

The William Holmes McGuffey Family Papers and The McGuffey Reader Collection: Two “Bright Ornaments” in The Walter Havighurst Special Collections, Miami University Libraries

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On June 14, 1826, John Witherspoon Scott, the first president of the Oxford Female Institute, a Miami University professor, and father of the future First Lady Caroline Scott Harrison, congratulated 26-year-old William Holmes McGuffey on obtaining a position as a professor of ancient languages at Miami University. “That it [Miami] may take its station in the first rank of literary institutions, and that yourself may be one of its brightest ornaments is my sincere wish,” Scott wrote.

Scott’s wish was prophetic. Miami University grew to become one of the top public universities in America, currently ranked 27th by *U.S. News & World Report*. William Holmes McGuffey became a “bright ornament” in American educational and literary history. During his decade at Miami, McGuffey was invited to write a series of readers for schoolchildren. Eventually selling over 125 million copies, the McGuffey Readers became McGuffey’s most lasting professional achievement.

The Walter Havighurst Special Collections houses two collections that provide insight into the life and work of William Holmes McGuffey: The William Holmes McGuffey Family Papers and The McGuffey Reader Collection.

The William Holmes McGuffey Family Papers include correspondence that McGuffey sent or received between 1826 and 1873. One of my favorite items is a letter written by Nicholas

Longworth to McGuffey on February 6, 1833. One of the leading citizens of Cincinnati of his day, Longworth lived in the home that is now known as the Taft Museum. He extensively redecorated the home's interior and hired African American painter Robert Duncanson to paint landscape murals in the foyer, which are now considered as one of the finest suites of domestic murals dating from before the Civil War.

Although Longworth's success in real estate made him influential, his wine-making skills led him to be known as the father of American grape culture. In 1846, he issued a pamphlet entitled *The Cultivation of the Grape and Manufacture of Wine*. In 1853, he contributed directions for cultivating strawberries for wine-making to Robert Buchanan's *The Culture of the Grape, and Wine-Making*. It's interesting to speculate whether McGuffey was intending to grow grapes here in Oxford and what prompted he and Longworth to correspond.

Another interesting letter in this collection is one from Catharine Beecher. Born the same year as McGuffey, Beecher devoted her life to helping women become the best homemakers they could be. Her cookbooks, advice books, essays and articles guided women on running households and rearing children. Her most popular work was *The American Woman's Home*, published in 1869, which she co-wrote with her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe. She also advocated that women become teachers, founding academies for young women that emphasized students' physical, moral and intellectual development.

On July 1, 1845, Beecher wrote McGuffey, inviting him to lead an endeavor devoted to the cause of popular education that would bring him "into communion with some of the most interesting men in

the nation, and into the society and interests of some of the noblest, luckiest, and most influential ladies in our country." If the experiment was successful, it would lead to an institution that would train ladies to become teachers. The collection does not include McGuffey's reply, but this letter certainly reveals in what esteem Beecher and her family held McGuffey.

A missive that William Holmes McGuffey sent his 14-year-old son, Charley, tells us something about their relationship, but also attests to the importance placed on correspondence in guiding the development of young men.

In the 19th century, letters did more than convey information. Like clothes and manners, a formal letter projected the writer's class and character. It required attention at least as great as that devoted to personal grooming, because it indicated the writer's respect for the addressee. People were expected to take great care with the neatness and style of their correspondence and to ensure that it would be carefully written, in the best, finished hand. Good penmanship suggested a person of refinement and discipline whose word could be trusted. After beginning each sentence with a capital letter and writing in straight lines, with a dictionary at hand, letter-writers carefully fold their finished piece, making the corners sharp so that they showed a handsome shape when they were sealed.

While Charley did a pretty good job on his recent correspondence to his father, he included the phrase "I forgot" one too many times for his father's liking. Transcribing his letters should help Charley improve his handwriting and composition. After all, McGuffey reminds his son, "a plain sound hand is of the utmost importance to

one who expects to do business in a Law-office, and indeed, to every scholar."

Charley lost his mother, Harriet Spining McGuffey, just three months before this letter was written, while she was visiting relatives in Dayton that July. That's why his father writes, "Remember, my dear son, to read a portion of your Bible every day, and do not forget daily, and steadily to pray to God to keep you from evil, and to prepare you for the duties of life and for the hour of death. Think often of your departed Mother, and often ask yourself how she would advise, and what she would think of any course you are about to pursue."

Charley died of cholera September 15, 1851, while on a family vacation in Burlington, Vermont.

The collection also includes journals and reminiscences written by McGuffey's daughter, Henrietta McGuffey Hepburn, between 1853 and 1910. Henrietta was born July 10, 1832 in Oxford, Ohio, married Andrew Hepburn on July 10, 1857, and died in Oxford on March 17, 1922. Her husband was president of Miami University from 1871 to 1873 and was a professor in Miami's English department for many years.

On April 5, 1902, the 70-year-old Henrietta wrote her recollections about this portrait of Henrietta's mother, Harriet Spining McGuffey. Painted in 1835 by Horace Harding, it still hangs in the dining room and day parlor of the William Holmes McGuffey Museum, on the campus of Miami University.

