

Origins and English Predecessors of the New England Primer

GILLIAN AVERY

SOME day someone will perhaps solve the mystery of the origins of the *New England Primer*,¹ remarked William Sloane in 1955, adding gloomily that all problems of who said what first in seventeenth-century English and American children's books were complicated for modern scholars by young readers who had either eaten their books or torn them to shreds, and had later omitted to deposit these shreds in the rare-book room of the nearest university library.¹ Any attempt to discuss its early history comes up against the harsh fact that nothing certain is known about its first thirty-seven years (even this figure is approximate), since no edition earlier than 1727 has survived. The Lenox collection of the New York Public Library holds one copy, and AAS—whose previous earliest edition was 1750—has recently acquired another. The first was published by Kneeland and Green

In trying to assemble this paper without the benefit of a recent visit to AAS, I have had to lean heavily on staff there. Their kindness and interest was as unflinching as ever, and I would particularly like to thank Joanne Chaison, Alan Degutis, Carol Fisher-Crosby, Caroline Sloat, and especially, Marcus Allen McCorison, for generously contributing a bibliographical note on the AAS's 1727 copy of *The New-England Primer Enlarged* as a coda to my essay. I am also grateful to Giles Mandelbrote of the British Library, and Professor Michael Treadwell of Trent University, Ontario, for helping me with the complexities of the Harris family and contemporary London printers.

1. William Sloane, *Children's Books in England and America in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1955), 192.

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of Boston, and though the lower third of the title page of the AAS copy is missing, typographical evidence shows that it must also have been printed by Kneeland and Green, AAS says in the same year, because Boston printers of the 1720s would not leave printing types standing for any significant length of time.

The early history of the *New England Primer*, America's most famous schoolbook, is one of the most complex of bibliographic problems, tied up as it is with a more than usually elusive seventeenth-century printer. So much has to be supplied from conjecture, and its original contents can only be guessed. Any study of seventeenth-century schoolbooks is further complicated by the way so many compilers lifted material from other publications and failed to acknowledge their sources. One schoolmaster author engagingly admitted as much. 'The materials of it I have digg'd out of other mines, and cast them into such a mould, as I hope, and pray, that, through a smile on high, they may be of use.'²

The creator of the *NEP* is traditionally held to be Benjamin Harris, a London bookseller who had compiled the ferociously anti-Catholic *Protestant Tutor* in 1679, and who, drummed out of England, advertised 'a Second Impression of *The New-England Primer enlarged*' in Boston in 1690. Harris's political views and the English religious background of his time are a vital part of the book's history, but any attempt to provide him with a conventional biography runs up against the fact that there were a number of Benjamin Harrises in London at the turn of the century, three of whom were printers. Little more has been added to the material assembled by Paul Leicester Ford in 1897 in his monograph,³ supplemented by Charles F. Heartman's bibliography.⁴ Charles L. Nichols, in an article on a Harris publication, tried to sort out Benjamin Harris from his son, also Benjamin.⁵ J. G.

2. Thomas Lye, *The Childs Delight* (London, 1671).

3. Paul Leicester Ford, *The New-England Primer* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1897).

4. Charles F. Heartman, *The New England Primer Printed in America Prior to 1830* (New York, 1922).

5. Charles L. Nichols, 'The Holy Bible in Verse,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 36 (1926): 71-82.

Muddiman investigated Harris's political career in a series of articles contributed to *Notes and Queries* in 1932. The known facts about Harris and the *NEP* have been summarized in several works using these sources, most succinctly in William Sloane's *Children's Books in England and America in the Seventeenth Century* (1955), the best study of the subject. Sister Mary Augustina Ray considered the relationship of the *NEP* to *The Protestant Tutor*.⁶ David H. Watters in an article in *Early American Literature* in 1985 discussed the language of the 1727 *NEP* and children's probable understanding of it.⁷ In passing, he also offered the suggestion that the various elements in the *NEP* might have been assembled in 1727 for the first time, and that Harris might have had nothing to do with the work. But there is no doubt that Harris was a fairly prolific publisher of educational works, and that there is sufficient evidence to associate him with this particular one. Until such time as a seventeenth-century edition of the *NEP* turns up, one way forward seems to be to look at it in context with its English contemporaries and predecessors. From the eastern side of the Atlantic and with access to schoolbooks in the British Library and the Bodleian and one important example held by Keele University, it is now possible to add a little about the origins of the *NEP*, in particular identifying the source of the famous rhymed alphabet, and also the probable author of one of its most famous items, the dialogue between Christ, Youth, and the Devil.

I. THE CONTENTS OF THE EARLY 'NEW ENGLAND PRIMER'

The position of this speller in the cultural history of a nation is perhaps unique. No introduction to reading achieved anything like the same universality in England; certainly none had the same influence. Ford estimated that there was an annual average sale of 25,000 copies over a period of 150 years, or total sales of three

6. Sister Mary Augustina Ray, 'The Protestant Tutor. A Forerunner of Benjamin Harris's *New England Tutor*,' *Historical Records and Studies* 30 (1939): 65-139.

7. David H. Watters, ' "I spake as a child": Authority, Metaphor, and the New-England Primer,' *Early American Literature* 20, no. 3 (1985-86), 183-213.

million copies. George Emery Littlefield in his *Early Boston Booksellers* (1900), calling it 'the most remarkable book that was ever published in this country, and which has had such a mighty influence in moulding the mind, forming the habit, and coloring the creed of our ancestors,' gave an anecdote to illustrate how it had become engrained in the American consciousness. Isaac O. Barnes, a noted wit of the 1850s, was thought to be dying. His friends summoned a physician, who reassured them that as his feet were warm there was no immediate danger—was anyone known to die when his feet were warm? 'Yes,' said Barnes, 'John Rogers.'⁸

All those at his bedside would have recognized this allusion to the inescapable primer of their youth. Rogers was the first Protestant to be burned at Smithfield in the Marian persecutions, and an account of his martyrdom in 1554, illustrated with a woodcut, was to be an almost constant feature of the *NEP* right into the nineteenth century. An edition printed in Portland, Maine, in 1841 still retains it, and indeed Ford said that he had seen only two editions without it. The event had been described more fully in 1563 in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, popularly known as the *Book of Martyrs* (a work that Harris frequently drew upon), and its survival for 280 years in a country where few could have known who Queen Mary was, nor why Rogers was being burned, is another extraordinary fact in the history of the *NEP*.

