

“A Textbook Controversy”

The effort of the American Legion to eliminate all un-American teachings from the schools of the nation has been a real success. . . .In fact, radical advocates of the use of the Rugg books have frankly and publicly admitted that the books are being “quietly removed from schools.”

--R. Worth Shumaker, American Legion convention, September 19, 1942.

In the 1930s, the social science textbooks authored by Dr. Harold Rugg were standard classroom fare in schools throughout the United States. The books sold 1.3 million copies in ten years and were studied in over 5000 school districts, including San Diego. But late in the decade, the books came under remarkable public scrutiny and were attacked as “subversive” and “un-American.”



Harold Ordway Rugg was a professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University. The descendent of a Revolutionary War Minuteman, Rugg was a respected historian, teacher, and educational theorist. In 1922 he directed the creation of a social science booklet series for middle school students (grades six to eight). Six years later, he co-authored a groundbreaking book on progressive education called *The Child-Centered School: An Appraisal of the New Education*.

In 1929, the schoolbook publishers Ginn and Company began turning the work of America’s best known educator into textbooks. For secondary schools there was a 6-volume “Rugg social science series”; for elementary schools, there was the 14-volume “Man and His Changing Society” series. The books sold widely and established a model for textbook publishing that still exists.

But despite their popularity, Rugg’s textbooks began to draw controversy. In 1935, a citizens’ group in Washington, D.C. complained about volume one of the high school series, *An Introduction to American Civilization*. Calling the book “communistic,” they demanded withdrawal of the book. A school board committee investigated but rejected the demand when they found “no mention of communism in this textbook, not even a suggestion of it.”

The corporate world also complained about Dr. Rugg. When the American Federation of Advertising discovered a textbook phrase that said “advertising costs were passed on to consumers,” they accused Rugg of criticizing American selling practices by his suggestion that marketing raised the prices of consumer goods.

A national attack on the Rugg textbooks began in 1939 when magazine publisher and Hearst newspaper columnist Bertie C. Forbes charged that Rugg’s textbooks were “viciously un-American.” Rugg, who had once visited the Soviet Union, was also accused of being “in love with the way things are done in Russia.”

In Englewood, New Jersey, where Forbes was a member of the school board, a “schoolbook trial” began and Dr. Rugg was called upon to defend his textbooks. To his relief, he found parents and teachers overwhelmingly supportive. The school board rejected Forbes’ demand that the books be banned.

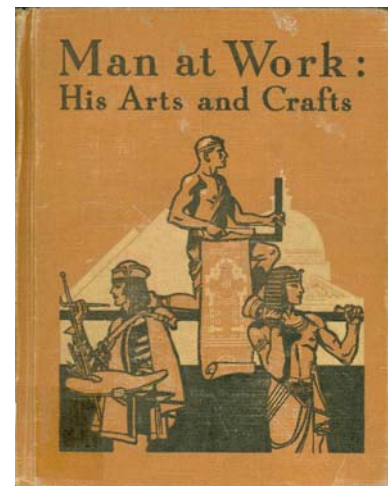
But attacks on Dr. Rugg continued to escalate. In San Diego County, local patriotic groups and businessmen denounced the textbooks. The Daughters of the American Revolution condemned the books as subversive and the Chamber of Commerce complained they were an “indication of Communism boring from within.” San Diego’s Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Will C. Crawford, announced that a curriculum committee would study the matter.

Among local educators like Crawford, criticism of the Rugg series presented a conundrum. The textbooks had been used in San Diego for ten years and were, according to Crawford, the most nearly “complete textbooks dealing with social science available on the American market.” Walter Hepner, president of San Diego State College agreed that the books were valued for their “completeness” but allowed “he never liked them.” J. M. McDonald, superintendent of the Sweetwater school district, promised that “if any subversive matter is contained in these books they will be removed from our system.”

The San Diego County Grand Jury decided to investigate the matter in 1940. In their annual report, released in mid-January 1941, the Jury hit the books hard. “It was found,” the report read, “that the (Rugg) books had a tendency to tear down the democratic form of government. The committee therefore recommends that the book be not used in public schools.” The report added that educators “admitted that parts of the books were definitely subversive.”

At least one educator took issue with the “admission.” Dr. John S. Carroll, the Deputy Superintendent of County Schools declared “no critic ever has brought to me a marked paragraph of the book and definitely called it subversive.” But Carroll added a disclaimer: “the author may be said, at times, to express the ultra-liberal viewpoint.”

In San Diego school districts, officials were quick to distance themselves from the controversy. Some responded to the Grand Jury report by announcing that the Rugg social science series was already being discontinued. Dr. Crawford claimed that the replacement task had been taken prior to any public comment, “not because they were subversive, but because they were too advanced for junior high school students.”



Vol. 7 of the Rugg Elementary series

Other educators loudly denied that they had ever used Rugg textbooks. Martin Perry, principal of Escondido High School for 23 years, said the books “have never been used in this school since I have been here.” The principal of Coronado High School declared the books had never been used at his school “and they are not even in our library.”

As sales of Rugg’s textbooks declined in the early 1940s, organizations such as the American Legion congratulated themselves for their perceived role in banishing the books. The Rugg series was replaced in large measure by books authored by Stanford University professors Paul R. Hanna and Isaac James Quillen--men who were perhaps as “progressive” as Rugg, yet managed to avoid the politicized attacks from the “Rugg-beaters.”

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