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Collecting Emerson

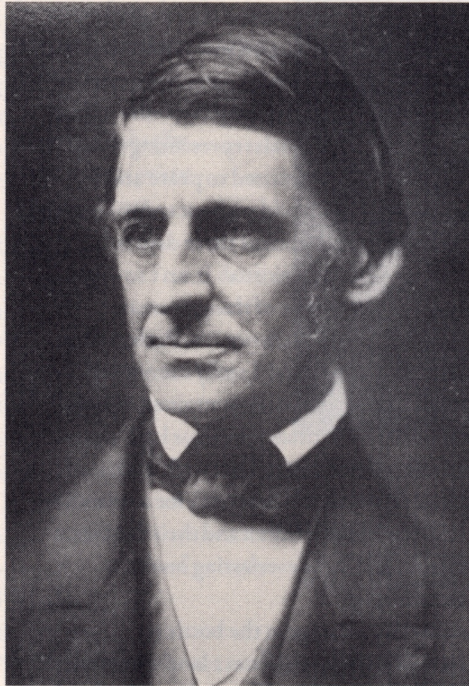
R. Eden Martin

Editor's note: This year marks the 200th Anniversary of the birth of Ralph Waldo Emerson. We conclude the year with this tribute to our greatest intellectual. This is the second in an ongoing series by Caxtonian R. Eden Martin, a partner in the law firm of Sidley Austin Brown & Wood and a collector of American, English, and Russian authors.

Ralph Waldo Emerson occupies a curious place in American intellectual and literary history. He initially set out to be a minister but soon concluded that he could not honestly preach the tenets of his Boston church. For the rest of his career, he was primarily a public lecturer — at first speaking in New England, but later, giving talks throughout the country.

Until late in life, he did not hold a position in a university. Yet Emerson is known today primarily as a “public intellectual” — in particular, as the principal spokesman for a group known as “Transcendentalists” — roughly speaking, the American wing of German idealists. As Harvard’s Professor Lawrence Buell has recently written: “By 1850 he had become the first figure in U.S. history to achieve international standing and influence as a speaker and writer of comprehensive scope, addressing the branches of knowledge from religion, ethics, and literature to economics and natural science; the major figures and episodes of world history; the traits and trends of modern culture; and the urgent social issues of the day.” (Buell, 13)

Many of his one-liners became well known and were widely quoted. “Hitch your wagon to a star,” was one. Another was “When you strike at a king, you must kill him.” But today, Emerson’s essays, once the stuff of high school English courses, are now largely relegated to college courses in intellectual history. Viewed critically, these essays are mostly cut-and-paste collections of his brilliant aphorisms, lacking



Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1843. This photograph hangs in the home of Thomas Carlyle in England. All images of books in this article from the collection of R. Eden Martin.

clear connective tissue or sharp analysis. His strength was in the sentence, not the paragraph and still less, the page.

As to his poetry, perhaps Buell had it about right when he wrote that Emerson “never mastered the poetic line as he did the prose sentence. Too much filler, too much reliance on cliché, too much semantic and syntactical contortion to fit rhyme and meter.” (Buell, 136) Yet a few of his poems strike this reader as fine and memorable. Perhaps brilliant images and aphorisms are better suited to verse than to sustained works of prose.

Whatever intelligence or beauty readers today find in Emerson’s essays and poems, there can be no doubt as to his influence — both at the time and with later generations of thinkers and writers. For that reason, the story of how his books came to see the light of day has some interest for book collectors.*

I

Waldo, as he later chose to be called, was born in Boston in 1803, the fourth in a family of eight. His father, a minister in a Unitarian church — the First Church of Boston — died when Waldo was eight years old. Well educated for the time, Waldo’s father had read widely in science and literature; he also wrote a church history, edited an American hymnbook, and was a founding member of the “Anthology Society,” as well as editor of its *Monthly Anthology* — the first literary review of its kind in the country.

