



Ellen Cyr

Forgotten author of a best-selling reading series

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Ellen Cyr (1860–1920) was a schoolteacher in Cambridge, Massachusetts during the 1880s. While her occupation was not unusual, Cyr was unique in that she was the first woman in American history to have a widely sold reading series marketed under her own name.

Cyr began her book career producing the *Interstate primer and first reader*, published by the Interstate Publishing Company in 1886. This was revised for Ginn in 1891 as the *Children's primer and first reader* and the following year as the *Cyr Readers*. One hun-

dred years ago, as today, the production of books for the teaching of reading was taken very seriously. 'The Reading program of an educational house is a matter of great moment. Readers (in the elementary list) are the most important single unit from the point of view of the number of copies issued and the financial return' (Lawler, 1938, p.187). Financial return on the *Cyr Readers* was long and steady. The books were used regularly for well over twenty years (Mrs Ruel P. Smith, 1920) and were considered 'one of the outstanding successes of the day' (Lawler, 1938, p.187).¹

¹ The *Cyr Readers* were popular enough to be translated into Spanish, Japanese and Braille. The Spanish translations were for Spanish-American schools throughout Cuba (Lawler, 1938). Requests by Japanese businessmen led to the production of a Japanese translation when California adopted *Cyr's readers* as the state text in 1905 (California State Board of Education, 1904–05). A third transla-

tion was produced when the *Cyr Readers* were put into the Braille system for the blind. Cyr's primer was the earliest Spanish translation into Braille (see *Union catalog of hand-copied books in braille – grade one, two and three and a half*, compiled 1934, p.194). The English version of the *Cyr Readers* appeared in Braille in 1896 (*List of publications in American braille*, 1910, p.7).

An 1898 review in *Book reviews: a monthly journal devoted to new and current publications* described the series as ‘admirable . . . from every point of view’ (p.58).

Since these books were popular, well respected and wide reaching, they affected many children in significant ways. One would think that published information about the author would exist; it does not. The kind of attention paid to male textbook authors like McGuffey, Webster, Gray, and Gates has not been afforded Cyr or her female contemporaries. Who was Ellen Cyr? Why did she produce a series of readers? How did her books compare to others of the day? Why were her readers popular? Why was she ignored? It is the purpose of this paper to explore these questions.

Four approaches to historical research were used to engage in this study: qualitative, quantitative, content analysis, and oral history (see Monaghan and Hartman, 2000). The qualitative approach was used to examine a family diary, letters, a will, a eulogy, and assorted newspaper clippings, genealogical records, annual reports, school-board minutes, publisher’s pamphlets, surveys, and period journals. These largely primary-source data allowed me to construct a story about Ellen Cyr and how and why she began writing books in order to understand the reasons for the popularity of Cyr’s readers. Both quantitative and content analyses were employed. The *Cyr readers*, and a variety of other school readers were examined and compared. Oral history was used in order to understand the author and influences on her text. Several relatives were interviewed: a grandson, a great granddaughter, a great nephew and a great niece. These interviews led to numerous family artifacts (family photos, a wedding invitation, and books).

In addition to several methods for undertaking historical research, historians have various theoretical frameworks through which to view the histories they construct. There is ‘the celebratory work of Cubberly and his colleagues, the efforts at revision by Cremin, Bailyn, and their followers, the radical work of Karier, Katz and others, and Kaestle’s call for an approach to educational synthesis incorporating all three approaches’ (Lybarger, 1981, p.8). The historical lens through which this particular history is viewed is Kaestle’s (1972) ‘synthesis’. I believe it is most realistic, because it allows one to view Cyr’s text development as a practical confluence of ‘idealism’ and ‘self interest,’ something that evolved ‘more by mundane accretion than dramatic reform’ (p.218). She didn’t like the instructional materials she was supposed to use, so like many teachers, she made her own. ‘Then,’ as her sister noted, ‘came the great success of her books’ (L. Cyr, 1920, p.5).

This study begins with an examination of the family life of Ellen Cyr, including her teacher preparation, then compares her primer with those of its contemporaries, discusses the influence of her publisher, Ginn

and Company, and finally poses reasons why she has been ignored by historians.

Who was Ellen Cyr?

Ellen Cyr came from a family of educators and writers. Her father, Narcisse Cyr, was a strong influence in Ellen’s life. According to oral information provided by Phyllis McPheeters, an 81-year-old great-niece of Ellen, Narcisse was a Protestant minister who ran a parish in Canada and published a newspaper called *Le Semeur Canadien* (personal communication, September 3, 2003). He and his wife, Maryann, opened a school for young women and both of them taught there. ‘Narcisse believed firmly,’ emphasized McPheeters, ‘that girls should be well educated.’

Unfortunately, Maryann soon died, leaving behind Narcisse and their six-year-old son. Being the pragmatist he was, however, Narcisse married a French teacher from the school, Ellen Howard. Their first child, Ellen Mary Cyr, whom the family called Nellie, was born in 1860. The family continued to grow and after four more children (Lucy, Howard, Frank, and Honorine) Narcisse found that he had become too liberal for Protestants in Canada, so he moved to Rutland, Vermont, to live next door to his in-laws. Of this time in Rutland, Ellen’s sister, Lucy noted, ‘Nellie loved out-door life . . . the birds, the butterflies, the flowers, etc. . . . She took many rides in the country with her aunts, . . . and she spent the greater part of her summers for several years on a farm on beautiful Boardman Hill in Centre Rutland’ (L. Cyr, 1920, p.3), the pastoral dairy land near the Green Mountains of Vermont. This love for and knowledge of the outdoors was well reflected in Cyr’s early readers (e.g., *The children’s second reader*, 1895: ‘The story of a seed,’ ‘Bessie and the flowers,’ ‘The parts of a flower,’ ‘The runaway geese,’ ‘Snowflakes,’ and ‘Carl and the clouds’).

Too soon the family’s happiness was shattered when the youngest child, Honorine, died of diphtheria. Feeling it was time to move on, the Cyrs moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Again, Narcisse ran a church and another school for young women. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s mother owned the house they rented while in New Hampshire. Narcisse spent half of the week with his school and the other half at Boston University, where he taught French. After a time, he decided that the family should be relocated to Cambridge so he could teach French full time. Mrs Longfellow told the Cyrs to contact her son, and he helped them find housing near him on Auburn Avenue in Cambridge. The friendship and visits between the Cyrs and the poet grew and later manifested itself in stories in Cyr’s *Children’s second reader*, 1895 (e.g.,

‘Longfellow’s birthplace,’ ‘Longfellow’s home in Cambridge,’ ‘Longfellow’s children,’ ‘Longfellow’s birthday,’ etc.).