Yet another is its longevity. The only English schoolbook which outdoes it is John Colet and William Lily's Latin *Grammar*, or the 'Royal Grammar.' Published in revised form in 1549, this was to remain virtually unchanged for over 400 years and through some 350 editions.⁹ But for centuries Latin was the principal subject taught to boys in the Old World, and in England a decree of Edward VI in the year of the *Grammar*'s publication made the use of the book mandatory in all grammar schools. There was no

8. George Emery Littlefield, *Early Boston Booksellers 1642-1711* (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1900), 157.

9. William Lily and John Colet, *A Short Introduction of Grammar*, 1549. Introductory note to facsimile edition (Menston: Scolar Press, 1970).

book of comparable popularity to teach reading to younger children. The comprehensive bibliography in Ian Michael's *The Teaching of English from the Sixteenth Century to 1870* lists over twenty spellers published in England between 1660 and 1700.¹⁰ Nearly all were written by schoolmasters, many of them Puritans, clergy who had been ejected from their livings for refusing to conform to the doctrines of the Church of England, and the fact that the *NEP* was compiled by a layman whose interests in it seem to have been largely commercial again sets it apart.

John Locke in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) spoke of 'the ordinary road of the horn-book, primer, psalter, Testament and Bible'¹¹ in the progress towards literacy. He could not think of anything else suitable for young readers except Aesop's fables and the ancient tale of Reynard the Fox.¹² Many children in fact moved straight from the hornbook with its alphabet, syllabary, invocation to the Trinity, and Lord's Prayer, to spell their way through the Bible. The primer was an intermediate step, which provided more in the way of reading matter, though in the seventeenth century this mostly took the form of prayers, graces, biblical texts, catechism—the primer then still being a relic of the liturgical book it had been in pre-Reformation times. 'The aims of the petty [primary] school were wholly and consciously religious and moral,'¹³ said Thomas Baldwin, writing of Shakespeare's early schooling, and this was to persist; indeed the *NEP* was to hold firmly to this tradition for the whole of its long life.

Ford reproduced the Lenox *NEP* in facsimile in his 1897 monograph, 'restoring' text that was missing. It opens with biblical texts beginning, 'Train up the child in the way he should go.' Then follow letters, vowels, and syllables. The famous rhymed picture alphabet comes next with its sonorous opening 'In Adams

10. Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English from the Sixteenth Century to 1870* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

11. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London, 1693), 186.

12. A medieval beast epic first published in English by William Caxton in 1481.

13. T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare's Petty School* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1943), 20.

Fall / We Sinned all.' The next page reads, 'Now the Child being entered in his Letters and Spelling, let him learn these and such like Sentences by Heart, whereby he will be both instructed in his duty, and encouraged in his Learning,' and 'The Dutiful Child's Promises' follow. Then 'An Alphabet of lessons for Youth' (biblical texts), the Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments, and Duty of Children to their Parents. Ford supplied traditional *NEP* verses for the missing pages which followed, starting with

I in the burying place may see
Graves shorter there than I;
From Death's Arrest no Age is free,
Young Children too may die;
My God, may such an awful Sight,
Awakening be to me!
Oh! that by early Grace I might
For Death prepared be.

(David Watters has suggested that these lines may have been written by Cotton Mather,¹⁴ who certainly had used the image of the short grave in a sermon addressed to youth in 1689.¹⁵) There are four pages listing the books of the Old and New Testaments and numerals in letters and figures, then eight pages devoted to the burning of John Rogers followed by the verse exhortation always ascribed to him by the *NEP* (but composed in fact by Robert Smith, another Protestant martyr). The Lenox *NEP* concludes with the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

It has not been possible for me to examine the AAS copy (fig. 1). The main differences seem to lie in the sequence of the contents and in the catechism, which is John Cotton's 'Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes.' This, however, though first printed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was not addressed specifically to New

14. David Watters, 'I spake as a child,' 203.

15. 'A Child once being observed to become a very prayerful and pensive Child, gave that Account of it, I was in the Burying-place t'other day, and there I saw a Grave shorter than myself.' Cotton Mather, *Early Piety Exemplified in the Life and Death of Mr. Nathanael Mather* (1689), 63.

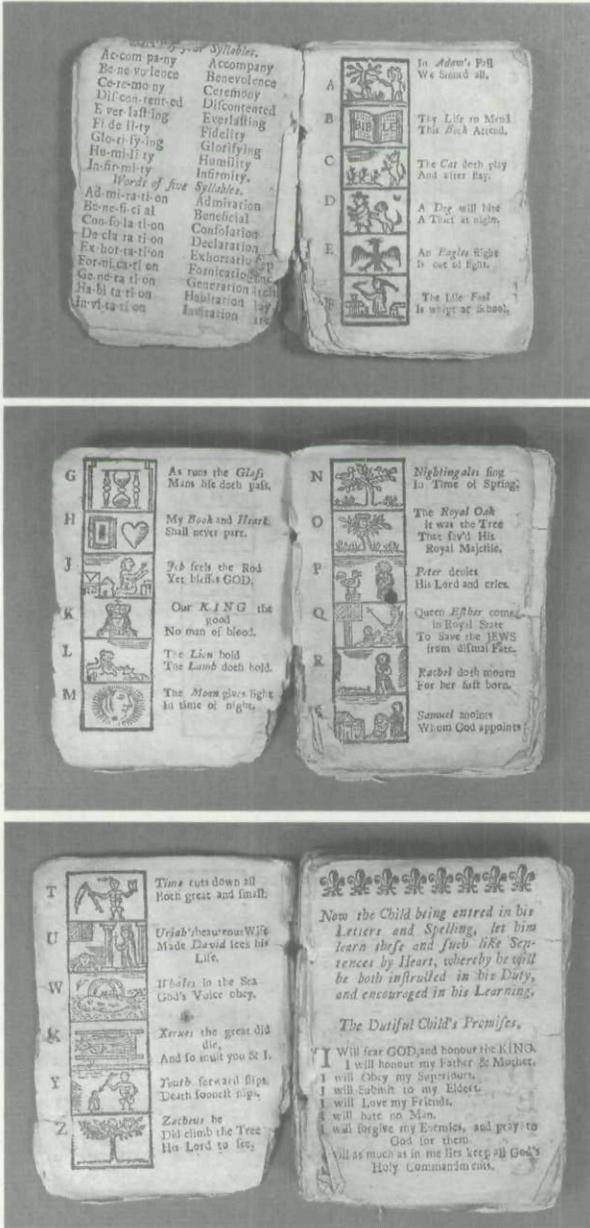


Fig. 1. The alphabet from *The New-England Primer Enlarged* (1727). This copy, held by the American Antiquarian Society, has been restored since it was photographed. Text block dimensions after restoration, 7.5 cm. x 9.5 cm.

