting success. Truly radical reforms advocated by Webster at a later stage were ridiculed and rejected, and had he included them in his Speller, it would not have achieved its phenomenal success. Extravagant claims have also been made about its influence, which was clearly considerable but not revolutionary, consisting largely of reinforcing and complementing existing trends and practices in American education and society. One can only speculate as to why Webster appended the anomalous preface to the text; more importantly, the result of this contradiction has been to view the Speller in its entirety as a revolutionary, radical document. In fact, Noah Webster's American Spelling Book was an essentially conservative text which owed its lasting success to its very conservatism.

NOTES

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1. This philosophy is articulated in "On the Education of Youth in America", in *A Collection of Essays and Fugitive Writings* (1790) Delman, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles and

- Reprints, 1977), pp. 1-37.
2. The Dictionary was not written with the sole intent of being a school book but was used widely in this regard.
 3. This view is nearly universal; see, for example, H.D. Babbidge's editorial comments in *Webster's On Being American* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967); Hillel Black, *The American Schoolbook* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1967), p. 82; Ruth Elson, *Guardians of Tradition* (Lincoln, Nebraska, U. of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 240, to name only a few.
 4. A comparison, for example, of the 1783 and 1831 editions (see references) reveals increasing conservatism.
 5. At the time of the Revolution, virtually all texts in use in America, except the *New England Primer*, were of British origin (Nietz, *Old Textbooks*, p. 14.).
 6. For an account of these spellers, many of which borrowed heavily from Webster, see Nietz, *Old Textbooks*, Chapter 1.
 7. Comparison of the 1783 and 1831 editions reveals this development.
 8. Rollins, "Words as Social Control", p. 424. (Ironically, Jefferson Davis shared Webster's views on the power of language, stating on the eve of the Civil War, "...above all other people we are one, and above all books which have united us in the bond of common language, I place the good old Spelling Book of Noah Webster." (quoted by Commager, *American Spelling Book*, p.5.)

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Sandra Tomkins, a final-year student in history at McGill in 1983-84, is now continuing her studies in England at Christ's College, Cambridge.