Another personal literary influence was John Greenleaf Whittier. In Ellen’s eulogy, Lucy remembered visits she and Ellen made to Whittier’s home. ‘She [Ellen] never forgot him nor the great yellow cat that he brought in to help him entertain the young girls’ (pp.3–4). Ellen wrote about Whittier (and sometimes his cat) in her *Children’s second reader*, 1895 (e.g., ‘Whittier’s birthplace,’ ‘Whittier’s school days,’ ‘Whittier’s home at Amesbury,’ ‘Whittier’s birthday,’ etc.). The original works of both Longfellow and Whittier were interspersed with stories about their daily lives.

Sadness once again visited the family when Ellen’s mother died in April 1879. On Christmas Eve of that same year, Lucy’s diary reads, ‘I have a step-mother’ (L. Cyr, 1879). Their stepmother, Cornelia Shin, was fourteen years younger than Narcisse and a pupil in his school. Ellen, who had attended normal school and was eighteen at the time, left home to start her own career as a teacher. Her seventeen-year-old sister, Lucy, joined her. Their father continued editing religious newspapers in Canada and the United States, published books, lectured, and traveled throughout the United States and Europe. His love of literature and writing and his spirit of independence left its mark on his daughters. The family’s environment and friendships directly influenced Ellen’s work; her teacher preparation further refined her craft.

Teacher preparation

A year after her mother’s death, Ellen began teaching at the Holmes Primary School in Cambridge, Massachusetts (*City of Cambridge annual reports*, 1880).² Cyr was first listed in the Annual Reports in 1880 as one of four teachers at a school with 160 students. It was only because of Ellen’s attendance at the ‘Cambridge Training School’ (or Normal School, as it also was called) that she was allowed to teach in Cambridge. The policy of the Cambridge School Committee was that primary classes could only be taught by teachers who resided in Cambridge and were educated in the Cambridge Training School (see 1872 *Annual report*). The Cambridge training program lasted only one year, but was intense. During that year, preservice teachers took courses and interned in the ‘practice-schools.’

In these practice schools, novices were to observe

and be observed. Under the direction of the principal, an ‘experienced instructor’ would watch them teach and provide feedback. ‘Their school-work is discussed, analyzed, criticized . . . their defects or mistakes pointed out’ (*Annual reports*, 1872, p.210). At a later point, the superintendent himself tested students in reading. Francis Cogswell, the superintendent of the Cambridge schools, said, ‘The reading was not confined to the text-books. Nearly one-half of the scholars read selections which I had taken with me for the purpose of testing their ability to read at sight’ (*Annual reports*, 1879, p.309). According to Cogswell, teachers had the latitude to use whatever reading method they chose: ‘It may be of little consequence whether the alphabet, the phonic, or the word method is used’ (p.308). However, he was adamant that reading be thinking and not just elocution: ‘it is of vital importance that reading be taught so that words become what they are intended to be – *vehicles of thought*. Any method which fails to secure this result is wrong’ (p.308).

After Training School, the novice teachers often served as substitute teachers and held a two-year probationary position during which they received less than full salaries. They were expected to keep up with the educational literature, visit other schools, and attend ‘educational conventions.’ If the novice teachers did not meet a ‘high standard of excellence [they were] dropped from the roll’ (*Annual reports*, 1878, p.242). The School Committee looked at the hiring of teachers in rather Darwinian terms: ‘A Training School . . . works as a process of natural selection, in which, as always, the fittest live’ (1880, p.319). Given her upbringing and teacher preparation program, one can see why Cyr would have been an excellent teacher. With knowledge of literature and nature imbued by her family and strong pedagogy from her Training School, Ellen was poised to construct her own readers.

A new primer: comparisons with the old

According to the eulogy given by her sibling, Ellen felt ‘that the books chosen at that time for little children could be improved upon as to subject matter and as to pictures [so] she [Ellen] formed the idea of writing one to be used just in her school-room’ (1920, p. 5). This was a bold move for a novice teacher, especially when a specific curriculum was advocated. Superintendent Cogswell had specified the primers to be used in the Cambridge schools as: ‘the Franklin . . .

² During the 1880s in the United States, primary school meant kindergarten through third grade, while grammar school contained fourth through ninth grades. In the United Kingdom, grammar

schools (where Latin and Greek grammar were taught) provided a secondary education for children approximately age 11 and older. The elementary school typically educated children younger than 11.

the Analytical, Sheldon's, Munroe's [sic], Appleton's and the Eclectic' (p. 340).³

Also, Lucy Cyr's eulogy stated that Ellen was told by a clerk at Lothrop (Ellen's first publisher whose Chicago branch was called Interstate Publishing) that her primer 'had the greatest sale of any book at that time in the company' (1920, p. 5). In order to identify components that may have led to this popularity, a thorough analysis was done of Cyr's and the other primers used in the Cambridge schools. Elements of reading methods used and content contained in all six primers were examined and compared. Objectives across primers were fairly consistent. Main objectives, as stated by primer authors, were either language development or assistance with reading instruction via the 'word,' 'phonic' or 'alphabetic' method. Three of the primer authors (Cyr, McGuffey and Hillard), claimed to implement a combination of alphabet, word, and phonic methods in their primers. None of them, however, incorporated the alphabet method via syllabaries or tables of syllables. While the claim to cover all reading instruction methods known at the time was undoubtedly a marketing tool, dropping the alphabet method was practical considering the fact that it was tedious, ineffective for teaching word recognition, and generally out of favor by the end of the nineteenth century (Monaghan & Barry, 1995).

Rickoff's (*Appleton's chart-primer*) intention to emphasize language was carried out via illustrations for *conversations* and *color-lessons*' and *'story-telling by the children'* (p. iii). Pictographs (see Figure 5) were used so students could talk about animals and objects whose names they probably couldn't read (e.g., horse, hammock). Sheldon (*Sheldon's primer*) also encouraged conversation, but did not facilitate it with text features as Rickoff did. Monroe (*Chart-primer*) took a different tack on language, focusing instead on quality of voice.