England children; Cotton had been vicar of Boston, Lincolnshire, and the original title was *Milke for Babes, Drawn out of the Breasts of both Testaments, Chiefly for the Spiritual Nourishment of Boston Babes in Either England*. With only sixty-four questions, it is shorter and simpler than the Westminster's one hundred and thirty-seven, with answers of up to one hundred words, which all had to be learned by children from the age of four. Even Cotton Mather admitted this to be 'a great Encumbrance to our Babes.'¹⁶

Most of the ingredients of the two primers will also be found in the standard seventeenth-century spellers, as will be seen. The famous verse dialogue between Christ, Youth, and Devil, which later in the century was to become a feature of the *NEP*, does not appear in either, nor do verses from Isaac Watt's *Divine Songs* (1715), which were also to be habitually included. The lines beginning, 'Now I lay me down to sleep,' first appeared in a London edition of 1781; their authorship is still unknown.

But what did the first *New-England Primer Enlarged* contain and where did it come from? The mystery starts on October 5, 1683, when one John Gain entered in the London Stationers Register 'his Book or Cobby Entituled the New England Primer or Milk for Babes.' It is perhaps this book—a copy of which seems to have been taken out to the new country by one of the emigrants—to which the London publisher Richard Chiswell was referring when on April 13, 1685, he wrote to John Usher in Boston, 'There is not one New England Primer in London, if they will take Ten Grose, and send over a book to print it by they may be furnished, less than that Number will not Answer the Charge.' Charles Heartman boldly suggested in 1922 that 'Gain' was possibly an alias for Benjamin Harris, the London bookseller and printer whose picaresque career might well have included concealment of his identity.¹⁷ But records show that there was a John Gain (or Gayne), who not only was sued by the Stationers'

16. Cotton Mather, *The Man of God Furnished* (Boston, 1708), preface.

17. Heartman, *New England Primer*, xiv.

Company in 1681 for illegally printing primers, but who in 1685 was defendant in an action for debt,¹⁸ so Heartman's theory must remain his own.

In Benjamin Harris's advertisement in 1690, placed in the almanac of Henry Newman, *News from the Stars* 'for the Year of the Christian Empire, 1691,' printed in Boston by Harris himself, he gave a short summary. 'There is now in the Press, and will suddenly be extant, a Second Impression of the New England Primer enlarged, to which is added, more Directions for Spelling: the Prayer of K Edward the 6th, and Verses made by Mr Rogers the Martyr, left as a Legacy to his Children.' Ford supposed that this 1690 New England Primer contained 'the Alphabet, followed by the Syllabarium, the Alphabet of Lessons, the Lord's Prayer, Creed and Commandments, the Poem of John Rogers with the picture of his burning, the figures and numeral letters, and the names of the Books of the Bible.'¹⁹ This guess is safe enough, and, bar John Rogers, it mostly follows the pattern set by predecessors. The prayer attributed to the dying Edward VI is not found in any extant *NEP*.²⁰ It was taken from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and with its plea 'to save this Realm from Papistry, and maintain thy true Religion' was clearly irrelevant in New England. But then so was John Rogers, who found a place till the end. More will be said of Harris's sources, and the particulars in which the *NEP* differed from its contemporaries.

II. BENJAMIN HARRIS AND HIS PUBLICATIONS

The fact that there were apparently three Benjamin Harrises who were printers c. 1700 makes it difficult to disentangle who was responsible for what books, and to provide any sort of accurate biography. The most active and influential was the one already named, an Anabaptist of strong political views who played a

18. Henry R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers . . . in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1668-1725* (Oxford: Bibliographical Society, 1968), 123.

19. Ford, *New-England Primer*, 9.

20. Ford, *New-England Primer*, 45.

prominent part in the early history of newspapers.²¹ He had two sons, Vavasour and another Benjamin, both of whom were apprenticed to him; both were freed on November 7, 1698. But the same apprenticeship records²² show a third Benjamin Harris, this time the son of a William Harris, freed on November 12, 1705.

Harris was an extreme example of the strong political and religious partisanship of his time. On July 7, 1769, he issued the first number of his news-sheet, *Domestick Intelligence; or, News both from City and Country* (to be renamed later the *Protestant (Domestick) Intelligence*) that was to cause him much trouble. The year 1679 also saw the publication of his *Protestant Tutor. Instructing Children to spel and read English, and Grounding Them in the True Protestant Religion and Discovering the Errors and Deceits of the Papists*.²³ Though this subtitle suggests that it is a schoolbook, there is little educational content, and much sensational description of tortures, martyrdoms, massacres, and plots, copiously illustrated.²⁴ Others were to produce anti-papist schoolbooks—Edward Clark wrote *The Protestant School-master* (1680) and Moses Lane *The Protestant School* (1681)—but Harris's compilation was particularly violent, its material largely drawn, as Harris himself acknowledged, from Foxe's *Martyrs*. It was dedicated to the eldest son of the duke of Monmouth, himself the natural son of Charles II and looked upon by English Protestants as their champion against Rome. (Charles II was darkly suspected of having Catholic sympathies, and his legitimate heir, his brother James duke of York, was known to be a member of that church.) In February 1679/80 Harris was brought to trial for 'selling and publishing a scan-

21. See James Sutherland, *The Restoration Newspaper and its Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), *passim*.

22. Donald F. McKenzie, *Stationers' Company Apprentices 1641-1700 and 1701-1800* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society), vols. 17 (1974) and 19 (1978).

23. At one time it was thought the *NEP* derived from this work, but Worthington Chauncey Ford in 'The New England Primer,' *Bibliographic Essays: A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924) has shown how little connection there is between the two books.

24. It is discussed at length in Ray, 'The Protestant Tutor.' The first edition (1679) of *The Protestant Tutor* is reproduced in its entirety from the British Library copy.

dalous and seditious pamphlet called Appeal from the Country to the City.' He had pirated this inflammatory tract, whose writer is held to be a certain Charles Blount, from the original publisher, identified by a contemporary as Langley Curtis.²⁵ It warned that its readers of the horrors that they might expect under a Roman Catholic ruler, '... the whole town in a flame, occasioned this second time by the same Papish malice which set it on fire before [a reference to the Great Fire of 1666]. At the same instant fancy that among the distracted crowd you behold troops of Papists ravishing your wives and daughters, dashing your little children's brains out against the walls, plundering your houses and cutting your own throats. . . .'²⁶ It supported Monmouth's claim to the throne and called on the people to rise against Charles II. Lord Chief Justice Scroggs remarking that one could 'hardly read a more base and pernicious book, to put us all in a flame,' Harris was convicted, pilloried, and sent to prison, contriving however to continue his news-sheet with the help of his wife and of Nathaniel Crouch (1632?-1725?), who under the names of R.B., or Richard or Robert Burton, was himself a miscellaneous writer who specialized in pilfering from other men's works. Crouch's exact connection with Harris is unknown, though in at least one book, *The New English Tutor* discussed below, material appears from previous publications by both of them. Like Harris, he published several works for young readers, usually ferociously anti-papist (from 1689 a profitable line), and often crudely violent, even salacious, though he chose supposedly godly subjects from the scriptures.

