The School Textbook and the People’s Library


“He who controls books controls education,” exclaimed Education Minister Jules Ferry on May 5th 1879 to the Classical Texts Examination Commission. Ten years later, a decree dated January 29th 1890 made the use of school textbooks mandatory in primary schools, even stipulating their number. Henceforth, no schoolchild in France would escape learning and acculturation by the book. Research by Alain Choppin has shown that schoolbook publishers gladly supported this unprecedented initiative; the annual total of 200 titles published in 1865–67 rose to 500 publications in 1872–75, increasing to a peak of 933 titles in 1883. Precise figures for print runs are scarce; however, the late nineteenth century clearly saw a deluge of print destined to cram the basics of education into the offspring of the masses. Armand Colin's bookshop alone reportedly sold 50 million volumes between 1872 and 1889, when schools numbered some 4.3 million pupils. In the light of the 5.8 million copies disseminated by Colin in 1882–83, it is clear that the whole of France was inundated by his works and that those who managed to avoid reading them were rare indeed.

2 Ibid., 85.
Beyond the statistics, this amounted to a cultural revolution. If we are to believe the surveys conducted by Frédéric Le Play between 1857 and 1908, by the end of the century, two thirds of working-class families had books available at home. School collections represented 40 per cent of the total, twice that of devotional works. However, we cannot extrapolate too much from Le Play’s work as the small sample size of 55 family budgets does not allow for any definitive conclusions. The data can, however, serve as a rough and ready guide to the extent to which printed textbooks reached the most underprivileged members of society. This picture should be compared with further research into the rural populace, peasants in particular; however, here, the statistics remain silent. What is known is that on average, 700 manuals were published in France in the years 1875–95, and the millions of books that brought wealth to booksellers such as Armand Colin, Fernand Nathan, and Louis Hachette were distributed to some of the country’s most remote districts. It became mandatory to possess them from 1880 onward, ten years prior to Jules Ferry's decree. Ferry had perfectly grasped the significance of the battle for the book, which was to rage between 1870 and 1900.

It is not enough to speak of gradually changing practices and habits; rather, we propose to study the years which preceded the Belle Époque in terms of a break with the past. This quiet revolution took place during the great economic crisis which shook the world between 1873 and 1895, as if its aim were to underscore the futility of quantitative approximations, deterministic causality, and economists’ models. As food started to become scarce, as work dried up in the industrial cities and the rural exodus was forcing the surplus farming population into urban areas, this spiritual manna fell from the heavens and the state began to socialize the mass of citizens hitherto unfamiliar with books as private property. The

4 Frédéric Le Play, Les Ouvriers des deux mondes, 1857–1908, 12 vol.
grandchildren of Stendhal’s M. Sorel, father of the bookish hero of *Le Rouge et le Noir*, had to accept an idea which sixty years earlier would have been deemed eccentric: the son of a carpenter such as himself might devote several hours each day to books on history, geography, mathematics, grammar, or civics. Julien Sorel would no longer climb a tree with cries of “filthy bookreading dog!” ringing in his ears.\(^5\) Henceforth, use of the whip or a clout round the ear would be used to enforce familiarity with the printed word, no longer seen as devilish or scandalous.

While civilization undeniably took a great leap forward in this era, the small volumes in circulation during the pre-war period offer a taste of what little cultural baggage was available to those who were to fight in the trenches in 1914. Schoolbooks were the true classics of nineteenth-century publishing.\(^6\) Like Roger Chartier, we would do well to remember that, beyond statistics and surveys, we need to address the tricky issue of “the point at which text and reader meet,”\(^7\) which also involves tackling the thorny issue of *how* people read. Research is lacking on this issue, despite the invaluable collections of schoolteachers’ accounts gathered by Jacques and Mona Ozouf.\(^8\) Can we treat France as one homogeneous entity, or should we acknowledge the regional diversity highlighted by Eugen Weber?\(^9\) Did young people from the Auvergne learn the same geography lesson inspired by Pierre Foncin as their counterparts in Normandy or the Jura? Did Larive and Fleury’s grammar exercises, distributed as promotional material to every schoolteacher by Armand

---

7 Ibid., 295–97.
Colin, who also sold a further million copies of the title between 1882–83, elicit the same reaction in southern France as on the German border? A dip into the ideological waters conveyed by these texts is a risky exercise, if Roger Chartier is to be believed, since this investigation does not put the reader in the picture at all, supposing him or her to simply be uniformly receptive to ideas; we ignore this issue at our peril, however, as it triggered the two textbook wars of the period.

