Webster, Noah, 1758-1843

Definition: Webster, Noah from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

US lexicographer whose books on grammar and spelling and American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) standardized US English.

Webster learned 26 languages and began the scientific study of etymology. Following the American Revolution, he was prompted by patriotic sentiment to create schoolbooks that would impart that sentiment to young students. His Blue-Backed Speller sold nearly 100 million copies in a century. In 1833 he published a revision of the Authorized Version of English Bible.

Summary Article: Webster, Noah from The Columbia Encyclopedia

1758–1843, American lexicographer and philologist, b. West Hartford, Conn., grad. Yale, 1778. After serving in the American Revolution, Webster practiced law in Hartford. His Grammatical Institute of the English Language, in three parts, speller, grammar, and reader (1783–85), was the first of a list of publications which made him for many years the chief American authority on the English language. The first part, often revised, was his famous Elementary Spelling Book, or “Blue-backed Speller,” with which he helped to standardize American spelling. Pioneer families on the frontiers taught their children to read from it; in the schools it was a basic textbook, and in settlements and villages its lists were read out for lively spelling matches. By 1850, when the total population of the United States was about 23 million, the annual sales of Webster’s spelling book were some 1 million copies, and the figures increased yearly.

An active Federalist, Webster became a pamphleteer for centralized government and wrote his Sketches of American Policy (1785), proposing the adoption of a constitution. The difficulty of copyrighting his works in 13 states led Webster to agitate for many years for a national copyright law; it was passed in 1790. In 1793 he left Hartford to support Washington’s administration by editing the New York’s first daily newspaper, American Minerva (later the Commercial Advertiser); he was also editor, at various times, of several magazines. Webster also wrote scholarly studies on a great diversity of subjects, including epidemic diseases, mythology, meteors, and the relationship of European and Asian languages.

During most of his later life he lived in New Haven, Conn., and Amherst, Mass., and was a member of the first board of trustees of Amherst College. Deriving his income from his schoolbooks, he devoted most of the rest of his life to compiling dictionaries. After his Compendious Dictionary was published in 1806, he worked on another, the two-volume The American Dictionary of the English Language (1828), which included definitions of 70,000 words, 12,000 of which had not appeared in such a work before—many were unique to American English. Its definitions were excellent, and the dictionary’s sales reached 300,000 annually. Webster’s foremost achievement, the work helped to standardize American pronunciation. He completed the revision of 1840, and the dictionary, revised many times since, has retained its popularity. See also dictionary.

See his letters, ed. by H. R. Warfel (1953).

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biographies by H. E. Scudder (6th ed. 1971) and J. Kendall (2011);
Monaghan, E. J., A Common Heritage: Noah Webster’s Blue-Back Speller (1982);

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