The news-sheet lasted until April 15, 1681, when it advertised a rabble-rousing broadside, 'A scheme of Popish cruelties; or a prospect of what we must expect under a popish successor.' The horrors that were forecast had already been catalogued in the above-mentioned 'Appeal from the Country,' but this time they

25. J. G. Muddiman, 'Benjamin Harris, the first American Journalist,' *Notes and Queries* 163 (1932): 131-32.

26. Quoted in J. G. Muddiman, *The King's Journalist, 1659-1689* (London: John Lane, 1923), 216.

were to be 'lively represented in a large copper plate'—as they already had been in several copper plates in *The Protestant Tutor*. Authority acted swiftly; the court of King's Bench bound him over to cease publishing, and he went back to prison. He made abject protestations of penitence from the King's Bench prison, but as soon as he was out returned to his old activities. 'This ungrateful wretch makes the use of his liberty that he carries down the seditious libels, which he was shy of vending here, to put them off at Bristol Fair,' wrote a London contemporary in 1683,²⁷ and it seems that he was also purveying similar material from a London coffee-house.

In February 1685 Charles II died, acknowledging that he was a Roman Catholic—as had been long rumored—and was succeeded by his defiantly Catholic brother James II. Four months later Monmouth landed on the Dorset coast, claiming that he as 'captain-general of Protestant forces of the kingdom' was the legal heir. After only five weeks he was dead too, defeated in battle and beheaded. Harris, the champion of Monmouth, understandably now felt himself to be *persona non grata* and left the country, probably first taking refuge in Holland and then making his way to Boston, which he and his son Vavasour reached late in 1686. The London bookseller John Dunton, who was also in Boston in 1686, wrote to a friend in London that it was not surprising that the *Protestant Tutor* had made Harris enemies with the Popish party. 'To speak the truth, Mr. Benj. Harris has had many good Thoughts, tho' he has wanted the Art of improving 'em; and cou'd he fix his Mercury a little, and not be so volatile, he wou'd do well enough.'²⁸

Harris was to make brief visits to London in the following two years, to see to his business in Gracechurch Street, and perhaps to buy books. From 1688 his Boston premises were known as the

27. Henry Muddiman, quoted in J. G. Muddiman: 'Benjamin Harris,' 150.

28. John Dunton, *Letters from New-England*, ed. W. H. Whitmore (Boston: Prince Society, 1867), 144.

London Coffee House, and in 1690 he secured a licence to sell 'Coffee, Tee and Chucaletto.' But he was again in trouble with authority. The first issue of his news-sheet *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick* (the first American newspaper), appeared—without permission—and was immediately suppressed.

It would seem from the almanac advertisement mentioned above that Harris had published a first edition of the *New-England Primer* sometime between 1687 and 1690, probably in 1690. The introduction of a hyphen in the title may be significant, indicating that whereas the John Gaine publication was a new primer for England, Harris wished it to be clear that the Boston one was specially designed for New England. But whether he had filched it from John Gaine or whether it was his own compilation will probably never be known.

Harris's Boston printing business was particularly successful during the years 1692–94, and Littlefield found thirty-two items recorded as published by him, well over half the total number of imprints for all of New England.²⁹ But Harris did not commit himself to the new country and by 1695 was back in London. Here there was now a Protestant monarch, William III, and the climate was more favorable for him. He launched yet another news-sheet, *Intelligence Domestick and Foreign*, hoping, he asserted, 'in some measure to retrieve my losses and misfortunes . . . under the happy Government of his present Majesty, who hath so gloriously restored and confirmed our rights and privileges to us.' (The Toleration Act of 1689 had restored freedom of worship to dissenters.) The news-sheet lasted only three weeks, and was followed by a paper almost instantly suppressed, Harris being accused (for the third time) of publishing false news, and taken into custody. Another, the *London Post*, was launched in 1699 and ran until 1705. By this time he had a reputation not just for sectarian polemics and turbulent behavior but for piracy and dishonesty. John Dunton, who had suffered at his hands, had turned violently

29. Littlefield, *Early Boston Booksellers*, 159.

against him: 'His employment, or rather livelihood, is to blast other men's credit, and to steal their copies.'³⁰ So this was the man who had such a formative influence on the new country—a very different character indeed from the worthy authors responsible for the schoolbooks to be discussed later. It is not known when he died, but perhaps by May 1718,³¹ because in that year an apprentice was bound to Vavasour Harris, who seems to have taken over the business.

Vavasour too must have died soon afterwards, by which time the printing business had dwindled to very little; records show that his widow was receiving poor relief in June 1720.³² Nevertheless the Harris firm was an important one, and Benjamin, bigoted and unscrupulous though he was, is a pioneer figure, one of the earliest printers to publish juvenile books in any quantity, producing titles that feature in all histories of the subject.

The first to be published, in 1673, was Benjamin Keach's famous dialogue *War with the Devil* 'chiefly intended for instruction of the younger sort,' and the way that a version of this reached the *NEP* long after the death of both Keach and Harris is of considerable interest. Keach was an Anabaptist preacher who had been in trouble with the authorities in 1664 over the unorthodoxy of the religious teaching in his *Childs Instructor*, and was ordered to destroy all the copies. *War with the Devil* derives from medieval morality plays, notably *Everyman* (an early sixteenth-century rendering of a Dutch original). In this verse drama God tells Death to summon Everyman. Everyman unsuccessfully pleads for delay, then tries to persuade his friends to go with him. He is finally prepared for the journey, but has to leave everything behind, bar only his good deeds. For this medieval writer it was worldly preoccupu-

30. John Dunton, 'Living Elegy,' reprinted in his *Life and Errors*, ed. J. B. Nichols (1818), 465. Nichols refers to Dunton as 'this ingenious but eccentric Bookseller, whose latter years were strongly tinged with insanity.'

31. Plomer, *Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers*, gives the date as c. 1708. Muddiman records the death of a Benjamin Harris in 1720, but this may have been either of the other Benjamin Harrises mentioned earlier, 'Benjamin Harris,' 169.

