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# Three Spelling Books of American Schools, 1740-1800

Lydia A. H. Smith

## I.

**T**HE NEW ENGLAND PRIMER, that best-selling handbook of Puritan religion and reading, and Noah Webster's "Blue-Backed Speller" have long been so famous that they have thrown other schoolbooks into undeserved obscurity. Yet between *The New England Primer* (1683) and Webster's speller (1783) there were two other widely used beginning texts for children: the non-New England Primer and the speller.<sup>1</sup>

The non-New England primer<sup>2</sup> is less interesting than the speller because it imitates its great predecessor as closely as possible while still meeting newer demands for the inclusion of more liberal religious doctrines and secular material.

The speller was fuller and more satisfactory than the primer. In Puritan days a child progressed from hornbook to primer, from primer to Psalter, thence to the New Testament and at last to the Old Testament. The primer had originally been no more than a first religious handbook with some introductory reading material added (by 1591).<sup>3</sup> When the speller appeared years later, the primer was re-edited to meet its competition. But although it appealed to a wider audience than the Massachusetts Puritans who had used *The New England Primer*, it kept its strongly religious purposes. The speller, however, moved more specifically into the field of teaching reading. It typically included a complicated grammar, long lists of words for spelling, and more selections for reading practice than the primer had done.

<sup>1</sup> Copies of these texts are in the Harvard Library collection and were used for this study.

<sup>2</sup> For a full study of these, see Charles Frederick Heartman, *American Primers, Indian Primers, Royal Primers, and Thirty-seven Other Types of Non-New-England Primers Issued Prior to 1830* (Highland Park, New Jersey, 1935).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Leicester Ford, *The New England Primer* (New York, 1897), p. 8.

This is not to say that the speller was non-religious; far from it. The author of every speller took its double task very seriously — to teach both reading, and duty to God and man. But there was a marked change from the Puritan primer:

the change demanded was not simply more freedom in the use of secular material. The nature of the child, his inclinations, tastes and desires became dominant factors in the choice and arrangement of subject-matter. The incompleteness of the primer and the Bible as a course of study in reading for the elementary schools began to be felt early in the post-Revolution period.<sup>4</sup>

The author who has been quoted is a little too sanguine about the degree to which the interests of the child were consulted, but there was a slight move in that direction. The speller continued the important work of character education which has always been an accepted part of American education. It comprised spelling book, grammar, and reader, all in one volume, an unwieldy book which Webster later separated into the three parts of his *Institute of the English Language*.<sup>5</sup>

Between the older style primer and Webster's texts stood the speller, a transitional schoolbook having some characteristics of each. The three most widely used spellers in this country were Thomas Dilworth's *A New Guide to the English Tongue*, William Perry's *The Only Sure Guide to the English Tongue*, and Daniel Fenning's *The Universal Spelling-Book, or, a new and easy guide to the English language*. Many features of these books could well be examined; one could look at the grammatical analysis they presented; one could consider how they taught reading; one could search out the literary sources of their reading exercises. The focus of this study, however, will be on the message which the books carry, the values implicit in the stories and poems and prayers, the attitudes which the writers were trying to inculcate in children. These were popular books and, since adults buy schoolbooks, they must have contained ideas acceptable to adults. Children's beginning schoolbooks provide society with an early opportunity to teach the cherished values of the culture.

Like many other things in early America, the speller was borrowed from the mother country. There had long been spellers in England,

<sup>4</sup>Rudolph R. Reeder, *The Historical Development of School Readers and of Method in Teaching Reading* (New York, 1900), p. 19. Reeder places the importance of the speller late: there was Coot's *English Schoolmaster* of 1590, and in the southern colonies this speller had a wide circulation.

<sup>5</sup>Part I is the speller, Part II the grammar, Part III the reader.

and the first ones widely used in America were English. Isaac Watts (d.1748) wrote an author's preface to his *Compleat Speller*, saying, "'Tis not my ambition, by this Composure, to supplant the Primer or the Spelling-Book," which clearly means that both kinds of books were being used. Later he referred to long-established spellers by Mr. Dyche and Mr. Munday. And *England's Perfect School-Master* by Nathaniel Strong had its second edition in 1704.

Watts's plan for a speller, in his preface, shows the kind of book it was. "Since it lies naturally in my Way, I will venture to speak my Sentiments concerning the best way of composing them." Part I, he says, should introduce, in time-honored fashion, the alphabet, two-letter syllables, tables of common words of three letters, and then of one, two, three, and more syllables, arranged by accentuation; after that should come catalogues of proper names, divided into syllables also. He thought this was a "method happily and judiciously contrived for the ease of the Teacher, and the profit of the Learner." In Part II of Watts's ideal speller, three or four pages should "just . . . tell the young Scholars briefly, which are Vowels, which are Consonants, which are Diphthongs; and also teach them the common Stops of Comma, Colon, and Period, with the Marks of the Ten Figures, etc., till they grow up to be fit for a fuller Acquaintance with all these things." Usually, as a matter of fact, Part II in the typical speller was much longer than three or four pages; indeed, Watts's own *Compleat Speller* contained ninety-six pages of punctuation, spelling rules, and grammar. The compiler apparently put in Watts's already published work on the subject, rather than merely the brief pages for the "young Learner," who might later go into grammar in greater detail.

Part III was very carefully prescribed:

Lessons for Children of various Kinds, wherein there should be not only such Praxes on the Words of different Syllables . . . but several easy Portions of Scripture collected out of the Psalms and Proverbs and the New Testament, as well as other little Composures, that might teach them Duty and Behavior towards God and Man, Abroad and at Home. Then I would place some Pages of short Sentences, to discourage the Vices to which Children are most addicted. Then a Catalogue of common English Proverbs: After this, some of the more difficult Parts of the Scripture, with Proper Names in it, chusing out such Verses as may at the same Time entertain the Child with some agreeable Notions of Sacred History. Next to this might be added some well-chosen, short, and useful Stories that might entice the young Learner to the Pleasure



of Reading; Something of the History of Mankind, a short Account of England, or the common Affairs of our Nation: And the World will forgive me, if I should say, let a few Picces of Poesy be added; and let the Verse be of various Kinds, to acquaint the Learner with all Sorts of Subjects and Manners of Writing, that he may know how to read them when they are put into his Hand. And if the Author would add proper short Prayers and Graces for Children, he has my hearty Approbation. After all, it would not be amiss, if a Leaf or two were employed in shewing the Child how to read written Letters, by a Plate of Writing in the Secretary and the Round Hand, graven on purpose; as well as the Lord's Prayer or Creed, or some such short Specimen repeated in the Roman, the Italian, the Old English, and the written Letters. I should rejoice to see a good Spelling Book framed according to this Model.