When we take account of the national scale of the cultural revolution which brought books into homes at every level of society after 1870, a chronological rift is apparent. The efforts by former Education Ministers François Guizot and Victor Duruy earlier in the century to eliminate illiteracy among the French populace, teaching them to read, write, and count, had proved effective. Thanks to Guizot, Hachette became France's leading educational publisher, as evidenced by its title of University Bookseller. Yet his influence appears nugatory when comparing sales for 1831–35 with those for 1875–85. With the advent of the Third Republic in 1870, book ownership became a mass phenomenon affecting every citizen. Municipalities took the place of individuals as book purchasers, and even the most financially disadvantaged were involved in the process of acculturation by textbook. Popular forms of publishing such as serial novels, manuals, and cheap volumes, were all outstripped by schoolbooks in terms of print runs. To understand quite how ground-breaking this was, it is important to grasp the vital significance of individual ownership of those five or six books whose possession was mandatory for pupils aged between six and thirteen.

The nation’s schoolteachers: Lavisse, Larousse et al

Impressed by the size of the print runs recorded for the various volumes of Ernest Lavisse’s *Histoire de France*, historian Pierre Nora declared him “the nation’s schoolteacher” in his 1984 work *Les Lieux de mémoire*.\textsuperscript{11} Lavisse, tutor to Napoleon III’s son, was the spiritual son of Victor Duruy. Ferdinand Buisson, France's director of primary school education, was an enthusiastic advocate of Lavisse’s *History*: “here we have it, the truly national and truly liberal little volume of history that we were asking for to serve as an educational tool.”\textsuperscript{12} This little tool fitted the new regime's needs so perfectly it might almost have been commissioned specially; it enabled the government to set out a united vision of France for the nation's youth without having to legislate for the use of a particular title, as had been proposed by both the French Revolution and the Restoration.\textsuperscript{13} The Armand Colin publishing archives studied by Caroline Duroselle confirm Lavisse’s runaway success.\textsuperscript{14} Joining the business in 1876 with *Leçons préparatoires d'histoire de France à l'usage des commençants* (Preparatory lessons in French history for beginners), Lavisse sold 5 million copies of his series by 1889. In 1882–83 alone, he sold 540,000 history books and 244,000 civic instruction manuals through Armand Colin under the pseudonym Pierre Laloi.\textsuperscript{15} These figures must have made Hachette green with envy: its Bled collection only sold 610,000 copies by 1967, fewer than Lavisse’s 1882–83 tally of 784,000.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 265.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 53.
However, others did even better. Master grammarians Larive and Fleury achieved sales figures which far outstripped even Lavisse. Selling 1 million works in 1882–83 and 12 million between 1872 and 1889, they were well ahead of geographer Pierre Foncin, whose work sold 11 million copies between 1874 and 1889, and mathematician Pierre Leyssenne, who had already racked up some 6 million sales by the centenary of the Republic. Over the medium term, these rankings varied little. By 1920, Larive and Fleury were neck and neck with Pierre Foncin, with 26 million books sold by Armand Colin. Leyssenne achieved sales of 15 million, Lavisse sold 13 million, and Guyau’s *Cours de lecture* (Reading lessons) reached 9 million. The geographer Paul Vidal de La Blache also did a roaring trade. 800,000 of his wall maps were distributed around the country, adorning classrooms throughout France, where they were seen, studied, and discussed by countless teachers and their pupils. The authenticity of these statistics is indisputable: the figures cited by the publisher at the time of the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 match those in the accounting records held by the owner’s family. They are evidence of the boom in the school book trade between 1875 and 1890 and through to 1914. The Ferry law was only one factor behind this boom, which in fact started before the law was passed.