32. I am indebted to Professor Michael Treadwell, Trent University, Ontario, and to Giles Mandelbrote, British Library, for information about Benjamin Harris and his sons.

pations and the complacency of middle age that threatened the soul. For the Puritans it was the follies of youth, and in the later seventeenth century we find a surge of writings on this theme. In 1671 Thomas Sherman had written *Youths Tragedy* in the same dialogue form as *Everyman*. He took a far severer view, however. The repentance of wayward Youth comes too late, and he is consigned to everlasting damnation despite his last-minute pleas for forgiveness.

Benjamin Keach's *War with the Devil* followed two years after. It used a similar scenario to *Youths Tragedy* but was more merciful. Truth, Conscience, and the Devil all argue with Youth but the first two finally triumph, and as Youth pours out his remorse the voice of Christ is heard, granting forgiveness. Although Keach said on the title page of *War with the Devil* that it 'discover[ed] the corruption and vanity of youth,' he did not use it in his *Instructions for Youth, or the Childs and Youths Delight*, a popular compendium of religious and secular instruction, originally published in 1693 and later given the title of *The Childs Delight*. Instead, in later editions we find the very different dialogue between Christ, Youth, and the Devil—the same verse dialogue that was to be a feature of the *NEP*.

It is shorter and less prolix than *War with the Devil* and far more powerful. Youth starts blithe and carefree. He is deaf to the warning words of Christ, and listens instead to the beguiling Devil who assures him there is no hell and urges him to resist his parents, ignore his book, and to play truant from school. When the Devil perceives Youth's growing uneasiness, he changes his tactics and concedes that there is a heaven, and also 'a Hell of Misery.' But what matters that, when Youth can repent at any time? Christ gives one final warning, but still Youth hesitates, dreading the derision of his former comrades. Impatient, Christ sends Death to strike him down and is inexorable when Youth pleads that he is too young to die. The poem ends with Death carrying Youth away, and there is an eight-line conclusion pointing the moral:

Thus ends the Days of woful Youth
 That won't obey nor mind the Truth,
 Nor hearken to what Preachers say;
 But do their Parents disobey:
 They in their Youth go down to Hell,
 Under eternal Wrath to dwell.
 Many don't live out half their Days,
 For cleaving unto sinful Ways.

The first extant English edition of *Instructions for Youth* to include this dialogue is the ninth, which the British Library conjecturally dates as 1710, six years after Keach's death. Given the common practice then of digging in 'other mines,' and of sometimes using a popular name to float another's work, it would not be safe to assume from this that the Dialogue was necessarily written by Keach. But AAS possesses a copy of *Instructions for Children; or, The Child's and Youth's Delight . . . written by Benjamin Keach*, printed in New York by William Bradford in 1695. It is listed by Wing³³ as the second edition. In this the Dialogue is included under the title 'A short Dialogue, shewing the Woful state of an Ungodly Youth,' and it is reasonable to suppose that Keach wrote it himself and that this was its first appearance in print. It was apparently not taken up by the *NEP* until after 1727.³⁴

Keach had written *War with the Devil* for older readers; the frontispiece shows 'The youth in his converted state aet. 16' (in sober puritanical garments), and 'The youth in his natural state aet. 16' (dressed in the extreme of frivolous fashion). The message would not have had much urgency for the younger child, and

33. Donald Goddard Wing, *Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British America 1641-1700* (London: Index Society, 1945; rev. 1972).

34. Excerpts from it also occur in 'the Bradford fragment,' four leaves from an educational work found bound up in a copy of a book printed in Philadelphia in 1688. The date when it was bound can only be speculative. The fragment is in the possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and appears to have been tentatively identified as coming from a *New England Primer* of 1693. But there is no clear evidence about the date and the two pages of catechism that P. L. Ford reproduces are certainly not from either *Milk for Babes* or the *Westminster Shorter*, which are the only two that he had ever seen in the *NEP*. It seems more likely that the leaves come from an unrecorded edition of Keach's *Instructions for Youth*.

Keach also might well have regretted its note of optimism and welcomed the chance of redressing this in his schoolbook.

One of the few juvenile publications that can be claimed to be written by Harris rather than compiled from others was *The Holy Bible in Verse*, published in London in 1699, in Boston in 1717, and frequently reprinted there. Charles Nichols points out that the cuts in it are identical with ten of the twenty-four in the rhymed alphabet 'except that they are reversed, showing them to have been drawn on new blocks from an earlier edition.'³⁵ *The Holy Bible in Verse* was designed as a mnemonic rather than as poetry; the opening address to the 'Christian Reader' says 'you'll find it an excellent Antidote against a weak Memory.' In an edition of 1712 the younger Benjamin cautioned readers 'against a little spurious Book, printed with the same title as this, and shaped like it, as ignorantly and illiterately as can be, printed by one *Bradford*, which book is partly stolen from the Original first printed by B. Harris, Senior. . . .' This suggests that the older Harris had retired from the business by 1712.

Two lesser-known books followed. The British Library possesses a fourth edition of *The Fables of the Young Aesop*, published by a Benjamin Harris in 1700 and signed B.H. In an excessively vague preface it is implied that these verse fables were the work of a German author, Christianus Lozmani, who was crippled by a fall when he was a child and died young. However, the 'Life' of Lozmani that follows gives no account of anything he wrote, nor even mentions the fables. It seems possible that 'Lozmani' was a fiction on the part of 'B.H.,' the real author, and the verse is certainly as lame as Harris's versified Bible. In 1709 a Benjamin Harris published *A Token for Youth* 'by J.J.' With this compilation of exemplary deaths of children (which also includes matter lifted from Thomas White's *A Little Book for Little Children*, 1674?) the publisher clearly hoped to cash in on the enormously popular

35. Nichols, 'Holy Bible in Verse,' 74.

success of *A Token for Children* by James Janeway, who had died in 1674.

