

The Irish Readers Revisited: The Power of the Text(book)

Robert J. Graham

The Irish Readers, the first textbooks authorized for use in Upper Canada (1846), provide evidence of deeper social-historical processes of knowledge production. A study of the pedagogy, form, and content of representative lessons uncovers an ideological matrix meant to reproduce society on fixed lines of race, class, and gender. Such class-specific social theory silently structures textbooks, giving precedence to certain forms of knowledge. A critical semiotics of the textbook would counter common assumptions about knowledge and its dissemination.

The Irish Readers, premiers manuels dont l'utilisation a été autorisée dans le Haut-Canada (1846), permettent de mieux comprendre les mécanismes socio-historiques de la production des connaissances. Une étude de la pédagogie, de la forme et du contenu de chapitres de ces manuels, dévoile une matrice idéologique reflétant une société stéréotypée du point de vue race, classe et sexe. Une théorie sociale fondée de façon aussi précise sur les classes structure les manuels en privilégiant certains savoirs. Une sémiotique critique des manuels ferait contrepoids aux idées préconçues à propos de la connaissance et des moyens de diffusion de celle-ci.

The institution should be universal—accessible to every child in the land. The Christian Religion should be the basis and all pervading principle of it. . . . The mother tongue alone is taught. Every topic is *practical*—connected with the objects, duties, relations and interests of common life. The object of education is to prepare men for their duties, and the preparation and disciplining of the mind for the performance of them.

Egerton Ryerson, *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction*, 1847

When Egerton Ryerson penned those words he was a man with a mission. As Assistant Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada, he had been charged with reducing chaos in the public education system to order. His problems were many, not the least of which was a want of uniformity in textbooks. In a disturbing number of schools, “teachers had to use such books as the parents chose to send” (White, 1922, p. 9). There were sometimes “two or three tattered fragments of books in the school” which were “considered common property and used by all in attendance” (White,

1922, p. 9). Ryerson's response was to introduce systematic use of the Irish National Series of school books, despite local preferences for other grammar and spelling books, and amid protestations from writers promoting their own publications.

The selection of the Irish Readers was a decision of some importance. Tomkins (1986) observed, "During an era when the textbook was the *de facto* curriculum, there was hardly a dimension of policy that textbooks did not touch" (p. 66). On the one hand, from the limited perspective of school organization, adoption of uniform textbooks solved the problem of student mobility, permitting easier classification of students, school inspection, and common examinations. And at a time when most teachers lacked training, they were invaluable pedagogical tools since "teachers could be trained in the books and according to the methods they would use in their future classrooms" (Tomkins, 1986, p. 67). On the other hand, in the perspective of moral, social and political considerations, the Readers successfully cut across national and religious lines. As several commentators have observed (Graff, 1977; Parvin, 1965; Prentice, 1977; Tomkins, 1977, 1986; Stamp, 1977), Upper Canadians were generally concerned about the influence of American teachers and texts in the schools.

Indeed, a major motivation in gradually setting up provincial controls over text and library books in Upper Canada was the hope of eventually ridding the schools of republican, chauvinist and anti-British literature from the United States, which many teachers and superintendents believed had a pernicious influence on the minds of young Canadians. (Prentice, 1977, p. 53)

Although Ryerson realized he could never wholly exclude American texts, the Readers exerted a "pan-imperial appeal without being stridently nationalistic" (Tomkins, 1986, p. 67).

Akenson (1970) has shown the Readers were appropriate to the Irish socio-political situation. They met the demand for books upon which a Christian education could be grounded, and at the same time "avoided unnecessary controversial matter" (p. 239). Yet the books were not secular in our modern sense of the word. They were "crammed full of moralizing and religiosity" (Akenson, 1970, p. 235) while striving to remain denominationally neutral. In fact, amid constant threats to social order posed by class and religious conflicts, "Blandness and uniformity in the treatment of sensitive subjects was the educators' prescription for the promotion of social harmony" (Prentice, 1977, p. 128).

