

“SCHOOLMASTER TO AMERICA”

By HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

IN 1783 the United States achieved independence, and President Ezra Stiles of Yale College prophesied that the new nation, happily free of those provincial dialects that confused social and regional differences in less fortunate countries, would be bound together by a single and uniform language. At that very time a young graduate of Yale, teaching obscurely in Goshen, New York, proclaimed what was to be a cultural and linguistic Declaration of Independence. Noah Webster wanted to call his little book “The American Instructor,” but the dignified President Stiles overruled him and dictated the pretentious title, “A Grammatical Institute of the English Language: Part I.” It was in fact nothing more impressive than a Speller; to generations of Americans it was to be familiarly known as “Webster’s Blue-Backed Speller.” It caught on, at once; within a few years it all but monopolized the field; under its benign guidance generations of young Americans learned the same words, the same spellings, the same pronunciations; read the same stories; absorbed the same moral lessons.

It was all part of a larger program—a program for cultural as well as political independence from the Moth-

er Country. “America,” wrote the young pedagogue, “must be independent in literature as she is in politics”; and in the Preface of his Speller he elaborated on this notion:

The author wishes to promote the honor and prosperity of the confederated republics of America. . . . This country must in some future time be as distinguished by the superiority of her literary improvements, as she is already by the liberality of her civil and ecclesiastical constitutions. Europe is grown old in folly, corruption and tyranny. For America in her infancy to adopt the maxims of the Old World would be to stamp the wrinkles of decrepit old age upon the bloom of youth, and to plant the seeds of decay in a vigorous constitution. American glory begins to dawn at a favourable period. . . .

It was characteristic of Webster that he should associate the dawn of American glory with the publication of his own book, and it was prophetic, too, for the connection was there, and it was soon to be notorious. In 1783 Webster had few qualifications for either education or philology, but enormous enthusiasm for both. It was a sound instinct that directed his energies into these fields, and held them there through a long

life of distractions, ambitions, and conceits.

The Speller, and after it the Grammar, the Reader, and the Dictionaries, assured Webster a place among the Founding Fathers. Over the years he consolidated his position, and extended it. Indeed, wherever we look there is Noah Webster, dour, angular, and aggressive, busily fathering institutions and organizations that we now think of as characteristically American. Even in an age of Fatherhood, he was fabulously progenitive, and insistent, too, on his parental prerogatives. He was, clearly, the Father of the American language, and he was certainly one of the Fathers of American education. If we turn to that group of statesmen who made the Constitution, there is Webster, holding aloft his “Sketches of American Policy,” and determined to be numbered among the Founding Fathers. He presents himself no less insistently as one of the Fathers of American political thought, for in voluminous pages he told Hamilton how to run parties, lectured Madison on the Presidency, and instructed Jefferson on the nature of democracy. If we look to journalism, there is Webster, editor of the *American Magazine*, of the *Minerva* and the *Herald*, and all ready to toss off a history of American journalism.

If we consider science there, too, is Webster, edging up to Dr. Franklin and Dr. Rush and Dr. Rittenhouse, hopefully proffering his two-volume "History of Epidemics," and with sheafs of scientific articles bulging in his coat pockets. He is surely the Father of Copyright; he has some claim to be the Father of the Census. What with his school histories, and his edition (or was it his?) of Winthrop's Journal, he is one of the Fathers of American history; and his many essays on banking, finance, and insurance support his claim to be a Father of American Economics as well. And finally his singlehanded revision of the Bible—he thought it his greatest work—permits us to call him one of the Fathers of the Church!

