"LIBERTY OF TRADE FROM THE THRALDOM OF THE AUTOCRATS": PROVISION OF SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS IN ONTARIO, 1850-1909

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This article examines provision of elementary school readers in Ontario from 1850 to 1909. It traces the conflicts that arose due to the dual role of textbooks as economic commodity and democratic instrument of curriculum. It illuminates the strategies that three dominant stakeholders used in textbook provision to position themselves to best advantage in these conflicts: the Education Department, retail booksellers, and textbook publishers..

Key words: textbook publishing, school books, booksellers, political and economic contexts, curriculum history

Cet article porte sur la fourniture de manuels aux écoles primaires de l'Ontario de 1850 à 1909. L'auteure relate les conflits qui ont surgi en raison du double rôle des manuels, comme objet de commerce et comme outil démocratique utilisé dans les programmes scolaires. L'article met en lumière les stratégies qu'ont utilisées trois catégories d'acteurs clés afin de se positionner au mieux de leurs intérêts dans ces conflits : le ministère de l'Éducation, les libraires et les maisons d'édition de ces manuels.

Mots clés : édition de manuels scolaires, manuels scolaires, libraires, contextes politique et économique, histoire des programmes scolaires.

Textbooks have always generated controversy because their presence in classrooms represents the final step in a unique journey in which the philosophy of equal educational opportunity and the capitalistic profit motive jockey for position at every turn. Textbooks, an instrument of curriculum, are intended to give students equal access to knowledge. At the same time, they are an economic commodity, representing a money-making venture.

In this article, a historical narrative, I have traced how the tension between these two aspects of textbook provision resulted in sustained and acrimonious controversy during the period from 1850, when the Canada West Education Department established greater control over textbook provision through an Educational Depository, to 1909, when the entire contract for the printing of the Ontario Readers was removed from a Toronto-based publisher "textbook ring" and awarded to a department store. I ask the question, "How did the place of the textbook as economic commodity intersect with its role as curriculum instrument in Ontario during the period, 1850-1909?" To answer this question, I have drawn evidence from newspapers, booksellers' trade publications, memoirs, testimony before the 1907 Ontario Text Book Commission, publishers' celebratory histories, and the influential *Canada Educational Monthly*, a journal of commentary on education.

I do not argue against the place of the textbook as economic commodity within a competitive marketplace. As this article will demonstrate, the greatest conflict occurred when the Ontario Education Department attempted to mitigate effects of the textbook's place as economic commodity, exercising greater control over textbook provision at every stage: authorship, production, selection, sales, and distribution. During such times, publishing companies were permitted to form monopolies, parents paid exorbitant prices for their children's books, physical quality was poor, and sales and distribution were controlled in ways that reduced sales opportunities for booksellers.

I selected textbook provision dilemmas in Ontario, the English-Canadian province with the largest school population, for examination because it was the first province to authorize textbooks and, the site of the greatest opportunity for profit by publishers and booksellers. Other provinces typically used Ontario textbooks rather than develop their own.

The focus of the article is on readers because, as one publisher testifying at the 1907 Ontario Text Book Commission put it, they were "the prize of all the school books,"[1] meaning that they were the most lucrative. A reader, like other textbooks, is a book intended for use in schools. A reader differs from other textbooks only in terms of content. It is normally a collection of excerpts from previously published works;

whereas the content of other textbooks is presented in narrative form. This research stops at the classroom door. It is about clashes that occurred in the province of Ontario over how to provide textbooks for students. It is not about the content of the textbooks; nor, is it about how they were employed once they found their way into classrooms.

THE NATURE OF TEXTBOOKS

Textbooks have a solid bond with the state. All provincial governments in Canada have taken responsibility for their selection and authorization, and at times, even for their development. A textbook carries the imprimatur of authority. As such, it is deemed to contain legitimate knowledge between its covers, the approved version of the world considered acceptable for passing on to the youth of the nation.

Textbook provision warrants scholarly attention for four reasons. First, textbooks in Canada have played a crucially important role in education because of their ubiquitous role in classrooms. Data from memoirs,[2] interviews about students' school experiences,[3] and pan-Canadian classroom observations,[4] combine to tell us that they have been central to instruction over time. In the period under discussion in this article, they enjoyed the status of de facto curriculum, because few other resources existed and teachers had neither the training nor the time to develop their own resources. They were, and for that matter continue to be, the most visible symbol of the education system and, therefore, for the public, a focus for their concerns about education. Textbooks give every student access to the same core of content, regardless of the additional opportunities that may be available to the fortunate few. Furthermore, student readers view the information within their covers as authoritative. As one textbook author put it, "God wrote them; or if He didn't, He most certainly knew the authors."[5]

Second, they are important as an economic commodity. Prior to the 1980s, textbooks were the financial mainstay of many Canadian publishers. Indeed, few Canadian publishers could have sustained their trade book publishing functions if not for their textbook divisions. The Canadian publishing industry has been likened by a publisher to a pyramid with publishing financially lucrative textbooks at the base, acting as an agent for books from other countries on the slope (and this is

done with textbooks, as well as trade books), and trade books at the apex, admittedly more prestigious, but not as great money-makers.[6]

Third, textbooks are a unique artefact of print culture. They do not travel the typical route from author to publisher to point of purchase taken by other print materials. They are not as subject to publishing whims and vagaries because they normally have to undergo a rigorous selection process conducted by provincial departments of education.