The history of textbook publishing provides ample evidence. Charles Delagrave set up shop in Paris in 1865, Armand Colin in 1870, Henry Vuibert in 1876, Alexandre Hatier in 1878, and Fernand Nathan in 1881. Like Armand Colin, Nathan learned his trade through Charles Delagrave. While Delagrave eventually specialized in teaching materials and equipment, his apprentices entered the textbook publishing field, fighting a pitched battle with Hachette & Co. In the period leading up to Jules Ferry’s educational reforms, they

---

16 Ibid., for all of these statistics.

17 See also the Notice printed by the Armand Colin bookshop on the occasion of the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 (Paris Armand Colin, 1889).
recognized that the new era of mass education and literacy would affect every child in the country. Bookshops were transformed into publishing houses as their powerful owners sought out textbook authors to provide the material that would be taught in even the most disenfranchised parts of the nation. The end of the nineteenth century heralded the start of an era of mass culture, prefiguring that of politics.\textsuperscript{18} Lavisse was only one of some ten or twenty authors jockeying for position alongside the likes of Pierre Larousse, who died in 1875 but whose magnum opus, the \textit{Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle} (Great universal dictionary of the nineteenth century), the constant companion of journalists, teachers, novelists, and intellectuals everywhere, profoundly influenced the French psyche.\textsuperscript{19} They included Augustine Fouillée, more popularly known by her pen name, G. Bruno, whose reading book \textit{Le Tour de la France par deux enfants: Devoir et patrie} (A tour of France by two children. Duty and Country) was published by Belin in 1877. Selling on average 300,000 copies per year, it totaled 3 million copies in 1887 and owed nothing to the passing of Republican laws. In 1900, it was said to have achieved sales of 6 million but sales slowed with the militant revision of its content in 1905. Belin was a Catholic-run enterprise whose star author when Augustine Fouillée signed up was Abbé Drioux. With fifty-nine titles published by Belin between 1844 and 1877, Drioux provided Eugène Belin’s widow with guaranteed circulation in church schools.\textsuperscript{20} What could not have been anticipated at the time, however, was that secular schools would take up a work aimed at children at religious schools. It was not until the attacks by the \textit{Revue Socialiste} in 1899 that Augustine Fouillée's

\textsuperscript{18} See J.-Y. Mollier, "Un siècle de transition vers une culture de masse,” \textit{Histoirens et géographes} (December 1992).


identity was revealed. At Belin, *Francinet. Principes generaux de la Morale, de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Agriculture* (Francinet. General principles on Morality, Industry, Trade and Agriculture), published in 1869, heralded the success of *Tour de la France*, which listed the title as one of the author’s former successes. The fact that it went through 103 print runs before 1898 (albeit mostly reprints rather than revised editions) gives some idea of the author’s preeminence.

Augustine Fouillé struck just the right note with the children of a country battered by war. The League of Patriots, founded by Henri Martin in 1882, proceeded in a similar vein. Dominated by the poet and dramatist Paul Déroulède, the original organization brought together numerous shooting and gymnastics clubs formed after the defeat of 1870.\(^\text{21}\) The organization was tasked with training French youth to avenge the Prussian defeat of France before undergoing an anti-republican conversion to the Boulangist\(^\text{22}\) cause. Readers of the League's newspaper *Le Drapeau* would have been happy to wave their sons off on Fouillé’s *Tour de France*, a journey which began in Phalsbourg, a key city in the area divided by the Frankfurt treaty, and home to the writing team Erckmann and Chatrian. The mass education which was already sweeping France in 1877 generated, in this political context, a voice capable of speaking out about the upheaval suffered by many. Whether it was her intention or not, she was to become a fixture in many homes, helping to fuel a revolution in cultural practices and habits the likes of which Renan, with his *Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (Intellectual and moral reform), could scarcely have dreamed.


\(^{22}\) Translator's note: a political movement taking its name from General Boulanger, comprising of radical republicans hoping to revise the constitution on the one hand and bonapartistes and monarchists aiming to overthrow the republic on the other.
Other authors of highly popular textbooks followed similar journeys. Hachette was slightly behind the curve with the Gauthier-Deschamps collections, only entering the fray in 1904. Nathan got off to a tricky start but the history textbooks of Ammann and Coutant were reprinted many times.\textsuperscript{23} The lack of any systematic study on comparative print runs for textbooks for this period prevents us drawing up an exhaustive list of the most powerful players in the field. However, it is fair to say that Armand Colin was a strong contender. With some hundred or so titles published or reprinted by 1895, the company’s output represented 20 per cent of all titles in this market. It maintained its market-leading position in 1900, albeit with a slightly diminished lead. The 50 million books sold between 1872 and 1889 reached almost all schoolchildren. A notional tally of the school population over these seventeen years would equal around 55 million children and theoretically five or six times as many books. In fact, this calculation is erroneous as, in many areas, municipalities acquired works for lending, rather than for distribution to individual schoolchildren. If the total of 55 million individuals over seventeen years actually bought five or six manuals per year, France would have printed 250 to 300 million works, which was far from the case, despite books being aimed at a particular level (elementary, middle, or examination), rather than a particular class.