More important than either of these is *The New English Tutor, enlarged; for the more easy attaining the true reading of English. To which is added Milk for Babes* (i.e., the catechism by John Cotton). The title page of the copy in the British Library is mutilated, but it is surmised to have been published in London in about 1710. Possibly it was based on versions of the *NEP* that have not survived. The similarities between it and the editions of 1727 are so marked; indeed, Ford reproduced it in facsimile in his monograph so that the two could be compared. It is catalogued under Harris, and Ford asserts that it must have been printed by him 'or with his authority, for a comparison of the John Rogers print with that used in Harris's edition of *The Protestant Tutor* of 1716 shows them to be used from the same block.'³⁶ But it also includes illustrations to four verses—On Death, On Judgment, On Heaven, On Hell—that would seem to be drawn from those used for verses on the same subject in Nathaniel Crouch's *Youth's Divine Pastime*. (The first edition of this latter has not survived; a third was published in 1691.) William Sloane has strangely described *The New English Tutor* as 'a later edition of *The Protestant Tutor*,'³⁷ but the contents are almost totally different; only the martyrdom of John Rogers and his supposed verses are common to both. At the end we find anti-papist propaganda; the child is directed to 'behold the Man of Sin, the Pope,' and overleaf there is a diagram which Ford has identified as 'a cut used to illustrate the signs of the zodiac in an almanac,'³⁸ (fig. 2) with a papal tiara added to the naked figure, and the labeling altered to read 'malice, murder, false worship,' etc. Otherwise Protestant polemics are absent.

The opening pages of *The New English Tutor* and the two 1727 *NEPs* are similar: the biblical texts, alphabet letters in different types, and words of from one to poly-syllables. (These are the

36. Ford, *New-England Primer*, 138.

37. Sloane, *Children's Books in England and America*, 184.

38. Ford, *New-England Primer*, 50.

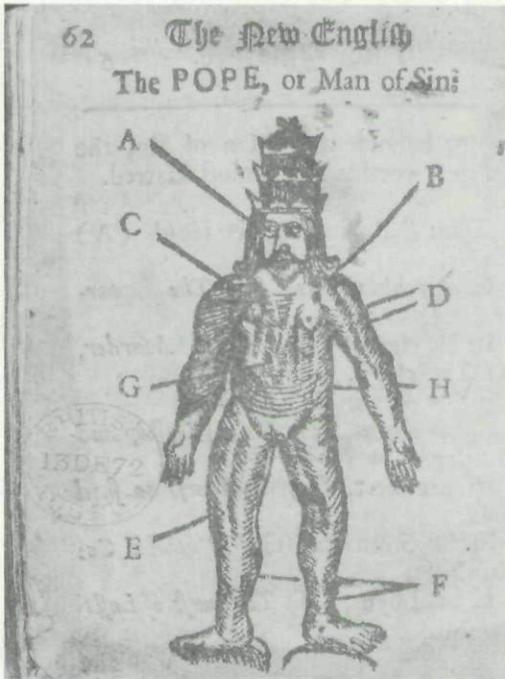


Fig. 2. *The New English Tutor* concluded with anti-papist propaganda. The key to 'The POPE, or Man of SIN' lists eight parts of the body that were the source of evils rendering the Pope 'worthy [of] thy utmost hatred.' The British Library.

same in all three books, but the *Tutor* includes more examples.) Further on we find Agur's Prayer ('Remove far from me Vanity and Lyes,' *Proverbs* 30:8-9), which was to be a common feature of later *NEPs* (though not included in 1727). The *Tutor* also includes 'the Prayer of King Edward the Sixth' from Foxe's *Martyrs*, advertised by Harris in 1690 but never found in any extant *NEP*. Among other contents common to both the *Tutor* and the *NEP* are The Dutiful Child's Promises; the Dialogue between Christ, Youth, and the Devil; John Cotton's catechism; and the familiar rhymed alphabet with its thumbnail woodcuts.

There has been much speculation about the origin of this, Ford conjecturing that Harris, who was by way of being a versifier,



Fig. 3. The alphabet from the *New English Tutor Enlarged*. The British Library.

might well have been the author.³⁹ (He also suggested that he might have written the Dialogue between Christ, Youth, and the Devil.) Sloane noted that the same alphabet appeared in *A Guide for the Child and Youth* of 1725, by T.H., 'Teacher of a Private School.'⁴⁰ Though widely thought of as an eighteenth-century work, this was in fact a fairly late printing of a schoolbook originally published in London in 1667, of which edition only one copy seems extant—the sole survivor from the seventeenth century—at Keele University, Staffordshire (fig. 4).⁴¹ It was a popular work, frequently reprinted, particularly in Scotland.⁴² From the prayers for the bishops and the royal family and the tone of the doctrinal matter we can see that T.H. was a Royalist and a High Churchman of the Laudian sort, who could only have sur-

39. Ford, *New-England Primer*, 26.

40. Sloane, *Children's Books in England and America*, 193.

41. Not listed in Wing (1945), this was included in the revised 1972 edition.

42. There were five eighteenth-century editions in Scotland: two in Edinburgh, one in Glasgow, two in Aberdeen, but only three in London. The popularity of such a High Church, Royalist book in Presbyterian Scotland is certainly unexpected. It was presumably used in Episcopalian circles, and the National Library of Scotland suggests that in the seventeenth century Aberdeen was a predominately Royalist area that had not embraced Calvinism in the same way as central and southwestern Scotland had.

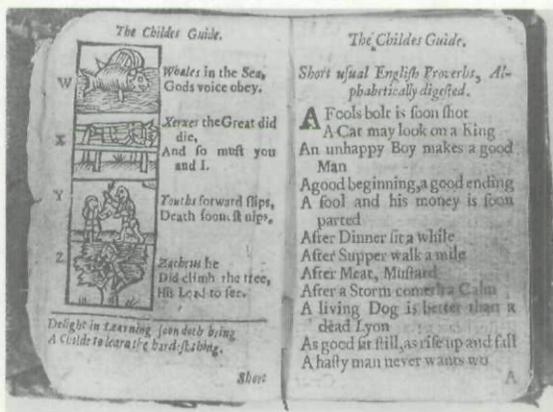


Fig. 4. T.H. *A Guide for the Childe and Youth* (1667). Keele University Library.

vived the Puritanism of the Commonwealth period by keeping a very low profile. His opening remarks in 1667 to 'the Instructors of Children' tell us that for a long time he did not know what to do with his book, 'but since a blessed Sun-shine hath appeared in our Horizon, [i.e. the restoration of the Stuart monarchy] I resolved to publish it.'