Many of these features were included in the typical speller; several were not. Watts's idea of a brief grammar, his use of history, his concern with poetry, and his plan to teach different styles of writing were not followed. But in most spellers there were, as he suggested, letters, syllables, lists of words by accentuation and length, a grammar, often in catechetical form, and lessons that would teach both reading and duty.

## II.

### DILWORTH'S SPELLER

In 1740 Thomas Dilworth, an English schoolmaster, wrote *A New Guide to the English Tongue*.<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Franklin reprinted it in 1747, probably for the first time in this country,<sup>7</sup> and it rose rapidly in favor until it became the most popular speller in American schools, running through at least forty-five editions.<sup>8</sup> (Figures 1 and 2 show pages from 1770 edition.) When Noah Webster wished to sell his

<sup>6</sup> A 1770 edition was used here.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalie V. Halsey, *Forgotten Books of the American Nursery* (Boston, 1911), p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Reeder, *op. cit.*, p. 30; Samuel Goodrich, *Recollections of a Lifetime* (New York, 1856); Alice Morse Earle, *Child Life in Colonial Days* (New York, 1899); Clifton Johnson, *Old-Time Schools and School-Books* (New York, 1904); George Emery Littlefield, *Early Schools and School-Books of New England* (Boston, 1904), p. 126-127; Samuel Chester Parker, *A Textbook in the History of Modern Elementary Education* (Boston, 1912), p. 80; Homer J. Webster, "Schools and Colleges in Colonial Times," *New England Magazine*, XXVII (November 1902), 376.

own speller, it was, by his own testimony,<sup>9</sup> Dilworth's he had to displace.

In the preface which follows the dedication, Dilworth shows definite shifts in emphasis from *The New England Primer* and its imitators, though he keeps some of the same familiar ideas. First he says:

It is as bad to learn the first Rudiments of Learning under wrong and depraved Habits as not to learn them at all. For the Man seldom clears himself of the ill Faculties, which he contracted in his tender Age. Train up the child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Here Dilworth suggests that "depraved Habits" are acquired, not inherited through Adam's fall, as the Puritans believed; and he recognizes that, since knowledge can be used for good or evil, values must be taught early lest evil ways creep in and pervert the virtuous mind.

A second interesting change also appears in the preface: Dilworth chooses words on quite new grounds. He frankly admits to changing Scriptural wording to make reading easier,<sup>10</sup> and he excludes "all such Words in every Part of this Book, which might tend to excite loose and disorderly Thoughts, to put Youth or Modesty to the Blush," — more secular motives than the *Primer* ever displayed.

Third, toward the end of the preface he states a familiar aim of such books as his own: learning leads to virtue and salvation.

The Knowledge of Letters . . . it is this, by which God has discovered his Power and Justice, his Providence, Mercy, and Grace, that we who live near the End of Time, may learn the Way to Heaven and everlasting Happiness.

He goes on to say elsewhere, however, that knowledge should not be simply memorizing, but should be storing up treasure for posterity, a key to understanding the world beyond one's immediate experience, a means of facilitating business correspondence with people in far away places, and in general an agent for bringing all men together. That he was simply covering as much ground as possible so as to recommend his book to many purchasers may well be argued; but the interesting thing is that these were the grounds on which he thought his book would be accepted.

The preface, of course, was for adults. The children's text began

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Webster's remarks about Dilworth's book in Part I of his *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (Hartford, 1783), introduction and p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Noah Webster declined to include any Scripture in his book, lest too early familiarity breed contempt.

much like the older primers, with the alphabet and syllabarium. Then came "easy lessons" of three-letter words.

No man may put off the Law of God.<sup>11</sup>  
The Way of God is no ill Way.  
My Joy is in God all the Day.  
A bad Man is a Foe to God.

Let me not go out of the Way, O God.  
O do not see my Sin, and let me not go to the Pit.  
Try me, O God, and let me not go out of the way of thy Law.

The Way of Men is not as the Way of God.  
The Law of God is a Joy to me.  
My Son, if you do ill, you can not go to God.  
Do as you are bid; but if you are bid, do no ill.

Then four-letter words were added:

Hold in the Lord, and mind his Word.  
My Son, hold fast to the Law of the Lord.  
My Son, mind not thy own Way, but the Way of God.  
Do not tell a Lye, and let not thy Hand do hurt.

Let all mind the Will of the Lord.  
Let no man hurt you, if you can help it.  
Do as well as you can; and do no Ill.  
The Lord is my Rock.

Hurt no Man; and let no man hurt you.  
Let thy Sins past put you in mind to mend.  
Send Aid to help me, O Lord, my God.  
Use not thy self to tell a Lye.

Soon, however, these abrupt, defensive, legalistic sentences give way to the serene mood and diction of the Psalms:

The Heavens declare the Glory of God; and the Firmament sheweth his Handy-work.  
One Day telleth another; and one Night doth certify another.  
There is neither Speech nor Language, but their Voices are heard among them.  
Their Sound is gone out into all Lands; And their Words unto the Ends of the World.

<sup>11</sup> This first sentence re-appeared in spellers throughout the century. Note that God and law and sin are three-letter words; Satan and devil, being longer, had to wait.

Altogether, the message of Dilworth's "easy Lessons" is to trust in the Lord, praise Him, and obey Him, for ultimately godly virtue will be rewarded and the ungodly will perish. The old note of membership among a chosen few is certainly present: the saving remnant is in the hand of God, the wicked are in darkness.

The speller then continues with a long section filled with lists of words to be pronounced, divided, and accented. Then comes a complex section, written in catechetical form, with rules for effective reading aloud, spelling, syllabification, punctuation, and grammar. Here are some curious examples:

Q. What is a Noun Substantive?

A. A Noun Substantive is the Name of any Being or Thing, perceivable either by the Senses, or the Understanding; as a Horse, a Book.

Q. What is a Substantive Common?

A. It is the Name of every Thing of the same Kind and Denomination; as a Man, a Dog, a Tree.

Q. What is Transposition?

A. It is the placing of Words out of their natural Order, to render the Sound of them more agreeable to the Ear.

Example

It cannot be avoided, but that Scandals will arise, and Differences will grow in the Church of God, so long as there is Wickedness on Earth, or Malice in Hell.

(Transposed)

It cannot be avoided, so long as there is Wickedness on Earth, or Malice in Hell, but that Scandals will arise, and Differences will grow in the Church of God.

[about Contractions] These Contractions ought to be avoided as much as possible, unless it be for One's own private Use, and where it would be ridiculous to write them at length; as Mr. for Master, and Mrs. for Mistress. It argues, likewise, a Disrespect and Slighting to use Contractions to our Betters, and is often puzzling to others.

Of particular interest are the forty-odd "Sentences in Prose" which follow, among them:

4. By the fall of Adam from the glorious and happy State, wherein he was created, the divine Image on his Mind, is quite changed and altered; and he, who was created but a little inferior to the Angels above, is now made but a little superior to the Angels below.
5. Children are such as their Institution; Infancy is led altogether by Imitation; it hath neither Words nor Actions but what are infused by others.