Finally, textbook content, textbook production, provincial approval processes, and even textbook sales and distribution are highly political; therefore textbooks have frequently been at the centre of controversy in Canada. The term *political* is used, not in the sense of provincial politics, but rather in the sense of accommodation to concerns of expedience, apart from explicit curricular and pedagogical goals. Political leaders and Department of Education officials have been criticized over many facets of textbook production, approval, and distribution procedures, including placing books "whose title to official favour is not that of merit"[7] on authorized lists. Such controversial events are often clashes over power – who holds it, who exercises it, and who are its victims – and therefore, warrant examination.

A textbook, then, is much more than a book that one might choose at random off a bookstore shelf. The factors concerning the nature of textbook provision are related in one way or another to a fundamental tension between the Department of Education's fiduciary obligation to provide equal educational opportunity for students and the place of the textbook as an economic commodity.

TEXTBOOK STUDIES

In recognition of the important role that textbooks play in education, there is a rich history of textbook research in both Canada and the United States. These studies have primarily involved content analysis.[8] The first major content analysis of textbooks in Canada was published by E. T. White of the Ontario Provincial Normal School in 1922.[9] White examined Ontario textbooks to 1921 from the perspective of their usefulness for pedagogical purposes. Later studies in Canada most often focused on history or social studies textbooks, examining depictions of race and culture,[10] gender,[11] and class.[12] Federal royal commissions have

conducted major textbook studies on at least two occasions. The 1970 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism compared depictions of Canadian history in the textbooks of Quebec and the other provinces, finding major differences.[13] The 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada examined how women and girls were depicted in readers and other elementary school textbooks.[14]

Major studies in the United States have examined textbooks as cultural artifacts, exploring what they reveal about the cultural context in which they were constructed.[15] Other studies have looked at the political and cultural contexts in which contemporary texts are produced and how they convey hegemonic ideologies.[16] Recent international studies have compared conceptions of nationhood in textbooks and curricula of different nations.[17] Other recent studies have examined conflicts over textbook content in the United States and other countries.[18] Depictions of World War Two in Japanese and German textbooks have received particular attention.[19]

Philip Altbach pointed out in 1991 that "the research on textbooks is uneven. There is a considerable body of knowledge—mostly generated in the United States—concerning the detailed pedagogical aspects of textbooks, but hardly any research on the nature of textbook publishing."[20] Studies in the United States over the past 15 years have begun to look at textbook production as well as selection and provision to students. For example, in 1990 the National Society for the Study of Education devoted its eighty-ninth yearbook to these topics.[21] This work includes examination of the politics of textbook adoption.[22] There has been little work of this kind in Canada. E. T. White's 1922 study of Ontario textbooks, although primarily a content analysis, does include examination of the influence of anti-American sentiments on textbook selection, the effects of a lack of textbook uniformity, the role of the controversial textbook depository, and the movement toward provision of free textbooks.[23] The most notable exception, however, is Viola Parvin's 1965 study of the authorization of textbooks in Ontario from 1846 to 1950. Parvin provides a comprehensive account of changing department of education policies regarding textbook authorization and resulting changes in relations between the department and publishers.[24]

Three histories of book production in Canada contain references to textbook production. In *Book Publishing and Publishers in Canada Before 1900*, H. Pearson Gundy analyzed the division of Canadian publishing activity into agency representation and educational and trade publishing, as well as the impact of imperial and dominion copyright legislation.[25] George Parker's seminal study, *The Beginnings of the Book Trade in Canada*, provides an invaluable record of textbook publishing[26]. This book was described by Francess Halpenny as "impressively document[ing] the organization of the trade, the emergence of the colonial and Canadian author, the means of bookselling, the technology of printing, the perils of copyright, and the builders of a national publishing industry."[27] The only other major study is Roy MacSkimming's 2003 *The Perilous Trade*, which deals with the period from the Second World War to the present and has some information about textbook publishing derived from interviews.[28]

Several historians of education have examined aspects of textbook selection and provision in volumes on broader topics. In their study, *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth Century Ontario*, Susan E. Houston and Alison Prentice offer insight into Egerton Ryerson's introduction of the Irish National Readers to the newly established school system of Canada West.[29] Charles E. Phillips in *The Development of Education in Canada* and George S. Tomkins in *A Common Countenance*, two comprehensive books about Canadian educational history, offer insights into curriculum, textbooks, and the role of textbooks in classrooms.[30]

Several works by Bruce Curtis are relevant here. In his book, *Building the Educational State*, Curtis examines the establishment of the education system in Canada West, including textbook provision, from 1837 to 1871.[31] In another study, Curtis contends that the importance of the Irish Readers, authorized in Canada West in 1846, lies, not in how they stratified school knowledge by creating a new class of literature devoted to pedagogical purposes, but rather in their usefulness in countering pernicious American influences.[32] In a later study, he examined the 1866 introduction of the Canadian National Readers, arguing that it "took place in the context of a two-fold (and still contested) process of norminalization of capitalist relations of production and a normalization of a particular kind of pedagogic relations of production."[33]

Curtis's studies are from the perspective of the education system, examining the nature of textbooks as curriculum and the motives within the education system for the provision of particular textbooks to students. Three other case-studies of textbooks in this period focus on the other side, that of the publishers. George Parker examines the relationship between Chief Superintendent of Schools, Egerton Ryerson, and the booksellers of Ontario.[34] Linda Wilson Corman dissects the role of James Campbell, publisher and agent, in the provision of textbooks to Ontario students between 1858 and 1884.[35] Oisin Patrick Rafferty analyzes the controversial 1884 decision by Minister of Education (and later Premier) George W. Ross to give a ten-year exclusive contract for a new reading series to three prominent publishing companies, while reserving strict departmental control over content and composition.[36]

THE EDUCATIONAL DEPOSITORY VS. THE BOOKSELLERS

Egerton Ryerson was appointed the first Chief Superintendent of Schools in Canada West in 1846. His immediate challenge was to bring uniformity to school books and to counter the insidious influence of American textbooks, which were prevalent in the schools. Having expeditiously taken care of this task through importation of the Irish National Readers at "nearly one hundred per cent below the retail selling prices of these Books to the British public,"[37] he turned to the next task of efficient provision of the texts.

