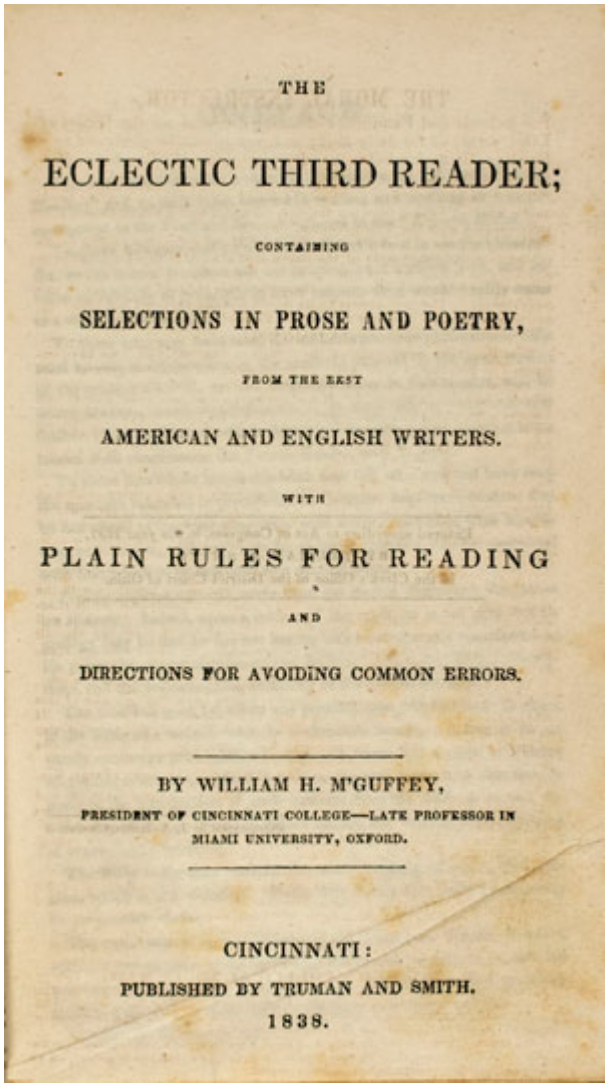
Closing the Books



THE

ECLECTIC THIRD READER;

CONTAINING

SELECTIONS IN PROSE AND POETRY,

FROM THE BEST

AMERICAN AND ENGLISH WRITERS.

WITH

PLAIN RULES FOR READING

AND

DIRECTIONS FOR AVOIDING COMMON ERRORS.

BY WILLIAM H. M'GUFFEY,

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CINCINNATI:

PUBLISHED BY TRUMAN AND SMITH.

1838.

Traversing the electronic textbook frontier isn't easy, but it's probably logistically—and pedagogically—necessary

It's taken about a year, but I've finally concluded that it's time for me—and, fellow teachers of U.S. history surveys, probably time for you—to do something that doesn't come naturally: give up on printed and bound textbooks. While teachers are not unique in our attachment to hard-copy publishing and cannot singlehandedly be the solution to the problems that plague the textbook industry, we are situated at a critical nexus in the chain, and it strikes me that, as a matter of social and educational responsibility, we ought to face the question of textbooks' future directly. Electronic books (a.k.a., e-books) are no panacea and have some clear drawbacks in terms of their readability (which I'll get to presently). However, we've reached a point where they merit a closer look.