If it have good or ill Language, it is borrow'd; and the Shame or Thanks are only due to them that lent them.

Sentence 4 above is pure Calvinism; 5 refutes it. But young readers are not theologians and so they were probably not confused by contradictory doctrines. Here are three more examples of sentences:

12. Gold, tho' the noblest of Metals, loseth its Luster when continually worn in the same Purse with Copper, or Brass; and the Best Men, by associating themselves with the Wicked, are often corrupted with their Sins, and partake of their Punishments.
34. Trade is so noble a Master, that it is willing to entertain all Mankind in its Service, and has such Variety of Employments adapted to every Capacity, that all, but the Lazy, may support, at least, if not enrich themselves.
42. Young Minds, being fullest of Ignorance, want Instruction most; are fittest to receive it, as being freest from Prejudice, and worldly Cares; and are apt to retain it best, being void of such Corruptions as would otherwise expel it.

The burden of all these sentences is: receive and heed goodly instruction, keep good company and good health, eschew pride of talents or possessions, excel only in virtue (and trade) — this is the way to happiness. Self-restraint and an eye turned inward to scrutinize oneself, outward to catch sight of the main chance. This comprehends "Obedience . . . the whole Duty of Man . . . toward God, his Neighbour, and himself."

"Sentences In Verse" follow those in prose and preach much the same doctrine; the sentiments are expressed in more high-flown language although it is still mere verse, not poetry.

#### On Youth

Fragrant the Rose is, but it fades in Time;  
The Violet sweet, but quickly past the Prime;  
White Lillies hang their Heads, and soon decay;  
And whiter Snow in Minutes melts away;  
Such and so withering are our early Joys,  
Which Time, or Sickness, speedily destroys.

#### The Self-Wise

Conceited Thoughts, indulg'd without controul,  
Exclude all further knowledge from the Soul:  
For he that thinks himself already wise,  
In course all further Knowledge will despise:  
And but for this, how many might have been  
Just, reputable, wise, and honest Men!

## On a Competency

Let me, O God, my Labours so employ,  
 That I a Competency may enjoy;  
 I ask no more than my Life's Wants supply,  
 And leave their Due to others when I die.  
 If this thou grant (which nothing doubt I can)  
 None ever liv'd or dy'd a richer Man.

These prose sentences and verses present Dilworth's message about the wise life — judicious, self-restrained, serious, and most unchild-like. Joy in childhood was still more than a century away.

With the basic principles thus laid down, it now remained for Dilworth to put his ideas into stories. Watts had suggested at this point a good deal of Scripture and some history, but Dilworth's next section includes a dozen "Fables," each illustrating a moral idea worked out in experience. A woodcut was given for each, with a moral statement below, followed by the story, and the "Interpretation," so that the message by no chance could be missed. Unlike earlier sections, however, religion has little place here: self-reliance, perseverance, and other active virtues are stressed.

He that will not help himself, shall have help from nobody.

*Of the Waggoner and Hercules*

As a waggoner was driving his team, his waggon sunk into a hole, and stuck fast.

The poor man immediately fell upon his knees, and prayed to Hercules, that he would get his waggon out of the hole again.

Thou fool, says Hercules, whip thy horses, and set thy shoulder to the wheels; and then if thou wilt call upon Hercules he will help thee.

## Interpretation

Lazy wishes never do a Man any service; but if he would have help from God in time of need, let him not only implore his assistance, but make use of his own best endeavours.

The tenth fable is particularly dramatic:

Evil be to him that evil think. Also: give a crust to a surly dog and he will bite you.

*Of the good natured Man and the Adder*

A good natured man being obliged to go out in frosty weather, on his return home found an adder almost frozen to death, which he brought home with him and laid before the fire.

As soon as the creature had received fresh life by the warmth, and was come to herself, she began to hiss, and fly about the house, and at length killed one of the children.

Well, said the man, if this is the best return that you can make for my kind offices, you shall even share the same fate yourself; and so he killed her immediately.

#### Interpretation

Ingratitude is one of the blackest crimes that a man can be guilty of; It is hateful to God and man, and frequently brings upon such a graceless wretch all that mischief which he either did or thought to do to another.

The morals of the other fables, some still current, are no less pithy:

- II. Be mindful of past favors.
- III. Young folks think old folks to be fools, but old folks know young folks to be fools.
- IV. A man may forgive an injury, but he cannot easily forget it.
- V. Make no friendship with an ill-natur'd Man.
- VI. Honesty is the best policy.
- VII. A Liar is not to be believed, though he speak the Truth.
- VIII. Let Envy alone, and it will punish itself.
- IX. One good turn deserves another.
- XI. Lazy Folks take the most Pains. Also, give a man his Bread and Cheese when he has earn'd it.
- XII. A Bird in the Hand is worth two in the Bush. Also, Never let go a Certainty for an Uncertainty.

Life is a serious, often a harsh matter, not to be played at by children, but worked at by men. This section lays heavy stress on developing a sober, prudent character; foolish fellows are to be avoided and scorned; life's performance is to be strictly judged. This is an egocentric point of view indeed, with little as yet about benevolence and humanity.

Moving from such an ideal of integrity, Dilworth next includes a section called "Public Prayers for the Use of Schools." In the morning, children were to pray that God "pour into our Hearts, as into their proper Channel, the pure Waters of Learning," so that "we may so diligently apply ourselves to our studies, that increasing every Day in Piety and good Literature, we may at length become not only useful to ourselves, but ornamental also, both to the State we live in, and to the true holy catholic Church. . . ." Then come the Lord's Prayer and a blessing; an evening prayer for forgiveness of the sins of the day past; then private prayers such as the "Prayer for Wisdom and Knowledge, to be said by a Child going to School, or at any other



Time"; a morning prayer for a child in which he prays that he may become worthy to be a "useful member of the Commonwealth . . . obedient to my Parents, and to those who have the Care of my Education; to behave myself soberly, and with good Manners to every one; that I may lead an innocent and inoffensive Life;" another evening prayer for a child begging God's protection from the perils of the night, both actual and spiritual. There was a grace before meat and one afterward, a prayer before going into church, upon seating oneself in church, and after divine service had ended. In all these prayers, the humble, inoffensive attitude was stressed, quite a different religious posture from the one Dilworth put forward earlier.

The book closes with a table of simple interest, at 6 per cent, from a month to a year, for any sum from 20 shillings to a thousand pounds!

So ends *The New Guide to the English Tongue*, and a strange mixture it is. There is the Puritanical emphasis on trust in God, membership in a chosen few, and hell-fire for the wicked; the secular note of prudent self-reliance; and these final prayers with their note of religious devotion, obedience, and humility — all in language well above the child's head. Clearly the book was not written for the children who struggled through it; to Dilworth and his audience, the child was a miniature adult.

