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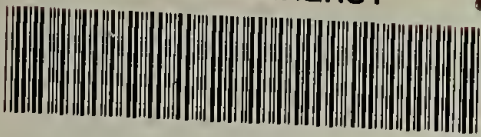
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A STABILIZING INFLUENCE: THE “WAR OF THE DICTIONARIES,” 1848-1861

**A Thesis Presented
by
JAMES F. LEACH**

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of**

MASTER OF ARTS

May 1996

Department of History

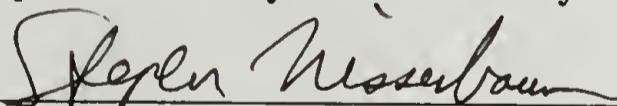
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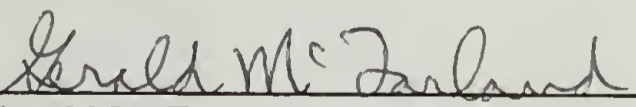
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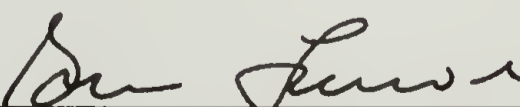

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INTRODUCTION:

A DURABLE STANDARD

Had Charles and George Merriam lived into the twentieth century, they would have been well-pleased at the success, and remarkable durability, of the literary juggernaut that they helped to create and launch. Noah Webster's name had become roughly synonymous with dictionaries, and he had been enshrined as a Founding Father. He was the Schoolmaster of the Republic: associate of George Washington, friend of Benjamin Franklin, dogged supporter of the Constitution and the Christian religion. That the Foundation for American Christian Education could still draw on this image in their forward to a 1967 reprint of the first edition of Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language*, is a testament to the tenacity of the Webster myth; but the reality was quite different.

By 1890, when G. & C. Merriam Co. finally retired the venerable *American Dictionary*, the book had gone through five revisions at their hands, not counting the first edition compiled by Noah Webster himself in 1828 and his own additions to that in 1840. Webster died in 1843 and from that point on each succeeding edition of his dictionary departed farther and farther from his principles. When the first edition of *Webster's International Dictionary* appeared in bookstores under the editorship of Noah Porter, most of what was uniquely Websterian was gone. The book had been shorn of Webster's innovations in spelling and pronunciation. His largely incorrect etymologies had been replaced by the most current philological work coming out of Germany. Even his highly didactic definitions (the real selling point of the *American Dictionary*) had been altered and in many cases replaced with more sedate and informative prose. In fact, with its inclusion of slang and vulgar language in the current (fourth) edition of the *International*, there is good reason to believe that Webster himself would be appalled to have his name associated with the book at all.

Regardless, if sheer number of Webster's dictionaries on the market is any indication, in the lexicographic world Webster is king and has been for more than one hundred years. This was not always the case. Nor was it clear when the Merriams acquired the rights to the *American Dictionary* in 1843 that the road to riches lay open before them. Instead, they had bought the rights to a dictionary that had twice proven unsellable, three times if we count the book's unlucky and brief sojourn in the hands of an Amherst, Massachusetts publisher who hoped to use it as exchange stock. Even worse, there were already two dictionaries on the market that were significantly cheaper and more in line with public taste-- Joseph E. Worcester's *Universal and Critical Dictionary of the English Language* and Worcester and Chauncey A. Goodrich's 1831 abridgement of the *American Dictionary*.

How did G. & C. Merriam Co. turn Webster's expensive, cumbersome and much-maligned dictionary into an almost uncontested national standard in the space of less than fifteen years? There is no easy answer to this question; but the appropriate place to start is with the changes in both the technology and economics of book production that were roughly coincident with George and Charles Merriam's arrival in Springfield in 1831. Unlike their Brookfield forbears, the Springfield-based Merriams were at the center of a regional publishing nexus which sent books to rural correspondents and received printwork and cash in return. By the time they acquired the *American Dictionary*, the Merriams were working almost exclusively with cash and expanding to accomodate the demands of a national market through the use of stereotyping and rail transport.

The Merriams moved into new forms of marketing and distribution, but they also attempted to adapt older, more personal business practices to a far-flung, often bureaucratic, clientele. Initially, they used the time-honored practice of sending agents out to sell their books to individuals, school-districts and counties. By 1851 they had adapted this strategy to state

legislatures and boards of education. Using the recommendations of other well-known men and the attention of lobbyists to push their “state measures” through state appropriations committees and committees on education, they gathered orders totalling in the thousands rather than the dozens of books yielded by more traditional marketing techniques.

The Merriams were also extremely adept readers of public opinion. They offered a national standard: a dictionary and a figurehead (Noah Webster) as rallying points in a battle over the substance of public education and social reform.

When the first rumblings of secession and the Civil War finally swept the controversy from the papers in 1861, the “War of the Dictionaries” had played itself out on many different levels. Long before G. & C. Merriam Co. came head to head with Joseph Worcester's publishers Jenks, Hickling and Swan and the “War” began in earnest, they were fighting with Webster's heirs to establish a clear copyright to the *American Dictionary*. Shortly after its publication in 1847, the controversy degenerated, as Oliver Wendell Holmes observed, into a “disguised rivalry of . . . publishers” for market domination. On another level, the publishers competed in a public where performance counted as much as substance and the reputations of both author and publisher carried the potential of opening vast markets in both the Northeast and the growing Mid-West. Thus, the publishers tailored their advertising campaigns, and their slanders against one another, to specific market sectors with explicit agendas for dealing with a mobile, anonymous, and increasingly foreign population.

At the base of all of this is a fundamental market shift-- from artisanal production and barter to factory production and a cash economy-- that radically altered the book trade, the structure of the marketplace, and the ways in which Americans in the years before the Civil War responded to change. The national standard, the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, represented a point of stability in this time of flux and Websterian advocates seemed willing to turn

to the Dictionary as often as the Bible for reassurance that everything could be right with the world. But, in 1831, when the Merriams came to Springfield at the invitation of a town afraid that their local newspapers had taken on a Unitarian taint, the national standard and the paper man they created to carry it, had yet to be born.

CHAPTER I

REDEFINING THE DICTIONARY AND THE FIRM

G. & C. Merriam Co. was not the first Merriam family collaboration in the printing business. In 1798, Ebenezer and Dan Merriam, at the invitation of “a small group of successful farmers, country lawyers, physicians, and merchants” moved from Worcester, Massachusetts to the growing “center village” of Brookfield twenty miles to the west. The brothers immediately founded a newspaper, the *Political Repository: or Farmer’s Journal*, which they abandoned in 1802: “the region’s population density and economic development were insufficient to support a newspaper in competition with [Isaiah] Thomas’ *Massachusetts Spy* and those papers published in the county seats to the west, Northampton and Springfield.”¹

E. Merriam & Co., faced a dilemma. Should the firm dissolve or stay in Brookfield? They resolved to stay and evolved into the sort of rural printer-booksellers that historian William Charvat describes in “Author and Publisher.” The Merriams were minor “correspondents” with larger publisher-booksellers in the cities—Worcester, Boston, Philadelphia and New York. Brookfield books (primarily Bibles and devotional literature before 1820 and schoolbooks, hymnals and “a new breed of works of religious instruction and consolation” thereafter) were sent by freight wagon into the cities and, in return, books that the Merriams had ordered flowed back out to them. In short, the Merriams received books for books, and, infrequently, settled their accounts with the larger firms in additional books, printing supplies or printing jobs. No cash, or so little as to be negligible, changed hands—and then always in favor of the larger firm.²

¹ Jack Larkin, “The Merriams of Brookfield: Printing in the Economy and Culture of Rural Massachusetts in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 1986 96(1), 40.

² William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Amherst Ma: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 47. Larkin 45-47.

The Merriams stood at the minor end of the line from urban publisher-bookseller to rural printer-bookseller, but they were also at the center of their own network of exchange with “ninety-one rural merchants in twenty-six towns of southwestern Worcester County.” The Merriams provided books in exchange for goods or store credits and, very infrequently, small quantities of cash.³

In this way, E. Merriam & Co. subsisted, and supported as many as thirty-one people, until the bottom dropped out around 1845. Homer Merriam, who eventually joined his brothers George and Charles in Springfield, noted that about 1845 the old system of books for books had broken down. Intimations of the shift from exchange of goods to cash exchange surfaced as early as 1824 when the Merriam’s paper suppliers began to demand cash rather than the odds and ends exchange that had characterized earlier relations. In response, the firm began to take on print jobs for cash from the larger firms with whom they did business. The measure had some degree of success. It provided the Merriams with much-needed cash and gave urban publishers access to cheaper printing rates; but it could not last forever. As Homer recalled, the delicate balance between cash and exchange finally collapsed altogether when city booksellers stopped ordering books in exchange for their own stock and began accumulating “cash balances against us.” Like many rural printer-booksellers, in 1848 E. Merriam & Co. fell victim to the tightening noose of urban cash versus the older exchange relations in which they still stood with their rural clientele.⁴

What factors enabled urban publishers to make the switch from an exchange to a cash-based economy and place their rural dependents in such uncomfortable straits? William Charvat argues that the accumulation of capital sufficient to “take over their proper functions from writers,” and rural printer-booksellers, flowed into the coffers of urban publishers primarily as a

³ Larkin, 48.

⁴ Larkin, 48-51, 65.

result of two changes. The first change, realized through agreements between “respectable publishers . . . not to interfere with each other’s reprint arrangements and the introduction of serialized reprinting of British novels (the stuff on which the cheap reprint market was based) in magazines like Harper’s Monthly, pushed retail book prices “to a level where some profit was possible” by curtailing the profitable reprinting business on which the American market thrived. The second change was the opening up of a “truly national market” with the extension of railroads into the interior. With increased profit on individual books, and the ability to distribute those books to a national market, the total profit was greater and corresponding, and the system of exchange associated with it increasingly unnecessary and unprofitable. Urban publisher-booksellers could effectively deal directly with their rural audience and save themselves the trade discount offered to former middlemen.⁵

Charvat concentrated on the negative aspect of the transportation revolution for rural book production, but transportation improvements that antedated the railroad actually fostered dispersed publishing and made Springfield a prime place to establish a printing house in 1831. George and Charles Merriam could not have known that Springfield was destined to become a railroad nexus for Western Massachusetts, Connecticut and Vermont, but they were certainly aware that the town—“with good highways east and west and a covered toll bridge across the river since 1816”—had promise as an overland, and, in a much more limited way, water transport center. Ronald Zboray contends that the “early transportation revolution, dominated by roads and waterways, encouraged the decentralization of publishing in scattered urban centers.”⁶

⁵ Charvat, 55.

⁶ Michael H. Frisch, *Town into City: Springfield, Massachusetts and the Meaning of Community, 1840-1880* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1972), 17-18. Ronald J. Zboray, “Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation,” *American Quarterly* 1988 40(1), 76.

In 1831, the shift from exchange to cash had not yet gathered the force that would eventually push E. Merriam & Co. out of business, and so when George and Charles Merriam opened their bookshop on the corner of Main and State Streets in Springfield, they largely emulated their uncle Ebenezer's business practices. Although they avoided the misstep of trying to publish a newspaper in Springfield (as they had been invited to do by "the orthodox people of the town" who feared the taint of Unitarianism in their own papers), the brothers did carry on a "bread-and-butter trade as booksellers" and began to turn out the "schoolbooks, Bibles and books of law" that had been their uncle's primary exchange stock. Unlike Uncle Ebenezer, G.& C. Merriam Co. prospered.⁷

Robert Leavitt, hired by G.& C. Merriam Co. to write their centennial history, attributed the early success of the company to the thrift the Merriams learned in their uncle's shop, to their appreciation of the value of stereotyping both in terms of cost and convenience, and, finally, to their "keen appreciation of the value of printer's ink in selling, of artfully stimulated publicity, and of the influence of a judicious distribution of free copies." Like most fledgling printers of the period, the primary difference between G. & C. Merriam Co. and E. Merriam Co. was that George and Charles recognized the importance of stereotyping, the "acquisition of books with an already-existing demand," and vigorous advertising to their success.⁸

The Merriams were not alone in their "keen appreciation" of either stereotyping or the value of advertising. Stereotyping simultaneously revolutionized book production and advertising by removing the danger of overselling a press run. It enabled publishers to engage in "long-term

⁷ Robert Keith Leavitt, *Noah's Ark, New England Yankees and the Endless Quest: A Short History of the Original Webster Dictionaries, With Particular Reference to their First Hundred Years as Publications of G.& C. Merriam Company*, (Springfield Ma: G.& C. Merriam Company, 1947), 45.

⁸ Leavitt, 44, 43.

advertising campaigns to boost not only the sales of the particular work but also the author's celebrity, in the hopes that previous works by that author might be sold."⁹

At the outset, G. & C. Merriam Co. departed from E. Merriam Co.'s business strategy in significant ways. The pillars on which the company would rest were stereotype plates and an effective, pro-active, advertising campaign to keep the plates "busy." And like so many young firms, G. & C. Merriam began to look for copyrights with an existing demand to act as an anchor for the firm. "[T]he brothers . . . decided to concentrate and specialize in one or two fields," and until the close of the 1830s, their primary triumph was the acquisition of *Chitty's Pleadings*, a series of law textbooks. But until 1843 G. & C Merriam lacked any other book, or series of books, with sales solid enough on which to build a fortune in copyrights and stereotyped plates. Circumstances, however, were about to change.¹⁰

When the first edition of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* rolled off the presses of New Haven printer Hezekiah Howe in 1828, its author's name was already a household word. His *American Spelling Book* was probably the most popular textbook in the nation-- approximately seven million had been printed by the end of 1827. Despite the brisk sales of his speller and the almost unheard of sums paid to him by Hudson and Goodwin for the rights to print the book for the entire fourteen-year copyright period, to get his dictionary published Noah Webster found himself back in the position in which he began with the first edition of the *American Spelling Book* in 1783. He had to underwrite at least part of the publication costs.¹¹

⁹ Zboray, 73.

¹⁰ James Green, "Author Publisher Relations in America up to 1825," unpublished paper distributed in "Critical Methods in Bibliography and the History of the Book" (Worcester, Ma: American Antiquarian Society, June 10, 1994), 7. Leavitt, 46.

¹¹ E. Jennifer Monaghan, *A Common Heritage: Noah Webster's Blue-Back Speller*, (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1983), 227, 72, 74. Noah Webster's biographers disagree about whether or how much money he had to provide. Most contemporary biographers mention it not at all, but

In 1816, Noah Webster was among the first of a group of professional authors who could make arrangements with publishers to buy the printing rights to their books for a “term of years, for a stated sum.” Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel’s exhaustive bibliography of Webster’s writings identifies one hundred sixty editions of the book by that time. Jennifer Monaghan’s more particular history of the American, or “Blue-Back”, Speller notes that, not including the 338,583 copies printed in 1816, almost two and a half million of copies of the speller were in print. Webster was both famous and successful, but the cost of producing the *American Dictionary* and the wariness of publishers to take risks in the wake of the Panic of 1819 placed him in a difficult position. “In the early twenties American publishers were not accustomed to paying anything at all to native writers, nor did they, except on rare. . . occasions, print native literary works at their own risk.” The responsibility for financing a new work, such as the 1793 edition of Webster’s speller, fell most often to the author who was also his own promoter and, occasionally, distributor. He relied on his “publisher” only for access to a press.¹²

Webster was an established “name” when he finally contracted with New York publisher Sherman Converse in 1826 to produce his massive *American Dictionary of the English Language*: why, then, was he expected to grease the wheels of production with some of his own money? The answer probably has less to do with Noah Webster than with his publisher and the gravity of the task at hand. In 1853, Sherman Converse was still complaining, not without cause, that the

Charles Merriam's “Recollections. . .” state “the copyright was taken out in the name of the author, and it is understood was published at his charge.” The only contemporary biographer to mention this possibility is Richard Moss who notes that Webster “had to agree to underwrite some of the cost himself.” Unfortunately, Moss did not cite where he got his information. [Richard Moss, *Noah Webster*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 21.]

¹² Charvat, 44. Emily Ellsworth Ford Skeel, Edwin H. Carpenter, ed., *A Bibliography of the Writings of Noah Webster* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1958), 5-55. Monaghan, 227. Charvat, 41-43.

dictionary had cost him “from two to three years of the best portion of my business life, without any adequate remuneration.” Webster’s fame aside, Converse needed his financial help because the cost of producing the dictionary must have been breathtaking not only in the traditional expenses of paper, ink and printing but also in the special-ordering of several obscure typefaces from Germany to print Webster’s etymologies. Neither Sherman Converse or Noah Webster left behind records of the cost of the first edition of 2,500 sets of the *American Dictionary*; but when the House of Baldwin rejected the work in 1825 they priced it out at £4,000. Webster was still an exception to the rule in that Converse was willing to do the job at all; but the cost of the work was simply too much for Converse to bear alone.¹³

James Green points out that this sort of shared risk was common with expensive books, and uses the first edition of Joel Barlow’s the *Columbiad* as an excellent example. Like the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, The *Columbiad* was meant to be an ambitious and sumptuous book. It was to be printed in “a large quarto format, [with] elegant hot-pressed paper, wide margins, large type, generous leading between the lines and fine engravings. John Conrad, Barlow’s publisher, initially agreed to publish the book at his own cost, but was forced to borrow \$2,000 from the author “to tide them over until sales began.” Conrad went bankrupt in 1812 and Barlow never recovered his money. Converse was probably aware of this and other literary disasters and, shrewd businessman that he was, asked for Webster’s support at the outset in producing a book that, minus the engravings, was more luxurious, and more costly than Barlow’s white elephant.¹⁴

¹³ *A Reply to Messrs. G. & C. Merriam’s Attack Upon the Character of Dr. Worcester and His Dictionaries* (Boston: Jenks, Hickling and Swan, 1854), 7. Monaghan, 108.

¹⁴ Green, 11.

The dictionary stalled, presumably waiting for the type to arrive from Germany, and at last went to press on May 8, 1827. It emerged eighteen months later in two quarto volumes priced at twenty dollars under the imprint of Sherman Converse. Even though Webster's name did not appear in the imprint under a rubric such as "published for the author by. . ." he was as vitally interested in both his dictionary and his speller, and was their most effective promoter.

Jennifer Monaghan proposes a useful way for dissecting the different actions which fall into the broad category of "promotion" for which authors were primarily responsible. In the era before the expansion of publishing capital enabled publishers to relieve authors of "the commercial busy-work which many of them detested," Webster's promotional campaigns broke down into six overlapping components: recommendations, lectures, advertisements and notices, donations of books, agents, and attacks on competitors. Each facet of Webster's campaign was an integral and useful part of a larger whole. Webster began with the time-honored tradition of "puffs" written for his work by university professors, "men of literature," personal friends and "famous persons of every kind." Webster approached both George Washington and Benjamin Franklin for endorsements for his speller and, after the publication of the *American Dictionary*, he circulated a petition endorsing both the book and its plan in Congress—it was signed by thirty-one Senators, including Daniel Webster, and no fewer than seventy-three Congressmen. Webster rolled these recommendations over into advertisements that he had printed up and distributed as broadsides or inserted in local newspapers wherever he went.¹⁵

Webster was his own best promoter. Beyond puffs and broadsides, he also used the newspapers for "free" advertising in the form of press-releases and anonymous reviews which he laundered through friends and family because he did not, judiciously, "wish to appear in person." But

¹⁵ Monaghan, 90. Charvat, 55. Monaghan, 92, 146.