All authors thought that illustrations were impor-

tant and each primer included pictures of varying size and quality which supported comprehension of text. Taking comprehension a step further, Cyr (*Interstate primer*) was the only author who specifically used the word 'comprehension' in her objectives, although Rickoff and Monroe included objectives for grasping the thought and meaning respectively. Through her frequent use of questions and silent reading activities, however, Cyr's is really the only primer that had a clear focus on comprehension instruction.

Tables 1 and 2 compare primers used in the Cambridge primary classes during the 1880s. Table 1 presents information about methods of reading instruction used in the primers, including approaches to word recognition, comprehension, and general story content. Table 2 presents a more in-depth analysis of the content and themes represented in the illustrations and supported with the text. Due to the primary nature of this text, illustrations often 'told' a story of their own.⁴

Primer length and word count

Cyr's (*Interstate primer*) was the longest, at 136 pages, but it averaged fewer new words per page than all others except Rickoff's (*Appleton's chart-primer*). This allowed students who used Cyr's primer to have more practice reading with new words in context before additional new words were added. While Cyr and Hillard (*Franklin primer*) both stated that they introduced only a few new words per lesson, Cyr added two new words per lesson to Hillard's six. Cyr's emphasis on practice, repetition and minimally different sentences is more thoroughly discussed in subsequent comparisons.

Word recognition

Word method

The word method was a popular approach to beginning reading instruction in the Cambridge schools. As Massachusetts superintendent Harrington (1879)

3 Cogswell identified six primers to be used in the schools, the first being the 'Franklin,' presumably the *Franklin primer* or *First reader*, of Hillard & Campbell, 1873. Second was the 'Analytical,' presumably the Analytical Reader of S. Putnam, 1830 which is not comparable to the other primers because it is one of the 'old style' readers that contained lists of words to pronounce, define and spell, followed by difficult passages. The initial list contained such names as 'Telemachus' and 'Ulysses' and words like 'aversion' and 'dread.' This is presumably not the material of a newly designed primary reading program of the 1880s. The third primer was 'Sheldon's,' presumably *Sheldon's primer* of E. A. Sheldon, 1873 and the fourth, 'Monroe's' (the *Chart-primer* of L.B. Monroe, 1877). Fifth named was Appleton's, *Appleton's chart-primer: exercises in reading at sight, and language and color lessons, for beginners* of R.D. Rickoff, 1884 and finally the 'Eclectic,' presumably *McGuffey's eclectic primer*, revised edition, of 1881.

4 Previous content analyses carried out on school readers were examined (e.g., by Women on Words and Images, 1972 and 1975)

to help think about the aspects of the primers that should be considered. Because of the simplicity of these primers/first readers, however, the content classification systems used by others cannot be directly applied here. These stories are not lengthy enough, for example, to contain tales of fantasy, biography or science. Lessons sometimes consisted simply of pictures with no text as with Rickoff's (1885) 'conversation lessons', or consisted of pictures of single objects paired with their names (Hillard, 1873, pp.7-13). Due to the emphasis on illustrations in these primers, illustrations were analyzed separately from text as well as in conjunction with text. Clearly illustrations served as a comprehension tool, but in and of themselves, sent messages about gender or culture. Table 2 includes information on the focus of the lessons, be it child, adult, animal, or object. Stories were read and reread to determine themes or concepts presented. Again, the question kept in mind was, how did Cyr make her primer different from and more marketable than the others used in the Cambridge schools?

Table 1

Comparison of primers used in Cambridge schools during the 1880s. Approaches to beginning reading instruction: word recognition and opportunity for practice of words: comprehension activities and general content of stories.

Primer Name	E.M. Cyr <i>Interstate primer</i> 1886	R. Rickoff <i>Appleton's chart-primer</i> 1885	L. Monroe <i>Chart-primer</i> 1887	E.A. Sheldon <i>Sheldon's primer</i> 1873	W. McGuffey <i>McGuffey's eclectic primer</i> , Revised Ed. 1881	G.S. Hillard & L.J. Campbell <i>Franklin primer</i> 1873
Primer Length	136 pages 69 lessons	48 pages 40 lessons	65 pages 48 lessons	60 pages 61 lessons	64 pages 52 lessons	84 pages 59 lessons
Word count—total for book	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 346 different words • Average 2.5 new words per page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 67 different words • Average of <1 new words per page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 248 different words • Average of 4 new words per page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 241 different words • Average 4 new words per page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 301 different words • Average 4.7 new words per page 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 501 different words • Average 6 new words per page
Word recognition – word methods						
• Prereading word lists	Yes – sight words, e.g., 'look,' 'see,' 'the' & content words, i.e. 'Momma,' 'Grandma,' 'home'	No	No-cue words for phonics instruction	Yes – content, i.e., 'tippet,' 'hatter'	Yes – sight words & content words, i.e., 'God'	Yes – sight words & content words i.e., 'milk,' 'loves', and word families
• Postreading word lists	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
• Review of words in sentences	Yes – two sets: 'Review' and 'Easy Reading'	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Word recognition – phonics diacritical marks						
	Diacritical pronunciation	Limited practice in: 'separating a word into its parts,' e.g., rat: r–a–t 'word building,' e.g., ha–t, ha–s, ha–d; pa–an, m–an, r–an 'vocal drills,' e.g., m–m–m–m r–r–r–r	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • synthetic phonics • word families • pronunciation info for teachers • 'build up the word' blending • lessons connected to phonics for 'primary chart' –letter/sound association • rhymes provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • charts support phonic-method • word families used, i.e., 'cat,' 'mat.' 'rat,' 'fat,' 'hat,' 'Ned,' 'led,' 'fed,' 'ten,' 'den,' 'men' 	Diacritical pronunciation	Limited use of word families
Comprehension						
• Number of questions	140	13	14	55	32	31
• Silent reading	Yes – two sets: 'something to do,' 'something to answer'	No	No	No	No	No
• Number of illustrations – (See table 2)	66	65	50	55	43	82
Content of Primers						
• Play	34 (49%)	15 (38%)	13 (27%)	7 (11%)	14 (27%)	24 (41%)
• Family	31(45%)	1 (3%)	0	0	1 (2%)	9 (17%)
• school	7 (10%)	0	0	0	2 (3%)	2 (3%)
• Proactive/independent activities	20 (29%)	1 (3%)	2 (4%)	7 (11%)	7 (13%)	4 (7%)
• Morals/lessons	0	0	0	0	16 (34%)	5 (10%)
• Math	28 (41%)	0	1 (2%)	0	0	1 (2%)

Table 2

Comparison of primers used in Cambridge schools during the 1880s. Approaches to beginning reading instruction: illustrations as aids to comprehension and transmitters of value.