### III.

#### PERRY'S SPELLER

In 1777 William Perry of Kelso, Scotland, wrote *The Only Sure Guide to the English Tongue*. Next only to Dilworth's in popularity,<sup>12</sup> its title is a clear attempt to adumbrate his. Perry, like Webster,<sup>13</sup> had nothing good to say about Dilworth's speller, although he did not object to its ideas. He merely called it "the most incorrect Spelling-Book, now made use of in America."<sup>14</sup> (Figure 3 shows the title-page of the 1785 edition.)

William Burton remembers Perry's book well from his boyhood:

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Earle, *op. cit.*, p. 144; Reeder, *op. cit.*, p. 30; Littlefield, *op. cit.*, p. 128-129; Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 206; and Nila Burton Smith, *American Reading Instruction* (New York, 1934), p. 26. The 8th edition of 1785 was used here.

<sup>13</sup> See note 9 above.

<sup>14</sup> William Perry, *The Only Sure Guide to the English Tongue* (Worcester, 1785), preface.



The spelling-book used in our school from time immemorial — immemorial at least to the generations of learners to which I belonged — was thus entitled: "THE ONLY SURE GUIDE to the English Tongue, by William Perry." What a magnificent title! To what an enviable superiority had its author arrived. *The Only Sure Guide!* Of course, the book must be as infallible as the catholic creed, and its author the very Pope of the jurisdiction of letters.<sup>16</sup>

But when he expected understanding to flood his mind with light from this great source, he found that "the understanding was not more called on than that of the devotee at his Latin mass-book."<sup>16</sup> He ends his description of Perry's book thus:

All vestiges of it will soon disappear forever. What will the rising generations do, into what wilds of barbarism will they wander, into what pits of ignorance fall, without the aid of the Only Sure Guide to the English Tongue. . . . ?<sup>17</sup>

Perry's preface, unlike Dilworth's, was concerned with correct pronunciation and right methods of teaching letters and syllables. Beginning with alphabet and syllabarium, as usual, he progressed to the "easy lessons" of words of gradually increasing length. But although he had not mentioned virtue or piety in his preface, the tone here was as religious as Dilworth's.

The Lord our God is a good God.

Fear the Lord all ye Sons of Men.

O Lord keep me in thy Way and let me not go down to the Pit.

Look back to thy Ways, my Son, and if thou hast done Ill let that put thee  
in mind to mend.

All that we say and do is seen by God.

Dust we are, and to dust we must all go back.

Pour out thy Ire on them that know thee not, O Lord.

Thou, O Lord, art what I long for.

Let us cry to the Lord, and be glad in him with a Song;

For he hath said, All them that love and keep my Law I will save.

When you come to School be sure to mind your Book, and sit still in your  
place, and make no noise.

The first thing that a Child should learn, is to know and fear the Lord; and  
that when young; For the Mind of a Child, like young Plants, will bend  
which way you please: To know God is to love, keep, and mind his Law.

<sup>16</sup> William Burton, *The District School as It Was by One Who Went to It* (Boston, 1850), p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

Shun all those who would do you Hurt, and do Hurt to none; then you will be loved by all who see you.

Note that, in the last sentence, popularity is given as the only motivation for being a gentle child; John Locke had similarly claimed (in 1683) that "reputation" was the greatest motivating force in a child.

On page 52, the biblical story of Job is given, complete and unsimplified, but also without comment.

Then the easy lessons are picked up again, followed by nearly thirty pages of spelling words, many more than in Dilworth's book. By this time, the spelling bee, as an important public intellectual contest, had become a craze.<sup>18</sup>

These words are followed first by a list of the books of the Bible (Watts would have approved of that inclusion), and then by "How to make good black INK," and "To make good red INK."<sup>19</sup> (See figure 4.) Similar recipes appear in Fenning's speller.

A long section of "Moral Tales and Fables" follows, many more than Dilworth's mere dozen, drawn from Greek mythology, folk tales, the Bible, and general moral observations. (Watts would not have approved.) From the latter category, here are some of the sentiments given:

There cannot be a greater piece of folly, than to endeavour to please all mankind.

It is lawful to prevaricate in certain Cases to save our Lives.

Honesty is the best Policy.

Men would be happy, if they would only be content with their condition.

Nothing is equal to the beauty of the mind.

The penultimate section is the grammar, very like Dilworth's, with the same catechetical technique and long definitions of the intricacies

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the exciting scene in Eggleston's *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* in which the hired girl defeats the schoolmaster in a spelling bee.

<sup>19</sup> In the *Common School Journal*, 1 (November 15, 1839), 337, Horace Mann complained as follows: "On looking into a majority of reading-books in our schools, I believe it will be found that they contain more separate pieces than leaves. . . . I have a reading-book, in which a catalogue of the names of all the books of the Old and New Testaments is followed immediately and on the same page by a 'receipt to make good red ink.'" It must have been Perry's book he referred to, which shows that it was still in use after 1837, the year in which Mann became Secretary to the Massachusetts Board of Education.

of the English language. The final section is an unusual one, called "Promiscuous Exercises of Bad English." It gives many sentences in bad syntax, incorrect punctuation, and misspelling. "Sovereignty and ranks is mor necessary evil to keep passhons within bownds." Perry's innovation was followed by few other spelling-book authors.

Perry and Dilworth are really much alike, in spite of some minor differences. Both preach endlessly at the child, often in a contradictory way; both insist on his passive acceptance of education; both see the speller as an agent for character development as well as for teaching reading. The differences between the two books are in their organization, selections, and a few of their attitudes; their similarities are much more striking.

#### IV.

##### FENNING'S SPELLER

Daniel Fenning's *A Universal Spelling-Book*, the last of the important spellers in this period and probably third in popularity,<sup>20</sup> is in some ways the most interesting. (See figure 5.) Of the three major schoolbooks, it differs most from the established patterns and accepted values.

To begin with, Fenning claims that his book will be "a Useful Instructor for the School, Shop, or Compting House . . . containing many useful Things":

Chronological Tables of Monarchs and Kings of England and other the [*sic*] most remarkable Occurrences in sacred and prophane History; with some short Remarks upon the seven Stages of Life, which are not only improving to the Mind and Morals, but may be of great Service to prevent Youth from falling a Sacrifice to the common Temptations of Life, and their own unguarded Passions.

The word "useful" here means "improving," not "designed for a particular use." In this older sense, a good character was the most useful possession a book could possibly give a young person entering any trade. Virtue was presumably taught in upper-class homes, but Fenning appears to know that some of the children who will read his

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 53, who gives Dilworth top billing, then Fenning, and then Perry. Cf. also Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 82; Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 26. Some authors who speak of Perry and Dilworth, however, do not mention Fenning at all, i.e., Reeder, Burton, and Littlefield.



book are going to be tradesmen, and he wants his book to teach them the right traits.