"It was the fashion when my mother was married for women, just as soon as they were married, to put on caps. My mother followed the fashion and so much did my father like the caps that he was never willing she should go without them. So she

wore them all her life and a very pretty little thing her evening caps were. Her every day caps were more simple. The fashion of caps must have been very different when my mother first put them on from what they were when I remember them. Soon after my mother was married my father had her portrait taken in oil and she is represented wearing a large lace cap with full lace frills and large bows of pink ribbon on one side. The likeness must have been good because my baby brother Edward Mansfield on being taken into the parlor where the picture hung held out his little arms to go to it. We children rushed to our mother calling out Oh! Ma Eddie knew your picture!"

In her July 5, 1902 journal entry, Henrietta records the dinner she and her husband, Andrew Hepburn, hosted for Guy Potter Benton, Miami's 12th president. Andrew Hepburn served as the university's seventh president, from 1871 to 1873; Benton held the office from 1902 to 1909. The entry tells us that the Hepburns served mutton steaks, tiny green peas, mashed potatoes, a tomato salad, cake and sliced pineapple on their fine plain white china and the McGuffey silver. A glass bowl in the center of the table was filled with nasturtiums. Henrietta intimated that she was "much pleased with Dr. Benton, he is a young man of 38 years a whole soul hearty go ahead kind of a man we think he will make a good president."

The McGuffey Reader Collection provides over 700 examples of the evolution of the Readers that William Holmes McGuffey began writing at his Oxford home in 1834. From Primers through High School Readers, the collection also includes word lists, spelling books and juvenile speaking texts. Several German and Spanish editions of the Readers can also be found in the collection.

These best-sellers were significant to children's educational and cultural development. Selections of prose and poetry taught them to read, influenced their taste in literature, and contributed to the development of their character and morals. Glancing at the table of contents of McGuffey's Eclectic Fourth Reader from 1879 reads like a literary Who's Who; selections include those by noted 19th century authors Mary Mapes Dodge, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Louisa May Alcott. Some selections include excerpts about the character of George Washington, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, and information about the first steamboat that Robert Fulton invented. However, the artists who contributed illustrations to reinforce those textual messages deserve just as much acclaim.

Scenes of familiar childhood activities both appealed to young eyes and resonated well with a child's developing perspective on what constituted a productive, enjoyable life. In McGuffey's New First and Second Eclectic Readers from 1863 and 1865, a visit to the seashore was portrayed so that youngsters would realize the importance of proper dress. Seeing a boy and a girl at a window feeding a bird reinforced the concepts of kindness to animals and to each other.

In 1879, the publisher of the popular Readers, Van Antwerp, Bragg & Company, realized that illustrations provided another way to make stories come alive for readers, so it sought and secured the talents of noted artists.

Scanning a list of illustrators often included in the table of contents of the 1879 edition of McGuffey Readers affords the opportunity to discover familiar names in the history of American art. Artists like Thomas Moran, one of the noted 19th century painters of the American West; and Howard Pyle, known as the Father of Modern

Illustration, with over 3000 books to his credit, got their start illustrating McGuffey Readers.

After being “obliged to sketch hog-pens and pork houses” when he lived in Cincinnati, Henry Farny became one of the major illustrators for the 1879 Readers, completing over 75 of the 300 illustrations produced for the books. His work for the Readers not only has great story-telling qualities because it was so closely associated with the text, but also depicts boys in realistic ways that would have been familiar to his audience. Later, his reputation was made through his paintings of Western Indians. Some examples of his Reader illustrations include “Courage and Cowardice” and “Young Soldiers,” both from the Third Reader.

John George Brown was a popular painter of urban genre scenes, often featuring children who worked as newsboys, bootblacks, or fruit vendors. At this time, the numbers of street children had dramatically increased since the 1850s, when an influx of immigrants caused rapid population growth in cities. Brown responded by incorporating working-class children who smile engagingly at the viewer while they transmit values like hard work and independence. By doing so, Brown focused attention on working-class immigrant children and established them as subjects for art. For example, Brown created illustrations for “The Truant,” in the 1879 Third Reader, and from the First Reader of 1879. Brown’s depiction of urban youth also seems to have influenced W.L. Sheppard’s rendition of “Henry, the Boot-Black,” from the 1879 Second Reader.

McGuffey Reader illustrations taught girls traditional domestic roles, and responsibility and duty to boys. They also evoke a sense of nostalgia for childhood. During the second half of the 19th century, especially after the Civil War, illustrations captured children’s happy,

carefree nature. By the 1860s and 1870s, childhood was seen as a precious time, so there was an increased production of specialized literature by and about children, including poetry, stories and magazines.

The McGuffey Readers of 1879 represent a transformation in book illustration, helping to establish it as fine art. Since photography was still in its infancy, there was great demand for illustrations, so artists had the opportunity to make significant amounts of money. Magazines like *Scribner's* and *Harper's Monthly* trained artists to produce exceptional illustrations. Newspapers employed sketch artists who developed excellent drawing skills to provide visual reports of events. What resulted was a group of talented professionals who, through their work, made significant contributions to the educational, cultural and moral development of late 19th century American children.

To learn more about Miami University Libraries' collections pertaining to William Holmes McGuffey, visit our website. Finding aids to the McGuffey Family Papers and the McGuffey Reader Collections are posted there at this URL:

<http://spec.lib.muohio.edu/publications.php>. Additionally, a newly revised and updated digital collection of the McGuffey letters is also available. The database includes images and transcripts of correspondence. Scans and transcripts of Henrietta Hepburn's journals are also in progress. The William Holmes McGuffey Digital Collection is available at this URL:

<http://doyle.lib.muohio.edu/cdm4/mcguffey/>