Representation via illustrations and supported with text	Cyr 66 total illustrations	Rickoff 65 total illustrations	Monroe 50 total illustrations	Sheldon 55 total	McGuffey 43 total	Hillard & Campbell 82 total illustrations	Totals
Boy main character	12	6	12	17	10	8	65
Girl main character	13	14	8	1	8	12	56
Girl & Boy	14	8	1	2	5	12	42
Adult male (male and children)	0 0	1 1	3 0	12 2	2 2	1 1	19 6
Adult female (female and children)	0 0	0 1	0 0	0 0	0 1	0 0	0 2
Adult female and male	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Family – text supports illustrations, this is my brother, grandpa, etc.	16	3	0	0	0	1	20
Animals – pets (dog, cat)	7	6	6	6	5	7	37
Animals – farm (cow, pig, chicken, etc)	0	6	4	0	4	6	20
Animals – wild, zoo, or forest (bird, fox, rabbit)	4	7	15	4	4	16	50
Objects – doll, top, tub, ship, etc.	0	22	1	11	3	16	53

commented to his colleagues, ‘The good primary teacher begins her instructions in language with words, not letters’ (p.300). Five of the primers, Cyr (*Interstate primer*), Monroe (*Chart-primer*), Sheldon (*Sheldon’s primer*), McGuffey (*McGuffey’s eclectic primer*), and Hillard (*Franklin primer*), incorporated pre-reading word lists. Cyr and Hillard used post-reading word lists and Cyr, Rickoff, and McGuffey included review activities with words previously learned. Cyr’s was the only primer that included all three forms of word practice including pre-reading word lists, post-reading word lists and additional practice of words in context via ‘review sentences’ and ‘easy reading’ sections. This level of practice was a unique feature for the time.

Cyr’s, McGuffey’s, and Sheldon’s primers began in similar fashion with words, then phrases, then short sentences in the first lesson. Cyr continued with much repetition of sentences with minimal differences. Figure 1 presents an example from her third page of text. Page 3 is included to show the entire lesson.

Hillard, by contrast, began his primer with ‘Word Lessons,’ presenting only words with their corresponding pictures for the first seven pages. Although not using these pictures to teach the letters of the

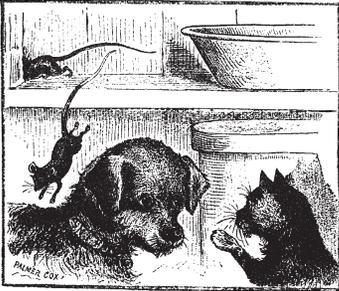
alphabet, Hillard included some unusual content words like vane, yoke, quail and zebra. Phrases and sentences were added later. Figure 4 presents Hillard’s third page of text.

As previously noted, Rickoff used pictures and words to make word phrases in conjunction with illustrations for language development. Figure 5 presents these picture-word phrases.

Phonic methods

While Monroe included prereading words, they were key words that contained sounds being taught. *Monroe’s chart primer* represented a synthetic-phonics approach to reading instruction and was the only one of the primers examined to do so. In the ‘Hints to teachers’ section, for example, Monroe directed the teacher to say, ‘Hark, and see who can make the sound that I make’ (p. 7). First ‘m’ was taught, then short ‘a’, followed by ‘n’. The teacher then had students ‘build up the word by uttering the sound in succession’ (p. 8). After blending, the students segmented or ‘prolong[ed] these elements, as if the word were stretched out’ (p. 8). ‘Sounds previously learned’ were periodically reviewed. Figure 6 presents an example from Monroe’s third page of student text.

2	THE INTERSTATE PRIMER.	THE INTERSTATE PRIMER.	3
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A căt a căt A dög a dög
 A răt a răt A păn a păn
 I căn sēe

 A dog can see.
 A cat can see.
 A rat can see a cat.

I can see a dog.
 I can see a rat.
 I can see a cat.
 I can see a pan.
 A cat can see a rat.
 A dog can see a cat.
 A rat can see a dog.
 A cat can see a pan.
 A dog can see a rat.
 A rat can see a pan.
 A rat can see a cat.
 A cat can see a dog.
 A dog can see a pan.

1. Pages 2–3 from E. Cyr's *Interstate primer and first reader*, Interstate Publishing Co., 1886. Lesson shows the extensive amount of practice (16 sentences) provided in this third page of student text for beginning reading instruction.

LESSON III.

Năt hăt fan eăn

f



a fan a hat

Ann and Nat.
 Ann has a fan.
 Nat has a hat.
 Ann can fan Nat.

2. Page 9 from W. McGuffey's *McGuffey's eclectic primer*, Revised Edition, Van Antwerp, Bragg & Co., 1881. McGuffey's third page of text for beginning reading instruction contained far less practice reading the words learned in context. Four practice sentences were included.

Sheldon's Primer. 9

LESSON III.

on fat on fat on fat
 fat on fat on fat on

a fat cat a fat cat



This is a fat cat.

Is this a mat?



This is a mat.

Is this the fat cat?



Is this the mat?

This is the fat cat on the mat.
 the fat cat the fat cat

3. Page 9 from E.A. Sheldon's *Sheldon's primer*, Scribner, Armstrong, & Co., 1873. Sheldon's third page of text for beginning reading instruction incorporated more syntactic variation, but much less practice with words in context than Cyr's. Six practice sentences were included.