Ryerson (1847) himself, in his *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction*, had advocated general education as an antidote to "the gangrene of pauperism [that] weakens the body politic at its very heart" (p. 11). The

schools would be the clinics and literacy the medicine. Yet literacy was “an instrument of social stability in a time of change, facilitating both progress and development without threat of disorder” (Graff, 1977, p. 25). For example, Prentice (1977) reported instances where Ryerson espoused individual and class mobility through the power of education while believing few were expected to achieve the improved status that went with education.

Education had another function besides the elevation of a respectable or “middle” class in Upper Canada. This was the related one of providing a safe and disciplined lower class, the necessary labourers over whom those who had bettered themselves could exercise their newly won power (Prentice, 1977, p. 115).

The adoption of the Irish Readers contributed significantly to continuing emphasis on the moral function of schooling, since the texts were neither unmediated nor ideologically naive. The moral messages that saturated virtually every lesson illustrated and recommended the maintenance of socially acceptable attitudes and standards of conduct, among which a concern for order, progress, and restraint were key elements. Similarly, the texts were not unmediated, since many of the routines and practices of schooling, of which only pedagogy will engage us more fully, served to underscore and to reinforce the explicitly moral stance of the texts themselves. Although the texts *alone* did not contribute to the suppression of facts about social and political conflict, few would deny they sought to inculcate normative behaviour, and to have students accept the “naturalness” of contemporary social organization. Textbooks are not only vehicles that organize knowledge in a convenient and systematic way, but are also cultural artifacts whose production and use is never ahistorical nor ideologically neutral.

Critical theory “sees conflict and tension rather than harmonic consensus as a central feature of social life” (Gibson, 1986, p. 5). The implied question, “Whose interests are being served?” often proves a disturbing (or illegitimate) question. I argue that close analysis of representative selections from several *Books of Lessons* will assist in making more explicit specific areas in Graff’s (1977) work at which, with his more comprehensive aims, he could only hint. This should alert us to a blind spot in our own assumptions and textual practices; namely, that if the authority of the textbook and the knowledge legitimated therein remains unchallenged and taken-for-granted, then what we consider our most enlightened and emancipated teaching strategies may be discovered to have their footing in ideological quicksand.

Several key questions, concepts, and ideas from Apple (1985, 1986), Taxel (1983, 1986), and Wexler (1982) provide a framework for analysis. In assessing whose knowledge is taught and produced in the schools, Apple (1985) asked “How is this ‘legitimate’ knowledge made available in schools?

By and large it is something to which we have paid much too little attention—the textbook” (p. 148). Likewise, Taxel’s (1983) contribution to earlier work by Kelly (1970), proposed that cultural artifacts like narratives for children “provide a model of behaviour consistent with its author’s perception of a desirable social order” (p. 62). Wexler (1982) contended that close analyses of textbooks, such as Anyon’s (1979) study of American history texts, are urgently required to augment our understanding of the “socio-historical processes through which school knowledge is produced” (p. 283), since those who control the routines that legitimate certain forms of knowledge, “increasingly own reality” (p. 283).

TEACHER TRAINING AND PEDAGOGY

In his illuminating account of the school reader’s role in the education of mid-nineteenth-century children, Goldstrom (1972) examined contemporary methods of training teachers. From the beginning of his apprenticeship, the pupil teacher “was not permitted to cast his eye over any book that was not immediately concerned with the instruction of his pupils” (p. 145). The reason for this was simple. The novices’ examinations consisted of reading lessons where teachers were both to demonstrate ability to question students on the text and to display their own understanding of the prescribed texts. The training was thorough and rigorous, starting at 6:30 in the morning and lasting until 8:30 at night. There were weekly examinations and annual inspections. “The most fashionable of the current educational theories also placed much stress on the school reader” (Goldstrom, 1970, p. 150), an emphasis which led in practice to a “debased” and “slavish use of readers” (p. 150). Under the highly structured timetable of the elementary classroom, “Teachers were asking two things of the secular reader: first, that it should lend itself to providing teaching matter for most of the day; second, that it be so organized that it could last for months, and preferably for the school year” (Goldstrom, 1970, pp. 150-151).

Ryerson himself would have seen these methods of teacher training on his earlier visit to Ireland. To supplement his knowledge, Ryerson sent to Ireland his chief assistant John George Hodgins, who underwent the prescribed course of instruction at the Dublin Normal School. And as Parvin (1965) states, “Some of the men under whom he studied were authors of the Irish textbooks” and Hodgins “was well prepared to assist Ryerson in adopting in Ontario many aspects of the Irish education system, including their textbooks” (p. 35).

