

NOAH WEBSTER
THE SCHOOLMASTER OF OUR REPUBLIC

By CLARENCE E. PARTCH

For more than a century and a half the name of Noah Webster has been a household word throughout the United States, brought into the homes by the millions of children who have learned to spell and to read by means of his books and retained in the homes by the hundreds of thousands of parents who have relied on his dictionary for their understanding of the words of our mother tongue. Only recently, however, have we come to a thorough appreciation of the character of our greatest American lexicographer. Since the Rutgers Library has within the last few months acquired a volume of his essays with his own marginal notations, Dr. Partch has prepared for The Journal a description of this book together with an account of other material which has long been preserved in the Library.

I

THE Rutgers University Library has recently acquired *A Collection of Essays and Fugitive Writings on Moral, Historical, Political and Literary Subjects*¹ to add to its group of writings by Noah Webster. The volume is especially valuable and interesting because it was Webster's personal copy. All of the essays in this collection were written before Webster was thirty years of age and were published in June 1790. In 1838, approximately fifty years after most of the essays were written, Webster carefully read the volume, marking passages and making marginal notations, signing and dating many of his comments. I wonder how many authors have taken the trouble to examine their earlier writings fifty years later and to offer criticism and corrections in the light of the changing social, economic, and political order?

I should like to list here a few interesting marginal notations in Noah Webster's volume of essays.

A passage marked in the Preface shows Webster's attitude towards the revision of spelling:

. . . The man who admits that the change of *bousbonde*, *mynde*, *ygone*, *monetb* into *busband*, *mind*, *gone*, *month*, is an improovment, must acknowledge also the riting of *belib*, *bretb*, *rong*, *tung*, *muntb*, to be an improovment.²

¹ Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1790.

² P. xi.

In his essay on "Education," he has marked the passage:

. . . But many of our inferior schools, which, so far as the heart is concerned, are as important as colleges, are kept by men of no breeding, and many of them, by men infamous for the most detestable vices . . . Will this be denied? will it be denied, that before the war, it was a frequent practice for gentlemen to purchase convicts, who had been transported for their crimes, and employ them as private tutors in their families?

Gracious Heavens! Must the wretches, who have forfeited their lives, and been pronounced unworthy to be inhabitants of a *foreign* country, be entrusted with the Education, the morals, the character of *American* youth?³

The marginal notation changes *Gracious Heavens!*⁴ to *How absurd*⁵ and says, *But not in New England.*⁶ Later, in the same essay, we find the following paragraph and marginal notation:

In the first place, our honor as an independent nation is concerned in the establishment of literary institutions, adequate to all our own purposes; without sending our youth abroad, or depending on other nations for books and instructors. It is very little to the reputation of America to have it said abroad, that after the heroic achievements of the late war, these independent people are obliged to send to Europe for men and books to teach their children A B C.⁷

*This was said to Gen Washington by N Webster in 1787 to prevent his sending to Scotland for a teacher for the Custis children.*⁸

In his essays on "Principles of Government and Commerce," "Bills of Rights," and "Government," he has marked many passages with red pencil and has made cross references to other essays in the volume.

In his first essay on "Government," he states that

. . . The right of electing rulers is the people's prerogative; and while this remains unabridged, it is a sufficient barrier to guard all their other rights. This prerogative should be kept sacred; and if the people ever suffer any abridgment of this privilege, it must be their own folly and irrecoverable loss.⁹

The marginal notation beside this statement, dated 1838, reads, *But party spirit corrupts this privilege & destroys the security.* In his second essay on "Government" appears the nota-

³ Pp. 18-19.

⁴ P. 19.

⁵ P. 19.

⁶ P. 19.

⁷ P. 31.

⁸ P. 31.

⁹ P. 51.

tion, *The Constitution of the United States has been repeatedly violated*.¹⁰ His third essay on "Government" contains the following passage and notation:

. . . In his oath he has sworn to act according to his judgment, and for the good of the people; his instructions forbid him to use his judgment, and bind him to vote for a law which he is convinced will injure his constituents. He must then either abandon his orders or his oath; perjury or disobedience is his only alternativ.¹¹

*The modern practice is to resign. 1838.*¹²

In his address, "To the Dissenting Members of the late Convention of Pennsylvania," the following section is double-marked with red pencil:

. . . The only requisit to secure liberty, is to connect the *interest* of the *governors* with that of the *governed*. . . . The only barrier against tyranny, that is necessary in any State, is *the election of legislators* by the yeomanry of that State.¹³

The marginal notation in Webster's handwriting reads,

*Contradicted by experience.*¹⁴

A footnote to his essay on the "American Revolution" reads as follows:

It has been controverted whether the capture of General Cornwallis was the result of a plan preconcerted between General Washington and Count de Grasse; or rather whether the arrival of the Count in the Chesapeak was predetermined and expected by General Washington, and consequently all the preparations to attack New York a mere finesse to deceive the enemy; or whether the real intention was against New York, and the siege of Yorktown planned upon the unexpected arrival of the French fleet in the bay. The following letter will set the matter in its true light.¹⁵

The footnote then gives a letter from George Washington, dated July 31, 1788, which explains that

. . . a combined operation of the land and naval forces of France in America, for the year 1781, was preconcerted the year before; that the point of attack was not absolutely agreed upon, . . . because it could not be foreknown where the enemy would be most susceptible of impression; . . . that before

¹⁰ P. 62.

¹¹ P. 77.

¹² P. 77.

¹³ P. 144.

¹⁴ P. 144.

¹⁵ P. 180.

the arrival of the Count de Grasse, it was the fixed determination *to strike the enemy in the most vulnerable quarter . . .*¹⁶

Webster's notations along the margin read:

I wrote to Gen Washington for information contained in his letter & in consequence of a conversation with Col Pickering, who stated his doubts as to the point in question. N Webster

See Letter of Mr Jefferson to Gen Gates Sep. 23. 1780. Life of Jefferson Vol 1 p. 182

*See United States Gazette. Vol 2. p. 594 Sept. 15 1790*¹⁷

In the closing pages of his essay on the "American Revolution" he refers to the "splendid and magnificent" procession that was formed in Boston "in honor of the happy event." [The ratification of the Constitution.] "This example was afterwards followed, and in some instances improved upon, in Baltimore, Charleston, Philadelphia, New Haven, Portsmouth and New York, successively."¹⁸ Webster notes that he *was in the procession in New York*.¹⁹

In "A Dissertation concerning the Influence of Language on Opinions, and of Opinions on Language,"²⁰ we find several marginal notations, *Error! Query, Uncertain*, and the longer note:

*This dissertation abounds with mistakes. I wrote with an imperfect knowledge of the subject April 30, 1838 N Webster*²¹

"An Enquiry into the Origin of the Words Domesday, Parish, Parliament, Peer, Baron with Remarks, New and Interesting,"²² contains whole paragraphs which Webster crossed out with red pencil and others which he marked *No, Qu, or See My Dictionary*.

In his essay of "Miscellaneous Remarks," appears the statement:

. . . In general the laws of New Jersey are highly republican; but they make no provision for a general diffusion of knowledge. Many of the yemanry are extremely ignorant. The college at Princeton iz a very valuable institution; but so little concern haz the legislature for the interest of lerning, that the funds of that college are taxed by law.²³

¹⁶ Pp. 180-181.

¹⁷ P. 180.

¹⁸ P. 203.

¹⁹ P. 203.

²⁰ Pp. 222-228.

²¹ P. 222.

²² Pp. 249-303.

²³ P. 349.

His later reading produced this notation: *I was so informed by Gov Livingston.*²⁴

His essay of "Miscellaneous Remarks"²⁵ seems to be the most carefully read of all his essays, judging from the line by line markings in red, blue, and black pencil. However, there are very few marginal notations in this essay.

His essay, "An Address to Yung Gentlemen," contains the statement that "A fencing skool iz perhaps az necessary an institution in a college, az a professorship of mathematics" with a marginal notation, *till wars shall cease.*²⁶

The last essay in the book, "An Address to Yung Ladies,"²⁷ was apparently less carefully read, or, if as carefully read, Webster probably agreed with his earlier opinions to a greater extent than he did in his other essays. The only section that is marked with red pencil reads as follows:

. . . My idea iz breefly this; that the woman who marries a man of bizziness, with very little property, haz a better chance for a fortune in middle life and old age, than one who marries a rich man who lives in idleness.²⁸

Whether Webster wished to question his statement or merely emphasize its truth must be left to the reader to decide.

II

Noah Webster, nicknamed the Schoolmaster of Our Republic, has probably had more influence upon the English language than any other American. He was well educated, a good student, and a prolific writer. An examination of his writings shows that he was particularly interested in philology but that he also wrote extensively in the fields of philosophy, history, politics and education.

His Blue Back Speller (American Spelling) is probably the most famous of all his writings. The material for this book was compiled in the year 1782, before the close of the War of the Revolution.²⁹ It was published in 1783 and was the first "United States Schoolbook Issued under our Flag." The first edition is excessively rare; the only three known copies are in the libraries

²⁴ P. 349. William Livingston, Governor of New Jersey, 1776 to 1790.

