

- The qualifications and ability of a competent dictionary writer.

NOAH WEBSTER, SCHOOLMASTER TO AMERICA

Harry Warfel's biography of Noah Webster, the great American lexicographer and journalist, is a well-balanced and important contribution to America's cultural and educational history.

Noah Webster (1758-1843) was the son of a Connecticut farmer who mortgaged his farm to send Noah to Yale. After graduation he taught school, studied law and was admitted to the bar. In 1783-85 he published a *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* in three parts — a spelling book, a grammar, and a reader. This was the first American work of its kind, and it soon found a place in the schools of the United States. While Webster worked on his dictionary, the famous spelling book was the principal source of income for his family. Before 1861 the sale of the spelling book had reached more than a million copies a year.

The American Dictionary, which came out in 1828, over a quarter of a century after it was first announced, contained 12,000 words and from 30,000 to 40,000 definitions that had not appeared in any previous dictionary.

Harry Warfel writes the following in his biography of Webster:

On his seventieth birthday, October 16, 1828, Noah Webster lifted his eyes from the last proof sheet of the scholarly Introduction to his Dictionary. Slowly he wiped the ink from the quill, laid it down, and methodically capped the inkwell. His moist eyes blinked. He turned to his wife and colleague, caught her hands. Together they knelt by the desk and prayed tremblingly in giving thanks to God for His providence in sustaining them through their long labor. Since June 4, 1800, when the project was first publicly announced, Webster had dan-

dled his book on his knee to the tune of a public lullaby of jeers, insults, and misrepresentation. Every opprobrious epithet in the vocabularies of calumny and abuse had been showered upon him. Undeterred by it, he had completed single-handed America's first monumental work of scholarship. *An American Dictionary of the English Language* was immediately acclaimed, in England and Germany as well as in America, the best work of its kind ever prepared.

Today, *Webster* and *dictionary* are synonymous terms in our language. No tribute can surpass this one.

Yet, curiously enough, although the name *Webster* is on the tip of every person's tongue who wants to consult that indispensable reference book, the dictionary, few can give the lexicographer's first name. When asked the question, the average informed person looks blank a moment, then hesitantly ventures 'Daniel I guess.' Thus Noah Webster, who eminently deserves a niche in the Hall of Fame, not only is not memorialized in that pan-

theon, but has suffered an even worse fate: his name has coalesced with that of the famous orator and statesman who was not even his kinsman.

Like Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose dictionary lost ground as Webster's gained, Noah Webster was more than a 'harmless drudge,' a writer of definitions. Before announcing his dictionary at the age of forty-two, Noah Webster had become the pivotal figure in American education and literature. As the author of a series of primary school textbooks and as the expounder of a nationalistic theory of education, he had become the young nation's first schoolmaster. As an itinerant propagandist for a Constitution, he had done more than any other single individual to prepare a climate of opinion in which a Constitutional Convention could be successful. As a clear-visioned economist, a humanitarian, a magazine and newspaper editor, a historical scholar, and a moralist, he ceaselessly drove his pen in furthering the best interests of his country. Although he completed the

Dictionary in 1828, he never surrendered work until death called him in his eighty-fifth year, May 28, 1843.

Something of the many-sided intellectual quality of Benjamin Franklin reappeared in Webster. Both possessed astonishing versatility and delved into every area of knowledge, leaving marks of influence in almost every field of activity developed in their times. It was fitting that Franklin, in his old age, befriended the young schoolmaster and tutored him in simplified spelling. But Webster, unlike Franklin, did not permanently slough off the iron mantle of New England Calvinism. And Webster never sought or obtained high political position. Essentially a scholar and publicist, Webster wielded his pen as a weapon in the perennial warfare against social injustice, scientific error, mental torpor, and national instability. Early in life he called himself *The Prompter*, the man who sits behind the scenes to correct errors or assist the memory.

Webster became our greatest schoolmaster. He passed

successively from the desk of a Connecticut log schoolhouse to the lecture platform, to the editorial chair, and finally, to the home library table as the arbiter of every English-speaking reader's and writer's diction. His schoolbooks were carried from the hills of New England across the Alleghenies; his were among the first books printed in every new settlement. Across the prairies and over the Rocky Mountains his carefully marshaled columns of words marched like warriors against the ignorance that tended to disrupt the primitive society of thinly spread and localized culture of America. Dialect variation disappeared from our writing and spelling, and to his blue-backed *Speller*, of which nearly one hundred million copies were sold before it went out of general use, America owes its remarkable uniformity of language. No other book, the Bible excepted, has strained so many heads, or done so much good. It taught millions to read, and not one to sin. And today the monolithic 'Webster' on every schoolteacher's desk, on the reference tables

of libraries, at the elbow of the justice, and on the study table of the scholar, bears silent testimony to Noah Webster's enduring labors and superb genius.

Patient, indefatigable laborer for American cultural advancement that Webster was, he yet never won the warm personal sympathy of his countrymen. A pugnaciousness in propagating his own strongly phrased ideas, a gesture many people considered egotistic, rendered Webster socially unattractive. His tall, spare, Yankee form stiffened under opposition. His massive head grew rigidly upright in an inflexible ambition to do good. The mountainous forehead, crowned with a forest of au-

tumn-tinted hair, sloped to beetling crags of eyebrows. Deep set, as in a cave, small gray eyes flashed lightning warnings of intense mental operations. A massive square jaw and a jutting nose persuaded opponents that here was one endowed by nature to hold his own against any and all opposition. The narrow, thin line of lips held taut a tongue ever ready to castigate error. 'If my name is a terror to evildoers,' Webster once wrote, 'mention it.' In this respect, too, Webster was the typical schoolmaster, the man who is more concerned to have lessons well learned than to secure the adulation of shirking, fawning ignorance. — *By Harry R. Warfel.*

NOT SIN BUT ERROR

A young girl came to the late Father Healey of Dublin and confessed that she feared she had incurred the sin of vanity. "What makes you think that?" asked her father confessor. "Because every morning when I look into the mirror I think how beautiful I am."

"Never fear, my girl," was the reassuring reply. "That isn't a sin, it's only a mistake."