The preface to the *Third Book of Lessons* (1864) shows these various influences, including an overriding concern for memory work followed by recitation. Advice on when and how to introduce spelling, grammar, and

pronunciation to the students fills up the remaining recommendations on language study. The Lesson on Glass (see Appendix 1) shows the influence of Pestalozzi and was intended to demonstrate "how the Master ought to make his Pupils familiar with the distinguishing properties of all material substances" (p. iv).

The Lesson is in the form of a conversation between teacher and pupil. Although the method might not have produced the same automaton-like response that Gradgrind elicited from Bitzer, the preface does suggest this same approach could be "very advantageously" (p. iv) applied to lessons in other subjects. Third, and finally, lest the teacher forget one of his primary aims, the pupils, "while they are learning this Book, will also be made to read the Scripture Lessons recommended by the Commissioners" (p. iv). Oral reading dominated the classroom to such an extent that "the constant repetition of passages would surely dent the minds of the young, regardless of their own ability to decipher the written word" (Graff, 1977, p. 43).

AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED LESSONS

If the Irish Readers were preferred because the content of their lessons avoided unnecessarily controversial material, then we must now inquire more closely into the Readers' contents in order to discover precisely what view of gender, race, and class they promoted. The *form* in which information was purveyed very often proved as important as the content. In an age of sermons and religious teaching, the compilers of the Readers had persistent recourse to forms of discourse such as fables, parables, and fairy tales in order to assist the pupils' assimilation of ideologies.

I analyze only two Lessons (VI, VII) from Section IV of the *Second Book of Lessons* (1858), since in Lesson VII the story begun in Lesson VI is completed. The narrative entitled "Martha Dunne" produces a crude but forceful example of gender stereotyping.

"Martha Dunne" is a sentimental tale that might well have been subtitled "The Making of a Schoolmistress." For, as we shall see, even in adversity, women's personal redemption comes through their social usefulness, if only they have faith in the restorative and transforming power of literacy. In lesson VI, orphan Martha is in the care of Molly Flint, a woman kind but "rather cross to children" (p. 158). However, Martha is a "very good obedient little girl" (p. 159), and Molly comes to love her as if she were her own child. Martha's greatest wish was to learn to read, but Molly was so poor that Martha had to work instead. After work, Martha would help Molly at home and was always "cheerful and obliging" (p. 160). Finally, Martha attends school, "so eager to learn" (p. 161) that the schoolmistress gives her extra books to read. In Lesson VII, Martha, now ten years old, breaks one leg and severely damages the other during an act of heroism when she saves a

child from being crushed under the wheels of a runaway carriage. She is informed that she will be a cripple; however, the clergyman assures her that she has, in fact, a great deal to be thankful for. As she grows stronger, and even in her sadness, Martha still performs small acts for her neighbours, such as reading to a sick woman. In due time, Martha herself becomes the village schoolmistress and “lived to a good old age, beloved and respected by rich and poor” (p. 165). As befits our aptly-named heroine, Martha’s life was dedicated to teaching others, a condition made possible only by her desire to become fully literate. Here, Martha’s skills lead not to authorship but to service.

It is by means of narratives like this, in which children are the protagonists, instead of the more “traditional” fables such as “The Fox and the Stork” (Section II, Lesson X), that the work of personalizing a moral message takes place. The central role of the clergyman as dispenser of wisdom and comfort (although the comfort of Job), departs from anthropomorphized animal wisdom in important ways that have everything to do with situating young girls in roles suited to their class and perceived abilities. The text not only restricts the range of positions from which it is possible to be read, but also, with the authority in the clergyman’s voice as a forceful descant to the narrator’s, easily acquires a measure of power.

If the form of “Martha Dunne” resembled a secular parable whose moral message was aimed at valorizing girls’ acceptance of gender-specific roles, then the mode most convenient for treating questions of race was exposition. Although a few lessons in the Readers deal with other races, most notably the North American Indian, they are generally first-hand accounts by settlers. Expositions of the history of race turn out to be an uneasy muddle of crackpot scholarship and fundamentalist beliefs raised to the status of racial myth and held together by hectoring rhetoric. “Our Ancestors—We Are All of One Race” is a two-part diatribe found in the *Sequel to the Second Book of Lessons* (1865).