²⁵ Pp. 325-377. ²⁶ P. 389. ²⁷ Pp. 406-414. ²⁸ P. 413.

²⁹ Letter by N. Webster, written in New Haven, Dec. 1827, published in a *Critical Review of Noab Webster's Spelling-Book* by Examiner, [Lyman Cobb], 1828. 35 Pp. Copy in Rutgers University Library.

of Harvard, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Watkins Library in Hartford, Connecticut.³⁰

Webster's Spelling-Book met a real need in the field of Education as judged by the demand for the book that has existed since the first edition. It was revised many times and seemed to grow in popularity with each revision. Although a pioneer in the field, it soon met with competition and criticism from its competitors.

In 1827 a series of articles appeared in the *Albany Argus* by Examiner severely criticising Webster's Speller.³¹ The burden of his criticism is summed up as follows:

Thus I have given a thorough exposition of what I have considered *defective, contradictory, or inconsistent* in Mr. Webster's Spelling-Book, school dictionary, and in his appeal "TO THE PUBLIC," for the purpose of exciting interest and inquiry, and thereby rendering a benefit to my fellow-citizens by enabling them to determine whether Mr. Webster has paid that attention to the *improvement and correction* of his spelling-book, which the extensive patronage he has received from the people of the United States, required of him; and whether, in its present state, it should be retained in our schools.³²

Mr. Webster replied to this attack in a dignified scholarly letter addressed to the Editor of the *Albany Argus*, December 1827.³³ In his reply, he says that when he compiled the material for his first spelling-book, "English Philology was little attended to in this country, and had but recently begun to engage the attention of the English."³⁴ He discusses the dictionaries then in use and shows that he was thoroughly conversant with the merits of each. The dictionaries by "Sheridan, Walker, Jones, Perry, and Jameson, all have their advocates; they all have their merits: but of all these, Walker is the *most incorrect* . . ."³⁵ Criticisms by Lyman Cobb and Webster's letter in reply were published by Cobb in pamphlet form. The purpose of the pamphlet is clearly stated as follows:

To Teachers, School Committees or Inspectors, Clergymen, and to the Friends of correct Elementary Instruction.

This critical Review of Mr. Webster's Spelling-Book is submitted to your *candid* perusal and examination with a request that you will, after you shall

³⁰ From information on exhibit card of the Rare Book Collection of John Davis Batchelder shown in the Library of Congress.

³¹ *Critical Review of Noab Webster's Spelling-Book, op. cit.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 32. ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 33. ³⁴ *Loc. cit.* ³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

have thoroughly and impartially examined the *defects* of his book which are pointed out in these numbers, and shall have become satisfied of their truth and importance, compare it *carefully* with the other Spelling-Books now in use among you, whether Perry's, Marshall's, Sears', Hawes', Kelly's Cummings', Bolles', &c. but more particularly with COBB'S in which, it is believed, the *defects*, contained in Mr. Webster's Spelling-Book, are remedied; and thereby be enabled to decide whether Mr. Webster's book with all its evident defects ought to be longer retained in use; and if not, which of the *other* Spelling-Books should take its place. . . .³⁶

It will probably never be known what effect, if any, this attack had upon the demand for Webster's Spelling-Book. However, it is known that his book still holds the record for "Best-Sellers," since more than a million copies were sold every year for over a hundred years. But for the profits of the American Spelling Book, the American Dictionary could never have been prepared.³⁷

III

Perhaps the most interesting item in the possession of the Rutgers University Library, and one which ties Noah Webster more closely to the University than does the fairly large collection of his writings, is a letter written on November 28, 1833, to Mr. William J. Thompson of the Philoclean Society at Rutgers. Although Webster was seventy-five years old at the time he wrote this letter, the handwriting is strong and legible. The letter and the home-made envelope, bearing the post-mark "November 1833," are both on file in the Library. The letter reads as follows:

New Haven Novr 28th 1833

Sir.

I have received your letter of the 25th Inst informing me of my election to be an Honorary Member of the Philoclean Society of Rutgers College. I request you, Sir, to communicate to the Society my grateful acknowledgments for the honor done to me by this proof of their esteem. At my advanced age, it is not probable that I shall be able to visit the Society, nor do I know that I can contribute any service to the Society, but I shall never fail to entertain sincere wishes for the prosperity of the Society, & for your personal welfare.

Please, Sir, to accept the respect of

Your Obed Srvt
N. Webster

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Advertisement, p. 2.

³⁷ *Notes on the Life of Noah Webster*, Compiled by Emily Ellsworth Fowler Ford. (New York: Privately printed, 1912), Vol. I, p. 62.