In 1850, he established an Educational Depository with the intent of making it possible to purchase bulk orders directly from British and American firms, and then sell them, in turn, to school boards at low prices. This move constituted a threat to the retail booksellers' profits. They had powerful support in the press, which objected to the government snatching profits from private enterprise. As the *Canadian Literary News Letter* put it in 1855,

> A public department has been reduced to the dimensions of a trading Concern, outrivaling every other competitor by the means of monopoly which it possesses. . . . [T]here are not so many industrial avenues open to our population that the Government can without serious injury place itself at the entrance of one to repulse honest and respectable persons who desire to enter.[38]

Early in the next year, the *British Colonist* opined: The Trade must be a very lucrative one for Dr. Ryerson, and we should say unhesitatingly that such a nice operation is very rarely to be met with. Really we believe that a very few years of the Monopoly will make the School Superintendent the richest man in the West.[39] No evidence has come to light to support this rather libelous claim; nor is there evidence that Ryerson sued. He did, however, deny the charges, stating that "there is not a shadow of truth in your statement and insinuation!"[40]

The Booksellers, who formed an association in 1857, published a pamphlet in 1858 that railed against the unfair advantage the Depository afforded the government in the competition for textbook sales.[41] In 1859, the association petitioned the legislature to abolish the Depository and its supposed iron grip over textbook provision; however, this request was to no avail.

Although Ryerson was constantly under siege during his tenure as superintendent, his retirement in 1876 ushered in a period of increased controversy. The Education Department, under Adam Crooks, the first Minister of Education, was accused of collusion with the publishing companies which issued the texts required for departmental examinations, and individuals in the department were suspected of financial gain.

Canada Educational Monthly emerged at this time as a source of both regular and harsh criticism of government textbook policies. Graeme Mercer Adam, an influential bookseller and publisher, began it in 1879, continuing as editor until 1884. He came to the task with extensive experience in the retail and wholesale book trades, as well as publishing. Adam experienced two major setbacks in his career. The second, in particular, may have contributed to his rather jaundiced view of the Education Department because it gave him firsthand experience with the effects on business of its sometimes arbitrary decisions. His wholesale firm, Adam, Stevenson & Co., went bankrupt in 1874, following the 1873 depression.[42] Then, in 1883, he edited the Royal Canadian Readers for The Canada Publishing Company, which the Education Department rejected in the subsequent competition for authorization.

Canada Educational Monthly was relatively successful. In December 1881, at the end of its third year of publication, Adam, in a self-

congratulatory comment, described it as having "established itself as a permanent and indispensable organ of the profession. It has now a fairly remunerative circulation, good advertising patronage, and a steadily increasing influence."[43] A perusal of the journal's contents reveals contributions by a range of stakeholders in the education system, including school inspectors and teachers, as well as such luminaries as the pre-eminent Canadian man of letters of the period, Goldwin Smith, and Principal George Grant of Queen's University. The contents ranged from reprints of articles in other publications, extracts from university convocation addresses, speeches made at teachers' conventions, letters to the editor, editorials by Adam, and announcements of events such as teacher retirements and teacher conventions. In the May/June issue of 1882, "An Old Headmaster," in an overview of the journal's offerings for the previous two years, gives it credit for the closing of the book depository. He concludes by saying:

> Through its career of the last three years, [*CEM*] has taken high ground, has temperately yet fearlessly handled abuses, and has provided for the more educated and more ambitious class of teachers such lessons of culture and guidance as have not been surpassed in any Canadian or American serial of its class.[44]

Adam did not view the department favourably even prior to the rejection of his edited textbook series in 1884. In an 1879 editorial, he pointed to a commercial unscrupulousness, in the matter of school books, utterly foreign to the experience and business methods of honourable men. That the Minister of Education has been wholly ignorant of the manner in which the authorized text-books have of late years been manipulated in their presentation to the schools of the Province, it is almost impossible to believe.[45]

He accused school inspectors of promoting illegal text-books in the schools, specifically, unauthorized texts written by the Senior Inspector of Schools, J. A. McLellan. "The grave impropriety of Dr. McLellan's pecuniary interest in these books while holding his official position, is a circumstance which cannot be too strongly reprobated,"[46] he stated in no uncertain terms. The commissioner appointed to examine this situation exonerated the department of any wrongdoing.

Following a petition from booksellers, Adam Crooks discontinued the practice of providing textbooks through the Educational Depository in 1877, although it continued to supply maps, globes, magic lanterns, apparatus for science experiments, and other teaching aids. In 1881, he dismantled it entirely. After an investigation into its operations, he had concluded that the majority of its textbook orders were from normal and model schools. Most of the common schools had continued to purchase their texts from booksellers, publishing was well established in the province, and the authorization of competing books kept prices firmly under control. Therefore, there was no longer a need for the depository, if indeed, there ever had been.