For Armand Colin and his competitors, the rationalization of sales techniques dictated editorial policy. As of 1885, some 150 employees worked for the company in sixteen departments in charge of manufacturing, advertising, subscriptions, copy-editing, dispatch, and so on. The director first met Lavisse and Foncin when they were young conscripts together in 1870 and understood that textbooks for primary schools required a particular approach. In 1872, as an experiment, he began sending each school a sample copy of his

works, whose formats, typography, and illustration formed a cohesive collection.\textsuperscript{24} However, the focus was now very much on the writers, who now had to be selected far more carefully. As the law of June 16th 1880 handed the choice of school books to teachers grouped into regional committees, reporting to departmental committees, authors now needed the appropriate academic credentials. Jean-François Mazaleyrat has studied the sudden change in writer profiles in publishing catalogues. The figures speak volumes, despite only being available for the field of history. Out of twenty-two history textbooks used in primary schools between 1873 and 1893, eight were written by teachers working in the big Parisian lycées, four by academics, four by inspectors or other senior officials in the administration, and just one by a primary school teacher.\textsuperscript{25} The author’s credentials, meticulously shown on the cover of each volume, were an indication of the quality of its content: publishers recruited authors based on their reputation and ability to inspire confidence in users and purchasing decision-makers. Between 1894 and 1922, there appears to have been closer collaboration between inspectors and teachers, resulting in a discreet tightening of book control processes by the central administration.

With such backing, Armand Colin could expect an eager welcome from teachers. As most districts had no bookshop, teachers acted as booksellers and were granted a discount for this purpose. The same applied to municipalities which lent out books, which occasionally incurred the wrath of the booksellers’ association; the practice continued unabated up to 1914, however. All of these changes go some way to explaining the magnitude of the figures quoted, explaining the change in the figures before and after 1875. Orders placed by the state with Louis Hachette between 1831 and 1835 for fewer than one million books, and the

\textsuperscript{24} See C. Duroselle, op. cit.

distribution of *La Petite Histoire de France* (A Short History of France) by Mme de Saint-Ouen, which sold some 2.2 million copies between 1832 and 1880, were small fry compared to the tens of millions of books distributed across the whole country by a single publisher by 1889.

**The People’s Books: Reading, Grammar, Mathematics, Geography, History and Civic Instruction.**

In order to compare similar books, we selected textbooks aimed at the top group in primary school, i.e. for children aged 9 to 11, printed between 1880 and 1900. In the absence of systematic legal deposit at the Bibliothèque Nationale, we looked at the collections at the Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique (INRP), the advantage being that these copies can be handled and studied in conditions similar to those in which they were in use. Jean-Marie Guyau's *La Première Année de lecture courante* (The first year of fluent reading), subtitled *Morale. Connaissances utiles. Devoirs envers la Patrie* (Morality. Useful knowledge. Duty to one’s Country) offers a direct glimpse into the world view of nineteenth-century moralizers. Guyau was a high school teacher and graduate of the INRP; his textbook was quickly chosen by the Ministry of Education for school libraries and by state schools in the major cities, with “Paris, Lyon, etc.” being printed on the cover. It was divided into three separate sections, combining improving reading matter and practical exercises designed to test reading comprehension. Prior to legislation introducing secular education and excluding religious schools from the state sector, this book does not ignore the existence of God, but does maintain a discreet silence on clerics. “Let us do good works and believe in

26 Thanks to Alain Choppin who kindly allowed us to access to these volumes at the INRP.

27 12th ed. of 1880, 12mo volume with 336 pages, some featuring small engravings.
“God” concludes the fourth reading in the section on moral tales. The next is devoted to useful knowledge about electricity, gas, inventions, etc., while the last defines the citizen’s duties toward society and country.