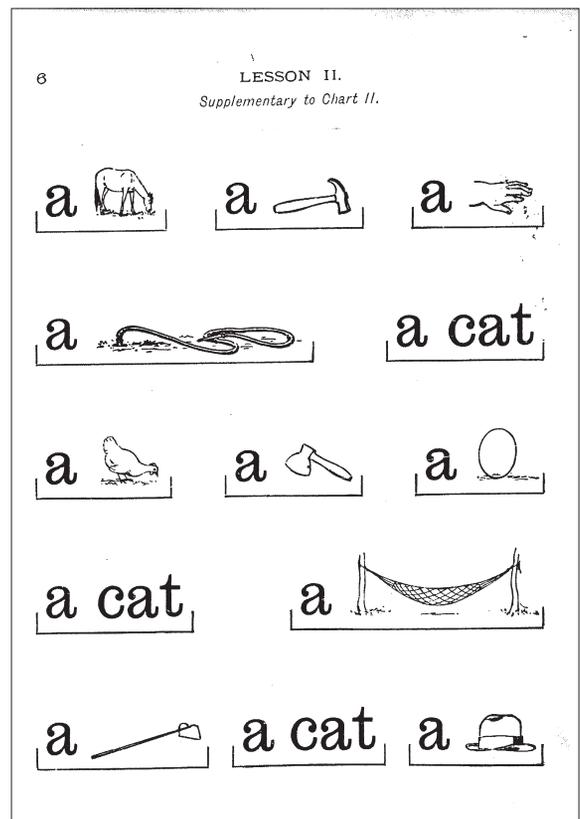
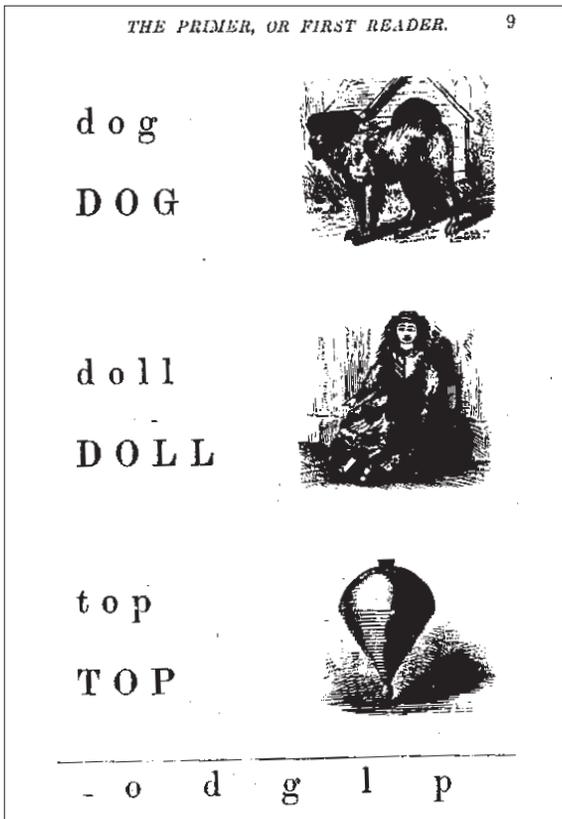
Synthetic phonics and the marking of letters diacritically were two phonics approaches used in the primers examined. Both Cyr and McGuffey used diacritical markings on pre-reading word lists. The sequence of words introduced in the primers implied an awareness of phonic application. For example, all primers began with an emphasis on short 'a' words. However, the similarity ends there. Sheldon provided 16 lessons with short 'a' words, McGuffey 5, and Hillard and Rickoff 1 lesson each. Cyr and Monroe each incorporated short 'a' with a long vowel word in their first lesson.

Rickoff made a brief reference to decoding near the end of his primer. Directions to the child were to segment five words and then to notice the beginning and ending sounds of seven other words. Sheldon and Monroe emphasized frequent use of word families on pre-reading word lists and in their stories. As in more recent criticism of some readers, because Sheldon and Monroe used rhyming words/word families as a component of their instructional approach, their stories often sounded contrived. Here is an example with nineteenth century vocabulary:

*This is a wag and a jag
 The wag is on the jag
 This is a nag and a wag
 A pad is on the nag.
 This nag is a bad nag.
 The wag has a hat on.
 The wag has the nag and the jag.*
 (Sheldon, 1873, p. 17)

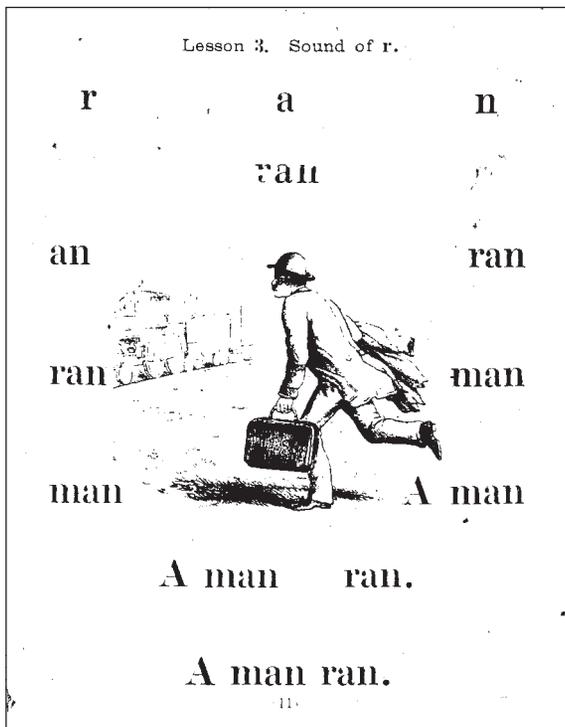
Comprehension

Along with a greater emphasis on practice with words introduced, another major difference between Cyr's primer and the others used in the Cambridge schools was in the area of comprehension. To begin with, Cyr's primer included many more questions than the other primers (i.e., 'Can you fish?' 'Can you see May?'). As a matter of fact, Cyr included almost as many questions in her primer alone as all of the other primers combined. Also, Cyr's primer provided exercises called 'Something to Do'. In these exercises, students were to read and follow the directions silently if they comprehended. These activities allowed the children to move: 'You may give your pencil to John';



4. Page 9 from G.S. Hillard & L. J. Campbell's *Franklin primer or First reader*, Brewer & Tileston, 1873. Hillard & Campbell's third page of text for beginning reading instruction included only single words. New vocabulary was not yet used in sentences.

5. Page 6 from R. Rickoff's *Appletons' chart-primer*, D. Appleton & Co., 1885. Rickoff's third page of text for beginning reading instruction included only phrases. New vocabulary was not yet used in sentences.



6. Page 11 from L. Monroe's *Chart-primer or first steps in reading*, 1877, Coperthwait & Co. Monroe's third page of text for beginning reading instruction provided one sentence of practice.