Criticism of Dr. May, the Depository Superintendent, for "corrupt management" in February of that year may have contributed to its untimely demise. Dr. May was "the chief capitalist"[47] in The Canadian School Apparatus Co. from which substandard supplies had been ordered for many years. According to *Canada Educational Monthly*, this company

> Was but an *alias* of Dr. May, and his establishment a back door for the Depository. That this official should for years be at once the requisitionist and the purveyor of the Depository, is a scandal that will ever adhere to the administration of the Department; while his transactions in the map and chemical trade, of an equally irregular character, are enough to demoralize the public service for all time.[48]

Canada Educational Monthly neatly encapsulated the issues around provision of equal educational opportunity versus textbook as economic commodity in the wake of this storm. Editor Graeme Mercer Adam pointed out that the "Minister has an unmistakable duty to perform, in seeing not only that the schools are provided with efficient text-books, but that they are furnished at a price reasonably suited to the pockets of the people."[49] He was also aware that "some consideration, however, must imperatively be given to publishers' rights and to authors' royalties. The author of a good text-book can scarcely be too-generously dealt with; and manuals of a high character will not be forthcoming unless their writers are well paid for their work."[50] Furthermore, he advised Mr. Crooks to find authors outside the ranks of Department employees, so there would be no conflict of interest.[51]

THE DEPARTMENT, PUBLISHER, AND BOOKSELLER TRIAD

Toronto became the printing and publishing centre for textbooks in English-speaking Canada in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Copp, Clark (1869), W.J. Gage (1880), and The Canada Publishing Company (1880)[52] were prominent in publication of readers. These firms had, for all intents and purposes, a monopoly over authorized readers in Ontario, Manitoba, and the North-West, as well as increasing dominance on the authorized lists in the provinces of the Atlantic region. The arrival of Thomas Nelson and Sons of Edinburgh at this time marked the first instance of the direct involvement of a foreign publisher in the Canadian school book trade. James Campbell, who had managed the American branch of the firm since 1854, was in Toronto by the late 1850s to act on Nelson's behalf, as well as to establish his own wholesale book business. He continued to work for Thomas Nelson until the bankruptcy of his own firm in 1884, in the midst of a recession.[53]

Campbell, acting as Nelson's agent, was able to get an adapted version of Nelson's *Royal Readers*, originally published in Scotland, approved for Ontario schools in 1883.[54] The same year, the Department of Education approved William Gage's *Canadian Readers*, also originally published in Scotland. The Canada Publishing Company's *Royal Canadian Reading Series*, the only series actually developed in Canada, was rejected. Here again, accusations of inappropriate pecuniary interest were made. Graeme Mercer Adam in *Canada Educational Monthly* charged that half the Central Committee

> who are entrusted with the judicial duty of recommending for authorization the text-books to be used in the Province, have intimate trade relations with a certain publishing firm in Toronto, and are at the same time expected to give an unbiased judgment on the books they are called upon to appraise.[55]

Adam was referring to W. J. Gage. He was particularly harsh concerning the worth of the Gage readers. He declared that "it is difficult to speak with respect, as its reading matter is almost wholly unsuited to Canadian schools, and the effort to Canadianize it, editorially and mechanically, is, we say it advisedly, a disgrace to the house that has issued it."[56] The editor's final judgment was that the series "is so objectionable as a whole

that only partisanship, or something worse than partisanship, could have allowed it to compete."[57]

Adam demanded to know why the *Royal Canadian Reading Series* by The Canada Publishing Company was not chosen, neglecting to mention that he had edited that particular series. One possible explanation is that the department held the view that there was too close a connection between the firm of Thomas Nelson and Sons, as represented by James Campbell, and The Canada Publishing Company. Not only did Campbell's son, William Campbell, manage The Canada Publishing Company, but James Campbell was a large shareholder. Therefore, if its series had also been authorized, Campbell would effectively have had two series competing against each other for sales. This may have been unacceptable to the department.

All this became irrelevant in November of 1883, when George Ross was appointed Minister of Education. In an abrupt about-turn, Ross announced that the department would develop a single authorized reading series called the *Ontario Readers.* This decision was likely made in response to the controversy over the choice of Nelson's *Royal Readers* and Gage's *Canadian Readers* earlier that same year under the administration of Adam Crook. It was also evidence of Ross's desire to exercise greater control over the education system by eliminating teacher choice. This decision likely played a role in the bankruptcy of James Campbell & Son because its *Royal Readers* were a crucial source of income at a time of economic recession.

Ross's intention was to develop the *Ontario Readers* in-house, causing Archibald MacMurchy, the new editor of *Canada Educational Monthly*, to refer darkly to "visions of fat things to departmental protegés, and no end of nice pickings to professional favourites of the Minister or needy hangers-on of the party."[58] Ross hired three senior educators to write the series: John E. Bryant, E. Embree, and William Little.[59] He later described them as "three men of well-known ability and taste and with large experience as teachers. . . . One member of the committee was the holder of a degree from the provincial university, another an inspector of high standing, and the third a teacher of wide experience."[60] It is interesting to note his remark that "for nearly two years they devoted themselves almost continuously to the duty assigned to them."[61] Viola Parvin

contradicts this, pointing out that the readers were authorized on November 26, 1884, only one year and three days after Ross's appointment.[62]

There is no indication of "fat things" going to these men as a reward for their labours, given that they "devoted themselves almost continuously to the duty assigned to them."[63] Parvin reports that Bryant was paid $2,780, Embree $750, and Little's estate $1,500.[64] Ross later discussed his practice of giving "a royalty of ten per cent on the retail price of each book, such royalty to be paid by the publisher"[65] to textbook writers who were able to work "without disturbing their professional engagements."[66] This must have amounted to a fair amount overtime for some.