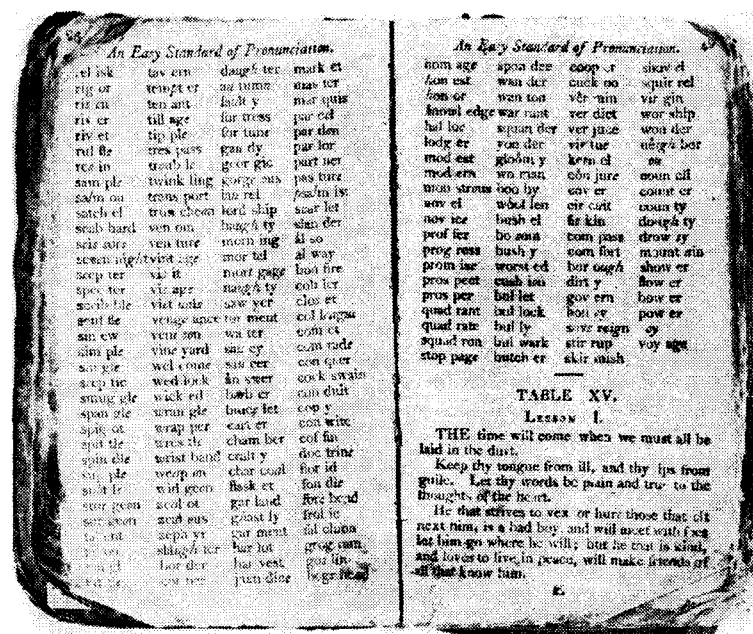
EVEN in an age of versatility, it is an astonishing versatility. And yet it does not quite ring true. The versatility of a Franklin, a Jefferson, a Bentley, a Rush, a Rumford is the spontaneous expression of a complex personality and an affluent and extravagant nature. But with Webster versatility seems to be the expression, rather, of nagging ambition, grim determination, and indefatigable officiousness, and perhaps of vanity as well. He was determined to make his mark; he was not going to be left out; and he was confident that whatever he touched he improved.

For all his wide and varied interests, he did not have a richly-stored mind; for all his vitality he did not have an open mind; narrow, cold, almost passionless, he was wholly lacking in those grace-notes his great contemporaries added to their scores with such ease. He read everything, but in order to get definitions for his dictionary; he taught music, but revealed not the slightest interest in the musical giants of his own time; he studied history, but only to learn that man is vile. He knew the languages of twenty nations, but was interested in none of these; he visited France only to deplore its licentiousness; he visited Cambridge, only to remark on the inferiority of its architecture. He was devout, but curiously untouched by religious sentiment. Religion was to him a kind of muscular exercise in moralizing; he was ready to drop his closest friend, Joel Barlow, because he found his poetry godless; and he thought the Bible would be improved by expunging the word "womb." He was zealous for education, but had little faith in the young, and thought voting should be restricted to those over forty-five. His reason for founding Amherst College was chiefly to confound and

From the First Edition of the Speller (1783)

• • "To attack deep rooted prejudices and oppose the current of opinion, is a task of great difficulty and hazard. It commonly requires length of time and favorable circumstances to diffuse and establish a sentiment among the body of people; but when a sentiment has acquired the stamp of time and the authority of general custom, it is too firm to be shaken by the efforts of an individual: Even error becomes too sacred to be violated by the assaults of innovation.

"But the present period is an aera of wonders: Greater changes have been wrought, in the minds of men, in the short compass of eight years past, than are commonly effected in a century."



"Let him (a child) begin with the first tables and proceed to the last; learning a certain number of words by heart at each lesson, so as to be able to spell them readily, as soon as the master puts them to him. This will afford variety to the child, who is apt to grow dull by being kept too long upon the same study."

• • "The author wishes to promote the honour and prosperity of the confederated republics of America; and cheerfully throws his mite into the common treasure of patriotic exertions. This country must in some future time, be as distinguished by the superiority of her literary improvements, as she is already by the liberality of her civil and ecclesiastical constitutions. Europe is grown old in folly, corruption and tyranny—in that country laws are perverted, manners are licentious, literature is declining and human nature debased. . . . We have the experience of the whole world before our eyes; but to receive indiscriminately the maxims of government, the manners and the literary taste of Europe and make them the ground on which to build our systems in America, must soon convince us that a durable and stately edifice can never be erected upon the mouldering pillars of antiquity. It is the business of Americans to select the wisdom of the nations as the basis of her institutions,—to avoid their errors,—to prevent the introduction of foreign vices and corruptions and check the career of her own,—to promote virtue and patriotism,—to embellish and improve the sciences,—to diffuse an uniformity and purity of language,—to add superior dignity to this infant Empire and to human nature."

—NOAH WEBSTER.



—Punch (Ben Roth).

"And when did you first notice this sudden mistrust of your fellow men?"

frustrate Unitarian Harvard. He was a cultural busybody; in an odd fashion he anticipated Big Bill Thompson's wonderful boast about Chicago: he took up culture, and he made culture hum.

And yet this is an ungrateful view; it is not what Webster was that is important, but what Webster did. And what he did is inescapably clear. He helped free generations of Americans from a sense of inferiority about their language, and gave them instead a sense of the dignity of their speech. He contributed more than any other single person to a uniform American speech, and to the avoidance of those differences in accent and vocabulary that might proclaim differences in background, in class, or in region. His wish was, he said,

to diffuse an uniformity and purity of language in America, to destroy the provincial prejudices that originate in the trifling differences of dialect and produce reciprocal ridicule, to promote the interest of literature and the harmony of the United States.