This unintended conclusion is the result of an intended act, which began last

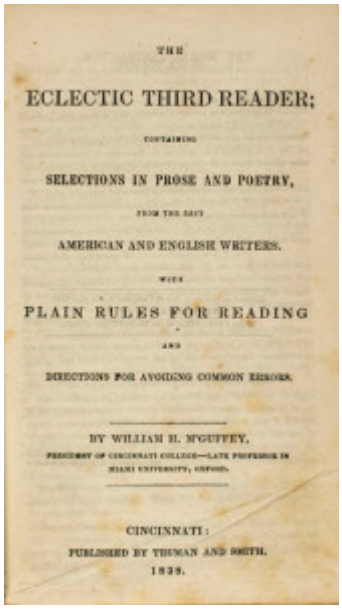
summer when I revisited the question of what U.S. survey textbook all teachers of the course in my department should use. In the eight years I've been at the school, we've been using *America: Past and Present*, by Robert Divine *et al.* (one of a number of texts published by Pearson Longman, a large international conglomerate). In the last couple of years, we've been working with the two-volume brief edition, which is lighter, cheaper (at least when students buy single volumes rather than the set, which costs more than the traditional textbook), and helpfully segments American history into thirty-three chapters of about fifteen pages rather than the customary thirty pages. There's a consensus among my colleagues that there's nothing really wrong with "Divine"—the custom in the textbook industry is to identify titles by the lead author—but nothing particularly compelling about it either. It does not, for example, stake any particular thematic ground, the way John Faragher *et al.* give their text, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, a multicultural focus. So I requested desk copies of a bunch of these other titles, which arrived in short order.

There's a lot to say about the contents of these books—that, in fact, was the original intention of the column you're now reading—but the dominant, even overpowering, impression I got from having a heap of them in my office was their sheer size. Many of them are massive. Considered solely as a matter of commerce, the textbook trade strikes me as colossally wasteful at best and a futile treadmill at worst. Because they take so long and are so expensive to produce—textbooks are not "written," but rather "developed" by whole teams of specialists, of whom writers are only the tip of a publishing iceberg—their prices are high. They now routinely cost in excess of one hundred dollars, making them three to four times as expensive as a hardcover trade book one would buy at a retail bookstore. Because even the avowedly "brief" editions are so large, academically ephemeral, and sold to captive audiences with little emotional attachment to them, there is a huge and growing used-textbook market serving students who understandably want to spend as little as possible. This means that publishers are effectively competing against themselves, and to do so, they are not only regularly releasing new editions but stuffing them with extras—Websites, downloads, CD-ROMs, and other ancillary materials—to make their new wares more attractive, if not indispensable. This in turn drives prices up still more, intensifying the problem.

Since the people in this business are not idiots, I imagine this is all still worth their while—and with public school systems, some on a statewide level, creating huge captive markets, the profits must be sizable enough to keep the big companies in the game. Still, you don't need to be a marketing genius to start thinking about the sheer cost savings of an online business model: the huge reduction in production costs! The elimination of warehousing expenses! The ease of updates! The relative reliability of a subscription-based retail model! And, in fact, virtually every major textbook publisher now offers an e-book as part of their product line, both bundled with the text and as a stand-alone.

In theory at least, the appeal of this model extends beyond the publishers. One can readily understand the ongoing resistance to e-book readers like the Kindle or Sony's electronic reading device. Printed books are not only a marvelous technology in their own right but are rich with lifelong emotional and sensory associations as well. But here we're talking about trade books. Textbooks are another story. Even in printed—and narrative—form, they're rarely regarded as anything other than databases. To be sure, they have a certain reader-friendliness; indeed many are positively lush with illustrations and arresting typography. But if nothing else, the cost-efficiency of e-books alone should be enough of an incentive to get purchasers to happily make the switch.

And yet this hasn't happened. No one I talked with at the book exhibits at last spring's Organization of American Historians conference in Seattle could (or would) give me hard figures, but it's clear that the e-book market is miniscule. It is increasing; two different publishing representatives cited a move from 1 percent to 5 percent of the overall market in the last year. Relatively speaking, that's a big jump. But it's surprising, even shocking, that there hasn't been more of a transition on this front.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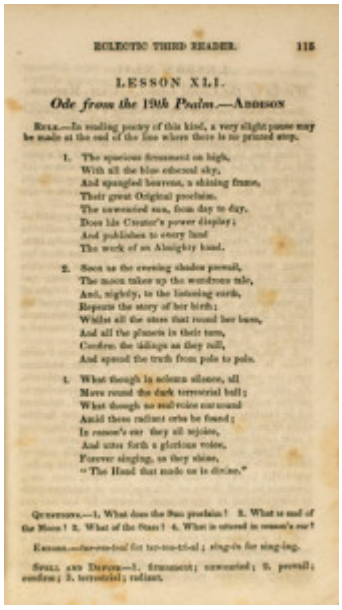
Title page from William H. McGuffey, The Eclectic Third Reader; Containing Selections in Prose and Poetry, from the Best American and English Writers … (Cincinnati, 1838). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Actually, I think publishers themselves are partly to blame for this. Given the enormous cost-savings, the prices of these books still seem too high; the going rate in the business is roughly half the price of a printed/e-book package. No doubt an economy of scale would help lower the price point. But it's hard to see why electronic versions of books should cost as much as fifty dollars; they should be a fraction of that.