Webster's craftiest means of self-promotion (particularly with his speller, which was a relatively small, inexpensive item) was charity. He not only gave away free copies of his books to those who might in return puff his work, he also donated copies to universities and secondary schools in a constant, almost missionary, effort to expand sales. Charity did not end with relatively minor handouts—Webster donated “a certain percent of annual sales” to schools and highly visible charitable causes.¹⁶

Webster's munificence points to an important aspect of his success. He clearly realized that his books were only one aspect of his fame, the other being the character he presented to the public in the form of charity and, equally important, in person. Webster's promotional campaigns were as much about him as they were about his books, and acting on this realization—that his name was a “commodity”—his strategies predated those of later publishing firms, including G. & C. Merriam Co., which built an empire on the Webster name long after any vestiges of Webster had disappeared from their products.¹⁷

Before considering the fortunes of Webster's various dictionaries (by the time he passed on in 1843 there were at least three different versions in circulation), a final aspect of the lexicographer's approach to marketing deserves consideration: the role of agents in widening his market. Webster made use of both paid and unpaid agents. Both groups pursued the same ends, but by different means and levels of intensity. His paid agents, the most aggressively employed, were given a commission of 7 mills per copy on each book they managed to contract with a local printer-publisher to sell. These travelling agents were also in the field to do the same kind of

¹⁶ Monaghan, 96.

¹⁷ For elaboration on this point see Charvat, 57, W. S. Tryon, *Parnassus Corner: A Life of James T. Fields, Publisher to the Victorians* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963.), 178-80, and Zboray, 73.

from the press in two quarto volumes at a price of twenty dollars and a press run of 2,500 copies. The previous year, 1827, ten editions totalling 383,329 copies of the spelling book, a small (16 or 17 cm) volume of only 168 pages, rolled off of presses all over the northeast and as far south as Baltimore. While Monaghan does not give the retail price of the individual books, the per-copy license fee paid by a publisher was seven mills per copy (i.e., seven dollars per thousand books). Webster's most popular book was also his cheapest. In 1821 Washington Irving's *The Spy* cost the "enormous" sum of \$5.37½ and the average cost of a reprinted British novel was only two dollars. In short, regardless of its merits the *American Dictionary* was simply too expensive to sell quickly.²⁰

1828 must have been a very stressful year for Sherman Converse. Because of its astronomical price and its orthographic and orthoepic heterodoxy, sales of the dictionary in which he had invested so much money were languishing. Facing financial ruin, he noted acerbically that, on Webster's part, "there seems. . . to be peculiar apprehension lest I should make something for my great expense of time and money." Whether or not this is true, Converse's imprint *did* appear on the only successful Webster's dictionary produced before 1847-- an abridgement of the *American Dictionary* in octavo that passed to the firm of White, Gallagher and White when Converse finally went bankrupt in 1833..²¹

In 1829, Converse convinced Webster to allow him to prepare an abridgement of the *American Dictionary* for the press, but Webster claimed that he was not well enough to do the job himself. Webster's family convened a conference to decide which one of his scholarly sons-in law would supervise the abridgement. After much debate, Webster himself chose Chauncey Allen

²⁰ Monaghan, 227, 142. Skeel, 70-72. Charvat, 40-41.

²¹ Monaghan, 140. Skeel, 249-251.

promotional work Webster himself had done, and was still doing, closer to home. Webster's unpaid agents, his web of family and friends, particularly his son William, effectively provided him with a network of informers on the fortunes of the speller and dictionary, errand runners, and unpaid labor on Webster's literary projects. His son-in-law Congressman William Ellsworth gave him a voice in Congress for a stronger copyright law.¹⁸

Webster and his network of agents did not establish retail outlets all over the country for books primarily printed in the East. Webster looked at book production and distribution from roughly the same standpoint as the Merriams when they emigrated to Springfield in 1831-- as a decentralized proposition whereby he and his agents could sell "one license for the speller in northern Ohio; another in Detroit for the whole of Michigan; and another, if possible, for the state of Indiana" (to use an example from Webster's charge to one of his most successful agents Walter Bidwell. Apparently, Webster never considered the possibility that books printed in Ohio might be shipped to Indiana or Michigan, and he seemed genuinely surprised when publishers to whom he had sold copyrights complained of infringement by their neighbors. For Webster, the primacy of the multiple imprint system, and the provincial character of both the printing and distribution networks associated with it (which produced 260 separate editions of the *American Speller* and 160 of its successor the *Elementary Speller* between 1784 and 1843), went unquestioned.¹⁹

Compared to the *American Spelling Book* which went into its second edition about nine months after the first edition of five thousand had appeared in August 1783, the first edition of Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* sold extremely slowly. The two books are obviously different, but the comparison is valid. In 1828 the *American Dictionary* emerged

¹⁸ Monaghan, 151.

¹⁹ Monaghan, 148. Figures on the number of editions of the spelling books taken from Skeel, 5-128.

Goodrich, a professor of rhetoric at Yale, and Goodrich in turn recruited Joseph Emerson Worcester, a young Harvard lexicographer, to do the actual revisions “according to Dr. Webster's principles and known wishes.” Goodrich and Worcester, with Sherman Converse providing the money, immediately set about “abridging” the dictionary and finished the work in record time (less than a year)-- all the words in the abridgement also appeared in its parent the *American Dictionary*. What was not in the new dictionary were Webster's vaunted “innovations”-- his simplified spelling and New England pronunciation key. Goodrich, whose best-known work was a volume of *Select British Eloquence*, and Worcester, who rigidly favored Walker's British pronunciation keys, “abridged” the work by bringing spelling and pronunciation in line with contemporary usage and cutting a few lines here and there from Webster's voluminous definitions. The abridgement appeared in late 1829 in octavo at a price of six dollars compared to twenty for its parent.²²

The first edition of the octavo abridgement quickly sold out, as did the second, third, fourth, and fifth editions all published by Converse in 1830. From then on the book appears to have been a steady seller, occasionally changing hands until, in 1843 N. and J. White of New York sold their rights in the *Octavo* to Harper and Brothers.²³

Noah Webster took no joy in the book's success. Instead, as the first edition of the *Octavo* was going to press he realized what had been done to the work and, in disgust, “became willing to sell the copyright for a round sum” to Goodrich. Webster maintained that the *Octavo* lacked his

²² William Chauncey Fowler, “Printed, But Not Published,” n.p., n.d., (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society) 8. “Charles Merriam's Recollections of Various Particulars in the History of Webster's Dictionaries, 1883,” *Merriam-Webster Collection* (Bienecke Rare Books Library: Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut) 3. [Hereafter, documents from the Merriam-Webster Collection will be noted by author, title, and MWC]

²³ Skeel, 249-55.

history of the language, diverged from the “important principles” adopted to correct the “anomalies” of the language, and mutilated the definitions, etymologies and spellings to such an extent that “the work must not be considered as mine.” In an effort to rid himself of his son-in-law-- and keep him from ever doing anything like this to his other works-- Webster sold Goodrich all the rights in the *Octavo* and promptly wrote him out of his will. In his last conversation with William Chauncey Fowler, another of his many sons-in-law, Webster confided that Goodrich should “never . . . again have the power to alter my Dictionary.”²⁴

Meanwhile, Noah Webster had added to the *American Dictionary* and proposed to bring out in an edition of 5,000 copies in two octavo volumes at the slightly reduced price of fifteen dollars. The Panic of 1837 may have been the only thing that saved Webster’s family from total ruin: they persuaded him, “in view of the bad times” to reduce the edition to only three thousand books; but Webster still had to mortgage his house to pay for it. Thus, the second edition of Webster’s work entitled *An American Dictionary of the English Language; first edition in octavo* appeared under Webster’s own imprint in 1841. This book suffered the same failings as its predecessor and, even worse, had to compete with the popularity of the *Octavo*. The second edition was an even bigger failure than the first, and, when Noah Webster died on May 28, 1843 (clutching a copy of his Speller if his daughter Eliza is to be believed) there were still 1,420 copies in sheets waiting to be bound. The edition, and the right of refusal (the privilege of printing the work for the remaining term of copyright) were sold by Webster’s executors (his sons-in-law William Ellsworth and, by an odd twist of fate, Chauncey Goodrich) to J.S.& C. Adams, printer-booksellers from Amherst, Massachusetts. This firm, like E. Merriam & Co. (by this time five years defunct), was desperately trying to reconcile cash with an exchange-based economy. The Adams’ paid \$3,000 for the unbound sheets with the intention of turning the dictionary into a

²⁴ Fowler, 7.

bargaining chip: “Adams’ believed Webster’s large dictionary would bring cash stock [books that they could sell for cash to students and professors] in exchange [with the publisher-booksellers with whom they corresponded].”²⁵

Charles Merriam wryly observed that “Messrs. Adams did not find their plan to work. The publishers of cash or classical books very largely confined themselves to their own publications and did not need other stock in exchange.” Although it is unclear how many sheets the Adams’ actually bound up themselves and how many bound volumes they bought from the Webster estate, J.S.& C. Adams were in the dictionary business long enough to learn that the *American Dictionary* sold slowly. Desperate to recoup some of their investment that they were “prepared to listen to proposals for the resale of their purchase from G.& C. Merriam of Springfield” as early as April 1844.²⁶

The Merriams did not make overtures to J.S.& C. Adams because the *American Dictionary* was already a runaway bestseller. Instead, they realized that the dictionary could be made into a huge success, like the octavo abridgement, if only they did two things: stereotyped the work and reduced both its retail price and production cost. Beyond this immediate strategy, though, the Merriams had only to look into the dictionary’s past sales and across the Berkshires into New York State to see solid market potential for their book in the public school system. In September 1844, J.S.& C. Adams (with the silent support of the Merriams) made a deal with Governor William Ellsworth in Hartford which relieved them of the burden of the second edition for “about \$1,000 over what they had paid for the books.” In addition, the Merriams agreed to pay

²⁵ Skeel, 238. Monaghan, 191. “Recollections,” 1.

²⁶ “Recollections,” 1.

the executors \$2,800 for the privilege of publishing the dictionary for the remainder of the copyright (fourteen years) and the right of first refusal should the copyright be renewed.²⁷

Here is one of many continuities with older traditions in publishing with which the Merriams had to contend. The contract that they entered into with the Websters was little different from the regional franchises that Webster himself had sold, for a period of years, on both the spelling book and, later, the countinghouse dictionary. According to the contract, any changes to the dictionary, any revisions at all, were “subject to the approval of one or both of the executors” who would act as intermediaries with the family. The Merriams, their hands tied as to revisions of the dictionary, might as well have been handed plates which they could print but not alter. Clearly this arrangement was not what the Merriams had hoped for. On October 18, before the contract negotiations were completed, they expressed a desire to “receive a proposition to consider upon a sum out and out, than to close for a percentage, at any price that is likely to be offered.”²⁸

The Merriams settled for a “sum out and out,” but their money they did not secure them a future interest in the dictionary. Before they had even bound up and disposed of the remaining copies of the 1841 *American Dictionary*, correspondence between the company and the Webster heirs, particularly Henry Jones and William Ellsworth, indicated that the Merriams intended to consolidate their transitory hold on the book. Promising “good offices” for the heirs (chief among them Gov. Ellsworth who would make the decision to renew, cancel or sell the rights to the

²⁷ G.& C. Merriam Co. to J.S.& C. Adams, (Springfield, Massachusetts: September 26, 1844) MWC. “Recollections,” 1. Executors of Noah Webster to G.& C. Merriam Co. (Hartford, Connecticut: November 5, 1844) MWC.

²⁸ Executors of Noah Webster to G.& C. Merriam Co., (Hartford, Conn.: September 1844 [?]) MWC. G.& C. Merriam Co. to J.S.& C Adams, (Springfield, Ma: October 18, 1844) MWC.

dictionary), the Merriams offered to buy the family out. These tactics did not bear fruit, and did not need to, until after 1847.²⁹

In the finite time allotted them, the Merriams wasted not a minute in mobilizing to get the dictionary into production. And, almost immediately, they ran into trouble. The potential success of the dictionary hinged on their ability to create stereotype plates from which large editions could be printed cheaply and on short notice. When they learned of an injunction, written by Webster himself, against stereotyping the large dictionary, progress towards publication ground to a halt. Webster's injunction would never have come into play had the Merriams not proposed to stereotype the whole work in one volume and sell it at a retail price of six dollars—identical to the price of the *Octavo* published by N.& J. White of New York. Webster's written restriction that he would not “sanction the publication from stereotype plates in *Octavo* form any Large dictionary, so as to prejudice or interfere with the octavo abridgements of the same work” was the old man's final concession to Chauncey Goodrich on the eve of Sherman Converse's failure. While the measure was meant to protect Goodrich from financial ruin, it was used twice, both times by Goodrich, to keep first his father-in-law and later the Merriams from making inroads into the sales of his highly profitable dictionary.³⁰

If the Merriams were aware that the injunction originated with Goodrich, they did not mention it, although Charles Merriam observed that it protected the fat profits that Norman White and Goodrich enjoyed on the book. The way the Merriams dealt with the problem is a model of guile and good business. Charles Merriam noted in his memoir that in 1844 there were three options that the company might have pursued to get around the restriction. First, they might have bought out “the adverse party”; but this option was unreasonable because, moderately prosperous

²⁹ G.& C. Merriam Co. to Henry Jones, (Springfield, Ma: November 8, 1844.).

³⁰ Fowler, 4, 5.

as they were, the Merriams were not in any position to replace the “annual profit of \$6,000” derived from the *Octavo*. The second, even more costly and impractical, solution was to print the dictionary “in octavo form Letter-press, and keeping the type for the whole work constantly standing.” The final solution, both economical and practical, was to stereotype the dictionary in some format other than octavo.³¹

The idea to print the *American Dictionary* in Crown Quarto originated with Philadelphia publisher-bookseller James Kay. Ten days after the contract for the dictionary was signed, in a letter back to Charles in Springfield, George was already thinking of ways to put the book in production as soon as possible in order not to “cut ourselves off from one year’s enjoyment of the copyright.” The final line of the letter was most revealing: it read, in part “We shall make a small quarto. . . .” The key word here is small. Webster’s 1828 edition of the *American Dictionary* in Royal Quarto measured twenty-three by thirty centimeters. The 1843 White and Sheffield edition of the octavo abridgement measured fifteen by twenty-four centimeters. The Merriams’ *American Dictionary* of 1848 in Crown Quarto measured twenty by twenty-six centimeters. It was neither the size of a quarto printed from Royal sheets, nor exactly the size of a Royal *Octavo* page-- even though the book was really an octavo imprint. Charles Merriam revealed more than he intended in his memoir when he called the page size for the new edition “Crown *Octavo*.” Rather than print in quarto on Royal sheets, the Merriams had their work stereotyped and printed in half sheets on slightly larger Crown paper, which was then cut and folded into two four page (quarto) gatherings that preserved the illusion of compliance while flagrantly violating the restriction against printing from stereotype plates octavo.³²

³¹ “Recollections,” 3.

³² “Recollections,” 3. George Merriam to Charles Merriam (Philadelphia, Pa: November 15, 1844). For pointing out the distinction between Crown and Royal sheets and encouraging me to

The Merriams went to press and came very near going to court over the size of their dictionary. Charles Merriam's memoirs and the company correspondence only hint at what was going on, but clearly Norman White was crying foul to whomever would listen—including the executors of the estate, whose approval was necessary to make any changes in the book. If, as Robert Leavitt asserts, the Webster family objected to the Merriams' proposed strategy, their opposition does not appear in the company records. Instead, the Merriams took the initiative and contacted William Ellsworth before Norman White did so in late September 1846. White's specific objections were never enumerated in the Merriams' letter to Ellsworth, but it is easy to ascertain that White's primary objection was to the price of the new dictionary and, to a lesser extent, the Merriams' representation of the dictionary as a quarto whose pages contained "nearly, or quite, as many square inches, as the original first edition quarto, being a little narrower and a little longer."³³

In spite of White's objections, the Merriams published the *American Dictionary of the English Language in one volume Crown Quarto* in late 1847 at a price of six dollars. But this *Webster's* was significantly different from any that had come before it—and most of those differences can be traced directly to the strange interaction between the Merriams, the Webster heirs, and their editor, owner of the *Octavo*, Chauncey A. Goodrich.

In negotiating their contract with the Webster family in 1844, the Merriams realized that part of their interest in Webster's work-- if the book was not to become a stale reprint "for issue and reissue, unchanged amid ever-changing times, until there should no longer be anyone so indiscriminating as to want its musty definitions, its disregarded reforms, its disproved philology"-

measure out the page sizes of the various dictionaries, I wish to extend a debt of gratitude to Dr. Michael Winship, Scholar in Residence at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass.

³³ G.& C. Merriam Co. to W.W. Ellsworth, (Springfield: September 30, 1846) MWC.

- was in revising and adding to it. These additions would not only keep the work “fresh,” they would also give the Merriams an integral interest in the work and cement their position as its publishers. The Merriams intended to create something more ambitious than the appendix to which they were entitled by contract with the Webster heirs. The same letter in which George Merriam revealed the format of the dictionary-to-come also illuminated that the Merriams’ commitment themselves to a thorough revision of the work.³⁴

On December 17, 1844, G.& C. Merriam Co. proposed to Chauncey Goodrich that he become editor of the *American Dictionary*. From the Merriams’ perspective, the Anglophile Goodrich must have seemed an ideal choice for editor. First, he was one of the executors of the will. Second, he was a member of the Webster family. Third, as black sheep of the family, he had already proven his willingness to tamper with his father-in-law’s work. Finally, and perhaps most important, he had edited (and, although the Merriams never found out, owned) the *Octavo*-- G. & C. Merriam’s most successful rival to date.held the copyright on the Abridged dictionary. By enlisting Goodrich as editor, the Merriams neatly sidestepped the approval portion of their contract by delegating the revisions to one of the executors on whose say-so such changes were made. By retaining Goodrich’s interest in the success of the *American Dictionary* as its editor, the Merriams bought themselves an effective, if at times unwilling, ally in perfecting the dictionary and fending off rival publisher Norman White’s attempts to hinder their progress towards the press.