The words of the alphabet as they appear in *The New English Tutor* are the same as T.H.'s with a few significant variations. Under K, T.H.—an ardent Royalist—referred to Charles II, newly restored to the throne, contrasting him with Britain's previous ruler, Cromwell the regicide: 'King Charles the Good / No man of blood.' This Harris in his *New English Tutor* neatly avoided by substituting 'King William's Dead / And left the Throne / To Ann [sic] our Queen / Of great Renown,' and Anne's short reign, 1702–14, gives an approximate date for his book. (As Harris's history will have shown, he could hardly have agreed with the original sentiment.) Under O both T.H. and the *Tutor* show a crude cut of a tree with a face in it, but the accompanying couplets—referring to the story that in 1651 Charles II, then Prince of Wales, had escaped from the Parliamentary army by hiding in an oak tree—are subtly different. T.H. says, 'The Royal Oak / our King did save / From Fatal stroak / of rebel Slave.' But the *Tutor* rejected 'rebel slave' and modified the rhyme to 'The Royal Oak / It was the Tree / That sav'd his / Royal Majesty.' (This reference to an event that could mean little in New England had extraordinary persistence, and was still found in mid-nineteenth-century primers.) The 1727 *NEP* follows the *Tutor* for O, but further modifies the K couplet by giving it a general rather than a particular slant: 'Our King the good / No man of blood.'

The most unexpected feature in the *Tutor* alphabet is the way Harris, the passionate iconoclast, accepts T.H.'s rendering of the letter I. The *Guide* had shown a figure on the cross below the letters INRI (Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum), with the accompanying rhyme 'Jesus did die / For thee and I.' Puritans abhorred the symbol of the cross, indeed Ford knew no *NEP*, even Epis-

copalian editions, to contain it.⁴³ Over the years the alphabet in the *NEP* came to vary according to the mood of the printer and the times, but if the subjects were biblical, I was often represented by Job, as in the 1727 editions: 'Job feels the Rod / Yet blesses God.' But the *Tutor* retained the woodcut of Christ on the cross, merely substituting the more grammatical couplet 'Sweet Jesus he / Dy'd on a Tree.'

A smaller point: in both T.H.'s book and in the *Tutor* the Y couplet 'Youths forward slips / Death soonest nips.' In neither case is there an apostrophe in that first word, but in the seventeenth century this was standard. By 'slips' the writer intended either young persons (as in a slip of a girl), or else young growth in a plant which Death like frost so easily blights. In the 1727 *NEP* the printer has struck out the s in 'youths' and this faulty reading persisted, though sometimes further emended to try to make better sense. George Livermore recorded a version that substituted 'onward' for 'forward' and showed a little boy driving a hoop, pursued by Death, and about to slip.⁴⁴

III. SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SPELLERS

Harris was a scavenger, not an innovator, and he had no experience of teaching. He gathered together the ingredients of his *New England Primer* from other men's works, according to the practice of time, even among schoolmasters, who did not scruple, as Thomas Lye had so engagingly admitted, to dig 'in others mines.' (They even copied each other's model sentences.) So the alphabet was not only the item that Harris lifted from T.H. He also took *The Dutiful Child's Promises*, with its preface, already quoted, about 'the Childe being entred in his Letters and Spelling.'

It was strange that he, a radical dissenter, should have drawn on *A Guide for the Childe and Youth*, which was so alien to his own outlook, and indeed stands out from its Puritan contemporaries.

43. Ford, *New-England Primer*, 24.

44. George Livermore, *The Origin, History and Character of the New England Primer* (New York: C. F. Heartman, 1915). Reprinted from the edition of 1849.

Probably the picture alphabet had drawn him to it. Though this was an unusual feature in 1667, T.H. was by no means a pioneer. Comenius had begun his encyclopedic *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (Nuremberg 1658, London 1659) with a delightful one in Latin and English, where the child is invited to make the same sounds as the bird or animal depicted—‘Cornix cornicatur. The crow cryeth. á á A a,’ finishing ‘Tabanus dicit. The Breeze or Horse flie sayeth. ds ds Z z’—the only difficulty being, as Charles Hoole admitted in his introduction to the first English translation, that it was ‘fitted for German Children rather than ours.’ (Hoole, 1609–67, was headmaster of a ‘private Grammar-School in Lothbury Garden, London.’) Hoole was, however, very enthusiastic about the illustrations—one to every opening: ‘For it is apparent, that Children (from their Infancy almost) are delighted with Pictures, and willingly please their eyes with these sights. And it will be very worth the pains to have once brought it to pass, that scarecrows may be taken out of wisdomes Garden.’⁴⁵ But *Orbis Pictus* would always have been a very expensive book, presenting many printing problems. There is no doubt about its fame, but the ordinary petty-school pupil needed a cheaper speller. The last English edition was the twelfth of 1777—from which however a New York edition of 1810 (the first American edition) was prepared, with illustrations by Alexander Anderson.

Other schoolmasters in the post-Comenius years also tried to remove scarecrows from the garden, sometimes using fanciful titles, more rarely including pictures. Thomas Lye (‘sometimes Minister of the Gospel,’ i.e., a dissenting preacher) called his 1671 speller *The Childs Delight*, and included a picture alphabet. John Newton, author of *School Pastime for Young Children* (1669) (who in an effusive dedication to his patron deprecatingly described himself and other masters of petty schools as ‘low shrubs’), was an admirer of Comenius, and included an attractive animal picture alphabet in his book. He thought learning to make words through

45. Preface to *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, trans. Charles Hoole (London, 1659).

letters on picture cards was a better method 'than by pointing with a fustue [*sic*] to the Letters in a Book,' and gave some suggestions for children's reading once they had mastered the art: 'the Church Service, Comenius his Orbis sensualism pictus, Aesop's fables, Herbert's poems, Quarle's Emblems.' (This gives some idea of the paucity of material then available for beginners.) The methods advocated in *School Pastime* were far more progressive than the then standard practices. For instance, there was a suggestion—perhaps taken from Comenius, whom Newton clearly admired—that the child should 'be suffered also to imitate the Pictures by hand.'

The books he cites indicate that he was writing for relatively wealthy patrons, but for many children the speller was probably going to be their sole reading apart from the Bible, and for almost all of them the only book specifically designed for the young. In New England there was even less time and money for expensive aids to learning. From the occasional bookseller's inventory we can get some idea of what schoolbooks were used there and their relative popularity. In 1700 the contents of Michael Perry's Boston bookshop⁴⁶ included '1 Ellis English school,' '12 Strong's spelling bookes,' '20 Youngs spelling bookes.' Tobias Ellis's *The English School*, first published in 1670, was a decidedly up-market spelling book. The 1680 edition (the first to survive) has alphabets (of progressively longer words) with elegant copper engravings, very different from the crude scrawls of the *NEP*. Unusually it also contains 'Directions for Children's Health, and Long Life,' similar to those to be formulated by Locke in 1693.⁴⁷ 'Strong's spelling booke' is *England's Perfect School-master: or, directions for exact spelling, reading and writing* by Nathanael Strong, 'Master of Great St Bartholomew's School in Cloth-Fair near West-Smithfield [London].' It was designed to last those boys who were not destined for grammar-school education and Latin, for the

46. John Dunton, *Letters from New-England*, Appendix B.

47. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.

whole of their school life. These boys were going to be apprenticed to tradesmen, so it begins with the alphabet and easy syllables and finishes with model letters, specimen bills, and receipts. Edward Young's *The Compleat English Scholar, in spelling, reading and writing*, first published in 1675, was even more popular; there were forty-one English editions by 1752.

