Print, Profit and Pedagogy: 
The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company

by MaryLynn Gagné

Abstract
The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company operated in Saskatchewan from the early 1930s through to 1978. The company specialized in textbooks for the K-12 market, but also published several trade titles of Western Canadiana. This small prairie publishing firm was able to thrive through the Depression years and beyond by profiting from its association with a successful job printing plant, by employing local educators, artists, and amateur historians as writers, by marketing directly to teachers and to the provincial Department of Education, and by exploiting the crucial role that the authorized textbook played in classroom instruction during this time.

Distinctive features of School Aids publications include a strong interest in and focus on the history of Aboriginal peoples on the prairies, incorporation of considerable local content, translation of homegrown textbooks into French, and suggestions of socialist influences. Winnipeg bookseller Jim Anderson referred to the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company as “the most energetic and prolific of prairie school-book publishing firms.” The story of this little known company represents a noteworthy chapter in the history of education and publishing in our province.

Commercial Printers Ltd.
Commercial Printers was established in Regina in 1929 when “a group of gentlemen that were employed with the Leader Publishing Company...formed Commercial Printers Ltd. and built the building on 1935 Albert Street.” Commercial Printers assumed control of the printing and stationery branches of Leader Publishing, while the latter company became Leader-Post Publishing, responsible for Regina’s daily newspaper. Under the leadership of President and Sales Manager John L. Anderson, Vice-president Harry Perry, and Secretary Robert Usher, Commercial Printers grew to be an immensely successful company with representatives throughout the province and an agent and branch office in Toronto. Using the traditional “hot type” method of printing, Commercial Printers produced great quantities of standard forms for municipalities, agricultural fairs, law offices and hospitals. The company also sold office machines and equipment, all manner of stationery and classroom supplies, and “everything from birthday candles to Christmas cards.” The “dean of Saskatchewan antiquarian book-dealers, Richard Spafford[9]” recalls that, “Commercial Printers was a very wealthy organization. At its peak it made huge amounts of money, which allowed Anderson to pretty much do what he wanted to do.” One of the things that J. L. Anderson and the other officers of the company wanted to do, “a bold venture for those days,” was to enter into the world of educational publishing.

The Rise of the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company
The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company appears to have flown somewhat under the radar in the documented history of Western Canadian publishing. Whether this is because the company operated as a subsidiary of Commercial Printers Ltd. or because of the generally low status of school textbook publishing is unknown. The firm’s publishing output of well over 200 titles would arguably place it in the same category as other small prairie presses such as Western Producer Prairie Books. Despite this productivity, the School

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Aids firm is not included in the Canadian Publishers’ Records database, an archival listing of records relating to Canadian English-language book publishers, nor does it appear in the Canadian Book Trade Bibliography covering the years from 1935 to 1985.

The Government of Saskatchewan’s Corporations Branch’s records are similarly sketchy, indicating that the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company was incorporated in 1941 (after operating for 9 years as an unincorporated company) with a mandate to “acquire, print, bind, publish, buy, sell, circulate or otherwise deal with manuscripts, books, periodicals etc.” Corporations Branch documents list John Levine Anderson as president of the company, and Robert Usher as secretary. J. L. Anderson was a bookbinder by trade. He was born in Minneapolis, Minn., came to Regina in 1906, and supervised the bindery department of Leader Publishing until the formation of Commercial Printers in 1929. Robert Usher was born in Liverpool, England and came to Regina in 1913. He began his career with Leader Publishing in 1921, joined Commercial Printers in 1929, and was active in the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company from its inception. Robert Usher was actively involved with the education community in the province and served for many years on the Board of Directors for the Regina Collegiate Board. Anderson and Usher remained on the list of directors of the School Aids and Text Book Company until 1965.

A retrospective profile on the School Aids Company published in the Leader-Post in 1950 provides a wealth of additional details. This article notes that the company’s first publishing effort was in response to the Saskatchewan Department of Education’s newly minted course on citizenship and character education:

School Aids and Text Book Publishing Co. was formed in 1932 and its first product was a little book to assist teachers and students in a new course. Since then, under the guiding hand of J. L. Anderson, president, the business has published books and booklets to cover everything from Vitalized English for pupils to Teacher’s Daily Plan Book for instructors. About 25 of the 42-odd authors who compile and write the books live in Saskatchewan. They turn out not only straight helpful books for pupils and teachers but easy-to-read stories of Canadian folklore, adventure tales and fairy stories.