A second prong of opposition was also founded in financial concerns. Many parents had purchased the new readers only months earlier. Public School Inspector, David P. Clapp, of Wellington wrote Deputy Minister Alex Marling, warning that "a row will ensue if any new change is made."[67] A year later, following the authorization of the new readers, the school trustees in London declared that they would continue to use the old readers "as long as allowed."[68]

The new books were more expensive, costing an additional five cents. This was substantial at a time when a labourer could expect to make about $350.00 (US) per year.[69] In a moment of irony, the new booksellers' journal, *Books and Notions*, which had commenced publication in August 1884, commented in December of that year: "Of course, the labouring population throughout the country will not raise an objection if the price of this primer is advanced 100 per cent, as its increased size and beauty will render parents perfectly satisfied to pay all that is asked—and more too."[70]

Money was also at the root of the booksellers' concerns about the *Ontario Readers*. They were shackled with newly purchased, and now useless, inventories of the Gage and Nelson texts. In a letter to George Ross, bookseller, J. S. Robertson & Bros. of Toronto, pointed out that:

> booksellers in anticipation of a good demand for the New Readers, especially in a country like our own where one series was almost entirely adopted, bought largely, never for one moment supposing that in a few months these books

would probably be discarded. . . . As booksellers in an important centre we see perilous "rocks ahead."[71]

It also appeared that the department was poised to reduce their customary discount of 30 per cent to 20. *Books and Notions* claimed that this was the government's way of recouping the expenses of developing four different sets of readers over two years:

> . . . all the work has to be paid for. Who pays it? Is it the Government? Or is it the publishers who, as a business venture, prepared the several readers? Not by any means. The innocent consumer and the middle-man pays all this enormous amount—for it is an enormous amount for such a result. . . . Never before in the story of book-making was there any such well-contrived plan to recoup the loss on this, the biggest blunder of the blundering Education office.[72]

Elsewhere, the journal declared, "[There is] no longer any need to take the far-off trips to the South African diamond fields to make a fortune; only get into School-book publishing in Ontario, and the diamonds will be found without the labour of digging."[73] Ross denied the charge, saying that "not one additional farthing was added to the price of the books as indemnity to the publishers whose books were cancelled."[74]

The booksellers' concerns were based on more than merely the immediate financial hit that they were facing. They saw, as Oisin Rafferty points out, "a thinly veiled attempt to form a textbook trust. . . . [and an] unholy alliance of publishing magnates conspiring with the education department to consolidate trade and restrict competition."[75] Ross's way of proceeding in this instance represented a significant departure from the existing pattern of relationship between the Department of Education and free enterprise, represented by publishers and booksellers. Under Ross, the department maintained strict control over every aspect of textbook development, production, and provision. It chose the developers, retained ownership of the plates, maintained the right to inspect finished samples of the books, and fixed the selling price and bookseller discounts. It then granted three publishing companies—Thomas Nelson, Gage, and The Canada Publishing Company—exclusive rights to print the series for ten years. (Nelson subsequently sold its publication rights to Copp Clark for a payment of $3000 per year for ten years.[76]) This was a significant departure from previous practice,

where contracts were open for tender and often limited to one year at a time.

A correspondent to *Books and Notions* explained the trade relationship between the booksellers and the publishers and Minister of Education:

> *These publishers derive the sole benefit from the labours of the retailers.* Here then is the position. The Minister of Education decrees what price, and who only shall publish them; the publishers then decree the wholesale price to the trade and we, the aforesaid trade, are given "Hobson's choice," that is sell them or see them go entirely into the hands of the dry goods or grocer men. Is not this a pleasant position to be placed? It seems to me akin to slavery, obliged to do our master's bidding on our master's terms.[77]

The booksellers were caught between the urgent economic demands of running a business and what they viewed as the capricious whims of politicians and educational bureaucrats, whose tax-supported employment protected them from the realities of the marketplace. Their response was dramatic.[78] On January 14, 1885, a "Red Letter Day of Bookselling [they] entered a strong protest against unfair division of profits on school books."[79] They demanded "liberty of trade from the thraldom of the autocrats, and compensation for the losses sustained in old useless Readers."[80] They formed the new Ontario Booksellers' Association, and presented Ross with a petition signed by 614 booksellers from 432 locations in the province, asking that the previous discount of 30 per cent be reinstated.[81]

The booksellers had reason to take strong action. In February 1885, their journal estimated the profits to the publishers from the Ontario Readers as $32,243.73 per year. This seems a conservative estimate. The journal reports in its March issue that a legislator in a speech on the school book question had estimated the gross profits to be $369,376.00 over a ten year period, pointing out that the discrepancy is likely due to his omission of manufacturers' profit. It concludes by saying that, "The only fault we have heard regarding our figures have been, that the profit is estimated too low. We knew this at the time, and so stated it, but desired to give the Publishers the benefit of any possible doubt."[82] The journal provides figures to indicate that the net profit to the publishers

per book was 40 cents, while the net profit to the retailer was only 27 cents.[83]

The 1884 contract was renewed for a second ten-year term in 1896. There was a delay between the end of one contract and the start of the next because during the course of the first contract, a representative of the publishers had traveled to Britain and secured copyright permissions for many of the selections in the readers. Apparently, it had not occurred to Superintendent Ross to do this, and therefore, the readers had been published, and reprinted many times, without copyright permission. When the end of the ten-year contract arrived, Ross had to either renew the contract with the copyright holders or develop completely new readers. He was not prepared to do the latter, so the contract was eventually renewed.