His preface is a long one, for he has much to say. First, he objects to spelling-book authors who give children lists of meaningless syllables. He plans to give them instead such fascinating words as "cake, pie, tarts, tops, . . . because they know the Names, and having an Idea of the Things before hand, they are half-taught." Unlike his predecessors, he knows that a child brings some experience with him to school.

He warns that a "rod, cane, or ferula" can be misused by a "passionate" master, and that "in regard to Learning itself, Infants may be cheated into it, and the more grown up Youth won by good Nature, and a true discerning of their natural Temper, Ability, and Disposition." He speaks here as a teacher of fifteen years' classroom experience and as a parent; and surely he echoes Ascham and Locke, Comenius and Pestalozzi, with his understanding of a child. It proves difficult for him, however, to put this point of view into his book.

He next inveighs against "Latinism" as an affectation of aristocratic schools, out of place in the "shop or compting house." He plans to use "very pleasant Fables . . . many useful Things in Prose and Verse . . . to promote Virtue, and furnish the Mind with early notions of Piety." Graces and prayers and "sacred and prophane" history will be included "purely to divert the more grown up Lads, and win them to the Love of Reading such Things as must of course be very much for their Improvement." The teacher is reminded of his "incumbent Duty . . . to instil into the Minds of Children an early Notion of their Dependence upon God," perhaps the most "useful" activity of any teacher.

The book proceeds at once to illustrations of "Generals of our Volunteer Army," uniformed and mounted in English style, and then comes a cartoon-like series of pictures showing military "exercises." Then Fenning submits letters of recommendation and a long list of the admirers of his book.

Now comes another title page (the child has far to go before he reaches the part "useful" to him), and at last the familiar alphabet pages.

Part I consists of lessons of 2-letter and 3-letter words, in lists under the categories, "Things most natural and common to children . . . birds and beasts, play terms, catables, apparel, things belonging to a house, parts of the body, the world, trees, plants, fruit, numbers, and



titles and names." Many of the words are now archaic, such as play terms like "giggs" and "chucks." But at least they were chosen for their familiarity to children, not only because of their accentuation.

Table V opens the substantive part of the book, with lessons "by which a child may begin to know his Duty to God and Man." (Watts had urged that he be taught his "duty and behavior to God and man.") The author kindly adds that if any of these lessons are too long, a child should be allowed to read and spell out only a few of them, according to the master's directions.

## Lesson I

Be a good Child <sup>21</sup>  
Love and fear God.  
Mind your Book.  
Love your School

Strive to learn.  
Tell no Tales.  
Call no ill Names.

## Lesson II

Do not lie nor swear.  
Do not cheat nor steal.  
Play not with bad Boys.  
Use no ill Words at Play.

Pray to God to bless you.  
Serve God and trust in him.  
Take not God's holy Name in vain.

So the lessons run, increasing in sentence length and difficulty, admonishing the child in now-familiar ways. In the next section, children read "Of the Creation," about "Duty to God," "Of God's Attributes," "Of Christ our Redeemer," and so on; but the doctrinal emphasis of *The New England Primer*, with its Westminster Shorter Catechism, is notably absent. The last lesson is this:

## Lesson XII

A good Child will not lie, swear, nor steal, nor will he take God's Name in vain. He will be good at Home, and will ask to read his Book; and when he gets up, he will wash his Face and Hands clean, comb out his Hair, and make Haste to School, and will not play by the Way, as bad Boys do.

When the good Boy is at School, he will mind his Book, and try to learn to spell and read well, and not play in School Time; and when he goes to, or comes from School, he will pull off his Hat, or bow to all he meets; and when he goes to Church, he will sit, kneel, or stand still; and when he comes Home, he will read God's word, or some good Book, that God may bless him.

As for that Boy that minds not his Church, his School, nor his Book, but plays with such Boys as tell Tales, tell lies, swear, steal, and take God's Name in vain; he will come to some ill End, if he be not well whipt at School and at Home, Day and Night, till he leaves off such Things.

<sup>21</sup> Note that this is not "No man may put off the law of God."

*He that loves God, his school, and his book, will no doubt do well at the last: but he that hates his school and his book, will live and die a slave, a fool, and a dunce.*

Whipping as a punishment seems inconsistent with Fenning's statement in his preface about such discipline; there too he seemed to know that a child plays occasionally, whereas here he draws a clear picture of a "good Child" whose only activities are at church, at school, and with books.

Such a child needed to know some Scripture too, Fenning thought, though he did not simplify it as Dilworth had done. After many familiar primer pieces like "Train up a child in the way he should go," and "the Lord knoweth the Way of the Righteous," the beautiful third chapter of Ecclesiastes is given in full: "To every Thing there is a Season, and a Time to every Purpose under the Heaven," followed by Psalms, including the introspective 139, "O Lord thou hast searched me out, and know me." Next comes much from Proverbs, mostly selections exhorting the young to listen to those older and wiser, "Fools despise Wisdom and Instruction." On the whole, the tone is serious, earnest, gentle to a degree, but still firm as to duty. The child is asked to control his childish behavior, to be obedient and dutiful, and to look to eternal things.

Four fables appear next, complete with picture, story, and moral. The first was later a great favorite among readers and spellers.

*Fable I. Of the Boy that stole Apples.*

An old Man found a rude Boy upon one of the Trees stealing Apples, and desired him to come down; but the young Sauce-box told him plainly he would not. Won't you, says the old Man, then I will fetch you down; so he pulled up some Tufts of Grass, and threw at him; but this only made the Youngster laugh, to think the old Man should pretend to beat him out of the Tree with Grass only.

Well, well, says the old Man, if neither Words nor Grass will do, I must try what Virtue there is in Stones; so the old Man pelted him heartily with Stones, which soon made the young Chap hasten down from the Tree, and beg the old Man's Pardon.

Moral

If good Words and gentle Means will not reclaim the Wicked, they must be dealt with in a more severe Manner.