Goodrich responded to the Merriams’ overtures two days later stating that if White agreed to the arrangement “there is nothing to prevent my superintending this work, and contributing the results of some years’ study to the design.” The Merriams immediately dashed off the proposal to Norman White, who had no doubt already heard it from Goodrich himself, and by December 26

³⁴ Leavitt, 46. George Merriam to Charles Merriam, (Philadelphia, Pa: November 15, 1844) MWC.

were able to write to Goodrich that “there appears to be no objection on his [White’s] part to your preparing an edition for the press, and indeed we see not how either or all of Dr. Webster’s Dictionaries and Spelling Book can continue the place they now hold in the public. . . without being made to harmonise with each other.” Although Goodrich revised both works simultaneously with a view toward releasing new editions at the same time, the shaky harmony between the publishers broke down when the Merriams revealed their intentions to publish the work in Crown Quarto and undercut the price of the *Octavo*. Goodrich quickly discovered that he had been hired to create a work that would supplant his own and his dealings with the Merriams, especially his dogged insistence on revising his own book for publication, show that he was none too happy about it.³⁵

If their treatment of the printing and binding of the work was interesting, what the Merriams effected between the covers was nothing short of amazing. Charles Merriam, with his usual gift for understatement, said that the work was simply brought up “to the latest date, restoring back the most objectionable orthography [that is, undoing the spelling changes that Webster viewed as critical to creating a uniquely American language], and so preparing it for proper sale.” The initial correspondence between the Merriams and Goodrich, however, pointed to a much more ambitious undertaking. On December 26, 1844, the Merriams sent Goodrich their proposed plan of revision: it included not only orthographical changes, but also a laborious replacement of Webster’s own system of pronunciation with one more “adapted to popular use” (in this case Walker’s pronunciation key, which Goodrich and Worcester had incorporated into the *Octavo*). The Merriams also wanted Goodrich to add new words and revise the existing definitions, particularly those in the sciences, and interleave them in the existing work. In an

³⁵ Chauncey A. Goodrich to G. & C. Merriam Co. (New Haven, Conn.: December 19, 1844) MWC. White and Sheffield to G. & C. Merriam Co. (New York, NY: December 23, 1884), MWC. G. & C. Merriam Co. to Chauncey A. Goodrich (Springfield, Ma: December 26, 1844) MWC.

attempt to undermine the success of Joseph Worcester's *Comprehensive Dictionary* which had been in circulation since 1830 and his more recent, and even more threatening, *Universal and Critical Dictionary of the English Language*, they also intended to add a geographical index to the dictionary. In short, in terms of substance, scope and price, the Merriams planned a juggernaut which would roll over all the other dictionaries on the field-- Goodrich's *Octavo* included.³⁶

Goodrich agreed with the proposals and contracted with the Merriams to revise the dictionary for "twelve hundred dollars" plus an additional nine hundred to provide remuneration for those whom he intended to employ to revise the scientific definitions and proofreading the galleys. From the outset, Goodrich seems to have seen himself as something more than a man hired to do a clearly defined set of tasks. In 1844, the fifty-three year old Goodrich had spent his entire life, with the exception of two years around 1816, as a Yale professor who supplemented his income by writing textbooks. When he contracted with the Merriams, Goodrich had three books on the market and, since he had likely provided most of the capital and all of the promotion for them, probably saw himself as the central figure in the publishing process. Accustomed to controlling the process, in the course of the three-year-long revision Goodrich vacillated between proprietary commitment to the project and sullen indifference when the Merriams asserted their authority over him and their dictionary.³⁷

This sort of resistance to his role as an employee of the G.& C. Merriam Co. was a constant theme in Goodrich's interactions with the Merriams. The editor began to chafe at the bonds of his unfamiliar role almost as soon as it began. On January 27, 1845, Goodrich sent an

³⁶ G.& C. Merriam Co. to Chauncey A. Goodrich (Springfield, Ma.: December 26, 1844) MWC. Chauncey A. Goodrich to G.& C. Merriam Co.(New Haven, Conn.: December 30, 1844) MWC.

³⁷ Chauncey A. Goodrich to G.& C. Merriam (Yale University, New Haven, Conn.: December 30, 1844) MWC. H.E.S., "Goodrich, Chauncey Allen," *The Dictionary of American Biography*, 2nd edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946).

angry letter to the Merriams, who had apparently decided to push ahead with the geographical index (the index does not appear in the 1847 edition). The index was, in Goodrich's opinion, unsuited to "the character of Dr. Webster's work" and he asserted his right to say "in the preface that it was added not by myself but by the publisher." Goodrich also vented his frustration with the Merriams' insistence on including the list of synonymous words from the *Octavo*-- his only original contribution to the work and the primary distinction between the *Octavo* and the *American Dictionary*. Incensed, Goodrich threw down the gauntlet--the first of many times he was to make this symbolic gesture: "If in respect to any [of the items mentioned in the letter] you want to change, I am perfectly willing to give up the contract. I told you from the first I was reluctant to undertake the work. My sole object has been to do honor to Dr. Webster's memory, and perfect the work as far as possible, within the period allowed me."³⁸

While he was actively resisting his role as employee, Goodrich was also taking on more of the characteristics of the author-promoter for the dictionary. In the same letter that threatened resignation, Goodrich his efforts to court university colleagues into collaboration with him. A little over fifteen days later, Goodrich notified the Merriams that he had obtained the help, and endorsement, of Prof. James Dwight Dana, Dr. Murdock, "formerly Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Andover," his own brother-in-law Henry Ellsworth, the Commissioner of Patents, and that "through a common friend" he had applied to A.J. Downing to revise the articles on architecture and landscape gardening. Goodrich, who was of the school that more is better, was gathering enough people together to write an encyclopedia, but never lost sight of the primary benefit all the distinguished names he bestowed on the book. "Should the gentlemen do less than I

³⁸ Chauncey A. Goodrich to G.& C. Merriam (New Haven, Conn.: January 27, 1845) MWC.

expect, and yet really make some contribution, their names alone will be worth hundreds of dollars to the work.”³⁹

Despite all the infighting, work on revising the dictionary moved relatively quickly once begun in the middle of 1845. Goodrich, revised both the *American Dictionary* and the *Octavo* simultaneously—no doubt against the wishes of the Merriams. Nevertheless, the 1847 edition of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* appeared in bookstores sometime around August 1847.

Concluding their relations as employer and employee and returning to those of publisher and copyright-holder, both the Merriams and Goodrich expressed a sort of bewildered exasperation. On October 1, 1847, the Merriams sent a letter to William Webster, the first of the Webster heirs to sell his interest in the dictionary to their company, expressing a marked lack of concern about Goodrich’s disapproval of the price at which the dictionary was being offered. “We know not that we have occasion to be disappointed that Prof. G. declines becoming a party to the arrangement. It has been a source of embarrassment from the commencement of our connexion with the enterprise that there have been distinct and differing interests” due to Goodrich’s divided loyalties.⁴⁰

As he was completing his memoir of Noah Webster for the *American Literary Magazine* in December 1847, Goodrich summed up his relation to the project: “The peculiar relations in which we have stood to each other for nearly three years are now brought to an end. They have been years of anxiety on both sides, but our Heavenly Father has kindly brought us through, in life and health. Our intercourse has been kind and friendly. We have differed on some points, and that

³⁹ Chauncey Goodrich to G.& C. Merriam (New Haven, Conn.: February 15, 1845) MWC.

⁴⁰ G.& C. Merriam Co. to W.G. Webster (Springfield, Ma: October 1, 1847) MWC.

difference has cost me a number of weeks of painful labor.” But, in the end, Goodrich made it clear that, after three years of resistance, he readily accepted at least one of the prerogatives of an employee: “Henceforth it will be no more incumbent on me than on Mr. Jones or Mr. Ellsworth, to watch, defend, or improve Dr. Webster’s dictionaries.” Chauncey Goodrich tendered his resignation from the firm of G.& C. Merriam.⁴¹

Goodrich was not out of the picture for long. The ink was hardly dry on his resignation when the Merriams attempted to restore him to his position as editor of the dictionary for life. In December 1847, with the dictionary selling well, the Merriams were looking to the future and contemplating the next revision of what was increasingly *their* dictionary (all of the Webster heirs, except for Goodrich, had by the end of 1847 assigned their rights in the dictionary to the Merriams for a flat yearly fee). Ongoing revisions, they reasoned, were necessary for precisely the same reason that the 1847 edition needed revision and not just reprinting: a dictionary must abreast of current usage. It only made sense for them to have someone who was already familiar with the dictionary take over its editing. With this in mind, the Merriams asked Goodrich solicitously “Have you any suggestions on this point?”⁴²

Goodrich had apparently replaced Noah Webster as the dictionary’s chief apologist and in late October 1848 the Merriams suggested that he might get some pecuniary advantage from the work of defending the dictionary and answering questions. Since Goodrich’s resignation implied that he was already fielding inquiries about the book free of charge, he eagerly took the Merriams up on their offer. On November 3, 1848 Goodrich signed an agreement with the Merriams to “act as permanent editor of Webster’s Quarto dictionary; [to] consult its literary interests; defend it

⁴¹ Chauncey A. Goodrich to G.& C. Merriam (New Haven, Conn.: December 1, 1847)

⁴² G.& C. Merriam to Chauncey A. Goodrich (Springfield, Ma.: December 3, 1847) MWC.

(according to his best judgement) when attacked, correct all errors that may be discovered, and collect new words and new senses of words.” For this task, Goodrich was paid one hundred sixty dollars a year—significantly less than he made on the original revision of the *American Dictionary*.⁴³

By the end of 1848, G. & C. Merriam Co. had secured a mouthpiece for their dictionary—a person to take the place of Noah Webster in defending the dictionary to the world. But the name Goodrich, while associated with Chauncey’s cousin Samuel (a.k.a, Peter Parley), did not sell dictionaries. On the other hand, the late Noah Webster’s name, by the time the 1847 edition was produced, was roughly synonymous with dictionaries. The first prong of the Merriams’ promotional campaign, then, was to push Webster’s name and character through memoirs. When a circular seeking subscribers for an advertising book to “contain about 100 Portraits, with Brief Biographical Sketches of Eminent Americans, Interspersed with Advertisements” appeared at the G.& C. Merriam Co. offices in May 1852, with an attached letter claiming that “a sketch of his [Webster’s] life so written as in itself to be the best advertisement” could be included in the book, the Merriams did not need advice from Mann and Law, the New York publishers who sent the circular. They had been inserting biographies of Noah Webster of varying length in all of their dictionary-related publications for years beginning with the biographical sketch of Webster written by Goodrich for the 1847 edition.⁴⁴

As well as continuing to promote the dictionary’s “author”—though with his orthography “corrected” and the dictionary thoroughly revised not much of Noah Webster was left in the book--

⁴³ "Memorandum of agreement between Chauncey A. Goodrich and G.& C. Merriam" (Springfield, Ma.: November 3, 1848) MWC.

⁴⁴ Mann and Law to Messrs. G.& C. Merriam (New York, NY: May 18, 1852) *G.& C. Merriam Company: Miscellaneous Correspondence, papers 1850-1854* (Worcester, Ma: American Antiquarian Society).

the Merriams also continued Webster's practice of gathering recommendations from the famous and influential; but the Merriams added a twist to their advertising and promotion that would have turned Webster green with envy.

A point-by-point comparison with Webster's own promotional program that the Merriams' marketing techniques differed from Webster's not only in scale and their ultimate goal. The aim of both Webster and the Merriams was, on the surface, to sell books; but the times in which they were selling determined the form that the books would take. Webster's program, grounded in an era before rail transport, aimed at selling the *right to print* and distribute his books and drumming up business to support local sales. The Merriam program was simply to drum up sales of *actual books*, printed and bound in the northeast and distributed by rail to booksellers and individuals all over the country. Different goals did not, however, mean different tactics. The Merriams' promotional campaign proved wider and more intensive than Webster's, but still used their predecessor's tried and true methods.

The Merriams continued, on a vast scale, the practice of giving out free copies of their dictionary—to kings, queens, presidents and other heads of state, to members of Congress and Senators and other legislators, to the antebellum literary elite, and to schools. In return they received puffs, and, more important, influence and name recognition for their largest distribution effort—selling the dictionary to public schools across the country.⁴⁵

Once they found a form and a price that would sell, the Merriams were blessed with a ready-made market for their books. Webster's speller, even in the 1860s, still enjoyed a wide circulation which kept his name in the minds of school officials. Therefore, when an affordable version of

⁴⁵ The correspondence files of the G.& C. Merriam company from 1847 onward are peppered with almost daily thank you letters too numerous to mention. A rough count between 1847 and 1854 reveals no less than fifty such letters each year. MWC

Webster's dictionary came on the market it only made sense to purchase copies which presented an orthography and pronunciation consistent with the speller. As the next chapter will show, school officials did not make these decisions in a vacuum. G. & C. Merriam Co. agents, with broadsides and, after 1853, sheaves of scurrilous pamphlets, were there to guide them. And, particularly in the Mid-West, the Merriams faced stiff competition from other textbook and dictionary publishers bent on securing not just school districts but entire states and regions for their "systems."

CHAPTER II

NEW MEASURES AND STATE MEASURES

At the end of 1849 the *American Dictionary of the English Language* had proven a steady seller, bringing almost sixty-thousand dollars to its publishers. Having found a format and price at which they could profitably sell the dictionary, G. & C. Merriam Co. built on Noah Webster's well-established reputation to market the dictionary as both a literary production for the general public and a textbook for use in the schools. To boost already promising sales the Merriams had to search aggressively for new markets for the work and new ways to sell it.¹

The obvious place to begin was with Webster's reputation in the schools. Webster's *American Spelling Book* was still widely used, and the generations of Americans who had grown up with the blue-back speller presented a ready-made market for the Merriams' agents to exploit. As late as 1855, at least one Merriam agent, D. Tilton, was still drumming up demand for the dictionary in the small towns and school districts of New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Using a combination of salesman's charm, broadsides aimed at capturing the attention of teachers, and free copies of the dictionary scattered where they might do good, Tilton visited local luminaries and school boards, "pushing" the *American Dictionary* to audiences familiar with Webster's other works.²

This strategy was much like the one pursued by Noah Webster's agents twenty years before. It curried favor with local authorities, built demand for the dictionary among individuals and local school boards, and maintained steadily growing sales throughout 1849 and 1850. Pleased

¹ Charles Merriam, "Charles Merriam's Recollections of Various Particulars in the History of Webster's Dictionaries, 1883," *Merriam-Webster Collection*, (Bienecke Rare Books Library: Yale University, New Haven Connecticut) 101. [Hereafter, documents from the Merriam-Webster Collection will be noted by author, title, date and the shorthand MWC.]

² D. Tilton to G. & C. Merriam (August 11, 1855), *G. & C. Merriam Company, Miscellaneous Correspondence, Papers 1854-1860* (Worcester, Ma.: American Antiquarian Society).

with success, the Merriams did not rest on their laurels, they looked across the Berkshires into New York for even greater wealth.

In 1838 the New York state legislature had decreed that each school district in the state with a population greater than ten thousand must set up a district library for its students. Funding was provided out of state tax revenues and a list of "useful and instructive" books forwarded to the schools by the State Superintendent in early 1839. Responding to this unprecedented opportunity, New York City publishers Harper and Brothers quickly assembled the required titles and presented them to the Superintendent as *Harper's School District Library*-- the perfect instrument to seed New York's school libraries. Sold at the irresistible price of nineteen dollars, the first series of fifty durable, uniformly bound volumes was followed by five more sets totalling 212 titles in 295 volumes for only one hundred fourteen dollars.³

Harper's School District Library gained the lucrative patronage of the New York schools by the simple virtue of offering all the right titles at the right price. The *American Dictionary*, on the other hand, was not the only dictionary on the market and was comparatively expensive for a school book. To gain acceptance in the schools, the Merriams' dictionary required something stronger than the endorsements of local school boards and state superintendents. It required the force of law.

In early 1850, the Joint Committee on Education of the Massachusetts investigated the use of its District Library Fund. To the Committee's surprise, almost none of the 3,000 school districts eligible for library appropriations had used the money and over \$30,000 of tax revenue was sitting idle. Senator Amasa Walker, originally from North Brookfield, Massachusetts, and an "old

³ Eugene Exman, *The Brothers Harper: A Unique Publishing Partnership and Its Impact Upon the Cultural Life of America from 1817 to 1853* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), 106-109.

acquaintance" of the Merriam family, chaired the Joint Committee. Charles Merriam claimed that Walker, "without our knowledge, proposed that the state buy a copy of Webster's Unabridged for each of its schools." The correspondence files of G. & C. Merriam Co. tell a somewhat different story. On January 19, 1850, Walker informed "Merriam & Co." of his intention to introduce an "order in the Senate that the State furnish out of the School Fund a copy of Webster's Dictionary for each School District in the Commonwealth." The Merriams not only knew Walker's intentions, they also advised him which "size and price would be best adapted" for use in the schools.⁴

As the first of G. & C. Merriam Co.'s "state measures"-- a direct appropriation from state tax revenues to provide copies of the *American Dictionary* for the schools-- Walker's bill set off heated debate before the Joint Committee in which the Merriams and their most persistent rivals Jenks, Hickling and Swan, came head-to-head for the first of many skirmishes. Worcester's publishers rushed Jenks' nephew, a lawyer recently graduated from Harvard, to the State House to convince the Committee of the merits of Worcester's dictionaries. He was also there to defame the late Noah Webster. In terms that the publishers bandied about for the next decade and beyond, Jenks portrayed Webster as "a weak, vain, plodding Yankee, ambitious to be an American Johnson, without one substantial qualification for the undertaking."⁵

Fortuitously, the Merriams were in Boston, and perhaps at the State House, the afternoon Jenks took the floor. They immediately called Yale professor Noah Porter (Chauncey Goodrich's protégé and later editor of the *American Dictionary*) to come to their defense. Porter arrived in Boston the night of February 1, 1850, heard the remainder of what must have been a tediously long

⁴ Recollections, 5. Hon. Amasa Walker to G. & C. Merriam Co., January 19, 1850, MWC.

⁵ Recollections, 5. Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed; Relating to the Publication of Worcester's Dictionary in London, As Webster's Dictionary*, (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., February 8, 1854) 10.

defense of Worcester the next morning and then "ably defended Webster" with a two-day long speech of his own.⁶

All did not go as the Merriams hoped. "Failing to get Webster rejected, or Worcester taken, the Legislature gave each District the choice to take either without cost to itself." The battle between G. & C. Merriam Co. and Jenks, Hickling and Swan was joined.⁷

Undaunted by their partial failure in Massachusetts, the Merriams refined their strategy and turned to New York. In February 1850, Merriam agents fanned out across New York state, distributing their usual broadsides, making visits and handing out free books. They also carried petitions directed to the state legislature "Praying that Webster's Unabridged might be taken at \$4 as one of the District Library works." On March 5, 1850, the Senate and Assembly of New York, responding to intense lobbying and petitions introduced a bill to provide a copy of Webster's Unabridged to every school district in the state as a part of the \$55,000 library fund appropriation. Afraid that New York's law makers would prove as indecisive as those in Massachusetts, in January 1851, the Merriams sent Porter to Albany to defend Webster as a crucial "uniform standard" for the schools.⁸

The Assembly passed their version of the appropriations bill in April and in June 1851 the Senate's "committee on literature" recommended passage of their version of the bill. Chairman Miller's report makes it painfully clear that regardless of the merits of the *American Dictionary*, the petitions from "persons deeply interested" in the schools, and even Porter's eloquent defense, the decisive argument for adopting the dictionary was its price. In accordance with their petitions, the Merriams offered the dictionary at four dollars rather than the usual six.⁹

⁶ Recollections, 5.

⁷ Recollections, 5.

⁸ Recollections, 5, 6. "No. 265, An Act-- Making Appropriations for the Support of Common Schools for [1851 and 1852]. . . (Section) 3," (Albany, NY: New York State Assembly, March 5, 1850).

⁹ Sen. Miller, et. al., "State of New York, No. 81., In Senate, June 19, 1851, Report [of the committee on literature]," (Albany, NY: New York State Senate, 1851) 5, 6.

By 1852, G. & C. Merriam Co. broadsides claimed that both Massachusetts and New York had adopted Webster's as their standard school reference work. Together the two states purchased 11,581 dictionaries at a total cost of \$52,324-- a significant supplement to the Merriams' otherwise brisk sales and a great incentive to repeat the maneuver in other states.