The article goes on to note that the School Aids Company published about 100 titles annually including a monthly magazine for teachers, that the authors are paid royalties based on a percentage of sales revenue, and that the School Aids books were used in every province in Canada, including Newfoundland:

Since that first volume for Saskatchewan schools, business began to grow and spread. The Regina firm became known for its helpful books in city and little one-room country schools from one end of Canada to the other. Thousands of copies of books a year now go out to established buyers of school aids.
School Aids and the Department of Education
The School Aids firm commenced operations in 1932 under the Conservative government of J.T.M. Anderson, who also assumed the portfolio of Saskatchewan’s Minister of Education from his election in 1929 until 1932. Archival files from the Department of Education included several letters on School Aids letterhead promoting new publications and offering complimentary copies for the consideration of Department of Education officials:

Far-Away People is a book of very complete and very interestingly written geography stories for Grade IV. You will notice in the Preface that Dr. J. D. Denny, Superintendent of Schools in Regina, assisted Miss McVeety in the preparation of her book. The features of Far-Away People to which we would particularly direct your attention are its completeness, its interesting style, its very helpful suggestions to teachers, and its excellent illustrations.

The 1930s also saw the launch of the company’s highly successful teachers’ monthly The Modern Instructor. This periodical, billed as “the magazine for progressive teachers,” was published by School Aids from 1932 to 1968. Each issue included articles on the latest teaching methods, short literature selections, units of study based on the Saskatchewan curriculum, and a popular hectograph section of reproducible seatwork, practice exercises and tests. Articles were authored by practicing teachers as well as educators from the Normal School and the University of Saskatchewan. Teachers were in short supply during the war years, and many began their careers after an accelerated six week Normal School course. One teacher interviewed by Saskatchewan students for a SchoolNet project noted that she would have been lost without a subscription to The Modern Instructor. A group of retired teachers I spoke with in southern Saskatchewan echoed this sentiment, with one teacher going so far as to refer to this publication as “her Bible.” The Modern Instructor also served as a convenient vehicle for marketing other School Aids publications directly to teachers in one-room schools throughout the province. The firm took full advantage of the popularity of this magazine, using it to promote other School Aids publications, as well as to advertise the school supplies, wall maps, duplicators, examination foolscap and ruled scribblers distributed by the parent company, Commercial Printers. Advertisements for textbooks and teacher aids published by School Aids figured prominently in each issue of The Modern Instructor; rural sales representatives deployed by Commercial Printers were more than happy to relay order forms back to the Regina office.

Following its successful beginnings in the thirties, the School Aids and Text Book Company was both well-established and well-positioned to respond, in 1944, to the newly elected CCF government’s desire for innovative, “made in Saskatchewan” curriculum materials. School Aids’ publishing heyday coincided neatly with the period in office of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, with Woodrow S. Lloyd’s tenure as Minister of Education and with Henry Janzen’s term as Saskatchewan’s Director of Curricula.
John Lyons, in a recently published history of education in Saskatchewan, describes Janzen's "collaborative and cooperative" approach to curriculum development as a "unique blend of central co-ordination, consultation, professional involvement, in-service education, and shrewd economics" which was in direct opposition to the traditional top-down model of curriculum development which left textbook selection in the hands of "hired experts from the university or normal school." Janzen's interest in locally developed curriculum materials dovetailed nicely with the availability of a Regina firm with a proven track record in educational publishing.

Bookseller Jim Anderson described the relationship between the School Aids firm and the Saskatchewan Department of Education thus:

I got the impression from this Mr. Anderson, the retired printer [referring to Thomas Anderson, not J.L. Anderson, founder of School Aids] that the publishing effort was print and profit driven – in other words, his firm profited from the printing of text books prescribed by the Department of Education. I believe the publishing company was thus an arm or offshoot of the printing exercise – and they would employ leading school teachers and other educators to write their books, geared to curriculum needs or in some cases to the whims of the authors... Penney Clark, in her paper "The Rise and Fall of Canadian textbook publishing", notes that educational publishing, until the early 1970s, benefited greatly from the critical role that the authorized textbook played in classroom instruction during that time period. The School Aids and Text Books Publishing Company was no exception. Most School Aids publications were either adopted as textbooks or listed as recommended reference books for Saskatchewan schools; several titles appeared in the province's textbook circulars for periods of time up to and exceeding 20 years. The endorsement by the Department of Education translated into sizable print runs and guaranteed yearly profits for the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company.