The morals attached to the other three fables read as follows:

Of the Lion and the Mouse: Since no one knows what may befall him nor

# A NEW GUIDE

## TO THE English Tongue:

### IN FIVE PARTS.

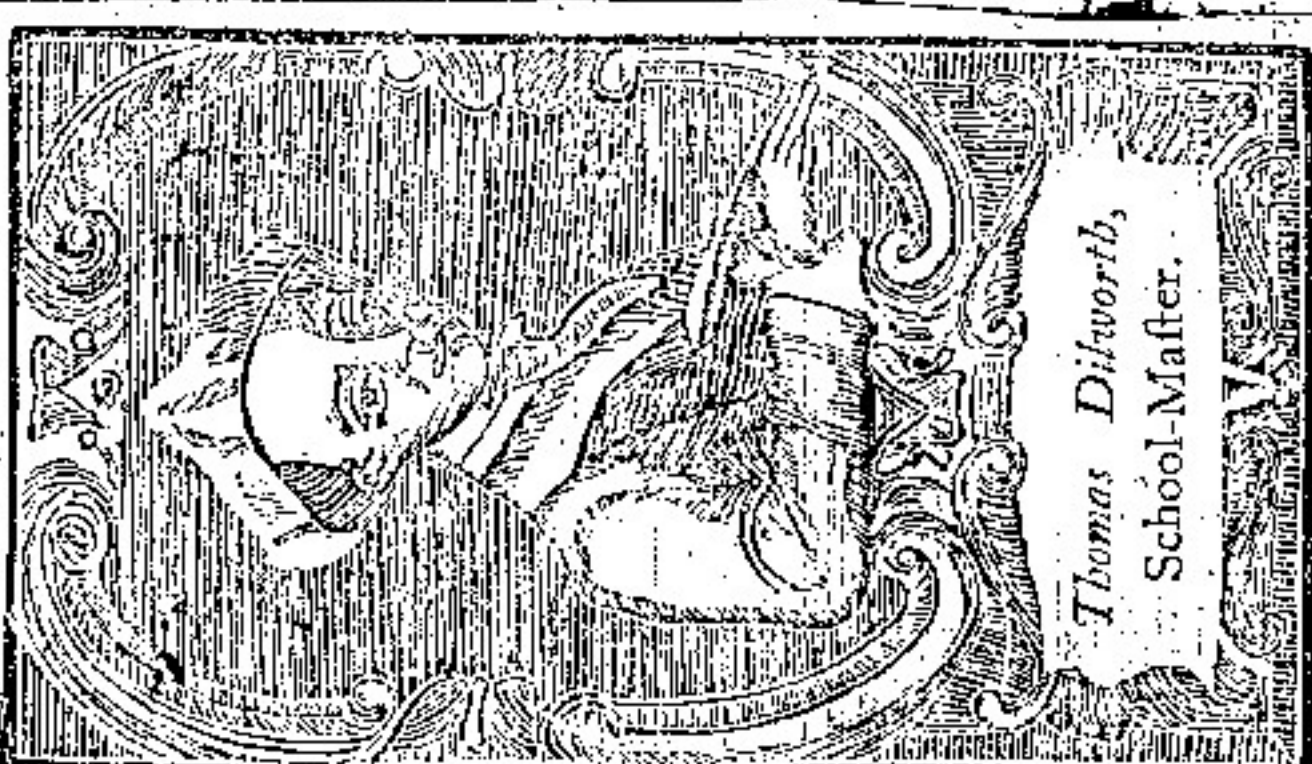
#### C O N T A I N I N G,

I. Words both *common* and *proper*, from *one to six Syllables*: The several *Sorts of Monosyllables* in the *common Words* being distinguished by *Tables* into *Words of two, three and four Letters, &c.* with *four* Lessons at the End of each *Table*, not exceeding the order of *Syllables* in the foregoing *Tables*. The several *Sorts of Polysyllables* also, being ranged in *proper Tables*, have their *Syllables* divided, and *Directions* placed at the Head of each *Table* for the *Students*, to prevent *false Pronunciation*; together with the like number of *Lessons* on the foregoing *Tables*, placed at the End of each *Table*, as far as to *Words of four Syllables*, for the *easier and more speedy Way* of teaching *Children* to Read.

The *Whole*, being recommended by several *Clergymen* and eminent *School-Masters*.

By THOMAS DILWORTH.

LONDON: Printed and Sold by WILLIAM McALPINE in Marlborough-street, 1770.



Thomas Dilworth,  
School-Master.

FIGURE 1



A New Guide



A Man may forgive an Injury; but he cannot easily forget it.

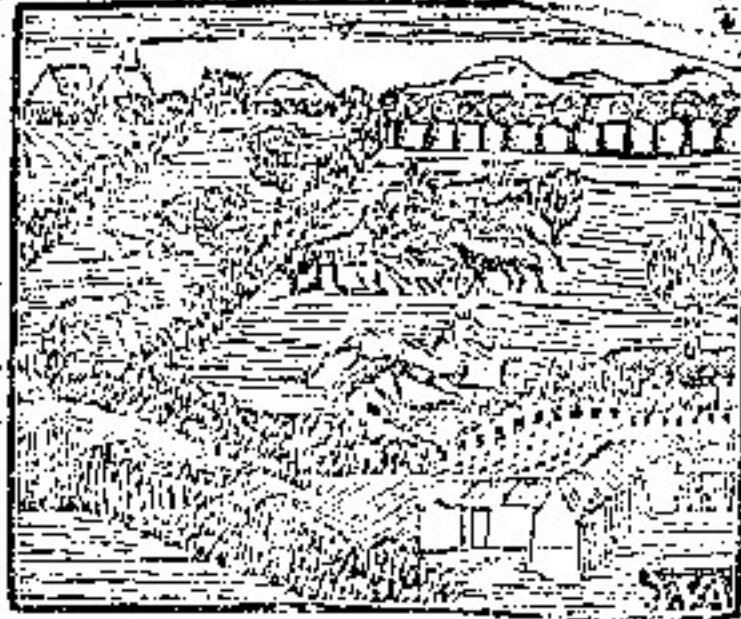
FABLE IV. Of the Husbandman and the Snake.

WHEN the Husbandman had brought up a Snake in his House; He, being angry with her, struck her with his Hat, and wounded her, for which reason she fled from him. Afterwards the Husbandman falling into Want, imagined that this Misfortune befel him for the Injury done to the Snake, and therefore humbly requested of her that she would come and live with him again.

The Snake replied, That she forgave him, but she would not return to live with him who kept a Hatchet in his House; adding, that although the Smart of the Wound was gone, yet the Mark was left, and the Remembrance of it was still fresh in her Memory.

The Interpretation.

It is not safe to trust that Man, who hath once made Breach in Friendship. It is God-like to forgive an Injury; but no harm to remember it, because it keeps us on our guard.



Make no Friendship with an ill-natur'd Man. FABLE V. Of the Wolves and the Sheep.

THE Wolves made a League with the Sheep, and Hostages were given on both Sides. The Wolves gave their young Ones to the Sheep, and the Sheep gave their Dogs to the Wolves.

Some time after, while the Sheep were quietly in the Meadow, the young Wolves began to steal their Dams; at which the Wolves came rushing upon them, and charged them with breaking the League.

The Sheep began to excuse themselves, saying they were feeding by themselves, and therefore could not guard the young Wolves, not having any Dogs with them. But the Wolves insisted on it, that they were guilty of a Breach of Friendship; alleging at the same time, that those Innocents, who never did any harm in their Lives, would not make such dreadful Lamentations, unless some Violence had been offered to them: and knowing the Sheep to be without their Guard, they fell upon them as voracious Chen Pieces.

