

**TO ALL WHO KNOW THEIR ABCS,
GREETING: A HISTORY OF THE ABCS,
LILLY LIBRARY, INDIANA UNIVERSITY**

by Heather E. Ward



INTRODUCTION

One of my most satisfying experiences as a graduate student in history and library science at Indiana University was mounting an exhibit at the Lilly Library. A project for the archives and manuscripts class, my exhibit was entitled “A Brief History of the ABCs” and drew on an extremely rich collection. Children’s literature was a particular interest of J.K. Lilly, and the Library holds nearly 10,000 children’s books in a still-growing collection—a key part of which is its ABC books and primers (Lilly Library overview, 2001). Although it was a short-term exhibit, the topic deserves broader attention, thus I present it here. I hope it will educate and enlighten and evoke renewed appreciation for some of the treasures the IU Libraries have to offer.

EARLY ABCS

In Christian communities in past centuries, the first aim of teaching children their ABCs was a religious one. They needed to know how to read in order to study the Bible and learn their catechism. This is evident in early primers that begin the alphabet with the figure of a cross, or are themselves cruciform, and often include an invocation of the Trinity and the Lord’s Prayer.

The Lilly Library owns numerous examples of such works, among them are an Italian reader from around 1520 written in rhyme and beginning with a crucifix entitled *La Sancta Croce*; a reproduction of *El*

Primer Libro from 1569 introduced by a representation of a saint receiving the stigmata (marks representing the wounds of Christ); and two 17th-century German alphabet books—one with the figures of Adam and Eve illustrating the “A” (see image 1) and the other from 1689 containing the German, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew alphabets.

These books are some of the earliest alphabets in the Library’s collections, but the history of ABC books goes back further than the 16th century. *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first known mention of an “abece” book as the year 1400 (Simpson, 1989). These books went under a number of names: apcie, absee, abecedarium, Christ-cross-row, cross-row, criss-cross-row (due to the cross shape or figure). One of the more illustrious authors using the term is Shakespeare in a soliloquy in the play *King John*:

“I shall beseech you”-That is question now;
And then comes answer like an Absey book:
“O sir,” says answer “at your best command,
At your employment, at your service, sir!” (I.i.)



Image 1 - [Alphabet] (n.d.). n.p.: Breslaugedruckt mit Grassischen Schriften.



Image 2 - Brown, A., & Stephens, J. (1836). *Syllabaire anglais et français, ou, méthode facile pour enseigner aux jeunes enfants à épeler et à lire l'anglais: Au moyen de gravures accompagnées de courtes phrases qui s'y rapportent, suivies de leçons instructives et de petites historiettes en anglais avec la traduction française interlinéaire et en regard* (2nd ed.). Paris: Librairie française et anglaise de Truchy.

ILLUSTRATIONS HELP LEARNING

Even in the 16th century educators were discussing and debating the idea of making learning fun. Including pictures along with text might help as a memory aid, but it also made the ABCs more interesting. The bright colors and comical figures in this French *syllabaire* attest to the growing interest in entertaining while teaching (Brown & Stephens, 1836). (See image 2.)

In her article in *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*, Gillian Avery (1995) cites a 1570 work by John Hart as the first known printed picture alphabet. This became a popular medium to teach children their ABCs and to identify various flora and fauna. The *British Battledoor*, which does not associate the animals with specific letters, and *Mrs. Lovechild's Book* are two 18th-century examples of illustrated ABC books. It is interesting to note the figures used to illustrate each letter. (See illustration 3.) Those in *Mrs. Lovechild's Book* seem particularly fine. Some books strictly used animals or people of different nationalities for each letter. Creativity was needed particularly for the letters "x" and "z."

HORNBOOKS, BATTLEDORES, AND CHAPBOOKS

Andrew Tuer's *History of the Horn-Book*, published in 1896, is still considered the most exhaustive source on the subject. In it, Tuer included miniature reproductions of hornbooks and battledores that could be removed and examined. Hornbooks, in common use from the 16th to the 18th centuries, were made of a leaf of paper covered by a plate of translucent horn and mounted on a tablet of wood with a handle. The horn was meant to protect the writing, "for in those days, as in these, children were prone to destruction..." as Tuer (1896) put it (p.2). These "books" contained the alphabet, often followed by a syllabary, a list or table of

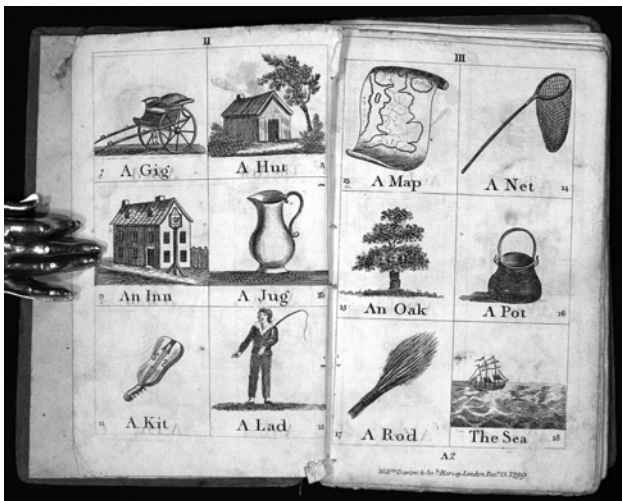


Image 3: Lovechild, M. (1799). *Mrs. Lovechild's book of three hundred and thirty-six cuts for children*. London: Darton & Harvey.

syllables, and the Lord's Prayer. The Lilly Library owns a number of hornbooks, some from as early as the 16th-century. Hornbooks were gradually replaced by the battledore.