'You may write your name on your slate'; 'You may get a little boy for me'. Children really had to comprehend to see if any of their classmates committed errors. Thirty-six of these directions were included. None of the other primers incorporated this kind of interactive reading and comprehension. Actually, this format appears to be decades ahead of its time. According to Smith (1986), the emphasis shifted to silent reading and meaning between 1910 and 1925 (Cyr's primer was 1886) as a result of the influences of individuals like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel, and Parker. Smith explained that 'dramatization' was used as an indicator of comprehension and provided a 1924 example from St. Cloud Minnesota that is very similar to Cyr's nineteenth-century primer: 'The teacher prints short action sentences. . . . She [teacher] introduces the card by saying that it tells them to do something. If any child in the class can read it, he is permitted to do so silently and perform the action. . . . Draw the pig. Color the pig red' (Smith, 1986, p. 182).

Illustrations

All of the primers contained numerous illustrations of various sizes, some full page and designed for generating stories and others small and of single objects. Each separate picture, regardless of size or complexity was examined and counted. Individual totals of illustrations were: Cyr, 66; Rickoff, 65;

Monroe, 50; Sheldon, 55; McGuffey, 43; Hillard, 82. These illustrations served to support and enhance comprehension at the word, sentence and story level. Along with supporting the written text, however, the illustrations also conveyed other messages to their young readers. First of all, these illustrations primarily supported stories about children. (Out of 361 total illustrations, 163 were of children.) While there were fewer total girls illustrated as main characters (56 total stories), than boys as main characters (65 total stories), the percentage of girls represented was higher in the 1800s than more recently (See *Women on Words and Images*, 1975). In these 1800s primers, 40 per cent of child main characters that were illustrated were male; 34 per cent were female and 26 per cent depicted both males and females. With the exception of Sheldon's primer, adults did not take center stage. While there are more total stories with boys as main characters, than girls, three primers included more female main characters (Cyr, Rickoff and Hillard). Also, Cyr's primer contained far more illustrations depicting family (Cyr, 16/69 lessons; Rickoff, 1/40; Monroe, 0/48; Sheldon, 0/61; McGuffey, 0/52; Hillard, 3/59.) Animals were well represented in total illustrations (107/361), a larger percentage consisting of woodland animals (50/107), than pets (37/107), or farm animals (20/107). Objects made up 53/361 total illustrations presented. The focus of Cyr's illustrations were children, with almost equal representation of gender. Her stories contained more illustrations of children altogether than any of the other primers (Cyr, 39/163 total children; Rickoff, 25/163; Monroe, 21/163; Sheldon, 20/163; McGuffey, 23/163; Hillard, 32/163). People, i.e., children and families were the focus of Cyr's illustrations rather than animals or objects. Current research on children's reading interests suggests that, overall, children are interested in books that are accessible, i.e., readable, and provide a character with whom they can easily identify either on a superficial or developmental level (Nevil, 2000). It appears that Cyr provided that connection.

Content

As the text in these primers increased in length, patterns in the content began to emerge. Those categories or content patterns were: play, family activities, school, proactive activities (which consisted of chores or helping), religious/moral lessons and math. 'Play,' for example, was depicted in lessons either through the illustrations; the description of play (e.g., 'I am so glad we can go on the pond. It is fun. I can row,' Monroe, 1877, p. 42); or use of the word 'play' in the lesson ('May has been out to play this morning,' Cyr 1886, p. 98). Play was identified in 34/69 of Cyr's lessons, 7/61 of Sheldon's, 13/48 of Monroe's, 14/52 of McGuffey's, 15/40 of Rickoff's, and 24/59

of Hillard's. Regarding family, Cyr included 31 lessons in which family members were specifically mentioned, compared to 0 in Monroe's, 0 in Sheldon's, 1 in Rickoff's, 1 in McGuffey's, and 9 in Hillard's.

Stories about the family in Cyr's *Primer and first reader* were endearing and all members were included. 'Charlie is my dear brother . . . Charlie can read. I want to read too. When Charlie came home she took the book to him. She got up in his lap. Charlie read to her.' (p.40); 'This is my dear Grandpa. I love my Grandpa. My Grandpa loves me . . . Have you a dear Grandpa? . . . Where is your Grandpa? . . . Will he play with you?' (p.45) 'John has a dear little sister. She is asleep. See John rock her. Have you a little baby sister?' 'I am trying to help mamma. Poor mamma is not well. I must help her. I am a big girl now' (pp. 80-81). Grandma and Papa are included, also. Again, perhaps Cyr's primer most successfully triggered reader interest by providing characters via family members with whom children could identify. Focusing on stories that would interest children was a significant consideration for an author during the late 1800s. The distinctiveness of childhood and the notion of children's literature was a concept just beginning to take shape. 'As late as 1893,' Macleod explained, '70 percent of public libraries banned children under 12' (1998, p.129).

Another reason both teachers and children may have been partial to Cyr lies in a second cultural value presented. More frequently than the other primers, Cyr presented lessons in which children were engaged in acts of responsible independence, i.e., helping a sick or busy family member, or feeding their pets or woodland animals. These acts of responsibility occurred in 20/69 of Cyr's lessons; Rickoff, 1/40; Monroe, 2/48; Hillard, 4/59; Sheldon, 7/61; McGuffey, 7/52. Women on Words and Images (1975) refer to this type of behavior as 'routine helpfulness' and make a distinction between this 'service work' and 'elective generativity' (i.e., teaching others to do something). While Women on Words and Images clearly put greater value on elective generativity, the developmental ability of a child reading a primer is more likely in line with the concept of routine helpfulness and an important step toward independence. While McGuffey presented religious information (i.e., 'God made the world and all things in it,' p. 59), Cyr portrayed behaviors that displayed this helpfulness.

A final reason Cyr's primer may have been popular with teachers was Cyr's inclusion of mathematics and to a lesser extent (because there is less representation across the board), her positive representation of school. Cyr included and spent more time than any other primer on mathematical concepts (Cyr 28/69 lessons; Rickoff, 0/40; Monroe, 1/48; Sheldon, 0/61; McGuffey, 0/52; Hillard, 1/59.) She presented the

following sequence: First, numerals, number words and the corresponding number of appropriate dots were shown together, representing numbers from one to ten. Next, practice was given adding dots up to a sum of 10. Then, one dot was subtracted from others until a minuend of 10 was reached. Last, the numerals themselves (1+1, 1+2, 1+3; 2-1, 3-1, 4-1) were added and subtracted, with 10 being the largest numeral used. In a sense, then, Cyr's primer served as a more comprehensive text of basic skills than other primers used.