The Interpretation. Like to their own use your Guard when an Enemy is near; they say: It has my counter to the Rules of Friendship; it will not become a true Friend, though you should him by the strongest Engagements. Honesty

FIGURE 2



T H E  
*Only Sure Guide*  
 TO THE  
**English Tongue:**  
 OR, NEW  
**Pronouncing Spelling Book.**

Upon the same Plan as *Perry's Royal STANDARD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*, (which is now made Use of in all the celebrated Schools in *Great-Britain and Ireland*, as the most COMPLETE COMPENDIUM of the ENGLISH LANGUAGE ever yet published.)

TO WHICH IS ADDED,  
**A Comprehensive GRAMMAR**  
 OF the ENGLISH LANGUAGE;  
 And, a Select Number of moral TALES and FABLES,  
 For the Instruction of YOUTH.

With an APPENDIX,  
 Containing, Directions for the different Sounds of the Consonants before all the VOWELS, with every Exception that is to be met with in our Language, from such general Rules:  
 Also, a complete List of all the Words in which *E* final does not lengthen the Syllable: Likewise, several valuable APHORISMS respecting the Sounds of the Vowels in the last Syllable of Words ending with *R*. And,  
 Lastly, Some critical Observations concerning the Sound of *ie*, *ie*, and *ie*.

*For the Use of Schools, and private Families.*

By **W. PERRY**,  
 Lecturer on the English Language, in the Academy, *Edinburgh*.

The EIGHTH EDITION.

PRINTED at WORCESTER, Massachusetts, by ISALAH THOMAS.  
 Sold by him, and the Booksellers in BOSTON.  
 MDCCCLXXXV.

FIGURE 3

88 THE ONLY SURE GUIDE &c.

*The Names of the Books of the Old Testament.*  
**G**ENESIS Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy Joshua Judges Ruth I Samuel II Samuel I Kings II Kings I Chronicles II Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes The Song of Solomon Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi.

*The Names of the Books of the New Testament.*  
**M**ATTHEW Mark Luke John Acts Romans I Corinthians II Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Phillipians Colossians I Thessalonians II Thessalonians I Timothy II Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews James I Peter II Peter I John II John III John Jude Revelation.

*To make good black INK.*  
**T**AKE five Ounces of the best blue Nutgalls, break them in a mortar, but not into small pieces; then put the galls into one quart of rain water, or, if this cannot be got, soft spring water; let them stand four or five days, shaking them often. Then take two ounces of white Gum Arabick; one ounce of double refined sugar, one piece of indigo, and put to the same, and shake them well, and let them stand four or five days more; then take two ounces of good green Copperas (the larger the better) and having first washed off the filth, put it to the rest, and also a small piece of clear alum, to set the colour, and it will be fit for use.

N. B. Put in a glass of Brandy, or other Spirits, to keep it from freezing.

*To make good red INK.*  
**T**AKE three Pints of stale beer (rather than Vinegar) and four ounces of ground Brazil Wood; simmer them together for an hour; then put in four ounces of roach alum; and these three are to simmer together for half an hour; then strain it through a flannel, or rag, and then add one ounce of gum arabick; then bottle it up, and stop it down until used.

FIGURE 4



Price, One British Shilling.

THE  
**UNIVERSAL SPELLING-BOOK:**  
 OR,  
 A NEW AND EASY GUIDE  
 TO THE  
**ENGLISH LANGUAGE.**

CONTAINING,

I. *Tables of Words* of one, two, three, four, five, six, and seven Syllables; with natural and easy Lessons inserted, adapted to the Capacity of Children, from three Years old and upwards, and yet so, that such as can already read, may receive sensible Instruction thereby: Being diversified with a Variety of Lessons, both moral and divine, as also Fables and pleasant Stories, in order to improve the Mind and the Understanding.

II. A very easy and approved Guide to English Grammar, by Way of Question and Answer, for the Use of Schools as well as private Persons, and by which they may very soon become acquainted with the Knowledge of the English Tongue, with very little Trouble and Application.

III. A Collection of near 5000 of the most useful Words of two, three, and four Syllables; viz. Noun Substantives, Adjectives and Verbs (placed alphabetically under their respective Heads) which are received and explained for the better Instruction of Youth, and Information of such Persons as would know the Meaning of what they read and write; being a Useful Instructor for the School, Shop, or Counting-House.

IV. Many useful Things necessary to help the young Beginner, and inform the more grown-up Youth, with a Variety of Alphabetical Copies, and Writing-Pieces, both in Prose and Verse.

V. Chronological Tables of the Monarchs and Kings of England and other the most remarkable Occurrences in Sacred and profane History; with some short Remarks upon the several Stages of Life, which are not only improving to the Mind and Morals, but may be of great Service to prevent Youth from falling a Sacrifice to the common Temptations of Life, and their own unguarded Passions.

THE FIFTEENTH EDITION, with Improvements and ADDITIONS.

By DANIEL RENNING,  
 Late School-Master of *Bures*, in *Suffolk*; and Author of  
*the Use of the Globes, Practical Arithmetick, Guide to Algebra, Royal English Dictionary, &c.*

DUBLIN:  
 PRINTED BY A. CROSS, NO. 28, BRIDGE-STREET.  
 1796.

FIGURE 5

who may be a Means of serving him, it is the highest Wisdom to behave kind and civil to all Mankind.

Of the Wolf and Crane: Thus ungrateful Men serve their Benefactors: Instead of rewarding generous Friendships and faithful Services, they think it ought to pass for a Favour that they do not return injuries and ruin instead of just Requitals.

Of the Town in Danger of a Siege: 'Tis too common for Men to consult their own private Ends, tho a whole Nation suffer by it. Their own Profit and selfish Views are all they aim at, notwithstanding they often undo themselves by betraying and undoing others.

All these highly secular and worldly-wise fables appeared in other spellers of the period; indeed, these four were probably more used than any others, showing, no doubt, that their sentiments were most approved. But what a change: "Be kind and civil to all Mankind" because you never know who is your enemy or possible benefactor!

Next follows a group of stories, "natural, useful, and entertaining." One concerns a trio of boys who played truant. One drowned; the others were "severely corrected." The moral is clear.

Then follows probably the most famous of all such useful and entertaining tales: "Life truly painted, in the Natural History of TOMMY and HARRY . . . by which Youth may see the Way of Life in general, and arm themselves against the common Temptations of it, and the Effects of Bad Company." Tommy and Harry, the sons of a "Gentleman in the West of England," represent the archetypes of boyish vice and virtue.

Harry indeed was a sullen, perverse Boy from his Cradle; and having always had his Will . . . he would go to School or stay at Home, just as he pleased, or else he would cry and sob at a great Rate; and for fear this should make poor Harry sick and out of Order, the fond Parents consent to let him do as his own Fancy directed; so that he at last minds nothing but Play, hates his Book, and always cries when he is desired to read, or go to School.