Their appetites whetted by successful state measures in the northeast, the Merriams turned their attention to the Mid-West in 1852 and were alarmed to find William Draper Swan waiting for them. The first intimation of trouble came to Springfield in January 1852. W. E. Smith, a Cincinnati publisher, reported that Swan had visited him "with two very shrewd agents" and asked for his assistance in "pushing Worcester." Smith, who claimed that the readers he published were "rigidly after Webster," heard from Swan that the Boston publisher was "visiting leading towns and influential educators for the purpose of securing adoption of 'Worcester's Primary Dictionary.'"¹⁰

The Merriams reacted quickly and by the middle of March 1852 Charles Merriam returned from a tour of Cleveland, Cincinnati and Columbus. While there he recruited agents, introduced a "State measure" similar to New York's for the adoption of Webster's dictionaries, and generally tried to stir up favor for both his firm and their dictionary. On March 11, 1852 the Merriams wrote to Noah Webster's feckless son William assuring him that were dedicating all of their resources to protecting "the interests of our system there." Little more than a month later, they again reassured Webster that even though the "State effort" had failed in Ohio and Indiana the "ultimate results, and incidental benefits to all the series, justify the effort and expenditure."¹¹

The Merriams were not eager to carry on the fight for Webster's entire "system" by themselves. As their efforts in Massachusetts and New York unfolded, they urged Chauncey

¹⁰ Allen Walker Read, "The War of the Dictionaries in the Middle West," in *Papers on Lexicography in Honor of Warren N. Cordell*, (Terre Haute: Dictionary Society of North America, 1979), 7.

¹¹ Read, 5.

Goodrich and the rest of Webster's family to take a greater part in the defense of their father's work. On April 24, 1852, conscious that they were competing with Worcester's series of school dictionaries as well as the *Universal and Critical*, G. & C. Merriam contacted F.J. Huntington & Co., publishers of *Webster's School Dictionary*, soliciting their help with the Mid-West campaign.¹²

The Merriams were in an awkward situation. Jenks, Hickling and Swan's agents offered the entire line of Worcester's dictionaries from the *Universal and Critical* to the humble *Primary Dictionary*. G. & C. Merriam Co., on the other hand, controlled only the *American Dictionary of the English Language* and had an openly antagonistic relationship with the other Webster copyright holders. In April 1852 the Merriams appealed to Norman White (publisher of Chauncey Goodrich's *Octavo*), to George Cooledge (publisher of the *American Spelling Book*) and to F. J. Huntington for assistance in defending "the system" and were apparently ignored. They applied to Gov. Ellsworth, the final arbiter in disputes over Webster's works, for relief but received no help from him, either. Ellsworth advised the Merriams to create and administer a common defense fund but the idea was stillborn: no one else bought the idea. Nonplussed, the Merriams resolved to defend all of Webster's works themselves; but they were also determined to "concentrate the interests" in those works in themselves by buying out the various owners. By the end of 1851, the Merriams had dedicated themselves to the sole defense of Webster's works and taken steps to counter Swan's runaway success in Ohio.¹³

In early 1851 Swan and his "shrewd agents" visited every "County Teachers' Institute" in Ohio and "ingratiated" themselves with both teachers and school officials. Swan also secured the services of L. Andrews, "Agent of the Ohio State Teachers' Association" and, through him, was

¹² Read, 6.

¹³ Recollections, 6.

elected an “honorary Member” of that group. These advances, along with visits to unaligned booksellers and local religious and civil leaders, helped Swan and his agents lay down roots from which to build strong support for the adoption of Worcester's system at the state level.¹⁴

In late April 1852, the Merriams coolly reported to Webster's heirs that their state measures in both Ohio and Indiana had failed. Both bills had died in committee, but the Merriams were not overly concerned: “[b]oth bodies meet again next Winter and the matter may then come up again.” Why were they so calm? Part of the reason was that they were “sparing no reasonable expense” to secure the services of someone who could almost guarantee that “the matter” would find its way back onto the legislative agenda. While Swan and his agents did the usual rounds of visiting and pitching name recognition for Worcester, the Merriams experimented with an entirely new kind of marketing and a new form of salesman.¹⁵

T. A. Nesmith, Esq. was not, as the Merriams pointed out to F. J. Huntington, “an ordinary Book Agent.” Unlike the ordinary agents of both publishers, Nesmith never made the rounds of school board meetings, never handed out broadsides or pamphlets, and probably never delivered his expensively bound free dictionaries to the recipients in person. He was a man with the luxury of “entirely refus[ing]” to do any of the work of a field agent.” And when ordinary agents' sales were reckoned in the dozens, Nesmith's sales totalled in the hundreds and thousands.¹⁶

Nesmith was an influence peddler whom the Merriams hired in late 1851 to counter Swan's progress in Ohio. Between 1851 and 1856 when Nesmith finally secured a state contract for 9020 dictionaries in Ohio, the Merriams' lobbyist was everywhere at once. In 1852 the Merriams entrusted him with one thousand dollars to ply members of the Ohio state legislature. In

¹⁴ Read, 6.

¹⁵ Read, 5.

¹⁶ Read, 6.

January 1854, he was in Michigan securing the influence of State Superintendent Francis Shearman. At the conclusion of their “long interview,” Shearman promised Nesmith that he would introduce the “*series*” into the schools “with or without legislative action” before he left office. A month later Nesmith was in Wisconsin bringing Milwaukee newspaper editors, the Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin and the Superintendent of Public Instruction under the Websterian banner.¹⁷

Nesmith, now the Merriams’ eyes, ears and voice in the Mid-West, was to inform them who could be bought and how much it would cost. Charles Merriam credited Nesmith with “securing” Wisconsin for his firm in 1854; but Nesmith’s own report to the Merriams shows that he only acted as a bridge between the company and S. L. Road, a former bookseller and “one of the most influential men” in Wisconsin whose attention would cost about one hundred dollars a week, no small sum for such an undertaking.¹⁸

Nesmith worked for G. & C. Merriam Co. for at least five years and pushed both formal and informal state measures in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio. Though his primary job was to secure sales contracts, he also served a far more important function. For the Merriams, who rarely visited the Mid-West, T. A. Nesmith was the company’s ambassador and link with those who could aid the fortunes of the dictionary.

At the end of 1852, however, Nesmith’s stunning victories for Webster’s system were still in the future and the Merriams were increasingly worried about Swan’s offhand success at blocking their efforts in the Ohio state legislature. Like Noah Webster thirty years before them, the Merriams were certain that if they won the West they would “ultimately get the country

¹⁷ Read, 6-8.

¹⁸ Recollections, 6. Read, 8.)

G. & C. Merriam Co. and Jenks, Hickling and Swan both saw the Mid-West as fertile ground for expansion. Charles Merriam described the Ohio market to F. J. Huntington as a field in which “the harvest is in proportion to the seed sown and the tillage expended.” William D. Swan, defeated in the northeast, hung his hopes on “planting a Worcester feeling in the ‘Western Woods.’” But where Swan saw wildflowers, Merriam saw Worcester's books as weeds best dealt with before they “got in” rather than “root[ed]. . . out afterwards.”¹⁹

Both publishers constantly referred to the interests of their “systems”-- a progression from elementary spellers and readers towards more specialized reference works all based on the same principles. Building on the notion of character as a series of impressions made on the pliable clay of young minds, they sought to forge early, deep associations with their systems in hopes of creating lifelong customers. In April 1856, Norman White observed that “[t]he Websterian current is too strong to be resisted. . . [and] we are raising up a generation who will fall into the Websterian ranks.” But even with such tangible evidence of success as the sheaves of orders for the *American Dictionary* pouring in from all over the country and the world, New York publisher A. S. Barnes was alarmed that the publishers of Hilliard's readers, cooperating with Jenks, Hickling and Swan, were giving away copies of their book “as an entering wedge to greater things.” “The rising generation,” Barnes feared, “if educated in Worcesterian methods will naturally swear by it in future life and so it will gradually acquire the recognized position of a standard.”²⁰

Even in the prosperous years of the mid-to-late 1850s, Webster's partisans worried about the future of the system. In 1852, with victories in Wisconsin and Michigan that transformed Webster defense into “a very different affair than it was,” still two years away, the future seemed

¹⁹ Read, 6.

²⁰ Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830- 1870*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) 4. Norman White to G. & C. Merriam Co. (New York, NY: April 12, 1856), MWC. A. S. Barnes to G. & C. Merriam Co. (New York, NY: March 15, 1857), MWC.

uncertain at best. To counter Swan's waxing popularity and rising sales of all Worcester's dictionaries in the Mid-West, the Merriams turned Nesmith loose with thousands of dollars of their money and merchandise only to see his initial efforts fail in both Ohio and Indiana. Despite the brave face they put on the situation for Webster's son William, the Springfield publishers were discouraged by failure and probably worried that they had lost the West to their rivals. In late 1852, the brothers began casting about for ways to cut their losses, and, if possible, regain lost ground.²¹

During the summer of 1853, the Merriams laid the foundation of an effort that ultimately bolstered their sagging fortunes in the Mid-West and, at the same time, undermine the credibility of both Joseph Worcester and his publishers. While in Alnwick, Northumberland, one of the firm "happened in at a bookseller's shop. . .and inquired what English Dictionary they sold." The shopkeeper replied that he sold "Webster's" and produced a volume under the imprint of Henry G. Bohn, a London publisher with whom the Merriams had had a brief correspondence in 1844. Oddly enough, the dictionary was not a Webster's at all: it was Worcester's *Universal and Critical* reprinted under the title *A Universal, Critical, and Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language: Including Scientific Terms, compiled from the materials of NOAH WEBSTER, LL. D., By Joseph E. Worcester*.²²

The story has a certain romance to it, but neither Charles nor George Merriam simply "happened" on Bohn's counterfeit Webster's. Joseph Worcester himself had seen the book advertised in "an English journal" in early 1853 and his former publisher John H. Wilkins had actually *owned* a copy of it since his partner brought it back from Italy in 1851. If Worcester and

²¹ Norman White to G. & C. Merriam Co. (New York, NY: April 12, 1856), MWC. Read, 5.

²² Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, February 8, 1854, 4. Joseph E. Worcester, et al., *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed; Relating to the Publication of Worcester's Dictionary in London*, (Boston: Jenks, Hickling and Swan, 1853.) 6.

his publishers knew of the forgery, it is unlikely that the Merriams, with a network of correspondents all over Europe, had not heard of the of Bohn's forgery until the summer of 1853. As later events showed, they were probably saving the revelation for what they deemed the proper moment.²³

Although the Merriams benefitted most from Bohn's deception, and certainly bore him no ill will for it (in 1865 they were the American distributors of "Bohn's School Library"), they had no direct role in producing the forgery. In 1847, Worcester's original publisher John H. Wilkins, of Wilkins, Carter and Co., authorized James Brown (of Little, Brown and Co.) to negotiate for the right to print the *Universal and Critical* in England-- "particularly with Mr. Bohn, from whom we had received an application for the privilege." By October, Brown sealed the deal with Henry Bohn and the plates were shipped to London. Wilkins and Carter, heard nothing from the publisher for almost a year, and finally sent Bohn a letter "urging him to go on in fulfillment of his agreement" and publish a London edition of the *Universal and Critical*. They "received an answer stating that [Bohn] was sorry the plates had been sent. . . [a]nd. . . learned that he had become interested in the sale of Webster's dictionary."²⁴

The "Webster's dictionary" Bohn referred to must have been his own counterfeit which he produced by placing a misleading title on the spine, and resetting the title page. But Bohn's most treacherous act, and the one most suited to the Merriams' purposes, was his mutilation of Worcester's preface to the *Universal and Critical*. The original preface contained a paragraph claiming that Worcester had carefully eschewed any benefit he might have derived from Noah Webster's work in producing his own dictionaries. Even though Worcester was in no way involved with Bohn (there is no evidence that he ever contacted the London publisher), the absence of this

²³ Worcester, et al., *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, 1853, 1-9.

²⁴ "Bohn's School Library," [handbill] MWC, 1865. Worcester, et. al., *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, 1853, 8-9.

critical paragraph reflected badly on the author of the *Universal and Critical* and revived suspicions, voiced by a bitter Webster in 1834, that Worcester was guilty of plagiarism. In short, by late 1850 Henry Bohn had produced and widely distributed a book remarkably suited to bait a trap for both Worcester and his publishers.

In an article that was a masterpiece of innuendo and half-truth, the Merriams laid their trap in the August 5, 1853 edition of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*-- a paper that both Worcester and his Boston publishers surely read:

"Mr. Worcester having been employed by Dr. Webster or his family, to abridge the American Dictionary of the English Language, some years afterwards, and subsequently to Dr. Webster's death, in presenting to the public a Dictionary of his own, of the same size as the Abridgement prepared by him of Webster, says in his Preface, that he 'is not aware of having taken a single word, or definition of a word' from Webster in the preparation of his work.

"Now mark this fact. An edition of Worcester's Dictionary has recently been published in London, and sought to be pushed there, in which the paragraph we have cited is carefully suppressed, and is advertised as 'Webster's Critical and Pronouncing Dictionary, &c., enlarged and revised by Worcester.' On the title page Webster is placed first, in large type, and Worcester follows in another line of smaller type; and the book is lettered on the back 'Webster's and Worcester's Dictionary'!"²⁵

The charges were just ambiguous enough for the Merriams to later deny that they had ever attributed participation in the fraud to either Worcester or Jenks, Hickling and Swan; but Worcester and at least two "journals" in Boston and New York saw things differently. The New

²⁵ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 5, 1853, 2.

York reporter observed that the Merriams had tried to “implicate Dr. Worcester in this injustice to himself. . . [and] more than intimated, that he or his American publishers had sanctioned the publication of Mr. Bohn.”²⁶

Facing charges of plagiarism and duplicity for the second time in his life, Joseph Worcester, over sixty and almost blind, faced a no win situation. If he simply ignored the charges they would spread and injure both his reputation and his livelihood. On the other hand, if he defended himself he would have to confront not only Noah Webster’s monolithic shade but also Webster’s zealous champions. The Merriams had crafted a fine trap. They were well-aware that Worcester was sensitive about his relation to the 1830 *Octavo* and that he had risen to his own defense against an anonymous Noah Webster three times between November 1834 and early 1836. They were betting that Worcester would rise to the challenge again when Webster’s charges were paired with the “Gross Literary Fraud” perpetrated by Bohn. Unlike Webster, who “judiciously” remained anonymous or allowed others to defend his work for him, Worcester countered criticisms of his work and character under his own name and risked the appearance of bad humor, or worse, vulgar self-interest in his work. Either way, regardless of his total innocence, Worcester was destined to lose the ensuing war for both his honor and his dictionary.

How is it that Worcester had so little understanding of the benefits of anonymity and why could he not leave the defense of his work to his publishers? Both questions address the primary differences between Noah Webster and Joseph Worcester. Unlike Webster’s *American Dictionary*, when Worcester’s *Universal and Critical* was published in 1846 the author signed all rights in the book, including the right to sell it, over to his publishers Wilkins, Carter and Co. Unfortunately Wilkins Carter fell on hard times and had to sell the work to Jenks, Hickling and Swan in 1851. If Worcester’s actions in August 1853 are any indication, the lexicographer may not have known his

²⁶ Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, February 8, 1854, 3.

new publishers very well: the first person he contacted after learning of Bohn's fraud was John H. Wilkins not William D. Swan. Likewise Worcester was not involved, as Noah Webster was while he was alive, with directly marketing his books to the public. He was an author with the luxury, and the liability of having almost nothing to do with the sales and promotion of his book. When presented with this new challenge to his credibility, he probably assumed, as he had when he responded to Webster's slanders in 1834, that he stood alone and began to marshal his own defense.²⁷

On September 30, 1853, Worcester finally contacted Jenks, Hickling and Swan. He sent them a "correction of some false statements relating to myself, which the publishers of Dr. Webster's Dictionary have made and circulated very widely" and packet of letters from John H. Wilkins, Sherman Converse and Chauncey Goodrich attesting to his innocence. William D. Swan edited and added to the document and in early October Worcester's *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed; Relating to the Publication of Worcester's Dictionary in London*, appeared in a twenty-eight page pamphlet with an appendix relating to Webster's 1834 plagiarism charges. Worcester's view of the "fraud" differed significantly from the Merriams'. Instead of laying blame at the feet of Bohn from the start, Worcester assailed the Merriams for "endeavoring to make the use of this dishonest proceeding of the London publisher to my injury, and in such a manner as no honorable or honest men would do, if they knew the facts of the case." Bohn was guilty of altering Worcester's work, but the Merriams had concocted a conspiracy to sully his good name.²⁸

Beginning with an account, of Wilkins, Carter's dealings with Bohn that clearly exonerated Worcester of any wrongdoing, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed* had the potential to nip the "War of the Dictionaries" in the bud. Had Worcester stopped with Wilkins' statement of the facts and

²⁷ Janice A. Kraus, "Caveat Auctor: The War of the Dictionaries," *The Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*, 1986 48(2), 84.

²⁸ Worcester, et al., *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, 1853, 7.

not felt compelled to defend himself against the charge of plagiarism as well, the matter might have ended there. Sadly, Worcester thought "that many persons may have been made to believe that there was something wrong or dishonorable on my part [in abridging the 1828 edition of the American Dictionary]." He was determined to set the matter straight in a point-by-point dissection of the Merriams' allegations.²⁹

First, the Merriams' insisted that Worcester was directly employed by Webster or his family to prepare the *Octavo*, and felt justified in availing himself of Webster's work in his own *Comprehensive Dictionary* published in 1830. Sherman Converse and Chauncey Goodrich were his actual employers and Worcester called on Converse to "give a brief statement of the facts in the case." Converse, in spite of his initial assurance that Worcester did "nothing whatsoever" "wrong or dishonorable" in making the abridgement, gave the impression that he was intentionally holding something back about his participation in the project. Three times in the course of his short letter Converse mentioned "variations" which Worcester made in the text of the dictionary at the request of Goodrich and himself. Converse also intimated that Webster gave "the copyright to another" before the book was even produced "that he might not incur the least responsibility for such variations as the abridgement might contain." If nothing else Converse's bitterness towards Noah Webster, the outcome of the enterprise, and his conviction that Worcester did no wrong were genuine. He even pointed out that Worcester twice refused to undertake the work "for the very good reason that you had then already made considerable progress in preparing a dictionary of your own." Converse's defense raised more questions than it answered about the way the abridgement was conducted, and, even on its own terms, did not support Worcester's claim that he

²⁹ Worcester, et al., *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, 1853, 10.

had avoided “all the benefit which might be derived from the use of materials found in his [Webster’s] work.”³⁰

In his haste to counter the Merriams' allegations and insinuations, Worcester opened himself up for further attacks on both a personal and professional level. Although he agreed with New York sheet music publisher Lowell Mason, Jr. that Worcester’s pamphlet was “weak and worth little if any notice,” Charles Merriam almost immediately began looking for ways to exploit Worcester's weaknesses. On October 23, he ordered Chauncey Goodrich to fill him in on the details of the abridgement and to feel out the opposition preparatory to issuing a “judicious reply” to Worcester's defense. Goodrich had secrets of his own to protect in relation to the *Octavo*, and gave the Merriams only as much of the truth as the case required. He insisted that the impulse behind the abridgement, and the changes to the “orthography & pronunciation” associated with it, originated with Sherman Converse. As “Dr. Webster's representative,” Goodrich claimed that he had authorized “variations” from Webster’s orthography and orthoepy to avert the “danger that the large work, incumbered by these, would be considered as a book for the learned alone.” Goodrich virtually eliminated Webster's odd spellings and “Yankee” pronunciations in an effort to “popularize” the *Octavo*; but that was not the only reason that he and Worcester had so radically changed Webster's work. An outspoken Anglophile, he also made the changes to bring the *Octavo* in line with his own spelling and speaking preferences.³¹

On November 22 Goodrich reported that Worcester felt “*wounded*, even towards me” for charging him with complicity in the fraud. “His mind has been so long impressed with the idea of your having falsified and insulted him, that it would be difficult for him to feel such things could ever be done by Christian men. From his cautious but resolute habits of mind, I am satisfied that

³⁰ Worcester, et al., *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, 1853, 11, 12, 13, 10.