When, in 1906, after 22 years, the contract again reached its end, it was renewed once more, this time for six months, to allow time for the newly appointed Text Book Commission to complete its work. This was a lucrative contract, indeed, and testimony to the commission reveals the depth of animosity it created among rival publishers. As Rafferty put it:

> Both the increased centralization of the department's decision-making and the rationalization of textbook publishing signaled a retrenchment of status inequality between local boards and the education department, and between booksellers and publishers, which resulted from the imposed limitations of the brokerage process itself. In the arena of business and government relations, the government was often viewed less as the legitimate guardian of the public interest, and more as a broker of business interests; and business was seen to be an enthusiastic collaborator with government in the project of shaping reform from above.[84]

THE 1907 TEXTBOOK COMMISSION REPORT

The textbook question was a plank in the platforms of both Premier George Ross and Conservative Party Opposition Leader, James P. Whitney in the 1905 provincial election. When Whitney became premier, he appointed a commission to investigate issues related to price, physical quality, selection, and publication. The appointed Commissioners were Chairman, T. W. Crothers, a lawyer from the town of St. Thomas; the official examiner, John A. Cooper, a Toronto journalist; Alexander Clark Casselman, Secretary; and George Lynch Staunton of Hamilton, Legal

Counsel. The Committee's work was very thorough. It summoned "representative teachers, inspectors, educationists, experts in every department of bookmaking (including two from the United States) and all persons publishing school text books for Ontario"[85] to testify before it. There was widespread public interest.[86] The list of 35 individuals who testified is impressive, indeed, including the presidents of Copp Clark, Gage, and The Canada Publishing Company, as well as representatives of other publishers, such as the Canada Book Company, Warwick Brothers and Rutter, and Morang; printers and booksellers, two school inspectors, two book binders, a high school principal and various employees of the Department of Education. The Commissioners traveled to the United States, where they visited many publishers, to investigate prices, methods of distribution, and the various steps in text-book making. They even went so far as to chemically analyze the paper from which the books were made.

The Textbook Ring

The proof of a textbook ring was the most inflammatory commission finding. This evidence revealed the validity of the booksellers' concerns about the "unholy alliance of publishing magnates,"[87] against which they had protested in 1885. The textbook ring of Copp Clark, W. J. Gage and The Canada Publishing Company had managed to maintain a steadfast control over textbook printing for twenty-three years. The presidents of all three companies testified; all admitted to collusion in the matter of copyrights for selections in the readers. They claimed that, during the term of the original 1884 contract, they assumed that the government owned the rights to these selections. When they discovered that this was not the case, they decided not to inform the government and to obtain copyright on their own, a ploy intended to give them crucial bargaining power when it came time to renegotiate the contract. Furthermore, the three companies agreed not to reveal to the government which specific selections each owned, making it more difficult for the government to negotiate a purchase of the copyright permissions. The point is made that the government could have purchased the copyrights much more cheaply and then put up the printing rights for open bid, thereby destroying the publishers' ring. The three publishers also agreed to shut

out competition from other companies, or give them minor concessions to ward off undue interference. For example, they made a deal with Morang Educational Company for rights to publish one small primer text if it did not go after their contracts.

What is especially interesting is the behaviour of William Gage. According to the commission report, he "induced one [British] firm to bring an action against the Minister of Education, so as to convince him of the importance of the copyrights. The action was only a 'bluff' action, but it apparently had its effect."[88] Testimony at the commission reveals that it was he who was most active among the publishers in intimidating the smaller publishers into accepting small contracts in exchange for not making a fuss about their exclusion from the more lucrative reader contracts. For example, Dan Rose, President of the Canadian Book Company, testified that Gage threatened to push him out of the publishing business if he exercised his right to publish certain sections of texts or certain entire texts. As with George Morang, he and Gage worked out a deal whereby he would accept small profits in exchange for not going after the business controlled by the ring.[89] Edward S. Caswell, Publisher, Methodist Book Room, testified that Gage "came to us with the ultimatum that we were either to allow them—they would publish the book and set up their own plates or make terms with them."[90] These publishers were cautious about getting involved because of the possibility of being sued over copyright. Caswell was asked, "if you wanted to get what you considered the right of other publishing houses in this country to tender in open competition for the books published by the Government you had to do it with this sword hanging over you, that you might be sued? A.—yes."[91]

Finally, it became apparent that significant shareholders in each company held important offices in at least one other of the three companies. There were earlier indications of this. In fact, sixteen years earlier, *Books & Notions* reported that "the personnel of one of the firms has by a recent transaction come to be made up chiefly of the members of the other two firms. This further consolidates the monopoly."[92] The Canada Publishing Company and Gage, in particular, had a close relationship. Both had their origins in R. & A. Miller, Booksellers and Stationers, which was established in 1844, and became Adam Miller &

Co in about 1874. This firm, in turn, was divided into two new firms in 1880: The Canada Publishing Company and W. J. Gage. The two firms had not been separated for long prior to their acquisition of the Ontario Readers contract in 1884. It does not seem surprising that they were willing to work so closely together, given their history.[93]

Physical Quality and Cost of the Readers

George N. Morang of Morang Educational Company of Toronto provided compelling testimony to the Commission. He strongly criticized the physical quality of the 1884 *Ontario Readers* and declared that he could produce a much better quality series for less money, but was prevented from doing so by the powerful triumvirate.[94] Even W. J. Gage, in a written submission to the Commission, offered the somewhat surprising opinion considering the source, that the *Ontario Readers* were "not books that a publisher would be proud of."[95] "The system adopted in Ontario has not encouraged authors and publishers to compete in the production of superior text books, with the result that many of the texts in use in our schools are inferior both educationally and mechanically."[96] He pointed to the system of open competition in the other provinces as being much superior.

