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DILWORTH'S SPELLER

All of the early biographers who mention Abraham Lincoln's first school book, call it Dilworth's speller. Since Lincoln himself furnished much of the source material for this biographical data, it seems plausible that he is the authority for the title of the book.

Thomas Dilworth published his first textbook in England in 1740 and called it "A New Guide to the English tongue." He dedicated the book to "The promoters of charity schools in Great Britain and Ireland."

Testimonies of more than one hundred clergymen and schoolmasters were gathered who declared that Dilworth's book was "the best of its kind that hath been made public." For more than a half century it occupied the leading place among the school books in the mother country and was sent to the colonies and wherever English was spoken.

By the year 1751 thirteen editions had been printed and by 1795 it had gone to the eighteenth edition. A new edition appears to have been printed in Boston in 1789 and one at Wilmington in 1799. The book continued to be brought out in various editions and as late as 1818 was "printed and sold by Daniel D. Smith at the Franklin juvenile book store, No. 190 Greenwich St., New York."

Dilworth's new guide to the English tongue contained features usually found in spellers such as the English alphabet, with each letter accompanied by a drawing of some object, the spelling of which began with the letter used. Tables of words arrayed in groups according to the number of syllables were supplemented by lessons for practicing these words. Another list of words contained those of the same sound but of different meaning.

Dilworth's book, however, was more than a speller, as it contained a short grammar of the English tongue; a collection of sentences in prose and verse; and a select number of fables "adorned with proper sculptures."

Some of the later editions introduced new features. In 1795 there were but four parts as may be observed by the title page reproduced in this article. It is noted that there was added an introduction to geography by John Gough in the edition which he published in Dublin.

A NEW GUIDE TO THE ENGLISH TONGUE

IN FOUR PARTS

CONTAINING

1. Words, both common and proper, from one to six syllables; The several Sorts of Monosyllables in the common Words being distinguished by Tables, into words of two, three and four Letters, etc., with six short Lessons at the End of each Table, not exceeding the order of Syllables in the foregoing Tables. The several Sorts of Polysyllables also, being ranged in proper Tables, have their Syllables divided, and directions placed at the head of each Table for the Accent, to prevent false Pronunciation; together with the like Number of Lessons on the foregoing Tables, placed at the End of each Table as far as to Words of four Syllables.

2. A large and useful Table of Words, that are the same in Sound, but different in Signification; very necessary to prevent the writing one Word for another of the same Sound.

3. A short, but comprehensive Grammar of the English Tongue, delivered in the most familiar and instructive Method of Question and Answer; necessary for all such Persons as have the Advantage only of an English Education.

4. An useful Collection of Sentences in Prose and Verse, Divine, Moral, and Historical. Together with a select Number of Fables adorn'd with Sculptures.

BY THOMAS DILWORTH, S. M.

THE EIGHTEENTH EDITION

To which is now added by John Gough An Introduction to Geography comprised in short and easy Sentences to be written out by Children. With a Map of the World.

LONDON, Printed: And
DUBLIN, Reprinted by John Gough, in
Meath Street, 1795

In the New York edition of 1818 the introduction to geography is left out, but it contains another part called part five which includes "forms of prayer for children on several occasions." This was evidently copied from the old primers in use in the church schools.

It is not known just what edition of Dilworth's Abraham Lincoln used. It could not have been the New York edition of 1818 as Abraham Lincoln's Kentucky school days were over by that time. It may have been the Dublin edition or one of the earlier American editions which contained part five rather than the geographical material.

It is likely that Dennis Hanks is responsible for the information, appearing in Herndon's Life of Lincoln, that Abraham Lincoln used "Webster's spelling book and the American speller."

The fact is that Webster's and the American speller mentioned by Herndon were one and the same, but later editions call Webster's American spelling book—Webster's elementary spelling book. The title page says it "is an improvement on the American spelling book."

The early editions of Webster's spellers closely resembled Dilworth's, in both construction and method. Webster also included "A moral catechism or lessons for Saturday," very much like the part five in Dilworth's.

One feature which the American speller introduced, which was not to be found in its English predecessor, was a brief federal catechism containing a short explanation of the Constitution. The following sentences copied from Lesson No. 107 in Webster's reveal how the text featured items of interest to the new Democracy.

"Legislation is the enacting of laws, and a legislator is one who makes laws.

"God is the divine legislator. He proclaimed his ten commandments from Sinai.

"In free governments, the people choose their legislators.

"We have legislators for each state, who make laws for the state where they live. The town in which they meet to legislate is called the seat of government. These legislators, when they are assembled to make laws, are called the legislature.

"The people should choose their best and wisest men for their legislators.

"It is the duty of every good man, to inspect the moral conduct of the man who is offered as a legislator at our yearly elections. If the people wish for good laws, they may have them, by electing good men.

"The legislative councils of the United States should feel their dependence on the will of the free and virtuous people.

"Our farmers, mechanics, and merchants compose the strength of our nation. Let them be wise and virtuous and watchful of their liberties. Let them trust no man to legislate for them, if he lives in the habitual violation of the laws of his country."

Whether or not there were two spelling books in the Lincoln home we cannot say but we are reasonably sure that Dilworth's was the first school book put in the hands of Abraham Lincoln.

Note. The editor is under obligation to Miss Esther Cushman of Brown University for photostat reproductions from Dilworth's speller.