³¹ Lowell Mason, Jr., Letter to Charles Merriam, November 5, 1853, MWC. Chauncey Goodrich to G. & C. Merriam (New Haven, CT: October 27, 1853), MWC.

he means to battle this out.” Goodrich concluded by complimenting the “kind and respectful” tone of the draft of *Merriam’s A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed* he had just read and cautioned that “it should be so in every particular” to avoid arousing Worcester’s ire.³²

Charles Merriam intentionally ignored Goodrich’s insinuation that Worcester knew details that might do “great and irreparable injury in respect to the octavo abridgement . . . involving the Quarto in its remote results.” He continued to rake the muck for ways to damage the opposition and draw them more deeply into the controversy. Oddly enough, only three days after sharply discouraging the whole affair, Goodrich provided Merriam with the means to further discredit Worcester’s dubious witness Sherman Converse. He mailed Charles Merriam a handwritten copy of the contract between Webster and Converse showing that the former held all control of the rights to abridge the *American Dictionary*. Formality or no, the contract flatly impeached Converse’s testimony that he “acted as agent for no man.”³³

On February 8, 1854 Charles Merriam’s *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, which Goodrich called a “powerful attack and defense,” was published and then revised and reissued on March 28. Merriam presented his work as an effort to “state the facts of the controverted topics, verify them, and leave the decision to such persons as may take any interest in the matter.” This reportorial approach gave G. & C. Merriam the opportunity to impeach the testimony of Worcester and his witnesses (particularly Sherman Converse) and, at the same time, compound their accusations against the lexicographer and his publishers.³⁴

While preserving the impression that they were only compensating for injuries to themselves, the Merriams’ version of *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed* was yet another

³² Chauncey Goodrich to Charles Merriam (New Haven, CT: November 22, 1853), MWC.

³³ Chauncey Goodrich to G. & C. Merriam (New Haven, CT: February 4, 1854), MWC.

Chauncey Goodrich to G. & C. Merriam (New Haven, CT: February 7, 1854), MWC.

³⁴ Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, February 8, 1854, 3.

masterpiece of finely crafted innuendo. Unlike Worcester, and later William D. Swan, Charles Merriam carefully edited extracts from Worcester's own pamphlet as well as letters from others to present the "facts" in a way decidedly favorable to his interests. Besides discrediting Converse and heaping scorn on Worcester for allowing the controversy to escalate, Charles Merriam also felt compelled to defend a supposedly disinterested party to Worcester's slanders-- Noah Porter.

At the conclusion of his own pamphlet Worcester assailed the Merriams for hiring a "public advocate" for their work. By 1853 the Merriams had hired not one but three public advocates for their dictionary: Chauncey Goodrich, their editor; Noah Porter, Goodrich's protege; and T. A. Nesmith, their lobbyist in the Mid-West. Worcester probably singled out Porter for his complaints because Porter was, up to 1854, the most influential and visible of Webster's friends. Charles Merriam acknowledged that Porter had defended Webster's damaged reputation before the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education, but hotly insisted that Porter had never recommended the *American Dictionary* to that or any other Committee. In fact, Porter not only helped to push Webster's system in Massachusetts, he also delivered a long appreciation of the *American Dictionary* before the New York State Assembly and, most important, penned at least two slanderous reviews of the *Universal and Critical* around 1848.³⁵

Like Nesmith who refused to act like a normal book agent, Porter's effectiveness as a lobbyist for Webster's system hinged on his ability to maintain a disinterested facade. If those to whom he praised the dictionary suspected that he had a pecuniary interest in its success, his opinion might be considered tainted with the same selfishness the Merriams hoped to impute to Worcester. In short, an effective advocacy of either work hinged on the ability to seem disinterested in monetary gain. The Merriams packaged their defense of Porter in this way and used the same excuse to turn their attention to the conduct of Worcester's. Holding the

³⁵ Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, February 8, 1854, 10.

lexicographer ultimately responsible for anything said about them, their dictionary, or its author, Charles Merriam presented his defense of Noah Porter and asked Worcester “whether it is just . . . to reaffirm his injurious statements concerning” Porter and the Merriams themselves. Merriam warned Worcester that if he persisted in his course he would, whether he believed his statements or not, be giving “currency to what he knows to be falsehood” and must be ready to be called to account for it. Finally, Charles Merriam asked Worcester to issue a “manly retraction” of his slanders against his firm.³⁶

Merriam also asserted that, despite his conduct, he and his brother were convinced that Worcester “cherished” a “delicacy of felling and nice sense of honor” that was absent in his publishers. Likening Swan himself to John Bunyan’s “Mr. By-Ends or Mr. Money-Love” who measured “his own reputation and success by the corresponding deprecation of another,” the Merriams requested Worcester, as a gentleman, to police the behavior of his publishers. The Merriams had not only profoundly eroded Worcester's credibility, they also unfairly married his reputation to the actions of his publishers. Predictably, Worcester failed to meet their lofty expectations.³⁷

On March 28, G. & C. Merriam Co. reissued the entire text of *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed* with a new appendix recommending Swan’s most recent pamphlet to readers as a perfect example of “how far the taste and spirit we have described as characterizing some of the assailants of Dr. Webster are cherished by them [Jenks, Hickling and Swan].” The Merriams openly accused Swan of behaving dishonestly and despaired that “any gentlemen, trained to mercantile pursuits, and accustomed to honest and fair dealing . . . would so far forget himself as to resort to measures so unworthy.” Swan’s behavior was, in Charles Merriam’s opinion, a personal and professional

³⁶ Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, February 8, 1854, 15.

³⁷ Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, February 8, 1854, 11.

disgrace. Rather than exerting “enterprising effort for his own publication,” Merriam insisted that Swan had “deem[ed] it necessary to villify the departed and slander the living to carry his plans.”³⁸

“All is *not* fair in business,” Merriam chided his assailants-- unless you were attempting to defend yourself against the libels of another. Swan promptly responded to this mixed bag of invective with *A Reply to Messrs. G. & C. Merriams' Attack upon the Character of Dr. Worcester and His Dictionaries*. Swan's *Reply* was published too soon after the February 8 pamphlet to have been a direct response to it and Swan denied that it was. According to the Boston publisher, his *Reply* was written to redress grievous harm done to Worcester's reputation by a pamphlet that Merriam agents had “extensively circulated throughout the Western States, and in sections of the Country where Dr. Worcester is personally unknown.” This pamphlet, part of which was supposedly written by a “distinguished teacher in Eastern Massachusetts,” frankly accused Worcester of plagiarism and Swan and his firm of passing shoddy goods on to the public. “Worcester,” the teacher contended, “was at once the pupil and assistant of Webster, and, seeing that he, Webster, had taken a step in advance of the age . . . , and also that Walker was ‘behind the times,’ treacherously went to work, catering to the Walkerian taste of the day, and produced his ‘bastard dictionary’ [Worcester's *Comprehensive*]” which Swan and his associates had used “unscrupulous measures” to “foist a worthless book upon the public.” Whoever wrote this libel was grossly misinformed about Worcester's publishing history-- Wilkins, Carter and Co. were the publishers of the *Comprehensive*-- but that, as Swan realized, was immaterial. What mattered was that these lies were spreading throughout the Mid-West, souring public opinion and slowing the progress of Worcester's system.³⁹

³⁸ Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, March 28, 1854, 15.

³⁹ William Draper Swan, *A Reply to Messrs. G. & C. Merriams' Attack upon the Character of Dr. Worcester and His Dictionaries*, (Boston: Jenks, Hickling and Swan, 1854) 4.

William Draper Swan was in the same unenviable position as Worcester. By binding Worcester to account for his publisher's behavior, Charles Merriam had tied Swan's hands. If he responded with the full vituperative force that he had shown he was capable of in his anonymous attacks on Noah Webster and his system in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* and the *Evening Transcript*, Swan's actions would reflect badly on his author's reputation. On the other hand, a tepid response would be worse than useless-- a virtual admission of the truth of the Merriams' allegations. Caught in such a dilemma, Swan did the only thing he possibly could: he reproduced every document cited by the Merriams, usually in full, with his own deft commentaries and hoped the public could discern the injustice of Charles Merriam's allegations.

First, Swan challenged Merriam to reveal the identity of his "distinguished teacher" or, failing that, to take the blame for "giv[ing] currency to what he knows to be falsehood." Second, the publisher assailed the Merriams' honesty as businessmen and accused them of unwarranted attacks on Worcester instead of "relying upon the merits of the work in which they are interested." Third, Swan allowed the ill-treated Sherman Converse to attack the Merriams for him.

Converse, whom the Merriams found "egotistical" and, at best, faulty in his memory of dealings with Noah Webster, had many reasons to bear Webster's publishers ill will. On February 8, the Merriams had dismantled Converse's claim that he "acted as agent for no man" by presenting the carefully edited text of the contract that Chauncey Goodrich had given them. Charles Merriam compounded this insult on March 28 by suggesting that both Worcester and Converse should take all "the consideration and benefit that they could glean from a certain passage from Matthew which should lead them to be more charitable." The allusion was to *Matthew* 7:1 and 7:3 "Judge not, that ye be not judged" and "why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye." Both verses counseled acknowledgement of and repentance for personal flaws-- in this case bad humor and poor memory.

The Merriams also claimed that they could find nothing in Worcester's *Universal and Critical* under either courtesy or candor "to justify a man bearing false witness against his neighbor."

Converse had apparently recommended that they look these words up and the Merriams cheerfully took the opportunity to accuse Converse of spreading lies about his connection to the *American Dictionary*.⁴⁰

Understandably piqued, Converse responded to the Merriams in kind. Astonished that "as professors of the Christian Faith" his tormentors would not accede to their errors once presented with the facts of his dealings with Noah Webster, Converse not only questioned the Merriams' religious convictions but also their sanity in continuing to parade "the garbling and misrepresentation contained in their attacks" before the public. Asking them to "make up an answer for themselves to the following questions," Converse invited the brothers to repair to "the secret communion of that secret and sacred retreat. . . a *Closet* which they do not neglect. . . ." Five times he asked the Merriams to consider whether it was "consistent with truth, justice or honor, or with the precept in the Golden Rule" to have implicated him, in several ways and at several times, in their conflict with Worcester and his publishers. Converse, unlike either Swan or Worcester, was far enough outside the controversy to question not only the Merriams business practices, but also their personal integrity.⁴¹

By publishing Converse's stern admonitions to the Merriams as an appendix to his own *Reply*, Swan not only avoided direct connection with the failed publisher's very personal indictment of his rivals, he also attempted to draw the Merriams' ire away from Worcester and himself.

⁴⁰ Charles Merriam, *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed*, March 28, 1854, 9. *Matthew*, 7:1, 7:3. Charles Merriam, *A Summary Summing of the Charges, With Their Refutations, in Attacks Upon Noah Webster, LL. D., His Dictionaries, Or His Publishers Made by Mr. Joseph E. Worcester, Sherman Converse, and Messrs. Jenks, Hickling and Swan.*, (Springfield MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., July, 1854.) 11.

⁴¹ Sherman Converse, "Postscript," to *A Reply to Messrs. G. & C. Merriams' Attack upon the Character of Dr. Worcester and His Dictionaries*, (Boston: Jenks, Hickling and Swan, 1854) 2.

Unfortunately, Swan's exhaustive treatment of the controversy provided the Merriams with an opportunity to issue *A Summary Summing of the Charges, With Their Refutations, in Attacks Upon Noah Webster, LL. D., His Dictionaries, Or His Publishers Made by Mr. Joseph E. Worcester, Sherman Converse, and Messrs. Jenks, Hickling and Swan* in July 1854. This pamphlet, the final one in the 1854 exchange, rivaled Swan's *Reply* for sheer size, but presented no new arguments. Instead, from the title page on Charles Merriam's newest work linked Sherman Converse directly to Worcester's camp and allowed the Merriams to hold Worcester accountable for *his* slurs against them as well as his publisher's.

Merriam's concluding statement amounted to a manifesto of his firm's complaints against Worcester, his advocates and publishers, and its placement-- at the end of remarks addressed directly to Joseph Worcester-- implicitly placed responsibility for the entire controversy on a failing of Worcester's "moral courage to publicly rebuke" his publishers for their various slanders against Webster, his dictionaries and his publishers. Merriam indicted Worcester for his own "injurious imputations before the public." He likewise held Worcester responsible for allowing Jenks, Hickling and Swan's representative to "most offensively and unjustly" assail Webster before a "legislative committee" and then upbraiding Noah Porter, who countered the attack, "as a mercenary 'public advocate' of Webster." He blamed the original controversy on Worcester's publishers and asked him if the course that they have pursued was "in strict accordance with truth and propriety, and such as can give reasonable offense to no one?"⁴²

The entire weight of the war was too much for Worcester to bear. By the end of 1854, he had lapsed into a bitter silence, ignoring the controversy and working on the next revision of the *Universal and Critical*. The Merriams' smear campaign had apparently accomplished a part of its mission. The pamphlets, sometimes published in newspapers or reviewed in literary journals,

⁴² Charles Merriam, *Summary Summing*, July 1854, 10.

propagated their slurs against Worcester into the Mid-West and , along with T. A. Nesmith's intense lobbying, seemed to have routed Jenks, Hickling and Swan. In October 1854, as Swan was reissuing his *Reply*, "Webster feeling" was spreading from Wisconsin through Michigan and into Indiana.⁴³

Why did G. & C. Merriam Co.'s campaign succeed so brilliantly while both Worcester and Swan's defenses failed? Both publishers assailed each other in the language of mercantile probity. Swan accused the Merriams of departing from the "usual and honorable mode of transacting business." The Merriams charged Swan with attempting to sell shoddy goods by "unscrupulous measures." Both questioned the taste, gentility and even religious convictions of the other. In short, G. & C. Merriam and Jenks, Hickling and Swan had attempted to denigrate each other's professional and personal reputations in every possible way. The only real advantage that the Merriams possessed was that Henry Bohn's forgery had damaged their sales in Europe; but even that had helped to spread the Webster name into new territory.

In actual fact, G. & C. Merriam's success may not have been so astounding and the pamphlet component of the "War of the Dictionaries" may not have affected the fortunes of either the *American Dictionary* or the *Universal and Critical* very much. Even before the bulk of Charles Merriam's libels and William Swan's rebuttals had been published, the tide of opinion in the Mid-West was turning towards Webster. There was another, more important, dictionary war going on in both the Mid-West and the Northeast and it was being fought not by agents and publishers but by a group of social reformers, school superintendents and clergymen who had their own reasons for favoring one or the other dictionary.

The "War of the Dictionaries" was, strictly speaking, a publishers quarrel confined to the need to expand markets at the expense of the competition; but that does not invalidate its

⁴³ Read, 8-9.

significance. All of the major participants, Charles Merriam, William Swan, Joseph Worcester, and Sherman Converse, articulated the struggle in terms meant to appeal to a larger audience. Their attacks on each other were designed to speak to issues of honesty, fairness, and conformity to polite behavior that were endemic to the larger war. Worcester was charged with plagiarism, stealing the thoughts and livelihood of another. Merriam and Swan both charged each other with dishonest business practices that undermined not only their credibility but also that of their profession. And Sherman Converse charged the Merriams with outright hypocrisy-- putting on the appearance of piety to advance their business interests. In this sense "The War of the Dictionaries" was a series of performances designed to convince the audience that personal character was directly related to superior products. By denigrating the competition, both publishers were attempting to erode the value of their products regardless of their merits. And this issue, of performance versus sincerity was the one on which the real dictionary war turned.

CHAPTER III

THE TRIUMPH OF THE PAPER MAN

Dictionaries played only a small part in the “War of the Dictionaries.” The publishers were more interested in the issues of personal character and name recognition than the virtues of the books they sold. While this may at first seem odd, a cursory glance at the 1859 edition of Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* and the 1860 edition of Worcester's *Universal and Critical* reveals that there was very little substantive difference between them.

Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, on which all subsequent editions were supposedly based, was a marvel of “innovation.” In contrast to earlier English dictionaries--particularly those based on revision of Samuel Johnson's work-- Webster attempted to make a clean break with the “mother tongue” in all respects. Whereas Boston and most coastal cities seem to have followed the British pronunciation keys of John Walker, the Yale lawyer spoke (and reasoned that his fellow countrymen should speak) the language of “New England”-- specifically the Connecticut and Massachusetts backcountry. Webster proposed that the diphthong -ea- be pronounced e instead of e (def rather than def), that -sk be pronounced as x (ax rather than ask), and that -th be pronounced as d (further rather than further). Webster's store of ingenuity for creating a uniquely American language did not stop there: he also proposed to simplify spelling on the grounds of pronunciation, analogy, and etymology. Taking a cue from changes already well underway, Webster dropped the final -k from words like musick, and logick, switched -re with -er as in metre, theatre and spectre, and began to purge the u from honour, and neighbour. Based in large part on his exhaustive if ultimately misguided research into the origins of the language, Webster also changed the spellings of island to ieland, bridegroom to bridegoom, women to wimen, and tongue to tung. In his enthusiasm to simplify the language, Webster moved beyond the bounds of his own dubious scholarship and fashion to advocate a whole series of

changes such as “lether, groop, stedly, thum, soe, ake, aker, ribin, nightmar, bild, spred, turky, fether, nuisance, and nehbor.”¹

Oddly enough, almost none of Webster’s own spellings persisted long after his death. As he had done with the 1831 abridgment, Chauncey Goodrich (author of *Selected British Eloquence*) purged all of his father-in-law’s more objectionable spellings from the *American Dictionary* and replaced Webster’s key with one of his own device substantially derived from Walker’s. Thus, as more than one observer noticed, by 1859 all that remained of Noah Webster was his name: his much maligned “innovations” were no more. Not all of Webster’s influence was gone by 1859, or even 1864 when the final revision of the *American Dictionary* was offered to the public under the editorship of Noah Porter. For his part, Worcester was more in line with the orthography and pronunciation of the day: his definitions were remarkably puny compared to Webster’s which had persisted, almost untouched, from the first through the fifth edition of the *American Dictionary*. Unlike his Yankee pronunciation key and his simplified spellings, Webster’s forty-year-old definitions stood the test of time and were acknowledged as superior not only by his own advocates but also those of his rival Joseph Worcester.