In its January 1907 report, the commission concluded that the books were generally of poor quality and proposed that greater attention be paid to size of type, quantity of information on a page, quality of illustrations and colour of paper. It warned that:

> It is clear that text book publishing in Ontario has fallen behind the times. Most of the books produced to-day are no better than those produced twenty years ago . . . . The paper used in the Ontario books is not equal to that used in the United States, and is much inferior to that used in Great Britain. . . . The Department allowed slovenly work, and apparently the inspectors and teachers either hesitated to criticize or were unfamiliar with conditions elsewhere. We believe that just as good books may be produced in Canada as elsewhere if the authorities insist upon an equally high standard.[97]

The Commission also concluded that the prices of the readers were exorbitant. It recommended that if the Department could not find a satisfactory set of readers, it should publish them itself, sending the printing out by tender to one firm.

The response to the commission report was immediate. First, and even before the recommendations were released, textbook prices were drastically reduced, with the *Ontario Readers* dropping in price from $1.35 a set to $.49. Second, the Minister of Education appointed "a school man with expert knowledge of printing and binding to supervise the preparation (of a new set of Readers) and a committee of representative teachers to assist him with their advice and experience."[98] The "school man" was D. G. Goggin, who was at the time chairman of the committee on readers, and became head of the Ontario Textbooks Office when it was formed in 1912.

Free Textbooks

The Commission came out strongly in favour of free textbooks. A number of people testified in support. J. L. Hughes, Chief Inspector of the City of Toronto Schools, made a compelling case, reporting on the free textbook system in the city, which had been in place since 1892.[99] He pointed out that provision of free texts was in keeping with the "general principle of free education"[100] because financial constraints did not hinder school attendance, students learned to take care of property, students who did not have texts did not disrupt the other students' schoolwork, and there were no worries about sanitation because books used by students with contagious diseases were destroyed.[101] This recommendation was very much in keeping with the thinking in other jurisdictions. British Columbia, for instance, established a Free Text-Book Branch in 1908, originally making free books available to elementary students, and by 1910, to secondary students as well.[102]

The booksellers were adamantly opposed to free textbooks; it had been an issue for discussion in their trade journal long before the textbook commission recommended the approach. They raised a number of objections, for example the unsanitary nature of used books and the possibility of spreading disease by touching them.[103] This objection may have been designed to alarm parents in the hope they would protest the move. A second concern was that "it would create within the children a spirit of extravagance. . . . for as we all know, that which comes seemingly-easy goes likewise."[104] A third concern was the cost to the public through taxes, for "the parent who has already provided his

children with books is to go on and bear the expense of providing other people's children for all time to come on as long as the unhappy taxpayer lives."[105] Of course, the booksellers' primary concern was their profits. *Bookseller and Stationer* declared that "School boards have no right to go into the book business and deprive the regular trade of their custom."[106] In 1901, booksellers were advised by their journal to "protest strongly against any further socialistic invasion of the book trade by municipal or Provincial authorities."[107]

THE 1909 T. EATON COMPANY READERS

In 1909, the province awarded the right to print the new *Ontario Readers* to the T. Eaton Company department store, retaining copyright as well as ownership of the plates. The company took up the task with enthusiasm, printing 509,000 copies of the books that year. From the perspective of the government, this was a prudent move because Eaton's offered the lowest tender.[108] This decision also allowed the government to move beyond accusations of being a pawn of the powerful textbook ring. For the T. Eaton Company, the contract provided a profitable way to keep the presses it already owned for printing its seasonal mail-order catalogues busy during times of the year when its catalogues were not being printed. Because the company name was to be on the cover of the books, it also afforded an opportunity for some free advertising. In addition, the company fervently hoped that, when parents came into the stores to purchase textbooks, they would purchase other items as well.

This contract, which merged the roles of publisher and bookseller, caused consternation among the booksellers. They suggested that its unfortunate effects be mitigated in two ways. First, they wanted the imprint of the Education Department placed on the texts instead of that of the Eaton's department store. Second, they wanted the Education Department, rather than the store, to distribute the books. As their trade journal put it:

> In this reader contract the Education Department of Ontario, unknowingly it is true; placed in the hands of the T. Eaton Company a weapon more powerful and potent than any yet possessed by that or any other department store, to further cripple and maim the retail trade. . . . Every reader bearing the imprint of the T.

Eaton Co. will be an advance agent for the latter into every home which it enters.[109]

Their concern was that, because the books could be purchased for twenty per cent less at Eaton's, parents would naturally want to purchase them there. Therefore, the less free advertising the department store could obtain by means of the books, the better. This concern really pertained only to urban areas because Eaton's intended to charge postage to send the books to rural customers, thus, for the most part, eliminating its cost advantage over the retail booksellers.