After his father’s death, Waldo’s deeply religious mother had to scramble to support the family — taking in boarders. But it was Waldo’s aunt Mary, his father’s sister, who apparently had the most profound effect on Waldo’s education. More a Calvinist than a deist, she was extraordinarily well-read and was a fine writer. She and her nephew kept up an extensive correspondence that lasted well into Waldo’s adult years.

With a scholarship and a job from the college and with help from his older brother, William, who was then teaching school in Maine, Waldo entered Harvard College in 1817, at the age of 14. The college then was much like a fine private high school today — at least in terms of the age of the students. At that time, Harvard’s student body consisted of fewer than 250 students. Richardson described it as “a small, nondescript place, half boys’ school, half center for advanced study,” with most of the students coming from New England. (Richardson, 6)

Emerson was not an outstanding student, graduating in the middle of his class. He studied Latin and Greek, as well as philosophy, history, science, and math. He also took a course in public speaking and elocution, which perhaps contributed to his choice of careers.

See EMERSON, page 4



Musings...

CAXTONIAN

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I just received a message in a bottle. Think what that means: the message comes from long ago and from a distant place. It suggests, as well, that I am now remote from the civilization that sent the message.

It arrived in a recently published book, *The Serenity Prayer*, by Elisabeth Sifton, the daughter of the eminent American theologian and intellectual, the late Reinhold Niebuhr. The book gives an intimate, personal view of the life and times of Niebuhr and his colleagues, a host of intellectuals representing many faiths and no faiths, all committed to peace and to absolute human equality, world without end.

My own sense of estrangement these days is personal, of course — and spiritual. It isn't so much a choice as it is the natural flow of things human, transpiring in life as I approach my 70s. Perhaps it is normal; perhaps it is abnormal. I really cannot say. But my relationship with divinity is strained, at best. We just don't have the intimacy we once had, and, in spite of an abiding inner peace, I live with a sense of solitude of soul these days. If it weren't for a splendid marriage, two marvelous children and their families, a few good friends, and some everlasting books, it might be disconcerting.

What makes the message in the bottle so significant is that it emanated from a land where once I lived and from people whose thoughts and deeds were models for my own young aspirations. Many years ago, one of my students asked me what 10 books I would take with me if I were to be marooned on an island for a long period of time. Among the books I chose were three by Reinhold Niebuhr — *Beyond Tragedy*, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, and *The Irony of American History* — as well as books by Niebuhr's friends and associates: Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*; Abraham Heschel, *The Wisdom of Heschel*; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays*.

I was impressed then with the brilliance of insights and subtlety of wisdom, which moved people to write so significantly from the tragic depths of World War II. What I did not know until I read Sifton's book was that these people, writing so powerfully and influencing me so intimately in those years, were colleagues in their visions and labors. And, of course, by aligning myself with them, as I did as teacher and as community leader, I labored along side them toward their lofty goals for people of all nations, all faiths, and all cultures. I continue in that labor.

The greatest single influence upon me in my early life — besides my family and church — was a

neighbor family, the Kleimans, one of three Jewish families living in my hometown. This lovely family taught me openness and respect for people different from myself. I became — and here is a phrase Sifton taught me — a *philo-Semitic*. They gave me a predisposition toward universal love of people, which I would never have achieved within a single-religion perspective. The three children of that family, now grown and scattered across the country, remain among my most revered friends to this day. We had the pleasure of being together one evening just a few weeks ago.

Thus, when Sifton writes of her family's friendship with Felix Frankfurter and, later, with Abraham Heschel, I know, first-hand, of which she speaks. I know, as her father did, that we shall have world peace only when friendships, flowing from a sense of absolute equality — no matter what one's faith is, or is not, bring us to a fellowship of kindred spirits greater than any singular religious perspective can ever achieve.