As for Tommy, he was quite of another Temper; for though he would now and then cry, and be naughty, yet he minded what his Parents said to him; he loved his Book and his School, and behaved so good natured, pleasant and mannerly, that all his Friends took Notice of him; the Neighbours loved him, and every Body praised him, because he was a sober, good-natured Child, and very dutiful and obliging.

When they grow up and get jobs, Tommy is sober and industrious, Harry drunken and profligate. After many earnest attempts at reforming his brother, Tommy gives Harry up. Harry's small in-



heritance is quickly spent on the same wretched companions with whom he has long caroused, until at last he is driven to crime. After robbery and murder, he and his friends elude the law by taking ship; on board they laugh at their successful escape. "But even thither divine Vengeance follows them, for a Storm arose; and drove the Ship against a Rock on the Coast of Barbary, and being dark many of the Crew perished, besides Harry's two unhappy Companions." Harry is saved for a crueller fate:

Harry, indeed, was by the Violence of the Waves, cast upon the Shore, but in the Morning he was presented with a shocking Scene — A raging Sea on one Side, and a wild desolate Place on the other; and having not the least Hopes of ever escaping, we may easily guess how he talks to himself — O, says he, that I had been more obedient to my Parents, and more grateful to my Friends! — O, that I could now make all wicked Youth sensible of my Sorrow, and their own Folly! How would I press upon them to avoid all Manner of ill Company, to hearken to the Instruction of their Friends, and pursue the Paths of Virtue. — Wicked Wretch that I am! — God be merciful to me a Sinner.

Thus he went on, often thinking upon his old Words, *don't care*, but too late; for after roving about and bemoaning his unhappy Fate, till he was almost starved to Death, he at last (we hear) became a Prey to wild Beasts, which God suffered to tear him to Pieces, as the just Reward of his Disobedience and mis-spent Life.

Thus you see that as Harry followed nothing but Vice; he lived a wretched Life, and died a miserable Death; but Tommy was always the Pattern of Virtue and Goodness, and still lives happy.

Just in case the young reader had missed the point, an "application" duly follows: "Learn then betimes, O Youth . . ." The whole concludes with the advice given Solomon by his father, King David, from I Chronicles.

A respite from preaching comes at last — a table of figures and numbers, a list of common contractions, a collection of words "nearly alike in Sound, but different in Spelling and Signification," and a short list of words spelt alike but pronounced differently under different syntactic circumstances.

Grammar comes next, still catechetical and latinate, for all Fenning's expressed dislike of "Latinism." Watts's idea that beginners at reading should have just a few pages of grammar was certainly not followed by spelling-book authors.

Forty-six pages of words follow, arranged by syllable length with brief definitions, after which we learn how

*To make good red INK*

Take one Pint of Vinegar, or fine stale Beer, one Ounce of Brazil Wood, ground fine and filtered; incorporate these together well, then simmer them over a clear Fire for near half an Hour, and strain it through Flannel or Linen. Or,

Take Half a Pint of Water, and put therein Half an Ounce of Gum Senega, or Arabic; let this dissolve in a Gallipot, and then add one Pennyworth of the best Vermilion, stirring it well for two Days.

Next, using that good ink, the child is set to an alphabetical copy, which begins with A: "A covetous Man is never satisfied. . . . By Diligence and Care you may learn to write Fair. . . . Command you may, your mind from Play. . . . Frugality and Industry are the Hands of Fortune. . . . Get what you can honestly and use it frugally. . . . Keep at a Distance from all bad Company. . . . Poverty and Shame wait upon the Slothful. . . . Vice is always attended with Sorrow. . . . Wanton Actions are very unseemly." There are no warnings about self-satisfaction or pride, although any child who really took these teachings to heart would be a prig.

Still more "useful Things" follow: verses for religious occasions and some on topics like education, religion, swearing, pride, gaming, and frugality; then more alphabetical sentences to copy, which ring all the same changes. Little graces and prayers for children are included, reminding one of the next to last section of Dilworth's book, and at last the promised "sacred and prophane History." It consists of a table of the kings of England from Egbert to George III, and then a "Chronological Account of remarkable Things, before the Birth of Christ." Creation was in 4047 B.C., the Ten Commandments were given in 1494 B.C., Jericho fell in 1415 B.C., Alexander the Great died in 326 B.C., and Herod was proclaimed King of Judea in 43 B.C. There follow the important events A.D., and the final selection of the book deals with the seven stages of life. Each stage seems more beset by temptation and sin than the last, despite all Fentling's sanguine promises of the happy results of virtuous living.

The "Conclusion to the Reader" closes the book in a very different tone:

Should you learn any Thing by what is penn'd,  
(Tho' e'er so little) I have gain'd my End.  
And should you know already what is writ,  
Pray be not over-fond of cens'ring it;  
But fairly join the Critic and the Friend,

Small Faults excuse, and what you can, commend:  
 "For be an Author e'er so wise and wary,  
 "He may in some Particulars miscarry."

So ends Fenning's *Universal Spelling-Book*. Although there is less doctrinal and more secular material than in Dilworth's and Perry's books, with less fear of death and damnation and more about the rewards of virtue in this life, the attitude toward the child is basically the same. The child while young is foolish and ignorant; the best thing he can do is to take on the sober adult characteristics of industry and frugality, virtue and piety, as soon as possible.

## V.

### SUMMARY REMARKS

Such, then, were the contents of the three major spelling books used in America, until Webster's speller was written and quickly won top place in its field. Until then, both spellers and primers were used widely as the elementary reading textbooks, and their contents varied chiefly in the amount of specifically religious material they included. Both became somewhat more secular than their predecessor, *The New England Primer*, to reach a wider audience, but the speller branched out even more than the primer did, and included much more non-religious material, practical selections, work in grammar, lists of words for spelling — a compendium of whatever came to hand that seemed to serve the purpose of the author and his adult audience.

In their message, however, both primer and speller show more similarities than differences. Both were intent upon bending the pliant young twigs into their proper shape, to suit adults who seemed to have little time or patience for children as children. Religious and moral values were fundamental and taken for granted. Obedience to God's laws and the dictates of conscience would bring reward both in this world and the next. The War in Heaven goes on, then, with earth its locale, but man has now discovered that faith and submissive prayer are not the only weapons by which it is fought. Frugality and industry, self-control and a scrutinizing conscience — these bring further assurance of a serene, prosperous life, and Heaven later on.

Again, this is an egocentric point of view, in its emphasis on the individual, striving soul. So egocentric is it that it dares not allow any



deviation on the part of the growing child, any new standards, any thought. It is a defensive position, not yet secure enough to reach outward, beyond self-examination, integrity, and duty, toward the more social virtues of benevolence and humanity. These virtues come in the readers of the next century.

Simmons College