

THE PASSING OF THE SPELLING BOOK

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THE spelling book is no more; in schools conducted in accordance with advanced pedagogic methods it has disappeared, swallowed up, as it were, in the "glittering generality" named "English." Possibly in secluded hamlets yet uninvaded by the kindergarten principle of learning through play, where children still amuse themselves by games of their own choosing, blissfully unconscious of their loss in not being "directed" in their sports, possibly in such secluded nooks, along with an occasional well-sweep and a spinning-wheel owned by a mistress who knows which way to turn it, the spelling book may linger. But in our cities and in schools of modern methods the spelling book has vanished. You may seek in vain the lean, much-thumbed volume in the children's hands; in vain the spelling class of our fathers' day, standing in line toeing the familiar seam in the floor, hands behind the back, heads up, and brains and vocal organs alertly catching the ponderous words propounded by the teacher, and promptly returning them duly and accurately spelled and syllabified. That was an anxious hour for those too lazy to study the lesson or too dull to learn it, but a strenuous hour of mental athletics full of keen delight to those prepared for the fray, a proud time for him who could hold or win the place of glory "at the head of the class"; some in later life have mounted to the world's high places of honor with a feebler throb of joyous pride than once thrilled their hearts in district-school days when they "went to the head" of the spelling class.

You may seek in vain for the written spelling lesson by whose aid some of ourselves climbed the steps of the gentle art of orthography. Can any modern school display of crayon landscapes, water-color apples, or even trim sloyd boxes be so goodly a sight as those creamy, ivory-finished tablets of ours as they appeared at the end of the spelling class, containing their forty words of artfully combined letters all neatly written and not one marked with the black cross of shame which meant wrong? Great was our humiliation at the appearance of these crosses, and great was it also over misspelled words in our compositions, which, while we were yet of tender age, we did not name themes or essays.

Imperfect spelling in those days was the mark of the dullard or ignoramus or the child of other ancestry than ours, whose fathers had never known the spelling book. To us, born from generations of pure-blooded New England forefathers, God-fearing men and themselves of the estate of the spelling book, the misspelling a word was a personal disgrace which was, moreover, an insult to our families.

Who of our generation does not remember the efforts of those of us who were the faithful to make the assurance of our knowledge doubly sure by dress rehearsal before the serious hour of the real struggle? the gathering about some philanthropic mate who would "spell" us, or the standing "in position" at our mother's knee while she rendered the same friendly service, or the passing the occasional examinations given by our fathers? They were inclined to try to puzzle us with such words as phthisic, Popocatpetl, and Nebuchadnezzar,—words which had small terror for us. They were bright and shining marks at which we had long trained our guns; but our teachers well knew the sly and treacherous words which were so elusive that aiming at one we were likely to hit another; those words containing an *i* before an *e* and those others seemingly of the same nature, but mysteriously disposing the *e* before the *i*, and those words which, to us, seemed to choose at their own sweet will whether or not their consonants, in the middle and at the end, should be single or doubled.

But the times have changed, and the spelling book belongs to the ascetic other days, when, as yet, the kindergarten had not risen above its place with young children, and working mightily leavened the whole lump with the principle of “mother plays” and the like. Spelling drill belongs to the simple, stern life of the past, together with other heroic practices, as sewing “over and over” and wood chopping, which, indeed, is still extant in the exercise of prime ministers and presidents who, moreover, in their youth were braced by the discipline of the spelling book.

If you ask the children of to-day for the spelling book they will answer: “We don’t have any; *she* keeps it on her desk.”

“And how do you study your lessons?”

“We don’t study any lessons; *she* just opens the book and asks us some words, and we spell them if we can.”

“And if you cannot?”

“We write them over again.”

There is no shame now in misspelling words. In the impersonal, upright, widely spreading handwriting which he who toddles may read, are wondrous variations upon dictionary English which never cease to amaze the instructor in secondary school or college, who has, nevertheless, had much and sad experience. There is no faintest blush of humiliation now on his cheek who sins against the laws of spelling, no pang of regret in his soul.

The teachers in the secondary school, however, feel the shame. They are of a former generation, and snatch golden moments from the all-too-brief algebra and geometry “periods” to struggle with a belated spelling lesson, containing hypothesis, corollary, parallel, and the like. The history and the classical teachers add something to the children’s select and limited repertoire of words, and the English teacher, sometimes in schools where English does not remain the same glittering generality which it often is in the grammar school, and where children who cannot analyze a sentence or spell its words are required to write theses upon the philosophy of Wordsworth and the difference in the styles of Dryden and Shakespeare.

Passing through the secondary school the children do pick up stray bits of orthographic learning, but they are turned out no spellers, after all. By no chance lifts and on no “flowery beds of ease” can one be carried to the height of the art of spelling. College examiners bear witness to this as they speak of the astonishing errors in brilliant papers, and merchants who tell us of the rarity of a perfectly spelled letter among the many “in the handwriting of the applicant” sent by high school graduates seeking positions.

Yet, though the spelling book has passed, may we not hope for its return? In these years, when we are enthusiastically adopting many of the good old fashions, may not the fashion of the spelling book “come in” again?