What is the manifestation of this encompassing, magnanimous disposition toward all of God's children? For Niebuhr, it was his public addresses and his written prayers. The title of Sifton's book, in fact, is the title of Niebuhr's greatest prayer, the "Serenity Prayer," which he wrote in 1943, at the height of fear and dread during World War II, and read for the first time in a small church in Heath, MA, the summer home of Niebuhr and many of his colleagues. The book focuses on the circumstances, international and personal, which brought forth this marvelous evocation to divinity — to humanity.

A commitment of faith, biblical in language and universal in intent, the Serenity Prayer is a reminder, in these uncertain days, of responsibilities so important, so urgent, that we neglect them with awesome consequence for humankind. A distillation of ancient wisdom, Niebuhr's prayer is the essence of the message in the bottle:

God, give us grace
to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things
that should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Robert Cotner
Editor



Reinhold Niebuhr's Elmhurst College graduation picture (1910). This and all images on this page are from the Niebuhr Family Papers, Buehler Library Archives, Elmhurst College, through whose courtesy they are used.

Major works by Reinhold Niebuhr 1892-1971

Does Civilization Need Religion?, 1927.
Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, 1929.
Moral Man and Immoral Society, 1932.
An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 1935.
The Nature and Destiny of Man (2 vols.), 1941, 1943.
The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence, 1944.
Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History, 1949.
The Irony of American History, 1952.
The Self and the Dramas of History, 1955.
The Structure of Nations and Empires, 1959.

Today the success of America in world politics depends upon its ability to establish community with many nations, despite the hazards created by pride of power on the one hand and the envy of the weak on the other....In other words, our success in world politics necessitates a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original dream, and a recognition of the values and virtues which enter into history in unpredictable ways and which defy the logic which either liberal or Marxist planners had conceived for it.

Reinhold Niebuhr
The Irony of American History, 1952

There remains for us only a very narrow way, often extremely difficult to find, of living every day as if it were our last, and yet living in faith and responsibility as though there were to be a great future....The ultimate question for a responsible [person] to ask is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation is to live.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
From a Nazi prison
Christmas 1942



Born in Wright City, MO, Niebuhr was educated at Elmhurst College and Yale Divinity School. After a pastorate in Detroit, he began his long career as a professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. Through his teaching and his books he became a major figure in 20th Century American thought. This undated photograph was made during his teaching years.

Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of [humankind's] ultimate concern.

Paul Tillich
The Dynamics of Faith, 1957.

[Rabbi Abraham] Heschel was the great interpreter of the Hebrew Prophets, and Pa had always emphasized that it was the Prophets' vision of God's transcendent righteousness that gives us a standard and the dynamic for ethical action. So it is no surprise that he and Heschel hit it off from the start: there was much for them to share and explore together. "Prophecy is a sham unless it is experienced as a word of God swooping down on man and converting him into a prophet," Heschel had once written, and my mother observed, "I think others would agree with me that the word of God indeed swooped down on these two friends."

Elisabeth Sifton
The Serenity Prayer, 2003



Elisabeth Niebuhr Sifton (rt) and her brother Christopher when they were children.

Following his graduation in 1821, Waldo went home to Boston and began teaching in a school for girls managed by his brother William. He continued to read widely and to add to his growing collection of journals and notebooks. Much of his reading dealt with theological or philosophical issues. In 1822 he published his first essay — “Thoughts on the Religion of the Middle Ages” — in the *Christian Disciple*, a local religious periodical. It was never republished.

By 1824, Emerson had decided to give up teaching and to take up divinity; and early in 1825, he registered for study at the Harvard Divinity School. However, his reading was never limited to religious subjects. By late 1825, he was concentrating on Plato — which, as Richardson says, would later become a “major preoccupation.” Indeed, the notion that ideas are not only important but more fundamentally real than facts was one which dominated — one might even say, corrupted — his thinking for the rest of his life. Off and on over the next several years, Waldo alternated between his teaching and his divinity studies, the former helping to pay for the latter.

By the summer of 1827, Emerson was preaching regularly in his father’s old church — the First Church of Boston. But he continued to make time for his broad reading. About this time, he also started the first of several notebooks of poetry.