The heroism of Joseph Bara is lauded from the start, surpassing that of Appius and Constance de Cezelli. Along with the benefits of the savings bank, we quickly get an idea of the main social concerns of the time. An adage hostile to the consumer society – still a distant prospect in the late nineteenth century – concludes the study: “Never buy anything which is of no use to you purely because it is a bargain.” The adage vividly conveys a domestic economy in which money was scarce and expenditure always suspect. Rejecting class war and hatred of the rich, the work rather extolled the wisdom of mutual societies over trade unions and the benefits of pension funds. Moderate patriotism was constantly emphasized. The volume concludes with the edifying tale of Suzanne, shot by the Prussians in 1870 for refusing to betray her people. The duty of French youth was mapped out: they should aim to be useful to society, hard-working, thrifty, patriotic, and ready to sacrifice themselves in the name of the Republic. Guyau’s reader was well written, lively and amusing, as well as steadfastly utilitarian: it proved a model of the genre.

The 86th edition of La Première Année de grammaire (The first year of grammar) was printed in 1887. Revised in 1882 to take account of the new syllabus, it claims to offer children “a sort of basic manual of the French language.” The second primer analyses words based on three categories: “God, children, animal.” Illustrations of the proper nouns, “Adam, Eve, Paris, the Seine” further draw on Christian moral values. The appeal to common sense,

28 Translator’s note: A young drummer boy killed by royalists during the Revolution.
29 Translator’s note: A French war heroine, wife of the governor of Leucate, who defended the southern town from Spanish forces after his capture and execution in 1590.
30 12mo volume, 148 pages.
the systematic references to nature and to familiar objects put the reader in familiar surroundings. Its precepts are intended to elevate the soul and often rely on church teachings. Exercise 33, for instance, reads “Sin often comes to us in attractive guises; we must learn to resist the tempting trap and remember that we must not judge people or things on their appearances.” This austere manual was used across France, defending traditional morals and extolling the virtues of work, thrift, and savings.

Larive and Fleury's comparable work *Dictées de première année* (Dictation for first-year students) included some 300 texts such as grammar exercises and accompanying written exercises, intended to give students “useful knowledge in all matters, both from the point of view of education and instruction in its strictest sense.”

Taking a more republican stance than Guyau, Larive and Fleury chose to champion Reinach over Clemenceau in the debate on the French Revolution in 1891. Madame Roland is mentioned twice in a positive light, implicitly decrying her executors. Charles Martel, Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Bayard, and Hoche take their places alongside her in the pantheon of famous historical figures, which obviously excluded Robespierre and Saint-Just. The importance of the fatherland is a key theme in the anthology, though few texts mention it directly. Hugo, Souvestre, Halévy, Claretie, Chateaubriand, and Delille are among the best known of the authors included. Lesser-known figures such as Georges Duruy, Paul Bert, and Larive and Fleury themselves go further than the great writers in preparing young French hearts and minds for revenge. Larive and Fleury define France as “a single body, a single soul” and declare that the country has suffered great injury. Even more explicitly, an allusion to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine is

---

31 *Livre du maître*: 12mo volume, 304 pages, 1900.

32 Translator's note: An influential Girondist supporter of the Revolution who fell out of favor during the Reign of Terror and was guillotined.
made through an eight-year-old orphan vowing to his mother to avenge the death of his father, killed by the Prussians in 1870.

Pierre Leyssenne’s *La Première Année d’arithmétique* (First year of arithmetic) primes youthful minds for the same battle by putting mathematics at the service of the army. The budding accountant is asked to calculate the number of bullet cartridges a regiment will need while stressing the importance of mental arithmetic. Saving money is one of the author’s key concerns and he devotes the concluding pages of his work to the savings bank. Workers and employees cannot all “invest in stocks or give their money to a banker”: they should take care to place their “little nest egg” in a savings bank, in the manner of the Gouget family in *Germinal*. With exhortations to be honest and cautious, particularly with figures, weights, and measures, arithmetic is put at the service of society. Problems are straightforward, making an appeal to common sense, discernment, and utilitarianism. Thrift and planning should be the guiding moral principles of the future worker, better armed to tackle the demands of an ever-changing nation.