Still, if publishers are the egg in this equation, teachers are the chicken. Educators are to the publishing industry what doctors are to pharmaceuticals: both are positioned at the nexus between producers and consumers. They (or their administrative superiors) are the ones who make adoption decisions, and generationally speaking, they are, as a group, digitally conservative. They're also procedurally conservative; as with many things in life, it often just seems easier to stick with what you know, whether that knowledge is understood in terms of form or content. If enough of us decided to make the switch, prices would probably come down.



ECLECTIC THIRD READER. 115

LESSON XLI.

Ode from the 19th Psalm.—ADDISON

READ.—In reading poetry of this kind, a very slight pause may be made at the end of the line where there is no printed stop.

1. The spacious firmament on high,
With all the blue ethereal sky,
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,
Their great Original proclaim.
The unwearied sun, from day to day,
Does his Creator's power display;
And publishes to every land
The work of an Almighty hand.

2. Soon as the evening shades prevail,
The moon takes up the wondrous tale,
And, nightly, to the listening earth,
Repeats the story of her birth:
Whilst all the stars that round her burn,
And all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings as they roll,
And spread the truth from pole to pole.

3. What though in solemn silence, all
Move round the dark terrestrial ball;
What though no real voice nor sound
Amid their radiant orbs be found;
In reason's ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice,
Forever singing, as they shine,
"The Hand that made us is divine."

QUESTIONS.—1. What does the Sun proclaim? 2. What is said of the Moon? 3. What of the Stars? 4. What is uttered in reason's ear?

EXERCISE.—Observe-ing for ser-ver-ing; sing-ing for sing-ing.

SPELL AND DEFINE.—1. firmament; unwearied; 2. prevail; confirm; 3. terrestrial; radiant.

"'Ode from the 19th Psalm'—Addison: with Questions, Errors, Spell and Define Sections," page 115 from William H. McGuffey, The Eclectic Third Reader; Containing Selections in Prose and Poetry, from the Best American and English Writers … (Cincinnati, 1838). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

We would also get better value for the money. E-books have some bona fide advantages over bound books. A good example is Norton's electronic version of Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!* (Because my curriculum has long been thematically framed around the concept of freedom, thanks to Foner's 1998 book *The Story of American Freedom,* this is the one that will be getting my vote this fall. Froner's is a rare case of a single-author textbook by a true master.) In addition to all the features of the book, the electronic version features brief podcasts and mini-lectures by Foner, along with other tools that books can't match. While such bells and whistles often amount to sensory overload, at least some of these features, like map exercises, could actually work rather well on a Smart Board in a classroom setting, which would serve to actually integrate the textbook directly into the curriculum.

Such considerations are clearly on the minds of developers at Bedford/St. Martin's, which this summer will launch HistoryClass, what it calls "an online

course space.” “HistoryClass,” which is built around a number of the company’s textbooks, is based on the “Angel” course-management system widely used in many school districts and universities around the country. It includes grading software and other course-management tools. Though technically not a subscription-based model because the product is not continuously updated, “HistoryClass” users will pay a fee for access for a set period of time. Products like these pose a significant challenge for textbook retailers, whether of the virtual or brick-and-mortar variety. Simply put, such retailers are in danger of becoming obsolete.