To summarize primer comparisons then, Cyr introduced new words at a slower pace, and provided much more practice with new words in simple sentences. Her primer was more interactive than the others, including many more questions and activities. Also, unlike the others, it included specific instruction in silent reading comprehension and mathematics, making it a more comprehensive text. Finally, Cyr's primer probably did a better job tapping into reader interest through its stories about other children and families.

The ability to identify material that children enjoyed was a talent also possessed by Daniel Lothrop, Cyr's first publisher (see L. Cyr, 1920). A man with good business sense, Lothrop started out as the owner of successful drugstores across the country. However, even then he was described as 'Always a book lover' (Tebbel, 1975, p.275). Like Cyr he was an innovator and his new concept was to sell books in his drugstores. In 1850, he moved into the bookselling business in several New Hampshire cities and then into publishing in Boston and briefly in Chicago with a branch called the Interstate Publishing Co. According to Tebbel, one of Lothrop's bookstores became a center for intellectuals in the surrounding area and Lothrop himself published some titles. His talent for choosing titles that children loved led him to his second wife, Harriet Stone, whose pen name was Margaret Sidney. Lothrop was publisher for Stone's very popular children's work, *Five little peppers, and how they grew*. Both Ellen Cyr and Lothrop's wife, Harriet, began publishing their works for children during the 1880s. While there is no record of their interactions, one can imagine the two women being acquainted.

When Cyr's primer appeared in November of 1886, it was reviewed by *The Women's Journal*, which was considered the 'voice of the American Woman Suffrage Association' and aimed at 'professional' and 'intellectual' women (Jolliffe, 1986). The review read,

Each of these simple lessons in good reading is an expansion of a short vocabulary of new words illustrated by a picture. The sentences are short and conversational, such as a child would use. The book is adapted to all of the methods of teaching now in use (H.B.B., p.371).

While many people recognized and lauded Cyr's instructional contribution, the business community

was especially aware of the financial possibilities. As noted earlier, a clerk at Lothrop told Ellen that her primer 'had the greatest sale of any book at that time in the publishing house' (L. Cyr, 1920, p.5). Because of this popularity, 'A representative from Ginn and Company visited her very soon after the book appeared, and engaged her to do all her writing for them' (p.5). Ginn was able to offer Cyr a reputation and a distribution that Lothrop did not possess.

Ginn steps in

Considered 'one of the foremost publishers of school and college textbooks in Boston' and 'the sixth largest publisher in the United States by 1890' (Tebbel, 1975, p.408), Edwin Ginn aimed to 'improve the content and format of school books' (Madison, 1966, p.126). Tebbel (1975) described Ginn as a man 'full of ideas and energy,' someone who 'was able to build a strong sales department composed of young college graduates whom he chose for their integrity, honesty, and alertness' (p.410). To their credit, Ginn and Company's smart, aggressive, well-connected staff put themselves in a position to promote texts like Cyr's across the United States and around the world.

Ginn salesmen introduced the *Cyr readers* to the California market and the books became the state texts. In December of 1904, the California State Text-Book Committee recommended that the *Cyr Primer*, *First*, *Second*, *Third*, and *Fourth readers* be adopted 'as the basis of a series of readers for the common schools of the State' (California State Board of Education, 1905, p. 157). In actuality, the *Fourth reader* that California used turned out to be a combination of *Cyr's Book four*, *Book five*, and *Book six*, so most of her series was implemented. (The readers were titled differently in different editions.)

In making their decision to adopt the *Cyr Readers*, members of the California Text-Book committee reported that they considered first the matter of 'merit' and second the matter of 'economy'. Additionally, the *Twenty-second biennial report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction*, 1905–1906, noted that Cyr's readers had been 'previously tried in the schools and pronounced good' (Shannon, 1906, pp. 69–70). Japanese residents in California requested that this newly adopted series be translated into the

Japanese language. The text book committee moved to do so, and the motion carried.

Cyr was undoubtedly happy to have California adopt her readers for the entire state. Royalties paid to Ginn from this transaction alone were well over \$9,000 per year and continued for five years. In today's dollars, that amount would translate to approximately \$180,000 per year (Sahr, 2003). According to Edwin Ginn himself (1910), authors received '50 per cent of the total' (p. 223). Additionally, in 1905, the *Cyr graded art readers* (stories based on the masterpieces of famous painters and stories of the lives of Renaissance artists with reproductions of masterpieces included) and the *Cyr dramatic readers* (stories written in dialogue form to be acted out) were adopted as supplementary to the California State series. With Ginn offices in Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Columbus, Dallas, Atlanta, Toronto, and London before the end of the 1800s, and business extending to India, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico during the 1900s, the works of its authors could indeed be influential and lucrative.

Why was Cyr ignored by historians?

While books, dissertations, and articles abound on males who authored reading series, almost nothing is written about their female counterparts.⁵ In one sense this is odd, given the feminization of the teaching force and the proliferation of female teachers in the primary grades. Since female teachers were much less expensive to employ, the typical attitude in urban areas was that 'female teachers should always be employed, when they are competent for the work, in preference to males' (*City of Cambridge annual reports*, 1869, p. 134). Also at this time, since women were the ones teaching beginning reading, they authored the books that taught children to read. This occurred with particular frequency after 1880 (Monaghan, 1994). Even the classic text on the history of reading instruction in the United States, *American reading instruction*, by Nila B. Smith, 1986, neglected to mention females like Ellen Cyr. Cyr's inclusion in Nietz's (*Old textbooks*, 1961) chapter on the 'Most popular American readers' is a real coup given the fact that she is the only woman noted along with twenty-five male authors.⁶

5 Dissertations, for example, include, Mavrogenes, N.A. (1985). 'William Scott Gray: Leader of teachers and shaper of American reading instruction'; Monaghan, E.J. (1980). 'Noah Webster's Speller, 1783–1843: causes of its success as reading text'; Scully, J.A. (1967). 'A biography of William Holmes McGuffey' and Vance, E.R. (1985). 'Classroom reading and the work of Arthur Gates: 1921–1930'.

6 Jenny Stickney, who was principal of the Boston Training School for Teachers and author of the *Stickney readers* (actually published one year before Cyr), was not discussed in Nietz's analysis. While

Stickney's books did not enjoy the widespread popularity of Cyr's (and were therefore not the focus of the present study), Stickney did produce a primer, five readers, four adapted fairy tales, and two nature/science books, initially publishing them herself. Nietz did not even include Stickney in his 'Less Popular Readers' category. Unfortunately, it's as though Ms. Stickney did not exist. She is never mentioned in the *Women's who's who of America* (Leonard, 1914) and the readers that bear her name are not listed under her maiden name in the National Union Catalog, but under her husband's name (Lansing) instead.