Both G. & C. Merriam Co. and Jenks, Hickling and Swan’s pamphlets almost always ended with pages of testimonials cribbed from school board reports, magazine reviews, and letters written directly to the publishers themselves. The difference between them, and most of the reviews of the two dictionaries that appeared between 1847 and 1860, was that Websterians could endorse their champion without mentioning the opposition. Websterian reviews from 1848 make no mention of Worcester’s 1846 *Universal and Critical* and the endorsements appended to all of

¹ Sidney I. Landau, *Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984), 61, 60. Robert Keith Leavitt, *Noah’s Ark, New England Yankees and the Endless Quest*, (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1947), 30. Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: the Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth Century America*, (New York: W. Morrow, 1990), 83-84.

the Merriams' pamphlets, particularly *A Summary Summing of the Charges*, likewise ignored the competition while citing the *American Dictionary* as “the best Dictionary of the English Language that has yet been published” and “as full and faithful a representation of the English Language, both written and spoken, as can be brought within the compass of a single volume in our day.”²

An examination of Worcester's supporters exposes the lexicographer's Achilles' heel: his definitions could not compete with Webster's. Swan's selection of university professors and school superintendents, all regarded Worcester as the standard in terms of “orthography and pronunciation.” Almost all of them also acknowledged that for “the definition and use of words” and their attendant etymologies, Webster's was the undeniable standard. J.D. Low, Principal of St. Louis High School, deemed Worcester's Comprehensive “an invaluable auxiliary in obtaining a correct knowledge of the English Language” and placed “it by the side of Webster's Dictionary upon my desk.” J. Blanchard, President of Knox College, Illinois was more direct on the subject: “Worcester's large Dictionary can hardly compete with Webster's in the definition of words, but it is a work of rare excellence.”³

Horace Mann offered a particularly interesting illustration of this duality. For Swan's *Reply*, Mann recommended Worcester's orthography and orthoepy as “the highest standard recognized by the best writers in England and in this country.” But Mann also wrote to Charles Merriam lauding Webster's as the “best Defining Dictionary in the English Language” and concluded that “[w]hoever may choose to purchase the Dictionary of other lexicographers, I should earnestly advise to purchase Dr. Webster also.” In short, Mann appears to have been on the horns

² “The New Edition of Webster's Dictionary,” *American [Whig] Review* 7 (March 1848): 301-306. “Goodrich's Edition of Webster's Dictionary,” *North American Review* 66 (January 1848): 256-257. Charles Merriam, *A Summary Summing of the Charges, With Their Refutations, In Attacks Upon Noah Webster, LL. D., His Dictionaries, or His Publishers, Made By Mr. Joseph E. Worcester, Mr. Sherman Converse, and Messrs. Jenks, Hickling and Swan*, (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co, July 1854), 16-17.

³ *Summary Summing*, 34-38.

of a dilemma which plagued Worcesterians and Websterians alike. Worcester's dictionaries helped them to speak and spell properly, but the "precise, full description" of words offered by Webster's helped them to think properly.⁴

In terms of size, number of pages, words, and price the two books were nearly the same. Yet, by virtue of sanitized spelling and pronunciation and superior definitions, Webster's clearly garnered a larger share of the market each year. How different were the definitions? At first glance, Worcester's definitions actually looked shorter, but length was not the issue. For most nouns, verbs and a fair number of adjectives both books were remarkably similar in content if not in execution. Worcester's definitions tended to be concise, providing a clear explanation of the word followed by at least one synonym, and, sometimes, an expository sentence of indeterminate origin and a notation of the source of the word and definition. Webster's work tended toward the encyclopedic. His definitions were wordier, often twice as long, lacked a synonym and, most important, illustrated meaning with Bible verses, pithy maxims or quotations from, Bunyan, Milton, Swift, Dryden and Shakespeare. Every time young scholars, to whom Webster's was widely recommended, consulted their dictionaries they were likely to receive a moral lesson such as "[w]ith the loss of reputation, an man, and especially a woman, loses most of the enjoyments of life," "Industry pays debts while idleness or despair will increase them," or even "unaffected modesty is the sweetest charm of female excellence, the richest gem in the diadem of her honor." With words and phrases like "appropriately," "in principle," "in fact" and frequent capitalization and italics to draw the eye as good preaching draws the ear, each of Webster's definitions was a little sermon in itself.

⁴ William Draper Swan, *A Reply to Messrs. G. & C. Merriam's Attack Upon the Character of Dr. Worcester and His Dictionaries*, (Boston: Jenks, Hickling and Swan, 1854), 36-37. *Summary Summing*, 17-19.

To whom did these sermons appeal? The most obvious answer is that Webster's definitions were attractive to those who were actually buying *the American Dictionary of the English Language* as well as the smaller works for their schools, libraries, and themselves. The pamphlets that the two publishers circulated with their broad claims of superiority and pages of endorsements by literary, educational and religious authorities suggest, however, that consumers may have relied on the opinion of others to select a dictionary. Benjamin Perkins, Chairman of the South Danvers, Massachusetts, School Committee, reported that he and his fellow committee members considered "it of greatest importance what dictionary is placed before the young" and had "read with much interest the 'Battle of the Dictionaries.'" Regardless of whether others beyond South Danvers were paying attention, both publishers clearly believed that keeping the controversy alive was beneficial to them, and continued to revise and circulate their pamphlets far and wide.⁵

Attentive to the influence that their pamphlets were likely to have, both publishers included endorsements carefully selected to present their dictionaries in the best possible light to potential customers and, by way of introduction, to prepare the field for both G. & C. Merriam Co. and Jenks, Hickling and Swan's agents. The implication of this corpus of approbation from 38 college presidents, 36 school administrators, 29 college professors, twenty-two teachers, fourteen clergymen, authors, Senators, judges, Supreme Court Justices and Presidents of the United States was that the country (almost all of these men were national figures) was going over to one or the other dictionary. Regardless of such fence riders as Amherst College President Edward Hitchcock and, as mentioned earlier, Horace Mann, and perhaps *because* they had been recruited by the opposition, all of these men were selected both for their perceived influence in helping to push through lucrative "state measures" and the weight that their names and positions had in the

⁵ *Report of the School Committee of South Danvers, Massachusetts*, Benjamin C. Perkins, chairman [South Danvers, MA: June 16, 1856], *Merriam-Webster Collection* (Benceke Rare Books Library: Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut). [Hereafter, documents from the Merriam-Webster Collection will be noted by author, title, and MWC.]

estimation of local school boards, public libraries and private consumers. G. & C. Merriam Co. sales figures show that sales via the coveted state appropriations to Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and Wisconsin accounted for twenty-five percent of Webster's total sales between 1851 and 1856. The other seventy-five percent must have come from others who partially followed the lead of their state legislators, and also weighed the merits of the two dictionaries--as attacked and defended not only in the publishers pamphlets but also in the periodical press-- for themselves.⁶

G. & C. Merriam and Jenks, Hickling and Swan were not the only source of information about their dictionaries. Especially in 1859 and 1860 (when new editions of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* and the *Universal and Critical* appeared within six months of each other for easy comparison) reviews and criticisms, as well as isolated editorial skirmishes, appeared in periodicals and newspapers ranging from *The Atlantic Monthly* to *The Southern Literary Messenger*, from the *New York World* to the *Marietta, Ohio Intelligencer*. The journals in which these pieces appeared were a mixed lot; but a quick look at the titles yields an interesting pattern. Of the ten newspapers surveyed, four were Whig party organs and two others, the *Boston Christian Advocate and Journal* and a clipping from the G. & C. Merriam Co. archives with the masthead "Observe All Things Whatsoever I Have Commanded You," had a markedly religious bent. The eighteen periodicals surveyed show roughly the same pattern: eight were Whig party organs and seven, by virtue of words like "Religion," "Christian," and "Biblical" prominently displayed in their titles (and in their contents), bore the stamp of evangelical Protestantism.

As a group, the reviewers were not unlike those who wrote endorsements for either Webster's or Worcester's. Of the thirteen men who wrote reviews, four were professional journalists. Three of the authors were educators of ranks ranging from headmaster to "Instructor in Languages," and among the remaining six were a publisher, a preacher, the librarian for the

⁶⁶ Charles Merriam, "Charles Merriam's Recollections of Various Particulars in the History of Webster's Dictionaries, 1883," MWC.

Boston Mercantile Library Association and a former Congressman. When they wrote their reviews, only one, William D. Swan (who attacked both Noah Webster and his dictionary from behind the pseudonym "Hermes") was directly connected to either of the publishers.

Both endorsers and reviewers seem to have been cut from the same cloth. They were, with the important exception of the judges, lawyers, legislators and Presidents, men of distinctly middling circumstances: neither at the top nor at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder but socially and professionally ambitious. Noah Porter, professor of mental and moral philosophy at Yale, complained that his salary of \$1,800 a year (only marginally more than the \$1,500 commonly collected by fledgling salesclerks) forced him to "tutor, write for the press, and take in boarders." Later in life he would achieve acclaim, and modest wealth, as both the editor of the last two editions of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* and President of Yale. In his lifetime Horace Mann rose from the chair of the Massachusetts Board of Education to the presidency of Antioch College in Ohio. But, not all of the members of this pool achieved greatness, or are even remembered today. Epes Sargent flirted seriously with bankruptcy early in his successful, if now forgotten career as an author, poet and playwright. Likewise, George P. Marsh, Whig Congressman and ambassador to Turkey, repaired his ruined fortunes at mid-life by becoming one of the leading philologists of the Gilded Age. Yet a third group left almost no mark at all behind them. Edward S. Gould, Anglophile and author, and William D. Swan, publisher of Worcester's dictionaries, both achieved modest success, sank into bankruptcy and never emerged.⁷

Despite Porter's complaints, and the more tangible financial troubles of others in this group, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that these men lived a very genteel sort of poverty. In 1860, the average Massachusetts farm hand could expect about \$15.34 a month and carpenters,

⁷ Louise L. Stevenson, *Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends: The New Haven Scholars and the Transformation of Higher Learning in America, 1830-1890*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986). "Gould, Edward," "Mann, Horace," "Marsh, George P.," "Sargent, Epes," *Dictionary of American Biography*, 2nd ed., (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1946).

foundry workers and masons were drawing only about one dollar a day "four days a week through three seasons of the year." Even the average public school teacher could look forward to only \$189 a year. Our reviewers, and particularly our endorsers, were not in this league. More likely they were living at the level of a successful merchant who could expect to clear two to three thousand dollars a year safely. They were, in short, part of an expanding, increasingly professional, middle class and it was to them, for a variety of reasons, that Webster's with its sanitized orthography and didactic definitions had broad appeal.⁸

In spite of their agreement on the superiority of Webster's definitions and their broad inclusion in the ranks of the middle class, there was a substantial difference between those who were recruited to endorse either dictionary and those who wrote reviews and criticisms. First and foremost, those who endorsed the "plan" of either lexicographer were names which might be familiar today or easily found in biographical dictionaries. Blatantly recruited for the influence of their names on the opinions of the reading public, they were wealthy, influential, and spoke with the authority of professional position (educational, religious, or political). The reviewers, by contrast, were of a different rank. That only eight out of the thirteen bothered to put any kind of byline on their work and five of those were pseudonyms suggests that these names commanded less attention than those of the endorsers for want of wealth, influence, position or a combination of these. These differences between "name" endorsers and largely anonymous critics played

⁸ Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 308. Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 61. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American city, 1760-1900*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 114. Bureau of the Census, *The Statistical History of the United States From Colonial Times to the Present*, (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 106-107.

themselves out not only in the media in which they appeared, but also in the messages that they had to sell.⁹

If the men whose endorsements were solicited by the publishers enjoyed national renown, their sentiments were carefully crafted to highlight their own prestige, and their perceptions of the national importance of either Webster's or Worcester's dictionaries. Unlike the reviewers, these men spoke in the first person, alluded the meaning of the dictionaries to themselves and then extrapolated that experience to the nation in a number of ways.

The first category of endorsements was also the least convincing. Unlike the more florid prose of others, some men merely contributed their names and a brief recommendation that may indicate either unfamiliarity with the work pressed upon them or a lack of time to peruse a two-thousand page dictionary for themselves. Alone, recommendations such as the one penned by Harvard President Jared Sparks, sounded remarkably flat in their assertion that "its [Webster's] reputation is *widely extended*" and that the work received "essential improvements from the able hands it has passed through." Sparks was not alone in his tepid praise for Webster's: the Lord High Chancellor of England, or more likely his secretary, returned a short thank you note to the Merriams and lauded the *American Dictionary of the English Language* as "[a] very valuable work-- A NECESSITY TO EVERY EDUCATED MAN." For their part, Worcesterian endorsements could also lack conviction and at least one recommendation, that of Professor Aaron

⁹ Although information on Jenks, Hickling and Swan's solicitation of puffs is lacking, the G. & C. Merriam Co. papers in the *Merriam Webster Collection* at the Beineke Rare Books Library at Yale show evidence of a campaign to curry favor for Webster's all over the world. The Merriams sent copies of the *American Dictionary* to Queen Victoria, to every President of the United States, to foreign dignitaries, members of Congress, state governors, school superintendents and every popular writer whom they could find. In the correspondence files there are well over one thousand letters written in the following form: "We do ourselves the pleasure of sending. . . . a parcel to your address containing a copy of Webster's Unabridged, with our compliments. . . ." All of the letters expressed admiration for the "productions of your own graceful pen," or "of your own now national reputation" and went on to "apologize for thus, in this slight way," attempting to recognize the esteem in which the Merriams held the recipient. The return letters were equally effusive and most of them, in whole or in part, found their way into the pamphlets.

Williams of Ohio University, was quite forthright in thanking Jenks, Hickling and Swan for their gift before granting the publishers the permission "to add my name to the list of those who 'do not hesitate to pronounce it [the *Universal and Critical*], in our judgment, the most comprehensive, accurate and useful Dictionary within our knowledge."¹⁰

Both sides of the controversy were aware that such recommendations lacked punch. The Merriams followed the lead of Noah Webster in circulating petitions, not only within Congress but also among college presidents, the principals of Boston's public and private schools, and the United States Supreme Court. Jenks, Hickling and Swan countered with petitions of their own-- the most lengthy of which encompassed college presidents and Supreme Court Justices from Maine to North Carolina. Those who did anything more than sign their names to the petitions acknowledged time and again that they were unfamiliar with the merits of the work in question. Justice Levi Woodbury concurred "fully in the leading portions of the above recommendation" and qualified his support with the admission that he had not "the leisure to examine all the particulars referred to." Justice William Cranch simply expressed agreement with the "sentiments" of Justice Joseph Story who was himself reacting to the "recommendations of President Day [of Yale], and other distinguished gentlemen."¹¹

While William D. Swan was correct that many of these endorsements were little more than glorified thank you notes written to make "courteous acknowledgments to the Messrs. Merriam for an elegantly bound copy of the Quarto Dictionary," he failed to recognize the solicited character of Worcester's endorsements. He also overlooked the most important reason that these highly public men were so faint in their praise-- they themselves could not decide which dictionary was best. In his recommendation for the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Edward D. Hitchcock, President of Amherst maintained that Webster's "far excels them all, so far as I know, in giving and

¹⁰ *Summary Summing*, 18. *Reply*, 36.

¹¹ *Summary Summing*, 19, [second pagination] 15-17, 21. *Reply*, 40-41.

defining scientific terms." The same year, Hitchcock not only signed a petition favoring Worcester's system, but also wrote that "in scientific terms, . . . it [the *Universal and Critical*] is the most complete Dictionary I have ever met; and, therefore, it will replace all others on my study table." Hitchcock was not alone in his indecision. Jared Sparks not only wrote the endorsement of Webster's alluded to earlier, he also was the first signer of Jenks, Hickling and Swan's massive petition of college presidents. By their brevity, their willingness to sign prepared petitions and their indecision *vis a vis* the dictionaries, many of these men reflected the dualism discussed earlier: they preferred Webster's definitions, but used Worcester's spelling and pronunciation. To an even greater extent the explanation for their easy willingness to follow the lead of their peers could be that they did not have time, or the inclination, to undertake the study that a comprehensive opinion on the subject would have required.¹²

One might conclude from this that many, if not most, of the endorsers of the two dictionaries were riding the fence-- and that most of them had both *the American Dictionary of the English Language* and the *Universal and Critical* close at hand courtesy of the publishers. This is true, but misses the most interesting ways in which these men used their recommendations as a forum to speak on issues of more import than Webster or Worcester.

By far, the most popular form of endorsement for *Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language*, and the easiest to write for anyone not wishing to actually crack the binding, was to play on its status as an *American* intellectual and material product. Presidents Polk, Taylor and Fillmore all took this route, dubbing Webster's "a truly national work, illustrating at once American learning, and American enterprise and art." Iowa's governor hailed Webster's as "an honor to America, and to every land where English is spoken." Four United States Senators greeted Webster's as "a new and valuable contribution to American literature." Chancellor R.H. Walworth

¹² *Reply*, 21. *Summary Summing*, [second pagination], 16. *Reply*, 41, 42.

of New York concluded that the dictionary was not only a credit to the country but also "unquestionably superior to any other Dictionary that has ever been published of the English Language."¹³

While maintaining Webster's position as an American scholar, those outside of the Capitol and the state house tended to take a more trans-Atlantic approach to their praise. President Emeritus of Amherst College, Heman Humphrey pointed to Webster's as "an honor to the country which gave him birth, to the age and to the language. . . ." On the other side of the ocean, Rev. John Angell James lauded Webster's as "one of the literary wonders of your country" and admitted "[t]hat the best Dictionary of our language which has yet appeared, should have been written by an American, is not exactly for the credit of the Father Land." Americans, like President Chapin of Columbian College, were eager to spread the benefits of the *American Dictionary* over the world. Webster's fame, according to Chapin, was as "universal and imperishable as the English language" and his dictionary promised "to be the chief vehicle to convey over the world the blessings of science and Christianity." Richard G. Parker, Principal of Boston's Johnson School, further stressed this theme in his conviction that Webster was "a benefactor to all of Anglo-Saxon origin" and his dictionary "the great fountain to which all will resort for draughts of pure English." In sum, as George Hyde asserted, Webster's could be of benefit to "[e]very human being who can speak or write the English Language."¹⁴

Many of the endorsers were committed to a trans-Atlantic English "linguistic nationalism" which linked partisans of both dictionaries to the "Father Land." But *American* nationalism of the sort espoused by Webster's supporters in their claim to a uniquely American product was more popular. This American orientation also foreshadowed the most critical realm in which the

¹³ *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 22, 24, 20.)

¹⁴ *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 16, 19, 16. Charles Merriam, *Have We A National Standard of English Lexicography? Or, Some Comparison of the Claims of Webster's Dictionaries and Worcester's Dictionaries*, (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1854), 22.

American Dictionary of the English Language and the *Universal and Critical* competed--the claim to the status of a national standard.¹⁵

By 1854 at the latest the residue of Webster's orthographic and orthoepic heterodoxy had been purged from the *American Dictionary*. These changes did not remedy the academic preference for Worcester's spelling and pronunciation and Jenks, Hickling and Swan were more than happy to exploit this weakness in a long series of recommendations and petitions. Often little more than a sentence asserting that Worcester's was used as "the STANDARD AUTHORITY IN THE ORTHOGRAPHY AND PRONUNCIATION of the English language" in a given school district or for well-known authors such as Washington Irving, these statements provided a base from which to make even broader claims of authority.¹⁶

Websterian reviewers could make no such claims, but they did call on an array of professors who sanctioned Webster's attempt to establish a "uniform system of Orthography and Pronunciation of the English Language," while admiring Chauncey Goodrich's "judicious" revision of his father-in-law's work. The Merriams' dogged attempt to find a way to meet this criticism of Webster's system suggests that uncontested superiority in the realm of definitions was not enough to sweep their rival from the field.¹⁷

Professional rivalry aside, both publishers attempted to claim the mantle of a national standard for their work. But, as the endorsements show, the national standard meant something beyond simple uniformity in spelling and pronunciation. To those who wrote endorsements for Worcester's *Universal and Critical*, the national standard hinged on issues of uniform diction,

¹⁵ Although his work almost entirely avoids the United States, Benedict Anderson's idea of "linguistic nationalism"-- of language as a unifying force for a diverse and farflung group of people-- seems particularly relevant to the formation of a uniquely American or English (trans-atlantic) language. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1983), 42.