The voice in these Lessons slides almost unobtrusively between the collective “we” and an authoritative “I.” “We” are the people “who inhabit these islands of Great Britain and Ireland” (p. 42)—a comforting thought for Canadian schoolchildren—while “I” will reveal to you “the long lives of the antediluvians” (p. 44). The history points out that the sons of Seth (one of the children born to Adam and Eve after the murder of Abel and the banishment of Cain), called themselves the “Sons of God,” while the female children of Cain who renounced divine worship called themselves “the Daughters of man.” Eventually these sons and daughters intermarry, “and the next thing we hear of is that the earth was corrupt and full of violence” (p. 43). But one family, that of Noah, continued to worship God and was chosen to preserve the race of mankind.

Especially engaging in this context are the revelations concerning the

ages of various Biblical figures, revelations which foreshadow the more detailed Table of Creation contained in the *Fifth Book of Lessons* (1847, pp. 85–87). These claim that Adam lived to be 930 and that 1656 years passed between the creation and the flood. Further, Adam, “who lived 700 years after the birth of Seth, must have been alive in the days of Lamech, Noah’s father; so that Noah might have heard through his father, from Adam’s own mouth, the history of creation and the fall of man” (pp. 44–45). So it is that the black race is treated in typical fashion as descendants of Noah’s son Ham (*ergo*, black is derived from white), and indeed “you may think it strange that men so unlike each other could have descended from the same stock” (p. 46). The answer to this puzzle is, of course, unsurprisingly plain: “There are black sheep and white sheep, you know, and the white prevails only because we prefer to keep up that breed” (p. 46). By the last page of the Second Lesson, some attempt is made to claim that, “whether black or white, bond or free” (p. 49), we are all sons of God; but by this time the central message is clear: all may be part of one race, but all are most assuredly not equal.

Yet if the origins and status of the black race are seen through the haze of myth, then the lessons which treat the North American and Canadian Indians resemble the verbal equivalents of picture postcards. On the one hand, the *Fourth Book of Lessons* (1847) presents a short, factual account of the North American Indian (Lesson XXV, pp. 138–141). This account is embedded within a similar series of vignettes, all of which are subsumed under the heading of “Descriptive Geography.” The exposition acknowledges that, because the tribes are so numerous, “it would be impossible to describe them all” (p. 139). So the passage settles for an archetypal picture of the Indian warrior, complete with buffalo skin, moccasins, painted face, shaved head, feathers, chains of shells, and rings of silver. This fearsome picture is complemented by a description of Indian women who wear no ornaments, have “glossy black hair” (p. 139), and who “would consider a man degraded if he were to perform any menial office” (p. 138). Some Indians have been converted to Christianity, and have settled into a life which resembles that of the white people; the greater number, however, still lead “a wandering and unsettled life” which proves “a great hindrance to their civilization” (p. 140).

On the other hand, it is instructive to compare this thumbnail sketch with the more extended treatment accorded the Canadian Indian in the *Supplement to the Fourth Book of Lessons* (1865, pp. 47–51). In this extract, a first-person reminiscence that bears many of the features of a diary entry, the Indians are all Christians, wholly settled, and given over to civilized domestic pursuits. Indeed, the Indians have taken over the manners and beliefs of the white settlers with a vengeance. Not only are they “scrupulous in their observance of the Sabbath” (p. 49), but have traded their war chants for the

rhythms of different songs. As the narrator observes: "Tis sweet to hear the Indians singing their hymns of a Sunday night; their rich soft voices arising in the still evening air. I have often listened to this little choir praising the Lord's name in the simplicity and fervour of their hearts" (p. 49).

In like manner, the Indian women are not strangers to the rituals of the bourgeois tea table. Indeed, on the occasion described by the narrator, an Indian woman is so overcome with gratitude at being allowed access to the tea table, that, after consuming a "moderate" amount of tea and bread, she "rose and wrapping her face in the folds of her blanket, bent down her head on her breast in the attitude of prayer" (p. 49). Gone too, it seems, is traditional Indian dress, since "The women imitate the dresses of the whites," and "the young girls can sew very neatly" (p. 51). This imitation and industry does not go unrewarded, and the narrator concludes her observations by stating that, "I often give them bits of silk, and velvet, and braid, for which they appear very thankful" (p. 51).