More specifically, he labored, in his books and his newspapers and his teaching,

to extirpate the improprieties and vulgarisms which were necessarily introduced by settlers from various parts of Europe; to reform the abuses and corruption which tincture the conversation of the polite part of Americans; to render the acquisition of the language easy both to American youth and foreigners; and to render the pronunciation of it accurate and uniform by demolishing those odious distinctions of provincial dialects which are the subject of reciprocal ridicule.

All this Webster achieved, first through that Speller which went triumphantly from generation to generation until it came to be as familiar as the Bible, and as essential; through the Readers which for a time commanded the field and yielded only reluctantly to the more popular Peter Parley and McGuffey series; through his famous Dictionary which appeared first, and modestly, in 1806, and then monumentally in 1828 and through all its metamorphoses achieved the distinction of being an institution in itself. It was the Speller that conquered the land. It established its sovereignty in the East; it went west with the Conestoga wagon, and in the knapsacks of countless itinerant pedagogues; it leaped the mountains and established its empire on the Pacific coast; it even invaded the South, and on the eve of that war he was to do much to bring on Jefferson Davis wrote "above all other people we are one, and above all books which have united us in the bond of common language, I place the good old Spelling-Book of Noah Webster." The demand was insatiable; it sold by the hundred thousand, it sold by the million, it sold by the tens of millions. No other secular book had ever spread so wide, penetrated so deep, lasted so long.

NEITHER energy nor ambition nor vanity explains anything by itself, for we want to know why these forces took one channel rather than another: why they contributed to social weal rather than woe; found outlet in public rather than in private activities; expressed themselves in national rather than parochial accents, in liberal rather than conservative terms. The driving force in Webster, the compulsion that explains all particu-

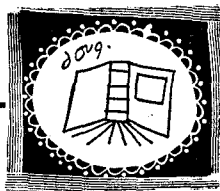
lar expressions of his ambitions and his energies, was nationalism.

It was, to be sure, an age of self-conscious nationalism, and Webster was typical rather than original. "We are laboring hard to establish in this country principles more and more national, and free from all foreign ingredients," wrote Alexander Hamilton. We must have an American literature, argued Joel Barlow and Philip Freneau and Timothy Dwight. "The business of education acquired a new complexion by the independence of our country," said Benjamin Rush. "One American work is of more value to the United States than three foreign ones, even of superior merit," wrote Horatio Greenough of painting. "The Churches of America are all assuming a new complexion," wrote Dr. John Livingston; "they now become National Churches in this new Empire." Even arithmetic was to be new, for, "as the United States are now an independent nation," said Nicholas Pike, "it was judged that a system might be calculated more suitable to our Meridian than those heretofore published." This was the climate of opinion in which Webster lived and flourished; this was the doctrine to which he enthusiastically subscribed, the gospel he gladly preached. "Unshackle your minds," he admonished his countrymen. "You have an empire to raise and support by your exertions, and a national character to establish and extend by your wisdom and virtue. Every engine," he added, "should be employed to render the people of this country national, to call their attachments home to their own country, and to inspire them with the pride of national character."

The nations of the Old World were the products of centuries of history; America was created. Old World nations had inherited and absorbed all the essential ingredients of nationalism; America had to manufacture them. The peoples of other countries had been born national, as had their fathers and their forebears; in America they were to be "rendered" national. What were the "engines" to be employed in this enterprise?

One of them, and one of the most important, was language. "A national language," Webster said, "is a bond of national union." And so it was—in France, in Denmark, in England, in Spain; and when ancient peoples organized themselves as independent nations in Germany, in Italy, in Greece, in Bohemia. The new United States was fortunate in having a common (even if an inherited) language; could that language be kept common over an immense territory, and among

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By Granville Hicks

ALTHOUGH Richard Wright has published eleven books over a period of exactly twenty years, "**The Long Dream**" (Doubleday, \$3.95) is only his third novel. His first novel was "**Native Son**," published in 1940, two years after a collection of short stories, "**Uncle Tom's Children**." An autobiographical book, "**Black Boy**," appeared in 1945, but his second novel, "**The Outsider**," waited until 1953. Since then he has published several volumes of travel description and sociological comment, only now returning to fiction.