The individuals who submitted manuscripts to School Aids were not, for the most part, professional writers. Some were amateur historians and archaeologists, but many were educators—classroom teachers, normal school instructors, school principals and superintendents. The list of authors who researched and wrote material for this publishing firm reads like a veritable who's who of Education in Saskatchewan – Frederick Gathercole, Marion McVeety, R. J. Staples, Elsie Dorsey, W. J. Oliver, and Morley Toombs, to name but a few. Both the authors and Robert Usher, co-director of the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company, had very close connections with Saskatchewan's Department of Education. Gerald Langley, whose 1944 thesis still serves as an authoritative guide to historical textbooks in Saskatchewan, described the textbook publishing scene in the province in the 1930s and 40s as a very close-knit community:

I was quite satisfied that there were connections between authors and publishers and government officials—that the Department of Education people knew the different authors and they knew which authors would produce good books. And the authors were anxious to work with the publishers who could get a book authorized...because unless the book was authorized, there wasn't much money in it for anyone! And so, the people in all those areas knew each other...It wouldn't be fair to say that they got it [referring to a contract to write or publish a textbook] because of political affiliations, no, but because they were known.

Under Henry Janzen, the Department of Education continued to play an active and significant role in vetting and even editing textbooks published by School Aids. It was not uncommon for authors to receive assurance from the Department of Education that their books would find a place on the authorized and recommended text books lists before approaching the publisher. In a letter to Mary Weekes dated December 3, 1948, Janzen assumes an editorial role:

I have read with great interest the manuscript on "The Indians of the Plains." For only one chapter do I have some comments to make. In the section on Trading Posts could you not include...
Janzen’s hands-on approach is further demonstrated in a 1946 letter in which he notes that he has received a revised edition of one of Weekes’ books and writes that:

Mr. Anderson of Commercial Printers brought me a manuscript copy of the revision of *Round The Council Fires*. I think it is a tremendous improvement, for our province at least, of the whole book. There are still a few words here and there which I am suggesting changing because of the difficulty of vocabulary for grades seven, eight, and nine students...I am particularly pleased with the sections on the beadwork of the Prairie Indians and also the story about the painted tips. 

In another letter he writes:

Regarding the matter of having the School Aids people in Regina undertake the publishing of *Trader Welsh* and *Trader King*, I can only repeat what I have told you before, that I shall not hesitate at all in placing these books on the list of supplementary reading for the boys and girls in grades VII, VIII, and IX. This is far as I can go. I certainly
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He goes on to state that listing the books as supplementary readers would mean that the department would order around 500 books “to start with” and continues, “If you and Mr. Anderson feel that with this encouragement you wish to take the risk of getting this book published I would say that you should go ahead.” Despite a close working relationship with the School Aids publishing firm, Janzen demonstrated that he has no great regard for commercial publishing houses when he wrote:

When we get our own printing establishment under way we can avoid the red tape, the undue profit of the publishers, and make sure that the authors get the recognition and reward which they richly deserve.32

In a handwritten addendum Janzen adds that “the second paragraph of this letter is quite personal, and I should like you to keep it confidential.”33 The CCF government, did in fact, purchase its own printing plant in 1945,34 but to my knowledge printed chiefly government reports and was never used to print school textbooks.

Focus on First Nations and Métis History

Among the text books and trade books issued by the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company are several titles which focus on aboriginal history on the plains. Particularly noteworthy are four books written by prolific author Mary Weekes, wife of the Surveyor-General of Saskatchewan35 and an amateur prairie historian with a keen interest in First Nations history and culture. Painted Arrows,36 Great Chiefs and Mighty Hunters of the Western Plains, Trader King, and Indians of the Plains were published by the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company between 1947 and 1950, and subsequently authorized for use in Saskatchewan elementary schools in support of the Social Studies curriculum.37 Indians of the Plains, a small seventy-five page booklet was notable in many respects. At a time when Aboriginal peoples were often portrayed generically and homogenously, Weekes emphasized the complexity of the various nations of Plains Indians. In a period when Canadian history textbooks often jumped from Iroquois tomahawks in eastern Canada to totem poles in British Columbia with only a passing nod to Western Canada, Weekes’ little book provided school children with information on the Cree, Sioux and Blackfeet nations in the West:

Our concern in this book is to learn about the tribes who live in Western Canada—that is in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. We wish chiefly to learn, however, about those who live on the prairies. The British Columbia tribes have their own culture, customs and legends, and they differ vastly from those of the prairie people.38