The term battledore originally referred to the racket used in badminton. The hornbook resembled this shape and passed its form on to the battledore book. (See image 4.) This form was less expensive to manufacture, being constructed of a piece of varnished cardboard that eventually lost the shape of the original hornbook to become folded in three. An even cheaper publication to produce was the chapbook. These were small pamphlets of popular literature that could be easily packed and distributed by itinerant dealers. They included all kinds of subjects for all ages. The lower cost of chapbook production made reading more accessible to people at all levels of society.

In *Children's Literature*, Margaret Kinnell (1995) notes "chapbooks for children had their origin in the cheaply produced and widely disseminated folk-tales which the London publisher-booksellers... published" from the mid-17th century right into the mid-19th century (p.26). The Lilly Library has a large collection of chapbooks of all kinds. Records for these are accessible through the *Chapbook Index on the Web* (Bauerle & Endelman, 1985). *The Silver Primer*, published between 1803 and 1841, is a typical chapbook with an animal assigned to each letter. It is difficult to identify the items pictured in some primers. (See image 5.) As you may have guessed, a *xiphias* is a swordfish. Notice also the creative "alphabet promiscuously placed" on the left side of the primer.

LEARNING ABOUT OTHER PEOPLES AND OTHER LANGUAGES

The Princess Royal's First Step to Learning, printed between 1860 and 1885, is a later version of a chapbook. There is a similarity of style between this and *The Silver Primer*. The alphabetical figures are mostly people and animals. It is sometimes shocking to see the examples used to educate children in the past. The caricature of a Jew for the letter "J" seems particularly jarring to 21st-century readers. (See image 6.)



Image 4 - Hornbook, no.21, Lilly Library

The 19th century witnessed a proliferation of children's learning tools. In the *Alphabet Français* from 1820, the earlier format with the cross is still evident—As one Dr. Brewer explained, “to remind the learner that ‘The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’” (Tuer, 1896, p.53). Some of the more colorful 19th-century examples in IU's collections, however, include hand-colored English and French alphabet cards. (See image 7.) From a historical perspective the English cards might be useful in understanding the predominant view that the British had of foreigners in the 19th century. Interestingly, the author of this particular set seems to have been more sympathetic toward people the further they were from Great Britain.

The Alphabet d'Histoire Naturelle: Pour Apprendre à Lire aux Enfants depicts birds, butterflies, and flowers in still brilliant shades. (See image 8.) The care taken in their illustration demonstrates the attention given to accuracy. The name of each is given in French and translated into Spanish and English.

MODERN DAY ABCS

In the last two centuries, alphabets have been produced in every shape and size. A small sample of the more recent ABC books held by the Lilly Library demonstrates the variety of styles created since the 19th century. *The Town Child's Alphabet* from 1924 represents city life in verse. The prolific illustrator Eleanor Farjeon created the drawings. *Animal ABC Book*, ca. 1935, written by Rowena Bennett and illustrated by Milo Winter, is also in verse. Here one can see clear changes in verse ABCs between the 16th-century *La Sancta Croce* and these 20th-century examples. Bennett's book also illustrates how much the animal alphabet changed from *Mrs. Lovechild's Book* of 1799.

ABC books continue to be popular for both children and adults. Edward Gorey's 1963 book *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* is a satirical take on the traditional ABC book—amusing in part because the style is univer-

sally recognizable, but the subject matter is darker than expected (Gashlycrumb Tinies). Chris Van Allsburg's *The Z Was Zapped* from 1987 is an appropriate book with which to conclude. Tony Watkins and Zena Sutherland (1995) have noted that, “diversity in style is...predictable from Chris Van Allsburg” (p.315). As one can tell from a subject search for “alphabet books” in IUCat, Indiana University's library catalog, this is a robust publishing field that continues to grow in new directions. Thus, Van Allsburg's varied style is illustrative of the wide array of ABC books created over the centuries and that continue to be created today.

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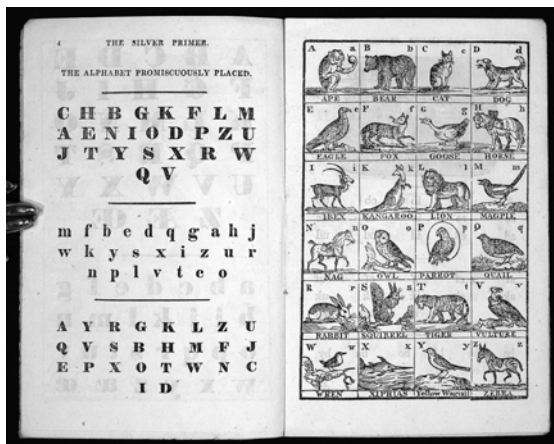


Image 5 - Silver primer, or first book for children. (c.1803). York: Kendrew, James.



Image 6 - Princess royal's first step to learning. (c.1860). London: Fortey, W.S.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Ward graduated from IU Bloomington with an M.L.S. and an M.A. in medieval history in 1997. She served as the history librarian at the University of Oregon (1997-2006) where she created and taught the credit course "Primary Sources from the Inside Out" with the university archivist. In 2006 she and her husband moved to Bangkok, Thailand, where she immersed herself in local and ex-pat culture, volunteering with libraries, studying Thai, and still managing to teach some Irish dance. In 2007 she plans to spend three months at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul managing the new USAID/Afghanistan website and training local staff to maintain it. She has particular interests in medieval studies, French, and primary source research. She enjoys travel, learning new languages, Irish dancing, and scuba diving with her husband. Her e-mail address is HeatherEWard@gmail.com.



Image 7 - [Alphabet cards] [flashcards].
[England : s.n., 18—]



Image 8 - *Alphabet d'histoire naturelle: Pour apprendre à lire aux enfants*. (n.d.). France: n.p.