"**The Outsider**" suggested that Wright was moving in a new direction, for, although the leading character was a Negro, the novel was not primarily concerned with race problems, as earlier books had been. On the contrary, Wright deliberately used the situation of the American Negro as an example of the contemporary predicament, just as Ralph Ellison had done in "**The Invisible Man**." One of the characters says: "Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders, and they are going to *know* that they have these problems. They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time."

But if Wright sees that the race problem is not isolated, he has continued to be preoccupied with it, as is demonstrated by such volumes as "**Black Power**" and "**White Man, Listen!**" "**The Long Dream**" returns to that theme, and therefore seems closer to "**Native Son**" than to "**The Outsider**." Wright is once more trying to show the world what being a Negro in America is like.

The first part of "**The Long Dream**" is reminiscent of "**Black Boy**" in so far as it is an account of a young Negro's experience in Mississippi. The time is some twenty-five years later than that described in "**Black Boy**," and Fish Tucker is the son of a prosperous undertaker and property owner, whereas Wright grew up in brutal poverty. The lesson Fish learns, however, is essentially the lesson Wright learned, and he learns it in the same harsh way.

In Parts II and III, on the other

hand, Fish's life takes a very different course from Wright's, just as Bigger Thomas's did in "**Native Son**." Like both "**Native Son**" and "**The Outsider**," "**The Long Dream**" turns into melodrama. Fish leaves school at sixteen, and goes to work for his father, Tyree, whose aptitude for making money he seems to have inherited. He not only acquires sexual experience but, at this early age, has a mistress and an apartment to keep her in. When the mistress dies in a dance hall fire, along with some forty others, Fish learns that his father is co-owner of the hall, owner of various other illicit establishments, and an agent of corrupt municipal officials in the exploitation of vice in the Negro section.

TYREE TUCKER struggles to save his life and at least some part of his fortunes, but is murdered by the white officials he has served. Fish himself is framed, and is kept in jail, quite illegally, for two years. It is no wonder that, when he is at last released, he flees to France. (Since 1946 Wright has made Paris his home.)

The faults of the novel are obvious. I have spoken of melodrama, and the term is justified, not because the events that unfold are inherently implausible but because Wright works so hard to give them emotional impact. As in his other novels, he displays a preoccupation with scenes of violence that can be understood but cannot be fully defended on literary grounds. His material constantly seems to be getting out of hand, as if he were driven—as I believe he is—by forces beyond his control.

I am also troubled by the characterization of Fish Tucker. Although a boy of sixteen might be as mature as he is supposed to be, he seems to grow up almost overnight. It is true that an acquaintance of his has been lynched and that he himself has had his first encounter with the white man's law and the white man's violence, but one ought to feel more continuity than one does. One ought to feel, as I do not, that the ideas Fish expresses are his ideas and not Richard Wright's.

Finally, there is the question of style. Wright has never been a master of polished prose, and "**The Long Dream**" is marred by frequent lapses. For one thing, the characters are likely to talk in a fashion that it is hard to accept. Here, for instance, is what the mother of the boy who is lynched says as she looks at his body:

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Your Literary I. Q.

FACTUAL OR FICTIONAL? (PART II)

Conducted by John T. Winterich



Only one name in each of the following groups of four is fictional; the others represent real people. Faye Chilcote Walker, of Columbus, Ohio, asks you to select the fictional character from each group. Stage or pen names are accepted as factual, not fictional, as are the names of legendary and ancient historical figures. Answers on page 62.

1. () Paul Bunyan () Paul Potter () Paul Revere () Paul Clifford
2. () Lily Beck () Lily Bart () Lily Langtry () Lily Pons
3. () John Hancock () John Halifax () John Dory () John Brown
4. () William Pitt () William Tell () William Ashe () William Law
5. () Emma Lazarus () Emma Willard () Emma Hamilton () Emma Bovary
6. () Daniel Defoe () Daniel Deronda () Daniel Boone () Daniel Webster
7. () George Babbitt () George Pepper () George Peabody () George Peele
8. () Marie de France () Marie de Verneuil () Marie de Medicis () Marie Du Barry
9. () Otto Kruger () Otto Kringelein () Otto Kahn () Otto Preminger
10. () Charles Tiffany () Charles Finger () Charles Darwin () Charles Darnay
11. () Virginia Carvel () Virginia Woolf () Virginia Mayo () Virginia Dare
12. () Kate Wiggin () Kate Fennigate () Kate Smith () Kate Greenaway