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Richard Spafford recalls selling numerous copies of *Indians of the Plains* from his Regina bookshop many years after this book was first published by the School Aids company. According to Spafford:

> It was the only description of the Indians of Saskatchewan—the various tribes and the languages that they spoke, their customs and what they wore and so on...It was the only thing of its kind for a long time and still is.\(^{39}\)

While other history textbooks glossed over the impact of Canada’s settlement policies on the original inhabitants of the land, *Indians of the Plains* was bluntly critical:

> The Crees have from the earliest times been generally friendly with the French and English who invaded their country, first to trade goods of little value for their priceless furs, and later when the Canadian government took over their vast lands.\(^{40}\)

*Great Chiefs and Mighty Hunters of the Western Plains*, also written by Mary Weekes and published by School Aids, was a recommended reference book for Saskatchewan schools from 1947 to 1977. The Publisher’s foreword in the 1947 edition notes:

> The early settling of the West comes alive again in these stories about the Indian statesmen who tried to keep the peace with their neighbors, the white settlers. The writer’s clarity and justice enlightens the development of these Indian personalities, which are supplemented with an account of the Western Indian treaties, prairie handicrafts, and legends.\(^{41}\)

In a letter to Weekes dated September 7, 1946 and written on Department of Education letterhead, Henry Janzen writes:

> I have read with great interest the material you sent to me on the Indian Peace Treaties. It is information which all our western school children should know. We understand far too little of the manner in which the territory west of the Great Lakes was taken over by the white man. Your explanations are direct and interesting and are stated simply enough for a boy or girl in grade IX to absorb without difficulty.\(^{42}\)

While the Weekes’ books published by School Aids and recommended for use in Saskatchewan schools arguably present a sympathetic and for the most part, well-researched view of aboriginal history largely absent in schoolbooks of this era, other School Aids publications do not fare as well—many present a biased and patronizing view of First Nations and Métis history and life. *Friends far and near*\(^{43}\) published by School Aids in 1953 and recommended for use in the Grades 3-4 Social Studies classroom was given an “objectionable” rating for its portrayal of pre-colonial native culture in a study of prejudice in social studies textbooks authored by the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission.\(^{44}\) As evidence, the authors of the report cite such passages as “people are not native to America, but horses and other animals are,”\(^{45}\) and “the Eskimos enjoy being out in the cold, even when the temperatures slip far below zero.”\(^{46}\)

The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company continued to evidence a strong interest in publishing materials relating to aboriginal peoples of Saskatchewan and the prairie provinces throughout its existence in the Albert Street location. Other School Aids publications with significant aboriginal content include *Indians of Canada and Prairie Pioneers*,\(^{47}\) *These are the Prairies*,\(^{48}\) *Stone Age on the Prairies*,\(^{49}\) and *Hunters of the Buried Years*.\(^{50}\) In 1963, in the waning years of the School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company, the firm published a set of Language Arts Wall Charts\(^{51}\) for use in northern Saskatchewan. The paintings were done by Lois Dalby, an artist and educator who has lived in the La Ronge area of Northern Saskatchewan since 1955. A 1966 article from the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation Bulletin congratulated the School Aids company on this publishing milestone, noting that “for the first time in the history of the province, special instructional materials have been published for use with pupils of Indian Ancestry.”\(^{52}\)

**Local Content**

“A Saskatchewan citizen buys good valued at $2.80, all subject to education tax. Find the tax.”
"A farmer ships 1,800 bushels of wheat. The dockage is 1.5%. Freight charges are 12 cents a bushel, and elevator charges are 2.5 cents per bushel. The wheat was sold at Fort William for $1.08 per bushel. What proceeds did the farmers receive?"

These mathematics word problems, from *Socialized Mathematics*, illustrate another distinctive characteristic of many School Aids textbooks—a focus on local and regional content. Local flavour is present in many of the Social Studies, Science, English, Art, and Mathematics resources published by School Aids in the 30s, 40s and 50s. Examples abound—a series of science books for the elementary school includes numerous references to prairie flora and fauna; a composition and grammar textbook incorporates writing samples of letters from imaginary children with addresses in Regina, Leader, and Weyburn, Saskatchewan; a teachers’ reference book for Art includes photographs of children from various Saskatchewan schools as well as examples of artwork by students from schools in the Moose Jaw area; a Social Studies textbook on Canadian geography and history includes a chapter on pioneer settlements in Western Canada. *The Lure of the West*, a School Aids publication authorized as a Social Studies reference book from 1947 to 1962, includes chapters on the development of new varieties of wheat in Saskatchewan, as well as brief histories of the “Queen City” and the “University City.” In an era where most Canadian textbooks were published in Eastern Canada or the United States, School Aids publications afforded Saskatchewan children the rare opportunity to find themselves, their history and their physical surroundings reflected in the curriculum.