¹⁶ *Reply*, 24, 26, 27.

¹⁷ *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 16.

proper spelling and preserving the purity of the language. Principal J. D. Low and Superintendent A. Litton of St. Louis both stressed the value of Worcester's dictionary for those who wished to obtain a "correct knowledge of the English Language," but neither man gave their own opinions on what constituted correctness.¹⁸

If a complete definition of "correct knowledge" of English was difficult to pin down, the consequences of imperfect or incorrect acquisition of the language were painfully clear to Worcester's advocates. George Emerson, a member of the Massachusetts Board of Education, maintained that the use of Worcester's dictionary tended to "keep the language pure in its vocabulary, and uniform and consistent with the best English usage in spelling and in pronunciation." The *Universal and Critical*, in Emerson's estimation, did "nothing to corrupt the language by giving authority to vulgarisms and provincialisms." Emerson was not alone in his perception of the dictionary as a bulwark against the encroachments of slang and unconventional usage: Professor E. A. Johnson of the University of the City of New York praised both Worcester's "propriety of orthography" and his "nice critical notes on unauthorized words, provincial usage, &c." Others, like George Clarke, Associate Principal of Mount Washington Collegiate School in New York City and Rev. William Jenks were more blunt in their views on Worcester's positive influence on the language. Clarke was ecstatic that the *Universal and Critical* had relieved "the fifty millions who use the English Language" from the need to consult "a variety of discordant, and. . . unsatisfactory, authorities." Jenks saw Worcester's as a balm to "check the irregularities that are deforming the beauty of expression which it has cost so much effort to establish."¹⁹

These men perceived that the English language, particularly in America, was under siege from within and without. None were more clear on the source of their complaints than the

¹⁸ *Reply*, 37.

¹⁹ *Reply*, 27, 34, 42.

Worcesterian James W. Beekman, chairman of the Senate Committee on Literature, and the Websterite Francis W. Shearman, Secretary of the Michigan Board of Education. Beekman's report to the Senate, delivered in 1851 (the year that two hundred twenty one thousand Irish immigrants and one hundred sixty thousand others flooded into the cities of the northeast and began to spread westward) expressed concern that the schools of the nation should direct their "earnest attention. . . to the training of all. . . pupils to a competent and correct acquaintance with our mother tongue." Special attention, however, needed to be given to the "multitude of foreigners, with their children, whom we welcome to our shores." These immigrants, Beekman warned, threatened to "hasten the corruption of our mother tongue" unless the children, who spoke another language at home, "and often a mixed and mongrel dialect" of that, were given a standard of English and "accustom[ed] to its use." Shearman was no less stern in his advice. Wary of the "provincialisms and discrepancies in the use of language" that were the inevitable consequence of mixing people "from all sections of the Union and the old world" together, Shearman asserted that youth should "early be protected from the harsh discord" that conflicting standards of writing speaking and lexicography occasioned.²⁰

Thus, while they spoke in terms of corruption of the mother tongue, many of those who favored Worcester's *Universal and Critical*, and some of those on the Websterian side of the controversy, articulated a deep fear of social upheaval bred not only by a transient native population but also by a massive influx of immigrants from both Ireland and Germany which crested in 1854. In the midst of this confusion, Worcester's supporters could look to their dictionary, their standard, for proof that the world had not changed so much-- that there were still proper ways of speaking, spelling and writing to which everyone could, and should, adhere. On a more basic level, the dictionary, the standard, provided another yardstick against which

²⁰ *Reply*, 32, *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 23.

Worcester's supporters could measure strangers. New acquaintances' claims to gentility could not only be measured by dress and manner, they could also be discerned in the way they wrote and in the sound of the very words coming from their mouths. Reverend Jenks summed it up best in his assertion that the *Universal and Critical* was "free from harsh innovations, conservative in its general character, trustworthy in its derivations." The orthography and pronunciation of Worcester's dictionaries were a standard against which the deficiencies of an unstable and polyglot world were measured. Correct spelling and speaking had become outward signs of virtuous character.²¹

The advocates of Worcester's system seemed to be satisfied with training the children of both natives and immigrants to imitate the diction and orthography of their betters. Almost none of them referred to the primary art of the lexicographer-- the writing of definitions. Webster's adherents, on the other hand, hardly talked about anything else and in doing so implied that the formal gentility of the Worcesterians would not suffice: the youth of America should be trained to *think* correctly.

By far the most common words used to describe Webster's definitions were "accurate," "complete," and "precise." Hon. John C. Spencer praised the "copiousness and precision" of the *American Dictionary* and maintained that "its great accuracy in the definition and derivation of words" lent it "an authority that no other work on the subject possesses." In its etymologies and definitions, Principal Isaac Shepard of Boston's Lyman School found Webster's "strict, faithful, copious and understandable." Presidents Day and Bates of Yale and Middlebury College respectively not only asserted the superiority of Webster's orthography, they also considered the definitions models of "discrimination, copiousness, perspicuity and accuracy." More than the careful etymologies, the clarity and content of the *American Dictionary of the English Language's*

²¹ *Reply*, 42.

definitions lent the book a "transparency" which left no doubt as to the "proper signification" of words.²²

As with Worcesterians, Webster's endorsers believed that their dictionary spoke directly to the issue of propriety, but in their case substance replaced form. Charles Merriam, the most forthright advocate of Webster's work as "Hermes" was Worcester's most polemical defender, was certain that "[a]ccuracy of definition is essential to accuracy of thought" and Noah Webster's sermonettes were perfectly designed to provide the proper meaning to shape those thoughts. J.D. Philbrook, Associate Principal of the Connecticut State Normal School, reported that in his school the use of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* in the classroom had fostered an appreciation for "the difference between guessing at the import of the terms used in . . . text-books, and knowing their meaning with precision and exactness." This precise knowledge of the meaning and usage of words, Charles Merriam thought, would exert "an important influence. . . on truth and honesty of character. Honest men are proverbially clear in their definitions. Demagogues and sophists rejoice in confusion of terms, and in vagueness of thoughts, words, definitions, propositions and reasonings."²³

Webster's definitions, paragons of clarity and precision, could safely be put before the young precisely because they left no room for interpretation or doubt. John Spencer was relieved that Webster's was finding its way into the schools so that "youth may not be obliged, as I have been, to unlearn the false pronunciation, the unsound philology, and the erroneous definitions which were taught me in my childhood." Francis Shearman saw Webster's as protection against the "harsh discord" caused by the adoption of different standards. Governor Eaton of Vermont was gratified to see Webster's adopted by his state because it "afforded a safe harbor after long tossing upon a sea of doubt and uncertainty" about issues of both usage and spelling. Governor Wood of

²² *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 21, 19, 15.

²³ *National Standard*, 14, [second pagination] 22.

Ohio was the most articulate of this group of advocates. The benefits of introducing *the American Dictionary of the English Language* into his state's schools were, in Wood's opinion, twofold: first, the dictionary would "break down all provincialisms. . . and produce uniformity and elegance in the use of our language"; second, and most critical, the dictionary would assure that "[w]ords would. . . be used by every one in the same sense in which they are defined by that able lexicographer."²⁴

Thus, for its public advocates, the *American Dictionary* was the highest court to which questions of usage and meaning could be taken. The Associate Principal of Boston's Dwight School reported that Webster's was in "constant requisition" by the boys of his school who considered "this authority of such importance in all contested points of orthography, definitions, &c., as to call for Webster at once." For many other supporters, Webster's was far more than an arbiter of meaning and diction: it was an encyclopedic work that could speak to any number of issues. William B. Calhoun, in sentiments echoed in the periodical press, lauded the *American Dictionary* as an "Encyclopedia, presenting substantially the circle of the sciences." To bolster this point, Charles Merriam drew extracts from *the New Jersey Literary Standard and Educational Journal* and from the *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate*. The *Literary Standard* hailed Webster's as the "teacher's best assistant, and an Encyclopedia imperatively needed in every school," and the *Christian Advocate* dubbed it "an encyclopedia of knowledge."²⁵

These sentiments were correct to a certain extent. By 1859, *the American Dictionary of the English Language* provided not only a spelling book, pronunciation guide, and an appendix that made it "as full of pictures as a primer;" it also boasted pronouncing vocabularies for Greek, Latin, Scriptural and geographic names, a primitive thesaurus, a fifty page ⁵acquision on the history of the English language, and Noah Webster's didactic definitions from the 1828 edition.

²⁴ *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 22, [first pagination] 21.

²⁵ *National Standard*, 14, 13, 23.

Worcester's *Universal and Critical* was almost exactly the same-- all it lacked was the moral authority of Webster's definitions, which was the rock on which it eventually foundered. Unlike Webster's dictionary which positively invited such comparisons, the *Universal and Critical* could not even claim approximate parity with the Bible in terms of moral authority. Where Worcesterian advocates were stonily silent Websterians like George B. Hyde crowed that "[n]ext to the Bible, I consider it *the Book*" and the *New Jersey Literary Standard* rejoiced that they would "be glad to see this great work in every house, lying close beside the family Bible."²⁶

For all of these reasons, Webster's dictionary, like the Bible, warranted close study. Horace Mann urged "all those who are especially dependent on self-culture, or self-education, to keep a copy a this work by their side, as a hand-book." Praising Webster's definitions, William Calhoun recommended "careful study of them, as an intellectual exercise" for the young "as an important means of advancement in knowledge." Several sources, including *the Phrenological Journal*, *The New Jersey Literary Standard*, the *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate*, and Nathan Fiske of Amherst College, found the *American Dictionary of the English Language* so critical to the goal of self-culture that it "should be procured at almost any sacrifice."²⁷

"If you do not mean to spell wrong, read wrong, write wrong-- go halting and blundering intellectually, as long as you live," the *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate* counseled, "buy WEBSTER'S LARGE DICTIONARY; and when you have it, *use it*." Whether the issue was spelling and pronunciation or meaning and usage, the sentiments of partisans on both sides in the dictionary controversy were remarkably similar: uniformity and "correctness" could act as a stabilizing influence both on the language and on the world as a whole.

Worcesterians expressed interest in schooling the young to habits of orthographic and orthoepic obedience and conformity to the polished standards of genteel expression. Websterians

²⁶ *National Standard*, 22, 23.

²⁷ *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 17. *National Standard*, 13, 23.

were anxious that children should internalize a way of thinking, both evangelical and quintessentially Victorian, that was written on every page of the *American Dictionary*. The groups also diverged in their opinions of where the national standard should be taught and used. Worcester's advocates saw the public schools as the primary arena in which the fight against corruption could be won; but Websterians, while agreeing that the school was a pivotal influence in training youth to consult the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, also recognized the importance of personal agency, self-culture, in winning the world over to a "correct knowledge of the English language."

If many of those who lent their names and opinions to G. & C. Merriam or Jenks, Hickling and Swan in support of their dictionaries felt that the adoption of one or the other work was critical to the future of the nation, those who wrote for the popular press were not so sure. As the extracts from the *New Jersey Literary Standard* and the *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate* that Charles Merriam included in *Have We A National Standard in English Lexicography* show, some of the reviewers were quite fervent in their advocacy for a particular work; but a bit of doggerel from the *Boston Post* and a brief lampoon from the March 10, 1860 issue of *Vanity Fair* tell a somewhat different story.

As William D. Swan contended in September 1860, the wide majority of the American public knew almost nothing and cared less about the etymological merits of either dictionary. They were also probably indifferent to issues of orthography and pronunciation which Worcesterians in particular saw as key to the stability of the republic-- and by 1854 this was a null issue because the dictionaries were in almost perfect agreement. The only real difference between the two books was their definitions; and advocates of both dictionaries expressed a preference for Webster's in this respect.²⁸

²⁸ Swan, Brewer and Tileston, "Significant Facts," *New York World*, September 30, 1860, 1.

From outside the arena, many spectators and commentators perceived the idiocy of the conflict and were willing to say so loudly. An anonymous pundit in the *Boston Post* penned “Words, words, words” a short poem on the war:

Worcester and Webster both engage,
Lexicographic war to wage,
And, with the zeal the cause affords,
Shoot back and forward many words.
In angry mood to vow ill each,
To rend the other’s parts of speech,
And no wise consonant essay
Each other’s roots to tear away.
While laughing as the discords swell,
The world regards the stormy spell.²⁹

The author of “Sporting Intelligence: The Battle of the Dictionaries” for *Vanity Fair* dismissed the controversy. Paired with an engraving by E. Muller showing the rival dictionaries, bleeding shredded pages and squaring off against one another in a boxing ring, the text picks up its narrative at the “one hundredth [sic] round” after identifying the combatants-- the New Haven Nestor (Webster) and the Cambridge Pet (Worcester)-- and their “bottle-holders”-- Merryman (G. & C. Merriam) and the Brewer (an allusion to Swan, Brewer and Tileston as the shifting firm was briefly known). What is abundantly clear in *Vanity Fair*’s treatment of the controversy is that unlike the purported struggle for vindication on the part of the publishers or the advocacy of a national standard pursued by the endorers the controversy as it played out beyond the bounds of the pamphlets was “a good deal mixed up.” By the time their “Reporter” left “[t]here were twenty-one distinct and independent fights going on outside the ring, and several clergymen, more or less obscure, had been carried wounded from the field.” The magazine’s gift for hyperbole

²⁹ *Boston Post*, nd, np., MWC.

aside, the dictionary war outside of the publishing houses was a confused affair in which the dictionaries themselves often played only a minor role.³⁰

On the other end of the spectrum from the anonymous pundit of the *Boston Post* and *Vanity Fair*'s "Reporter" were a substantial number of people who, for one reason or another, took the controversy seriously. These authors were not, on the whole, interested in advancing the fortunes of either dictionary; they were both intrigued by the conduct of the controversy or interested in its consequences for the development of American lexicography. Rev. John Marlay's commentary on the controversy for the *Ladies Repository* in September 1860 is a signal example of the first group. In language reminiscent of Charles Merriam's attacks on his rivals-- and their counter-attacks against him-- Marlay began by admonishing Jenks, Hickling and Swan for making "unjust and ungenerous allegations against Dr. Webster, such as a high-minded rival should disdain to make." Warming to his theme, Marlay surmised that "fair-minded and intelligent readers must be forced to the conclusion that it is a desperate cause which demands such aid," and concluded that the publishers should break off what he considered a "war of extermination." Finally, as if counseling his children, Marlay pointed out as Worcester himself had, to both his audience and the publishers, that "[t]here is room enough in the United States for both," that "[s]cholars who are able will become possessors of both," and that "those who are not so happy in their financial circumstances will, of course, 'get the best.'"³¹

A review of the *Universal and Critical* published five months earlier in the *New Englander* shared most of Rev. Marlay's sentiments. The anonymous author, very likely a professor at Yale, echoed Marlay's disdain for a "war of extermination." While ultimately recommending Webster's for a person who could only own one dictionary, he congratulated the

³⁰ "Sporting Intelligence: The Battle of the Dictionaries," *Vanity Fair*, March 10, 1860, 168.

³¹ Rev. John F. Marlay, A.M., "The Battle of the Dictionaries" *The Ladies' Repository* 20 (September 1860), 519.

man "who is able to own both." He then turned to the consequences of the controversy, resuming his critical stance by emphasizing that a "generous rivalry" and "honorable competition" would create lasting benefits and improvements for both works. Finally, a May 26, 1860 supplement to the *New York Times* devoting several pages to the conflict noted that the public stood "considerably obfuscated" between the publishers who had "kept up a perpetual series of literary skirmishes" and "belligerent ballista" without much real merit. In August, the *Times* published a Websterian rebuttal to the May 26 articles that illustrates the central tension between Worcesterian and Websterian thinking. Where the Worcesterian had seen only confusion, this reviewer commented on the leveling influence that the war had on the language: "[t]he structure and functions of language, as well as the subject of lexicography, are becoming better understood. The popular, as well as the scientific, idea of what a Dictionary should be, has been raised."³²

Those who reviewed Worcester's *Universal and Critical* had a particular notion of what constituted a good dictionary and were of the opinion that Worcester's magnum opus was only a beginning. The *North American Review* of April 1860 lauded Worcester's orthography as an accurate representation of words "as they are written and printed by the almost universal usage of England and America." Seven months later another reviewer, writing on the revised edition of Worcester's smaller *Comprehensive*, clarified the magazine's position on the utility of Worcester's system. It was, in the reviewer's estimation, an "essential aid in securing uniformity, and preserving purity in speech and writing throughout the so widely separated parts of our republic." Orthography, he concluded, "is a matter of fact, not of taste."³³

³² "Article IV," *New Englander* (May 1860), 428. "New Publications. Worcester's Dictionary" *New York Times*, May 26, 1860, 1. "The War of the Dictionaries," *New York Times*, August 7, 1860, 2.

³³ "Worcester's Dictionary," *North American Review* 90 (April 1860), 567. "Worcester's Comprehensive Dictionary," *North American Review* 91 (October 1860), 577.

The *North American Review's* stress on purity and uniformity, as well as his insistence that the language was a fixed entity, constituted essential truths for A. Roane, one of Webster's most vituperative enemies. Roane's two philippics, written for *The Southern Literary Messenger* and the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, blasted the "late, learned Dr. Webster" for his "most mischievous" influence on the language. Webster had, in Roane's judgment, "unsettled what was before fixed, and established an additional rule where previously there was but one." He paid grudging respect to Webster's definitions, but found the pronunciations "horrible" and the orthography "abominable." In desperation, Roane looked to "Walker and Worcester" to "check and counteract the pernicious effect" of Webster's heterodoxy.³⁴

The core of Roane's impassioned tirades against the influence of the *American Dictionary* was personal irritation that Webster had "constituted himself into an 'academy' and proceeded to issue his decrees with the lordly air of an autocrat." Roane did not object to the idea of an academy, in fact he favored the "permanency, stability and uniformity" that such bodies could give to a language. His objection was that Webster had attempted to do the job by himself without consulting "the best writers and scholars and . . . the most refined society in England and America" as Worcester, in Roane's estimation, had done. Roane finally conceded that if an "Academy of Language" established in either England or America should choose Webster's as their standard, he, in a "matter of duty against the convictions of my judgment, . . . [would] submit for the sake of having some recognized authority to determine questions of controversy and uncertainty."³⁵

Roane was not the only one among this group of lukewarm Worcesterites who longed for the restraining influence of an academy to regulate the language. E.G. Robinson, editor of the *Christian Review*, paused to pay his respects to Worcester's work, but spent most of his editorial

³⁴ A. Roane, "English Dictionaries, With Remarks Upon the English Language," *Southern Literary Messenger* (Richmond, Va.) XXII, no. 3 (March 1856), 172, 173.