Littlefield says that Edmund Coote's *The English Schoole-maister*, originally published in 1596, was popular in early New England schools.⁴⁸ Much of its appeal must have lain in the way that it addressed itself to the lay persons who often were called upon to teach reading and writing; Coote describes them as 'men and women of trades (as Taylors, Weavers, Shopkeepers, Seamsters and such other) as have undertaken the charge of teaching others.' As well as alphabet letters and syllables, it includes prayers, graces, metrical versions of the psalms, a catechism, and a few reading exercises in connected prose, which are interesting pieces of social history. 'I met a man by the way this day, who when he saw me hit me a blow, that it did swell: for that I did not stir my cap when I met him and ran my way: Then he did fret and outran me, and drew out his staf, that had a knot on the end, and hit me a clap on the scul, and a cros-blow on the leg, so that I did skip at it. . . .'

Michael Perry's stock also included quantities of hornbooks, '16 doz. gilt,' '38 doz. plain,' '106 doz. Assembly's catechism' (i.e., the Westminster Shorter, which always seems to have been more favored than *Milk for Babes*), and quantities of unspecified 'primers,' which may have been the *NEP*.

Children began their learning early. Charles Hoole said that the sooner a child was put to school the better; he suggested that 'betwixt three and four years of age' was a good time to start. 'The usual way to begin with a child, when he is first brought to Schoole, is to teach him to know his letters in the Horn-book,

⁴⁸ George Emery Littlefield, *Early Schools and Schoolbooks in New England* (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1904), 119.

where he is made to run over all the letters in the Alphabet of Christ-cross-row, both forwards and backwards, until he can tel any one of them, which is pointed at.⁴⁹

Joseph Brooksbank, author of the *Compleat School-Master* (1660), gives some further idea of methods at petty schools. The boys in his lowest form had to know the alphabet and be able to indicate the different letters with their fescues (pointers). The next form would stand up with books and fescues to read the lists of single-syllable words. The highest form had to deal with polysyllables, then perhaps in the afternoon read from the Bible.

The standard seventeenth-century speller catered for these teaching methods, and expected that petty-school pupils would need no other book. Many schoolmaster authors therefore provided a modicum of extra reading matter after the formal instruction. A favorite pedagogical amusement was to devise preposterous sentences ('Leave *Coughing*, then this *Coffin* take away'; 'Now am I bound for Ve-nice, an a-vow'd Vo-ta-ry of Ve-nus'⁵⁰) to illustrate words 'which are alike in Sound, yet unlike in their Signification' as George Fox and Ellis Hookes's *Instructions for Right Spelling* put it. (This Quaker primer, first published as *A Primer and Catechism for Children* in 1670, was the earliest English spelling book to be reprinted in America, editions appearing at Philadelphia in 1702 and 1737, at Boston in 1743, and Newport in 1769.)

Supposing then that the contents of *The New English Tutor* of c. 1710, outlined in the previous section, were reasonably close to the seventeenth-century *New-England Primer*, how would the latter stand in comparison to other educational manuals of the time? Even by the standards prevailing then it seems forbidding, saturated in reminders of death, and with little in the way of secular matter. And why the many printers who were to issue versions of

49. Charles Hoole, *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching School*, pt. I, 'The Petty Schoole' (London, 1659), 2.

50. The first comes from Fox and Hookes, *Instructions for Right Spelling* (1673), the second from the anonymous *Compendious School-master* (1688).

the *NEP* should all choose to retain the martyrdom of John Rogers is unaccountable. The 1727 *NEPs* already seem to belong to a past age, and show nothing of the lighter touch that was becoming evident in education. An English schoolmaster who signed himself J.G. had written *A Play-Book for Children* in 1694 'to allure them to read as soon as they can speak plain.' In the preface he said: 'I have sufficiently experienced the ill effects of large leaves, close Stuft with things not understood by Children, and many times in a black Print, as if the design had been to frighten from, rather than allure to Learning.' William Ronksley in *The Child's Weeks-Work* (1712) also sought to 'allure' small children and gratify 'their gay and airy temper.'

Come, take this Book
Dear Child, and look
On it a while, and try
What you can find
To Please your Mind;
The rest you may pass by.

His reading matter included verses, riddles, jokes, and fables.

In the course of its long history the *NEP* rarely tried to allure or to temper the original Puritan austerity. To the end, either John Cotton's *Milk for Babes* or the Westminster Shorter Catechism still formed a substantial part of the whole. There was much urging that children should daily prepare themselves for death; there were several verses on this theme (one has already been quoted), and there was the Keach verse dialogue. The emphasis on short graves that was a feature of the *NEP* throughout its life is not found in other spellers, even seventeenth-century ones. Thomas M. Clark (1812-1903), who came from a Presbyterian family though he later moved to the Episcopal church and was bishop of Rhode Island for forty-nine years, in 1895 recalled the *Primer* with loathing. 'There was a degree of gloomy satisfaction in the picture of John Rogers at the stake, with his wife and numerous progeny surrounding him, as they all looked quite comfortable, but the little poem which followed, beginning with the words "In

the burying ground I see / Graves there shorter than I [*sic*]" illustrated by the view of a graveyard crowded to its utmost capacity, did not inspire me with any sentiment but horror and fear, and this was intensified by an awful dialogue between "Youth, Death and the Devil" which it was an outrage to put into a little child's mouth.⁵¹

The bishop was contrasting what was available for Sunday schools in 1895 with the meagre provision in his own childhood. When he was a schoolboy there were better spellers by American authors for general educational use; it was on Sundays that he seems to have used the *New England Primer*, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century this is probably how it was mostly used—to teach the catechism, and to provide reading on a day when, for the strict, no secular literature was allowed. The American Sunday school touched the lives of far more children than its English counterpart, which was generally regarded as an institution for the poor and uneducated, and Sunday-school use of the *NEP* must have extended its life considerably. Writing in 1900, Littlefield spoke of a then fairly recent edition, revised and enlarged, published by the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society.⁵² It seems that this bastion of the orthodox Congregational Church was the last to fly the standard of New England Puritanism.

51. Thomas M. Clark, *Reminiscences* (New York: Whitaker, 1895), 7.

52. Littlefield, *Early Boston Booksellers*, 158.

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