**The French Connection**

The School Aids and Text Book Company undertook the initiative, unusual for such a small company, of publishing French language translations of a few of their popular Social Studies and Science titles. A translation of *Far Away People* by Marion McVeety was the work of Louis Charbonneau, a prominent Ontario translator of school text books in the 40s. *Peuples Lointains* was recommended by the Saskatchewan Department of Education as a supplementary source for Social Studies in French schools and as supplementary reading for French classes in collegiates, high schools and colleges. This School Aids publication also became the first French language Social Studies textbook to be used in the 40s in francophone elementary schools in Ontario.

**Socialist intimations**

The School Aids and Text Book Company came into its own during the early years of the CCF government in Saskatchewan. Thus it is not surprising that signs of the prevailing zeitgeist appear in many School Aids publications. The most intriguing hint, brought to my attention by Richard Spafford, comes in the form of the dedication page of a children’s picture book, “we are teaching our children to listen to the voices that call for peace.” The quotation from V.M. Molotov, Soviet leader and People’s Commissar for Foreign affairs from 1939 to 1949, appears at the beginning of *The tremendous adventure of the Peace Fairy*, published by School Aids in 1945, the same year Molotov addressed delegates at the San Francisco Peace conference. The
books for the next two decades. Several factors may have contributed to the demise of this once vigorous and successful company. These include a change in government in 1964, Henry Janzen’s retirement in 1967 as Director of Curricula, Robert Usher’s departure from Commercial Printers, and the adoption by the Department of Education of new textbooks published by established educational publishers from eastern Canada such as Gage, Thomas Nelson, Prentice-Hall, McGraw-Hill, and Macmillan. The School Aids and Text Book Publishing Company was struck from the register of corporations in Saskatchewan on September 29, 1978. 66 Commercial Printers continued to operate as a job printing plant in the province, finally closing its doors in 1994. 67 The building was unoccupied from the mid-nineties onward and was eventually sold in August of 2003. The structure was demolished in the spring of 2005. 68

Conclusion
The School Aids and Text Book Company was an astute and enterprising firm which profited in the Depression years from its rural connections and from the success of its parent company, Commercial Printers, and in the 1940s and later from its close ties with the Saskatchewan Department of Education, and from the movement in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba towards textbooks published in Western Canada. The School Aids story chronicles a particular confluence of economic, political, and pedagogical factors which came together to create an environment and an era of experimentation and innovation in grassroots educational publishing in Saskatchewan.

Endnotes
1 Jim Anderson, email message to author, April 21 2004.
2 Thomas Anderson, interview by author, May 8, 2006. Anderson was a country salesman for Commercial Printers in the 1950s, and later served as President and General Manager of the company until his retirement in 1984. Thomas Anderson is not related to J. L. Anderson, founder of Commercial Printers and the School Aids and Textbook Publishing Company Ltd.
4 “Commercial Printers Observe Anniversary.” The Leader Post, October 30 1954, 11.
History of the Book in Canada: Prairie Provinces http://www.hbic.library.utoronto.ca/fconfprairie_en.htm (accessed March 2006). This paper, from the HBiC website, estimates the publishing output of Western Producer Prairie Books at about 254 titles.


“Commercial Printers Now Settled in Albert Street Home.” The Leader-Post, August 18, 1930, 8.

Ruth M. Buck Papers. R-1654, F 7.87, Saskatchewan Archives.


Ibid.

Cover of The Tremendous Adventure of the Peace Fairy (Author's Collection)

42 Letter from Henry Janzen to Mary Weekes, September 7, 1946, Mary Loretto Weekes Papers, R-100, III.39, Saskatchewan Archives Board.


45 McVeety, p. 34.

46 McVeety, p. 74.


52 “Special Instructional Materials Published for Indian Education.” Saskatchewan Bulletin, January 1966.


59 Clark, p. 227-230.


61 Saskatchewan Department of Education Circulars.


66 Saskatchewan Department of Justice. Corporations Branch.


Ibid.