Pierre Foncin’s *La Première Année de géographie* (First year of geography) already prepared primary school students for their final exams by flagging up questions and pitfalls which may await them. With an openly vengeful tone, the book takes an aggressively militant stance toward Germany. Describing the geography of France, it states that “since the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, its total area now covers just 529,000 square km.” In the “French Regional Administration” section, the author states: “As of 1871, France’s population increased by 3 million, while that of Germany increased by 14 million.” One chapter deals with military defense and the three years of active military service required of French men prior to 1905,

---

33 12mo volume, 144 pages.
34 12mo volume, 52 pages, 1900.
and the losses suffered in 1871, painting the agriculture of Alsace and the industry of Lorraine as the two shining jewels in the nation's crown. The inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine are lauded for their loyalty, and France, the champion of human rights, is placed in stark contrast to Prussia, the brutal oppressor. It concludes with surprising frankness and vehemence: “And when Alsace and Lorraine become French once more, there shall be great joy upon these provinces’ return to the country from which they were snatched, but to whom their heart has always belonged.”

The chapter on the colonies takes a slightly subtler tone, stating that the colonizers should “seek to have their conquests forgiven through good deeds, namely instructing the natives and treating them with justice and humanity,” which would have been commendable had the lesson been taken on board by colonial administrators, military personnel, and traders. The manual is decidedly republican in tone, though it does not go quite so far as to call for a reform of secondary education open to all in a meritocratic competition. Primary education was intended to provide “vital knowledge” for all, while secondary education was reserved for the offspring of the educated classes. For the workers, a simple program of honesty was enough to put France's institutions on a sound footing and transform all boys into responsible, upstanding citizens. Having fallen foul of the “moral order” government of Patrice de Mac-Mahon before 1877, Pierre Foncin was certainly not a man who hid his allegiances: as a high-ranking academic official and founding president of the Alliance Française, Inspector General and honorary director of secondary education, he was intent on preparing hearts and minds for national retribution of the sort one might expect to find in history rather than geography textbooks.
Lavisse’s *Première Année d'histoire de France* (First year of French history)\(^{35}\) has been extensively analyzed by Pierre Nora, Christian Amalvi, and others.\(^{36}\) Aimed at primary schools and the first few years of lycée, it contains some 95 illustrations, 14 maps, and a wealth of short texts to learn by heart, as well as writing exercises. It waxes lyrical on the development of the French nation, from its great kings to the French Revolution. With seven books divided into chapters with 910 short narratives, it exhorts teachers to transform history lessons into solemn expressions of patriotic sentiment. National history is presented in an emotional tone to prepare for retribution. The last few paragraphs state this explicitly: “The History of France shows that the sons of our country have always avenged their fathers’ misfortunes!” This is illustrated by two examples: Charles VII after Crécy, Poitiers, and Agincourt, and the Revolution after Louis XV. The final narrative is equally unambiguous: “It is down to you, the children growing up in our schools today, to avenge your fathers, defeated at Sedan and Metz. It is your duty, your life’s overriding duty. You must think of it always, and when you are twenty years old and you take up arms, be good soldiers, showing great obedience to your commanders, brave and resolute on the battlefield.”

Ernest Lavisse took a similar tack in his works of civic education written with the pen name Pierre Laloï, while Augustine Fouillée moved schoolchildren to tears with the misfortunes of André and Julian in *Tour de la France par deux enfants. Devoir et patrie*.\(^{37}\) The cult of revenge was no empty concept in the secular schools of the Third Republic. This viewpoint prevailed not only in history textbooks, as might be expected, but also textbooks on grammar, reading, geography, and even arithmetic. This brief overview of French

\(^{35}\) 12mo volume, 240 pages, published in 1884.


schoolbooks between 1880 and 1900 gives an idea of the significance of nationalism at the time. In opposition to the much-quoted findings of Raoul Girardet, our reading contradicts the belief that this period marked a smooth transition from one form of nationalism to another. Rather, it should be viewed in terms of two intersecting forms of nationalism, the right joining the left, which receded far less than has traditionally been stated.

This interpretation chimes broadly with the study of public attitudes in 1914 by Jean-Jacques Becker and Rolande Trempé’s research on the way Carmaux miners rejected their former activism. Apart from the Socialist leadership, trade union direct action militants, the cadres of the CGT and anarchists included on Carnet B lists, the majority the French left, who would not long before have been republicans, remained immune to internationalist propaganda. A whole body of proletarian literature, including leftist journals such as Guerre sociale and L’Assiette au beurre, tried to root out patriotism and jingoism. It clearly drew much interest in teacher training colleges and gained some sympathizers amongst schoolteachers, who became pacifists and proponents of universal cooperation. The League of Patriotic Schoolteachers grew out of a belief, promoted by the conservative press, in a radical change of sensibility among teachers around 1890 to 1900. In reality, an ideological reading of the most commonly used textbooks gives quite a different picture. It is astonishing that Germany, so prompt to denounce attacks or intemperate language in the French press, did not protest more protest about the assault on the Prussian character in school textbooks. Jules Ferry’s sensational denouncement of General Boulanger, Minister of War at the time of