Ignoring a woman's accomplishments was, indeed, the practice of the past. Rebecca Pollard (1831–1917), for example, is 'credited with being one of the first and strongest influences in bringing about the synthetic phonics emphasis in reading, yet little is generally known about her life and work' (Vyduna-Haskins, 2001, p. 6). If women were not recognized in primary education, a field where they dominated, neither were they recognized in other fields. A female did not receive a medical diploma in New York State, for example, until 1849. A male was granted one almost a century earlier. Women did not receive the right to vote until 1920. Nochlin (1988) believes the fault for this lack of recognition lies in our institutions and our education; in essence, patterns of interaction were institutionalized. As Elizabeth Stanton said, 'The canon and civil law, Church and State, priests and legislators, all political parties and religious denominations, have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, – an inferior being, subject to man' (quoted in Johnson, 1913, chapter 9, p. 2). As part of this subjugation, women were treated like chattel. Cyr herself commented that her publishers 'were dreadfully opposed to my getting married. They argued against it. They held a regular conference one day. They said it would stop my work entirely. I said it wouldn't – and it hasn't. I have written more since I married than before' (*Occupations for women*, 1911, p. 4).

Disregarding female accomplishments at the end of the nineteenth century may have become an institutionalized practice, in an odd way, for the 'good' of society. The idea that intellectual activities could actually harm women because they might use up their 'limited energy' and 'endanger their 'female apparatus'' (Solomon, 1985, p. 56) was proliferated by credible sources like Edward Clarke, a medical doctor and Harvard professor. Clarke was invited to address the New England Women's Club, and in 1873 he published *Sex in Education; A Fair chance for the Girls*. In his book (which enjoyed seventeen printings), Clarke explained that a female's energy was needed during puberty to develop her reproductive system. It was Clarke's contention that 'the system does not do two things well at the same time' (p.70). Therefore, if a female's energy were devoted to study rather than the reproductive system, women ended up with such maladies as sterility and invalidism. Clarke continued,

When the school makes the same steady demand for force from girls who are approaching puberty, ignoring Nature's periodical demands, that it does from boys, who are not called upon for an equal effort, there must be failure somewhere. Generally either the reproductive system or the nervous system suffers. (pp. 97–98)

Clarke believed that 'the number of these graduates permanently disabled to a greater or less degree

by these causes is so great, as to excite the gravest alarm' (pp. 62–63). Sarah Hale, a visible and influential woman of the time, also reinforced this notion that a woman's role in the family was fundamental to the republic. Hale was the editor of *Godey's lady's book* for forty years and was, according to *The Oxford companion to women's writing in the United States* (Gossett, 1995), 'the most prominent American woman engaged in literary enterprise in the mid-nineteenth century' (p. 371). Representative of Hale's (1828) position was her advice to talented women 'that to make a happy *home* for her husband and children is far more praiseworthy than to make a *book*' (p. 121). Such attitudes, then, would deter women from celebrating or memorializing their academic accomplishments. During the early twentieth century, even if a woman's papers were saved, they were *not* likely to have been archived. Older (1995) elaborates:

If the main problem for women library users before 1900 was access, in this century it has been women's invisibility within libraries. All types of libraries and archives have tended to ignore or dismiss women's cultures and history, their written records and their creative work. The second wave of feminism [1960s] and the tremendous renewal of interest in women caused this situation to change. (p. 519)

Given the situation, then, that data on women like Cyr were scant, it makes sense that in later years, dissertations or papers were not written about these females. As Monaghan & Hartman (2000) point out, inaccessibility to sources limits choice of topic regardless of its appeal to a researcher.

The preceding historical research addressed questions posed about Ellen Cyr: Who she was, why she wrote, how her primer compared to others, why her books were popular, and why she has been left out of literacy history. In summary, she was the child of two well-educated adults who knew and loved literature and learning. Her work was the product of her upbringing and her circumstances, the culture, market influences, her teacher preparation program, educational needs and interests of the day, and the abilities of her publisher. Cyr wrote her first primer because she believed the readers currently being used could be 'improved upon both as to subject matter and as to pictures' (L. Cyr, 1920, p. 5). Her first book, according to her sister, was written in two weeks. Because it sold well, publisher Ginn sought her out and 'engaged her to do all her writing for them' (ibid, p. 5). Her primer undoubtedly was popular because it was the most effective of those used in the Cambridge schools at actually teaching children to read. Cyr's primer introduced new words and high-frequency words gradually and allowed for repeated reading with the words introduced. A variation of phonics was incorporated via diacritical markings to

aid with pronunciation. Cyr attempted to produce what we would call a more 'balanced' approach to beginning reading. There was practice with individual words, but also with meaningful text. The text was basically realistic and enjoyable with simple stories that focused on proactive children and family members. Boys and girls were represented equally.

Additionally, Cyr's primer was ahead of its time in its incorporation of silent-reading comprehension activities and instruction. Also, unlike the other primers used in the Cambridge schools, Cyr's incorporated basic math concepts: number recognition, addition and subtraction, to produce a comprehensive text. While the accomplishments of women in Cyr's day were typically ignored, Cyr did not ignore females in her books. Although her gender message does not come across in the primer, it is clear by the *Third reader*. This is another innovative concept. Cyr included female main characters and presented girls who took action. In the content analysis of readers from 14 major publishers in the 1970s, Women on Words and Images (1975) found males most often engaged in elective generativity, i.e., teaching others. In Cyr's beginning readers it was the female who provided instruction, most often teaching the child about nature. By Cyr's *Third reader* (1902), she provided substantial biographies of female authors. She showed the children who read her books that females could grow up to be something other than caregivers; they could be writers. The lives and works of such authors as Julia Dorr, Louisa M. Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Celia Thaxter, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Lucy Larcom were presented. Cyr continued to write books and produced a series with eight books, which was also innovative since her contemporaries produced only five or six books per series. Apparently, Cyr's reading books were sufficiently forward thinking to be used by teachers like those at Francis W. Parker's progressive school (e.g., Hall, 1901) in Chicago. As summed up by the reviewer in the 'Book Notices' (1903) section of *Education*, 'to say that it is a 'Cyr' is to pronounce it best among class readers.'

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