The potential buyers of these products, however, will focus on other objections, objections which students themselves are as likely to cite as their less tech-savvy teachers. Many students with whom I’ve chatted in recent months make clear that they find electronic texts extremely flexible: they can carry multiple e-books for different courses on the same laptop or hand-held device; they can highlight, take notes, and organize material easily; they don’t have to worry as much about whether they have what they need at home or school. Yet for every student who makes these arguments, there are at least as many who note that online texts are harder to read, that they feel forced to print out lots of documents and segments, that books are much more user-friendly when it comes to writing an essay at home or trying to do homework on a bus or in a car. Clearly, the costs of using e-books are not solely financial.

But sooner or later, any debate between formats will likely come down to price. I have little doubt that what many of these students or their school districts would do if they had a choice between a hundred-dollar textbook and a twenty-five-dollar e-book (indeed, some districts appear to be moving in this direction already). Of course, those who actually pay for books themselves should have a choice. But my guess is that the logic of the marketplace or the school district will exert itself eventually. Printed textbooks will probably become a luxury, no matter what happens. Indeed, many college and independent-school students admit, though not directly to their teachers, that textbooks are already a luxury that they don’t actually purchase.

And this brings us to what I regard as the heart of the issue: U.S. history textbooks are, at best, a crutch anyway. Truly effective teaching should draw at least as much on primary sources as a text, and this is one area in which e-books—which bundle primary sources without bulk—have a decisive advantage. Of course, one could argue that many historical sources are widely available in the public domain. But you could still make a case—again, if the cost was low enough—that a well-edited, consistently packaged collection via e-book or online subscription would be worth paying for, particularly for teachers who lack the time or autonomy to assemble their own curriculum.

It might be objected that textbooks are at least as important for teachers as students, as they create a curricular foundation for new teachers or ones pressed into service on unfamiliar terrain. One product worth mentioning—not, in fact, a textbook—is the online database CICERO, which carries the tagline

“History Beyond the Textbook.” It is published by the American Institute for History Education, a moniker which makes a thoroughly commercial operation sound higher-minded than it probably is, though its promoters shrewdly tap the well of the highly regarded U.S. Department of Education’s Teaching American History program for much of its content. Though the actual pricing depends on a series of variables like the size and length of a subscription, it appears that CICERO is one of the more cost-effective options available in the marketplace. While it lacks the narrative account that’s typically the centerpiece of an e-book, CICERO is chock full of the usual resources you can find in an e-book, including lesson plans, along with unique features like short videos of historical reenactors who bring the past alive for younger students.

The increasing use of video in education generally and in these educational tools in particular points to an uncomfortable truth: history, at least at the primary and secondary level, is less and less about reading. Actually, this reality confronted me at the start of this inquiry when I began sifting through print textbooks, all of which bear the unmistakable marks of a post-MTV generation. They’re all just so damn *busy*—open up to a random page, and you’ll see a map here, an illustration there, information in the margins, headers, subheads, captions, tables. The tables of contents alone, in long and short versions, go on page after page after page. Students tell me such features are appealing to them. Having lots of illustrations in particular makes the individual pages, often flowing in two columns of text, seem less dismaying. I get that. But as someone who likes and is serious about reading, I find all this activity distracting and am always surprised at just how hard it is for me to stay focused on those occasions where I decide I’m really going to read the textbook. My mind wanders, I doze off, I get bored. Nothing terribly unusual there; this happens to me, and my students, all the time. But the tendency is particularly pronounced any time I get near a survey textbook. The problem is even worse when I try to read a traditional textbook in e-book form, since most e-books simply mimetically reproduce the print book without making much effort to present the material in a computer-screen friendly manner. That, I think, has to change.

We can decry these realities; we can fight these realities; and we probably should do both. But if in fact we want students to be serious about reading, we probably shouldn’t be using a textbook in the first place. Our job should be organizing and presenting a series of carefully chosen and compelling stories about our shared past—and then asking our students to reflect, analyze, question, and interpret those stories as a prelude to making a case for the joy of reading. In an age of information, our role is one of promoting productive *conversation,* in the broadest sense of that term. You can’t do that very well if you’re buried in a textbook, electronic or otherwise.

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