40 Translator’s note: A list of suspect individuals kept under state surveillance during the Third Republic.

41 J. and M. Ozouf, op. cit., chaps. 5 and 6.
the Schnaebelé Incident,\textsuperscript{42} as a “Saint-Arnaud de café-concert” (a music-hall general), was less damaging to Bismarck’s empire than the insidious campaign of sniping conducted in school textbooks.

Beyond this patriotic and revanchist ideology, the majority of French pupils found their school textbooks offered an image of France that was fairly close to their daily lives. Rural scenes far outweighed city life and countryside scenes were intricately reproduced on many pages. Nor was religion overlooked, though it was largely treated in a rather consensual fashion. It proved a source of inspiration for secular morality, even when this condemned the intolerance of clerics or their forefathers. Increasing anticlericalism and free thinking led to schoolbooks being revised, but this was very much a superficial attack on glaring allusions to divinity, rather than anything more profound. The name of God disappeared and the saints were packed off to heaven, abandoning the earthly domain of the school textbook, provoking the ire of good Catholics everywhere.\textsuperscript{43} Nevertheless, no new morality arose to take its place.

The honesty of the worker, the cult of family life, the sanctity of marriage, the virtues of saving, respect for order and social hierarchies all remained the bedrock of school values. There was no glimpse of admiration for the militant trade unionist, no acknowledgment of the legitimacy of class struggle, no discussion of the comparative merits of capitalism and socialism. In the name of neutrality, as associated with secularism by Jules Ferry, a traditional, socially conservative model of society reigned supreme in school textbooks.

\textsuperscript{42} Translator’s note: A diplomatic incident in 1887 in which Guillaume Schnaebelé was arrested at the French-German border on charges of espionnage. The dispute turned on whether he had been arrested on French or German territory.

The Textbook and its Readers: an Uneasy Encounter

Roger Chartier has argued against this reductive and misleading political analysis. It presupposes an ideal, passive, interchangeable reader while disregarding the role of the teacher, who may have been atheist, agnostic, deist, Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. It takes no account of regional differences, nor of family influence; we now know that a family in conflict with a school’s aims can prevent them from being fulfilled. Many factors affect a reader’s relationship with the text. The issue is fraught with tensions. What sources might shed light on a dialectic which transforms a collection of sentences into a living entity capable of altering human perception? Life stories, autobiographies published by those who lived through the period, instructions for teachers, and the memories of these heroes of mass education offer a useful starting point.

We might initially look at teaching methods such as rote learning of set texts and dictations – two exercises in which children needed to focus on words and make an effort to understand what they were being asked to remember. Learning texts by heart and reciting them parrot-fashion may seem close to a catechism lesson, but in history and geography, emotional involvement overrode passive rote learning. Pupils preparing for the next day's spelling dictation would be less emotionally involved in the narrative. Agricol Perdiguier’s Mémoires record the flaws in the education system under the Restoration, but studies by André Chervel at the INRP showed that, from the Second Empire onwards and particularly in the Third Republic, spelling tests were the major concern for teachers preparing for the certificat d’études examinations at the end of primary school, where they felt that they were

being judged as much as the pupils. Jules Ferry and Ferdinand Buisson emphasized the need for variety in teaching and argued for modern methods, avoiding the monotony of narrow utilitarianism. Surveys into the persistence of various forms of patois also show that their use was generally receding, despite pockets of strong regional survival in Alsace, Brittany, northern France, and the Basque country.