The department refused both requests. Dr. Pyne, the Minister of Education, offered the opinion that it was the usual practice for the publisher's name to appear on books and that should continue to be the case. As for the idea of the department distributing the books, he had no intention of recreating the textbook depository.[110] The price of school books had been an issue in the 1908 election and the government was not about to rouse the ire of the public by failing to provide them at an acceptable price now. And it was successful in this intent. A glance at the cover of the 1885 *Third Reader* in the *Ontario Readers* series shows a cost of 30 cents, while the *Third Book* in the 1909 T. Eaton Company series cost 14 cents. This feat proved the *Globe* wrong. In May 1908, it had predicted that "when the new readers are issued the children of this Province will not get their school readers at any lower rate than that which prevailed before the Whitney government acceded to power."[111] It went on to declare that the existing prices were "a remnant sale,"[112] simply a means to get rid of the existing stock of readers before they were replaced by new readers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Two conclusions can be drawn from examination of controversies related to textbook provision: They are always political and they are always about money. Ensuring equal educational opportunity was the basis for establishing a public education system in Ontario and the provision of uniform and inexpensive textbooks a means of democratizing classrooms to attain that goal. At the same time, textbooks were produced by publishing companies and sold by booksellers as an economic venture. This mixture of bureaucracy, politics, and free

enterprise did not produce textbooks that were the least expensive or the highest physical quality.[113]

The Ontario Education Department spent the 59 years examined in this study, attempting to be the fulcrum, balancing a see-saw of competing interests. School children and their parents, the intended beneficiaries of a commitment to equal educational opportunity, were at one end, and the publishers and booksellers, who expected to make a profit from the textbook as economic commodity, were an uneasy duo at the other. At some times the see-saw balanced precariously. At other times, one or the other end landed on the ground with a resounding thud.

Of the groups at either end of the see-saw, parents with their children, and the booksellers, "the innocent consumer and the middle-man,"[114] as the booksellers' journal put it, wielded the least power. Parents and children were subject to the whims of the Education Department bureaucracy. Because children had to have the books, parents paid whatever was necessary to obtain them.

Publishers and booksellers were in an interesting position with respect to this journey of textbooks to the classroom door. They operated on the fringes of the educational establishment. They were reactive, not proactive, interpreting Education Department decisions, rather than leading the way themselves. And yet, the publishers and the booksellers had to lay their money on the line, taking financial risks to publish the books, or purchase them with the intent to sell.

The economic clout of the booksellers was not as strong as the publishers, particularly the oligopoly of powerful publishers, because they did not have the same access to profits. Their prosperity was dependent on the extent to which the Education Department bureaucracy chose to exercise control over textbook provision. When the department made the decision in 1850 to establish a textbook depository, it reduced the market available to the booksellers. In 1884, when Minister of Education, George Ross, granted printing rights for the *Ontario Readers* to three firms, instead of putting the contracts out to tender, he effectively gave Copp Clark (which purchased the rights from Nelson), Gage, and The Canada Publishing Company control over the trade for the next twenty-three years. This decision paved the way for the three

favoured publishers to become mini despots, who took every opportunity to use their power to the detriment of parents, other publishers, and booksellers. The three fortunate firms set exorbitant prices for the books. They severely limited the access to profits of other publishing firms such as Morang and the Canadian Book Company.

This triumvirate of publishers also exercised control over the fate of the booksellers in two ways. First, the booksellers' profits were hugely affected by the size of the discount they could wrest from the publishers and the government. Second, the publishers determined the wholesale price at which the booksellers could offer the readers for sale. If the booksellers balked at prices set by the publishers, they could be bypassed and the books sold directly to establishments such as dry goods or grocery stores. This would not have happened if the Education Department had simply opened the contracts to tenders or even if it had chosen to spread the opportunity to print the books across a number of firms. The booksellers had every reason to call for, "Liberty of Trade from the Thraldom of the Autocrats."

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[52] Pat MacDonald, "Copp Clark Closes Doors and Opens Book Collection to the National Library of Canada," *National Library News* 31 (June 1999). http://www.collectionscanada.ca/bulletin/. Accessed September 12, 2005. Copp Clark (now part of British-owned Pearson Education Canada) began in Toronto in 1841 as a retail bookstore and printing company, owned

by Hugh Scobie, a Scot. *W.J. Gage & Co. Ltd., A Story of Sixty-Five Successful Years, 1844-1909* (Toronto: W.J. Gage, 1909). Gage began in Montreal as R. & A. Miller, Booksellers and Stationers. The firm expanded to Toronto in 1860. W.J. Gage became sole owner in 1880. It is now Gage Learning Corporation. The Canada Publishing Company was formed from the same company as Gage.

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[78] Rafferty states that 700 booksellers protested in Toronto on January 14th (p. 86). His reference is *Books and Notions*, which is (probably intentionally) ambiguous on this point. It seems unlikely that 700 booksellers would have made their way to Toronto in the middle of winter. And if they had done so, surely *The Globe* would have mentioned it the next day. It seems more likely that their "strong protest" was merely the signatures on the petition that was presented to Ross. The booksellers, as a whole, were not particularly politically active. J.J. Dyas, publisher of *Books and Notions*, chided them because the membership of the booksellers' association stood at just over 100, instead of the 500, which he thought a more reasonable number. *Books and Notions* III (July 1887): 195.

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September, 1906; "Paid Big Price for Contracts," *The Globe*, 26 October, 1906; "Give Everyone a Show," *The Globe*, 9 November, 1906.

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[91] Ibid., 192.

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[101] Ibid., 103-115.

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[111] "Fooling Parents and Children," *The Globe*, 14 May, 1908.

[112] Ibid.

[113] It is highly likely that they were also not of the highest quality in terms of their content; but this study did not examine that question.

[114] "The New Ontario Readers," *Books and Notions* I (January 1885): 92.