³⁵ A. Roane, "Worcester and Webster's Dictionaries," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, MWC. Roane, *Southern Literary Messenger*, 172.

on "Our English Dictionaries" praising Webster's definitions and bemoaning "his lack of that finished, judiciously directed , and widely multifarious philological training, which . . . was wholly unattainable by a home-bred American scholar." Robinson deprecated the inadequacies of both Worcester's and Webster's works and looked hopefully to London where the Philological Society, under the direction of James Murray, was beginning work on *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (the *Oxford English Dictionary*).³⁶

As truly beneficial as the Philological Society's new dictionary would be in raising "the art lexicographic to new reaches of realization," a reviewer for the *New York Times* concluded that it would "only address the world of scholars." Worcester's *Universal and Critical*, and his smaller *Comprehensive*, were destined to become "the Dictionary of the great laity, and the fitting representative of the language of the two branches of the Anglican stock on either Atlantic shore."³⁷

Worcester's dictionaries, then, presented the possibility of a trans-atlantic standard from which other, greater works would necessarily emulate and lend much-needed stability to the language. What is intriguing is that as much as they admired Worcester's work, few if any of his supporters saw America or American scholars as the source for an English standard or a linguistic academy. All of them made knee-jerk obeisance to American scholarship and ingenuity, but ultimately considered that the form of the "mother tongue" should be dictated and fixed by those in the "Father Land."

Webster's advocates, on the other hand, realized that their champion's works were not yet perfect, but also saw the potential for radical improvement in a dictionary constantly revised to keep up with a living language. "Webster's and Worcester's Quarto Dictionaries of the English

³⁶ E. G. Robinson, "Our English Dictionaries," *The Christian Review* 25, no. 101 (July 1860), 415.

³⁷ "New Publications. Worcester's Dictionary," *New York Times*, May 26, 1860, 1.

Language" in *The Bibliotheca Sacra* maintained that "[w]e must have some new terms and new modes of spelling and pronouncing old terms; but the door of innovation should be closed so far, that nothing but improvement can come through."³⁸

The Boston *Mercantile Library Reporter's* P. (likely the Association's librarian William Frederick Poole) was less restrained in his approach to the evolution of the language. Pointing to the vast improvements in orthography since the Salem witchcraft trials of "1672," P. celebrated changes that had "left the vocabulary. . . wonderfully increased by the infusion of words and derivations from other languages" and the constant tendency of usage to do away with "the absurd inconsistencies" and the "pertinaciously clinging. . . effete anomalies" of linguistic conservatives. Moving from general observation to specific condemnation, P. accused Worcester of attempting to impose "an absolute and complete *petrification* of our language in its present form." In his opinion, Worcester's reliance on "venerable usage" as a standard for orthography was sheer folly and pointed to an unoriginal and unimaginative work that would, if adopted, teach one to spell "like an automaton" rather than a "gentleman and scholar." Finally, using clothing as a metaphor for usage, P. confessed that he had a "partiality for old forms and venerable customs, but . . . [a] wise man. . . yields to the discreet suggestions of his hatter and tailor; for sooner or later, fashion is sure to be revenged on us, if we undertake to thwart her decrees."³⁹

L.W. Andrews, President of Marietta College in Ohio, enlarged the theme of fashionable usage in an editorial for the *Marietta Intelligencer* in March 1856. Andrews asserted, as had the reviewer for *Bibliotheca Sacra*, that the standard for spelling and pronunciation was not fixed. It conformed to "good use": "the mode adopted by men of the highest literary culture. . . at the *present time*." Lacking both an aristocracy and a dominant metropolis to furnish standards of

³⁸ "Webster's and Worcester's Quarto Dictionaries of the English Language," *Bibliotheca Sacra and American Biblical Repository* XVII, no. LXXVII (1860), 669.

³⁹ P., "The Battle of the Dictionaries," *Mercantile Library Reporter* (1855), 71, 72.

proper usage, Andrews believed that Americans were forced to be more ingenious in finding standards for themselves. They were forced to fall back on the judgment of men such as Chauncey Goodrich and his fellow professors for a "species of census-taking" that determined orthoepic propriety. "[I]n daily contact with young men from the most intellectual families in the land" and mingling with "literary men" the "officers in a large college, like Yale," daily scrutinized the usage of those men, winnowed away the chaff of "affectation," and produced standard orthoepy based on the "best" usage.⁴⁰

While pronunciation could be derived, Andrews admitted that spelling was a more difficult subject. Webster's tended toward "innovation," but his changes were "sanctioned by the great body of educated men" and vindicated by their "general adoption." Far from pernicious innovations, as A. Roane had portrayed them, Webster's spelling reforms were becoming more accepted by both schools and by the press as "true methods of teaching" produced scholars capable of learning from reading rather than rote memorization.⁴¹

Webster's advocates were also searching for a national spelling and pronunciation standards and were convinced that American scholars could generate such guidelines within the boundaries of "good use" and fashion; but their willingness to experiment and their tolerance for variation began and ended with these superficial aspects of the language. As P. demonstrated, in "the weightier matters of the law"--definitions-- Webster's work stood supreme and inviolate. For the author of "Philology" in the August 1859 *New Englander*, the *American Dictionary of the English Language* had received the "sanction of the highest names at home and abroad" and gave "law" to "forty million of the author's own spelling books," provided a standard for "ten millions of volumes of school books. . . and . . . periodicals with an annual usage of thirty millions." Its

⁴⁰ L.W. Andrews, "Webster's Dictionaries," *Marietta [Ohio] Intelligencer*, March 1856, [reprinted by G. & C. Merriam Co., April 1856] 4, 5.

⁴¹ Andrews, 11.

definitions, according to an extract from the *Chicago Journal*, provided "a oneness of thought in a oneness of word." The definitions were a "dear depository of a common past, and those who have the same syllables for 'home' and 'mother,' for 'hearth' and 'heaven' can never be less than kindred."⁴²

The *American Dictionary of the English Language*, increasingly referred to as the Dictionary, had become the repository of a nationalistic and evangelical creed that made it as indispensable as the Bible. *Freneau's Journal* contended that "[s]ave the BIBLE, Webster's Dictionary has received more special recommendations of its high practical importance than any other book in the world." The *New Jersey Literary Standard* and a review of the 1859 *Illustrated* found in the Merriam-Webster Collection concurred and looked forward to a day when the Dictionary would lie close beside the family Bible "where it might be referred to hourly by the parents and children." Through its "transparency"-- the definition of words in "terms that did not themselves need to be defined,"-- the Dictionary, like the Bible, might provide answers to a wide variety of questions; but its real merit was that it could actually supplement the Bible that it lay beside.⁴³

Faced with thorny questions raised in family devotions and Bible study, families could turn to Webster's Dictionary not only for its moral lessons but also for spiritual reinforcement. Time and time again, reviews and comparisons of the definitions in the *American Dictionary* and the *Universal and Critical* singled out the words "grace," "faith," and "Arminian" as good examples of the relative merits of the two works. Webster's definition of grace began neutrally-- "Favor; good will; kindness; disposition to oblige another. . . ."-- but quickly switched both tone and content-- "Appropriately, the free, unmerited love and favor of God, the spring and source of all the benefits

⁴² P., "The Battle of the Dictionaries," 70. "Notices on Books: Philology," *New Englander* XVIII, no. 3 (August 1859), 798. "Our Republic. . . Save the BIBLE. . . ." MWC.

⁴³ "Our Republic. . . Save the BIBLE. . . ." MWC. "Observe All Things Whatsoever I Have Commanded You" MWC.

men receive from him." Worcester began his definition of grace with "[t]he favor and love of God towards any person," but, without designating a preferred signification other than by position, also provided twenty-one other definitions most of them amounting to a single word.

In "faith" Worcester was also wanting: he lumped "[b]elief ; trust in religious opinion; confidence; [and] trust in God" together without any differentiation or exposition. In Webster's work, the lexicographer compensated for the subordinate position of the "*theological*" definition of faith with his encyclopedic thoroughness: "The assent of the mind or understanding to the truth of what God has revealed. Simple belief of the Scriptures, of the being and perfections of God, and of the existence, character, and doctrines of Christ, founded on the testimony of the sacred writers. . . *historical* or *speculative* faith; a faith little distinguished from the belief in the existence and achievements of Alexander or Caesar." Webster further refined his definition to include "*Evangelical, justifying, or saving faith*" which amounted to "firm belief of God's testimony and of the truth of the gospel, which influences the will, and leads to entire reliance on Christ for salvation." This exhaustive catechistic lecture on the nature of faith was supported, as a good sermon ought to be, with four Bible verses and commentaries on the nature of faith by Dwight, J. Hawes, and L. Woods.

A final example, "Arminian," served to underscore the point. Worcester offered on "A follower of James Arminius, who differed, on several points, from Calvinism." Webster's definition, cribbed from an "*Encyc.*," did not give Arminius's first name, but did locate the origin of Arminian sects in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century Holland and also laid out the "sect's" basic doctrines: conditional election, the "Universal redemption" of all mankind through the Crucifixion "though none but believers can be partakers of the benefit," and conditional grace that could be lost once attained.

The list of comparisons could be extended almost infinitely to include "salvation," "truth," "righteousness," and "religion" itself-- all to Webster's credit and Worcester's disgrace. *The American Dictionary of the English Language*, an American catechism in the guise of a reference book, not only provided moral lessons on honesty, industry and modesty, but also helped the perplexed to clarify the sometimes contradictory and confusing articles of their own faith.

Worcester's *Universal and Critical*, regardless of its merits as a pronunciation guide and spelling book, lost the war because his authority failed in the most important aspect of a dictionary: his definitions lacked clarity and force of conviction. But this deficiency was not the only stone dragging Worcester and his works down into the depths of obscurity: unlike Noah Webster, Worcester had the bad luck to be alive through the entire controversy.

The first unfortunate consequence of Worcester's longevity was that he was personally called to defend his dictionaries against attack first by Noah Webster and later by G. & C. Merriam Co. The constant allegations of plagiarism, his alleged dependence on Webster, the epithet "student" was particularly galling, and the contested issue of whose authority had been used in abridging the 1828 edition-- all took their toll on an aging man. Over the course of 1853 and 1854 when he was the most directly involved in the conflict, Worcester's personal refutations became more emphatic and more bitter as the Merriams produced more and more "evidence" to call his veracity into question. In spite of his innocence, Worcester looked increasingly like a man with something to hide and this, no doubt, weighted public opinion against him.

Meanwhile, the real culprit in this case, Noah Webster's estranged son-in-law, had been busy rewriting the lexicographer's life to transform the irascible Yankee into a model for those who used or might use his books. Goodrich couched his descriptions of Webster in the context of a "youthful talent" cast upon his own resources in a "young country." By his own industry and ingenuity, Webster raised himself to "usefulness and distinction" as both the "instructor of millions

in the rudiments of education" and a patriot rightfully associated with George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and Benjamin Franklin. Webster had helped lay the foundations of the republic and American literature "which is already making for itself a place and a name among the most distinguished nations." In personal character, this Noah Webster was beyond reproach. He was unfailingly polite and affable, if easily offended by violations of "the established rules of decorum." He was a "watchful, consistent and firm" father to the children of whom he asked "instantaneous and entire obedience." He was quick to form opinions and equally willing to retract his "former statements with the utmost frankness; for he had not a particle of that pride of opinion which makes men so often ashamed to confess an error." Noah Webster was, in total, a self-reliant, industrious and perseverant man who walked with God his whole life and his example offered "[t]o the young, especially. . . lessons of instruction and encouragement, which cannot be too highly prized."⁴⁴

This image of Webster did not take hold immediately. The same month that Goodrich published his revised biography of Webster in the *American Literary Magazine*, a review of the new edition of the *American Dictionary* appeared in the *North American Review*. Unlike the glowing reports that came after it, this one depicted Webster as a stiff-necked and proud old man: his innovations were "attributable not so much to national feeling, as to the pride of original research and to independence of personal opinion. He was not apt to submit lightly to authority of any kind, when it conflicted with his own notions of what was required." Even as late as 1865, after the dictionary war had been over for four years, it was possible to find such reviewers as J.S. Hart noting that Webster was "strongly wedded to certain peculiarities" and unwilling to part with them even though they stood in the way of his success.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Chauncey Goodrich, "Life and Writings of Noah Webster," *American Literary Magazine* II, no. 1 (January 1848), 5, 28, 29, 27, 24.

⁴⁵ "Goodrich's Edition of Webster's Dictionary," *North American Review* 66 (January, 1848), 256. J.S. Hart, "The Revised Webster," *Princeton Review [and Biblical Repository]* 37, (1865), 376.

These less complimentary portrayals of Webster were the exception rather than the rule. Far more common were biographical sketches and vignettes that matched or exceeded Goodrich's estimation of his father-in-law. *Barber's Historical Collection* included a measured biographical sketch which painted Webster as an industrious, self-made man whose life was "long, useful, and active" and punctuated by "the full triumph of Christian faith." A short article from *Glances at the Metropolis*, painted Webster as a man with "an honest, brave, unfaltering heart-- a clear, serene intellect." His life was a "struggle" to win the "scepter which the great lexicographer wields so unquestionably" in benevolent influence over the language of the country; and, in light of his great service to his fellow men in providing a language which did not change a syllable in five thousand miles, he deserved to become part of an American trinity along with Columbus and Washington.⁴⁶

Hyperbole aside, Webster's career, his example as a personification of the morals in his dictionary and his claim to patriotic status, all acted as selling points for his work which Jenks, Hickling and Swan were helpless to counteract. In their pamphlets, Swan's anonymous editorials written under the name "Hermes," and at least one public appearance in the *Boston Evening Transcript* under their own name, the firm fruitlessly battled the paper man and their efforts probably hurt their cause more than they helped it. Unlike Worcester, Webster was dead and had to rely on the support of "friends" to defend his honor. What attacks on Webster's character *did* do was help to increase the circulation of Goodrich's sanitized version of his life. As the controversy dragged on it became difficult, for reviewers and for readers, to ascertain where the man ended and the dictionary began. Both reviewers and endorsers, even when acknowledging the contributions of Chauncey Goodrich or Noah Porter, referred to Dr. Webster in the present tense long after he was dead. Noah Webster had become a "paper man" and achieved an immortality in his association with the Dictionary.

⁴⁶ *Summary Summing*, 22, [second pagination] 14.

Thus, study of the Dictionary became inseparable from study of its author. In January 1848, the *Boston Mercantile Journal's* article on *the American Dictionary of the English Language* likened study of the dictionary to communing with Webster's spirit and counseled parents to give their sons access to the Dictionary "line upon line, precept upon precept. . .till he comes to the stature of a perfect man in his day and generation." The March 1848 issue of the *American Review* followed the same theme. It advised all those "aspiring to eminence in any walk" of life to study words "the instrument of thought as well as the vehicle of expression," and also to "take notice of the example of the author of this dictionary as worthy of imitation." Webster, the article claimed, was self-reliant, resolute, "undaunted by obstacles," and, most important, ambitious "not for ephemeral reputation, but to render a real service to his country and race." "Who will say," the review concluded, "the author did not enjoy in his own thoughts an ample reward?"⁴⁷

The success of both the *American Dictionary of the English Language's* claim to the status of a standard authority and the utility of Webster's image in promoting the cause can be measured by how closely each mirrored the standards created for them by both endorsers and reviewers.

President Woolsey of Yale, Chancellor Freylinghuysen of New York University, President Larabee of Middlebury College, President Keller of Wittenburg College, President Henry Ward Beecher of Lane Theological Seminary and countless professors from all over the country signed a petition which might serve as the educational yardstick for a national standard. Definitions were to be "precise and full" descriptions of the words, not "a loose collection of terms more or less synonymous." Signification was to be illustrated "and the use justified, by ample quotations from

⁴⁷ "Dr. Webster and the *American Dictionary*," *Boston Mercantile Journal*, January 1848, MWC. "The New Edition of Webster's Dictionary," *American [Whig] Review* 7, (March 1848), 306.

the best English and American authors." The vocabulary would judiciously distinguish between those words which are "provincial and obsolete," as well as vulgar, and make sure that they are not admitted "into a Dictionary that professes to be a standard of good English." Orthography would be "sanctioned by general adoption" with "real and important improvements. . . wisely retained." Pronunciation would derive from actual observation of the speech of "the truly educated among the English and American people" with "the artificial and affected" carefully removed from circulation.⁴⁸

For all of these reasons, the *American Dictionary*, after its careful revisions by Chauncey Goodrich, could claim authoritative status. But even beyond these superficial considerations, reviewers noted that "at the bar of usage Webster's stands acquitted." The most powerful argument for its adoption as a national standard was not based on its merits alone, but also on the fact that all over the country the young and the old were becoming "thoroughly Websterized." Newspapers, magazines and publishing houses used it as a style manual. Schools used it as both a reference and a textbook for the students. And parents and children in the home placed their Dictionary on the parlor table so that it could be close at hand if needed.⁴⁹

The Dictionary was a "condensed cyclopedia of all things known, rarely failing to answer all reasonable questions." David Greene Haskins recommended dictionary study to "those who hold places of trust or influence in the domestic circle, not only on account of its immediate results in disseminating useful information, but especially for its tendency to create literary tastes, and to awaken desires for more advanced philological attainments." There is little likelihood that families or individuals actually studied the dictionary, but Haskins' point remains valid if we consider the

⁴⁸ *Summary Summing*, [second pagination] 17.

⁴⁹ "Notices of Books: Philology," *New Englander* XVII, no.3 (August, 1859), 798.

Dictionary usage as a guide to cultivating proper literary tastes and attitudes towards provincialisms, improper usage and the meaning of the language itself.⁵⁰

The Dictionary guided the formation of taste and the lexicographer guided the formation of the Dictionary. Isaiah Dole, an Instructor in Languages in the Maine Female Seminary, believed that the prototypical "English Lexicographer" did not enter his profession at mid-life. He must have "grown up into the language, have become identified with it, must be discriminately cognizant of his intellections, and be able to present them accurately and fully in their natural order. His heart must beat sympathetically, whenever he meets idiomatic ease and simple grace, and modest adornment, and purity of diction. He must sensitively recoil. . .when he meets uncouth and barbarous terms, or words misapplied, or false rhetoric, or perverse logic." This prototypical lexicographer, a writer of the language in the most literal sense, would intuitively know how to distinguish between "what belongs to the vital organization of the language" and what was "inert and dead." The English Lexicographer, in Dole's view, would immediately recognize good usage and create a Dictionary in which the words would be "arranged orderly, defined distinctly, and illustrated appropriately" with "examples of use drawn from good authors."⁵¹

As most of the "War of the Dictionaries" had very little to do with the actual books in question, Dole's characteristics of the English Lexicographer may have less to do with dictionary-making than is immediately apparent. Looked at in the context of the conflict between the publishers themselves and in light of the reformed character of Noah Webster, Dole's lexicographer seems strikingly familiar. Like the paper man, the lexicographer is rigorously self-cognizant and disciplined. Like the genteel characters presented to the public by both G. & C. Merriam and Jenks, Hickling and Swan, the lexicographer balanced an abhorrence for hypocrisy and lack of

⁵⁰ "Literary Notices, " *[Windsor] Vermont Chronicle*, January 26, 1867. David Greene Haskins, "The Use of Dictionaries," *Old and New* I, 758, MWC.

⁵¹ Isaiah Dole, "Requirements in a Lexicographer of the English Language," *The American Journal of Education* 3 (March 1857), 162, 163.

social grace with a preference for modest fashions and simple-- plain, even, transparent,-- presentation. Finally, like the academies advocated by Worcesterites or the ever-vigilant professors of Yale, the lexicographer could hold the language to its proper principles against the influence of artificiality, provincialism and the invasion of "mongrel dialects."

In short, stripped of the linguistic veneer, Dole's requirements amounted to a curriculum for the cultivation of genteel tastes reflected in both the dictionary and the world. Substituting people for words yields a world in which the people would be orderly, clearly defined in their social roles and acting according to standards of behavior set by the better sort among their peers.

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