The old designs of glass, plate, china, and furniture are popular; the dignified comfort of colonial architecture is appreciated; and the cheery blaze of the family fireside has become an essential, though it be no more than a gas log in the corner of the “drawing-room” of a toy suite; and, if we are not precisely returning to the religious and social ways of our forefathers, we are taking interest in these, as we show by our pleasant and perhaps profitable plays at being our own ancestors, which take the form of paring, husking, and quilting bees, colonial tea parties, and even spelling matches (!) in which comes often speedy discomfiture to those young persons who are so hardened or so humble as to place themselves in a position sure to bring swift chagrin; the prizes and the glory of these occasions fall generally to the elders whose school days were of the era when the spelling book yet reigned.

There are still those who honor and obey the spelling book and esteem the results of its training, who mourn the present unblushing defiance of its laws and regard misspelled words a blot on the scutcheon of culture and education. There are many not too stern parents who look with disfavor on some of the modern methods by which children are supposed to learn without knowing that they are learning and without knowing what they are learning, some suggest, who regard the results of these methods unsatisfactory and who ardently wish to see the spelling book and multiplication table reinstated in their former places of honor.

“There is much talk of children working too hard in school,” said one mother; “my children do not have to work hard enough; sometimes, when they have an afternoon of games, story telling, or valentine making, I keep them at home and give them something to do which I think is of more importance for school hours.”

“I was a little country girl,” said another mother, and my daughter is a college graduate and a teacher, but she cannot begin to spell as well as I can; she often makes mistakes in her letters and she is constantly consulting me as a dictionary.”

The present disregard of the spelling book has evidently touched the heart of the writer of a recent article in the Churchman. He is reviewing a series of “readers”; these are his words: “The children of the new pedagogy are listless in their attention, and require the constant stimulus of diversion. They have far less ability to read than the older generation, and a pathetic inability to spell. . . . The text in these books meanders through large pictures in long lines and short. By so much as the child is amused he fails to be instructed. These ‘readers’ are adapted to various modern methods of instruction [these are named]; if *only some ‘reader’ could be adapted to the spelling book method, we should get better results.*”

Does not this writer propose the one effectual remedy for the “pathetic inability to spell”? We know that the “inability” is not due to any weakness of the children’s minds; they are no less able than their parents to learn and obey the laws of orthography; indeed, remembering the teachings of science in the doctrine of the survival of the fittest and evolution, and considering the children’s intellectual achievements, we believe that the present generation can do greater things than its elders. We know that the “inability” is not the fault of the teachers, who are far better trained and educated than their predecessors, and at least as faithful and devoted to their profession. In their methods they are simply obedient to the new pedagogy, which places the spelling book on the teacher’s desk instead of in the children’s hands. Must not our hope for better things rest in the coming again of the spelling book to a recognized place in the course of study and the daily discipline of the schoolroom?

The spelling book does not readily lend itself to the modern method of learning made easy; it can hardly be wreathed with allurements in the shape of games or story telling; it is of another kind; it means work for permanent results, not for temporary recreation. There is about the spelling book a certain atmosphere of “plain living and high thinking,” and of that stern morality which does right for right’s sake.

The wise and thoughtful are warning us, in these days of the republic, of the dangers of luxury, extravagance, and self-indulgence, and bidding us remember the downfall of Rome, and return in time to a simpler, sterner living. Might not the coming again of the spelling book, with its fine tonic air as of “freedom’s northern breeze,” blowing upon the languorous, tropical atmosphere which often pervades our schools, brace the systems of the children, and rouse them to vigorous action which would strengthen mental and moral nerves and sinews, and help make of us a hardy, enduring race of a fibre like that of the Fathers of the Republic.

EDUCATION, A Monthly Magazine Devoted to the Science, Art, Philosophy and Literature of Education by Richard G. Boone and Frank H. Palmer, *Editors*. Vol. XXIV, May 1904. (Boston: The Palmer Company), pp. 556 – 561.

Brief Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

June 25, 2010

I found this excellent article on the morning of June 25, 2010 as I was browsing GoogleBook.com for educational books from the past. This essay caught my eye as something worth republishing in a more accessible venue. I have used both Noah Webster's 1824 *American Spelling Book* and 1908 *Elementary Spelling Book* in my busy tutoring practice with incredible success. I have been puzzled for some time as to whatever led to the demise of such a powerful tool for teaching reading and spelling. The article is something of a sad lament but ends with a hopeful note and an invigorating challenge return the Spelling Book to the students of America. I consider it very valuable for its historical insights.

It was a article written in 2004 by former elementary teacher (first and third grades) and reading researcher, Miss Geraldine Rodger, "WHY NOAH WEBSTER'S WAY WAS THE RIGHT WAY," that first arrested my attention to the idea that the old spelling book method of teaching reading and spelling might have produced higher levels of reading achievement than our more modern methods. I immediately began teaching Webster's method and discovered to my great surprise that it indeed produced very high levels of reading achievement. It proved equally powerful for both beginning and remedial reading students of all levels. A fellow tutor and reading researcher, Mrs. Elizabeth Brown, has also taught Webster's method and arrived at the same conclusion. In fact, Mrs. Brown believes that no other method known to us is able to achieve such high reading levels. Mrs. Brown's website, www.thephonicspage.org, is a mine of information on spelling books and reading. I highly recommend her video reading program, "The Phonics Lessons" that is available for free in Quicktime format from her website.

I have a **Spelling Book Resource Page** on my website www.donpotter.net to which I welcome anyone interested in helping our students achieve higher levels of reading and spelling success.

I believe that the time has come to reinstate the Spelling Book to place of honor in our modern educational curriculum.

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