To move now from lessons that dealt with issues of gender and race to lessons that deal with political economy and its relationship to class structure, is to observe in the clearest possible way the bland treatment of sensitive subjects that Ryerson saw in the Irish Readers and that won his approval. In a section on Political Economy in his *Report of a System of Public Elementary Instruction* (1847), Ryerson justified the study of political economy in schools on the grounds it was connected "with the duties and wants of social life, and involves our relations to most of the objects of our desires and pursuits" (p. 144). Although he acknowledged its fundamental principles were simple, "To treat formally of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption, would exceed the province of the Common Schools and the capacity of their pupils" (p. 144). He approved, therefore, of teaching the "simple elements" (p. 144) such as division of labour, wages, rent, and so forth; and recommended the book *Easy Lessons on Money Matters*, which "has been prepared by the Archbishop of Dublin, and sanctioned by the Irish National Board" (p. 144). It is the lesson entitled, "Cause of High and Low Rates of Wages," excerpted from *Easy Lessons on Money Matters* and found in the *Supplement to the Fourth Book of Lessons* (1865), that now claims our attention.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to pass judgement on the economic ideas expounded in *Easy Lessons*. I shall instead examine its main "messages." The first part of the lesson consists of an extended proof of two economic propositions: "The high or low rate of wages, in short, depends, not on the price of provisions, but on the demand and supply of labour" (p. 242). And: "It is generally found the most *profitable* to employ the *best* workmen, though they are paid higher wages than what an ordinary workman can earn. In these cases, therefore, high wages and high profits go together" (p. 242;

emphasis in original). But when calm and careful reason have established these two propositions, the expository voice turns perceptibly more shrill, and the reader is alerted to one of the purposes behind the lesson.

All attempts of governments to regulate by law the rate of wages are useless and mischievous. Indeed, it may be said that more harm than good is likely to be done by almost any interference of government with men's money transactions, whether letting and hiring, or buying and selling of any kind. (p. 242)

But if government mischief is characterized in this way, it pales by comparison with the hideous nature of the restrictive practices indulged in by Trades' Unions. The principal regulation of Unions is "that no one shall work under a certain rate of wages fixed by them" (p. 243), and that if a man cannot obtain work at that rate, "he is to remain idle and starve, on pain of being most cruelly persecuted by the other workmen" (p. 243). Under this "unjust and oppressive" (p. 243) system, masters are compelled to pay higher wages; this makes trade unprofitable and interferes with the management of the businesses. Some masters are ruined; some give up business; some emigrate to America or elsewhere. This economic and social cataclysm can only be prevented in two ways: first, when "men come to understand their own true interests, they will agree to resist all illegal combinations" (p. 244); and, secondly, by attempting to secure "*true* liberty" (p. 244, emphasis in original), every man will be free to pursue his own interests, "provided he does no wrong to his neighbours" (p. 244).

The Irish Readers' potent combination of textbook, pedagogy, and school routine promoted an uncontested view of social reality. They formed part of a matrix that established a cultural and ideological hegemony in the mid-nineteenth-century schoolroom. Hegemonic (Graff, 1977, employing Gramsci's, 1971, concept) control over the moral bases of schooling involves on the part of the pupils "neither conscious choice, coercion, nor deliberate deception" (Graff, 1977, p. 34), but rather presents for approval a way of life and pattern of behaviour "in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in its institutional and private functions" (p. 34). In this way "the predominance of one class is established over others, by consent rather than by force" (p. 34).