All the evidence suggests that a schoolchild reading the works of Foncin and Lavisse would develop a sense of patriotism and pride in being a French citizen, the child of an upstanding, wealthy, powerful, and highly respected nation. Little is known, however, of the impact such works may have had on savings banks. There is inadequate data to demonstrate any correlation between their swelling coffers and the content of textbooks. Nevertheless, wealthy peasants were sympathetic toward post-1891 Russia, as evidenced by the antipathy shown towards the Russian state of 1918 and then the USSR of 1922, because of its refusal to honor the Czar's debts. The success of Russian loans and French investments in the country (12 billion gold francs in 1914, i.e. 200 billion francs in today's money) was not perhaps only down to increasingly flagrant press propaganda. Schools played a part in forming young minds, particularly in rural areas where the schoolteacher’s word carried considerable weight. It seems therefore reasonable to suggest that the same was true of positive attitudes to savings banks in urban areas, where they continued to grow throughout the Belle Époque. Along similar lines, we also find the “pious image, painted by Ferdinand Buisson, of the child teaching his parents, the little missionary of modern democracy.” Responses to Jacques and Mona Ozouf’s survey also confirm the presence of books in working-class homes and, while

45 See André Chervel’s articles in the journal Histoire de l’éducation 38 and following.
46 Idem.
47 Translator’s note: this calculation was made in 1993.
48 J. and M. Ozouf, op. cit., 40.
the “pious image” might be something of a cliché, the ideal promoted by the Ministry for Education certainly had something of an impact on the ground.

Another finding from Jacques and Mona Ozouf’s survey was the syncretism of republican political opinions. It is unsurprising that certain respondents associated republican and even socialist ideas with Christian values, given the consensual morality espoused in textbooks. Theft, lying, and deceit were all reviled as sinful, a public order offense, an attack on the fabric of society, liable to damage the country. Clearly not all countryside dwellers for whom the traditional domestic economy was sacrosanct would have been convinced. However, the image of the well-respected schoolteacher went some way to changing hearts and minds. The fact that the majority of teachers continued to marry in church confirms their attitude to religion, even after the separation of church and state in 1905. Perhaps too much has been made of incidents during the inventory of church property in 190649 and too little of the fact that, in a great many areas, the teachings of the priest were scarcely threatened by those of the teacher.

In the case of school textbooks, then, Roger Chartier’s objections are by and large overstated. They may be true of a few places here or there, particularly in a few well-documented areas of fierce resistance to the Republic, but mostly, their role was small. Similarly, a thoroughgoing study of teaching methods might raise doubts as to the success of textbooks; however, the bigger picture shows the clear success of acculturation by textbook, and of the partial cultural revolution implemented by educational publishers and the Ministry of Education between 1870 and 1914. An in-depth study of the most widely circulated works would determine the extent of their impact. This brief project has focused on statistics and

49 Translator's note: Many Catholics objected to the inventories and tried to prevent tax inspectors from entering churches.
school textbook print runs because these are what determine the validity of further research. The 50 million volumes printed and sold by Armand Colin between 1872 and 1889 give an indication of a cultural, political and social shift. From this era onwards, the book was to enter all levels of society, outstripping all of its rivals.

The people’s library, the indirect successor to the school library, was being built just before the Belle Époque. Dictionaries and encyclopedias are known to have been purchases of choice for the lower classes, who were largely responsible for their publishing success. Schools prepared children to look on such books as sacred authorities and town halls did the rest by generously distributing them as school prizes or Christmas gifts for workers’ children. The French people’s enduring love affair with history perhaps began with this revolution in reading habits, just as the popularity of Bernard Pivot’s dictations\(^{50}\) owes much to the great wave of interest in spelling in the nineteenth century. Without overstating these parallels, suffice it to say that in certain disciplines, civic instruction in particular, there may be breaks in continuity, without necessarily preventing the survival of traditions in other areas.

In 1846–56, publisher Michel Levy peremptorily declared that “the reign of the handcrafted potboiler” was over\(^ {51}\) and that housewives would henceforth be buying cheap novels rather than snipping popular serials out of newspapers and stitching them together by hand;\(^ {52}\) though he was proved wrong in the short term, Armand Colin and the other school publishers succeeded in 1875–95. Theirs was not an unqualified success however, and it was only in the most strictly utilitarian areas that it was seen on a large scale. Classroom

---

50 Translator's note: Bernard Pivot is a television book reviewer whose dictation competition has become a national institution.


textbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and practical manuals all came into their own during this period. Claude Auge’s *Petit Larousse illustré* was emblematic of this trend in 1905. Compared to these more heavyweight tomes, novels purchased for reading pleasure could never achieve such heady heights of publishing success. In this Christian country, the cultural revolution was only just beginning at the dawn of the twentieth century, but even in its early stages it was preparing the masses for political life, which was one of its most lasting legacies.

Translated by Nancy Burgess