CONCLUSION

Commentators on the Ryerson period (Graff, 1977; Parvin, 1965; Prentice, 1977; Stamp, 1977; Tomkins, 1986) generally agree that the introduction of the Irish Readers heralded the beginning of a "British colonial curriculum heritage that endured into the 1950s" (Stamp, 1977, p. 10). Further, Ryerson and his fellow educators set great store by the power of education to

create attitudes and behaviours considered appropriate for the smooth functioning of society. Yet, "Class conflict and . . . class distinctions were to be eliminated, but not the classes themselves" (Prentice, 1977, p. 123). What Ryerson and others wanted in their attack on pauperism through mass schooling, was a self-respecting class of labourers who, by adopting a bourgeois value system, would thereby identify with the tastes, feelings, and sympathies of their superiors. In this way conditions for social harmony could be created and the ground prepared for continued social progress.

It now becomes easier to see how implementation of a uniform system of textbooks would assist in such an enterprise. It might be objected that I have yet to take into account contemporary expressions of *resistance* to the Readers, and assumed instead a naive correspondence between the texts and their effects on pupils. Although resistance to the Readers from teachers and superintendents set in early, and complaints were made that the information went quickly out of date or that some lessons failed to hold children's interest, there were few protests over the moral or social attitudes promoted in the books. The most common criticism was that the Readers "were not Canadian enough in sentiment" (White, 1922, p. 19).

Although recognizing with Whitty (1985) that analyses of the effects of textbook discourse should be tempered by realizing that readers bring to the text "different knowledges, prejudices and resistances" (p. 43), I have sought to emphasize pedagogy, "since we need to know far more about the ways in which styles of pedagogy mediate teaching materials for pupils" (p. 43). Teaching style, as well as such features as school architecture, seating arrangements, and so on—what Foucault (1980) in another context calls "the internal discourse of the institution" (p. 28)—all contributed to the work of the text itself and its power to alter attitudes and to reaffirm values. As, on a larger scale, Anyon's (1979) study of history texts brought to light areas of social relations that operated silently as structural principles in those texts, so this analysis aimed to make the silences in the Irish Readers "speak." To this end I have followed Wexler's (1982) call for a critical semiotics of the school text in which "descriptions of the operation of structure to produce textual effect counter the reification of knowledge as a solid, though socially reflective, object" (p. 286).

By making explicit how the Irish Readers assisted in the promulgation of a specific world-view and, at the same time, privileged certain forms of knowledge, I have shown how a cultural commodity can be transformed into a potent agent for socialization and for the reproduction of society along class lines. Thus, to have singled out the Irish Readers for analysis is to recognize their pre-eminent position on an historical and cultural continuum that includes present-day textbooks. Questions of who produces them, what view of knowledge they promote, and how they are used, are near the

centre of the larger political and educational problems of human emancipation. To study the textbook as the repository of the symbolic culture of a nation is to discover, on the one hand, how little our need to deal with vital human concerns really changes and, on the other, to realize the extent to which the textbook, as a supposedly benign bearer of symbolic knowledge, must continually be interrogated for its assumptions by teachers and students alike.

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Robert J. Graham is in the Department of Curriculum: Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2.

APPENDIX 1

Extract from "The Lesson on Glass," Third Book of Lessons (Toronto: James Campbell, 1864)

Teacher. Now, in this piece of glass, which I hold in my hand, what qualities do you observe? What can you say that it is?

Pupil. It is bright.

T. Feel it, and tell me what it is.

P. It is cold.

T. Feel it again, and compare it with the piece of sponge that is tied to your slate, and then tell me what you perceive in the glass?

P. It is smooth; it is hard.

T. What other glass is there in the room?

P. The windows.

T. Look out at the window, and tell me what you see?

P. I see the garden.

T. When I close the shutter, what do you observe?

P. I cannot see anything.

T. Why cannot you see anything?

P. I cannot see through the shutters.

T. Can you tell me any word that will express the quality which you observe in the glass?

P. No.

T. I will tell you, then; pay attention that you may recollect it. It is transparent. What do you now understand when I tell you that a substance is transparent?

P. That you can see through it.

T. You are right. Try and recollect something that is transparent.

P. Water.

T. If I were to let this glass fall, or you were to throw a ball at the window, what would be the consequence?

P. The glass would be broken. It is brittle.

T. If I use the shutter in the same way, what would be the consequence?

P. It would not break.

T. If I gave it a heavy blow with a very hard substance, what would happen?

P. It would then break.

T. Would you therefore call the wood brittle?

P. No.

T. What substances then do you call brittle?

P. Those that are easily broken.