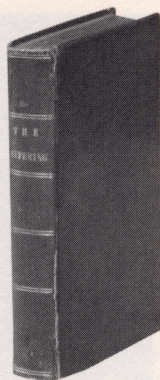
On Christmas Day 1827, 24-year-old Waldo met 16-year-old Ellen Tucker, the daughter of a Boston rope maker. Not long after, they became engaged. Waldo also began to be invited to preach occasional sermons at the Second Church in Boston, whose pastor was in poor health.

II

The year 1829 was a pivotal year in the life of young Ralph Waldo Emerson. In early 1829, the Second Church invited Waldo to become its “junior minister.” He accepted, though not without concern that his duties would unduly limit his freedom. The salary, soon raised to \$1800 per year, gave him a degree of economic security which he had never before enjoyed.

More importantly, on September 30, 1829, Waldo and Ellen Tucker were married.

And finally, Waldo saw his first writing appear in a book — *The Offering for 1829*, edited by Andrews Norton and published in Cambridge. Interestingly, this little book also contains the first book appearance of Oliver Wendell Holmes.



Emerson’s contributions to *The Offering* consisted of three anonymous pieces: (1) a two-page “extract from Unpublished Travels in the East,” (2) a short poem, “Fame,” later collected in one of his poetry volumes, and (3) a short piece, “William Rufus and the Jew,” probably, but not certainly, by Emerson. (BAL, 5173) Curiously, this first appearance of Emerson in a book was regarded as so insignificant by Richardson that he does not even mention it in his biography.

III

The next two years were an extraordinarily difficult period in Emerson’s life. Before he married, his wife Ellen had contracted a case of tuberculosis, which gradually grew worse. By the spring of 1830, her coughing spells had become more serious, and her condition deteriorated. She died in February 1831. It is difficult to imagine Emerson’s shock and pain. He told his aunt of his relief that his young wife’s struggle was now over: “Her lungs shall no more be torn nor her head scalded by her blood nor her whole life suffer from the warfare between the force and delicacy of her soul and the weakness of her frame.” (Richardson, p. 109)

Richardson believes that Ellen’s death led Emerson to separate himself from conventional life — from Boston, from society, and from his church. Whatever the cause of this separation, there is little doubt that his wide reading and theological studies led him in the direction of a then-unconventional theology, in which the scriptures played a less central role, and Christianity itself was validated only by each person’s life and experience. Ultimately, Emerson rejected the notion that the “scheme of redemption” — the initial fall of humankind, and its redemption through the crucifixion — should be the center of Christian life. As a corollary of this rejection, Emerson proposed to his congregation that the administration of communion be changed. His congregation disagreed, whereupon Emerson decided he could not continue as pastor.

Although Emerson resigned from his pastorate in September 1832, it was not until December that he published his “Letter to the

Second Church and Society,” which constitutes his first solely-authored publication. It is one of those rarities of book collecting sometimes referred to as “black tulips.” The seven-paragraph letter was printed both in pamphlet form and on satin. The Second Church’s records indicate that 300 copies were printed in pamphlet form. Both the pamphlet and satin printings were from the same type, which was redistributed for the second printing. (Myerson, 2-5) Very few copies have survived in either form. I am sorry to confess that I do not have a copy.

In his letter of resignation, Emerson says that he had been advised to take a sea voyage, and wanted to have a brief parting word with friends before leaving. The substance of the letter is summarized in this sentence: “I am no longer your minister, but am not the less engaged, I hope, in the love and service of the same eternal cause, the advancement, namely of the kingdom of God in the hearts of men.”

IV

Immediately after publishing his letter to the Second Church, Emerson gave up his house, sold his furniture, and booked passage on a ship heading for Malta. He arrived in mid-February 1833, thus commencing a European journey that lasted eight months. The trip took him initially to Sicily, Rome, Florence, and through the towns of Northern Italy. Waldo also spent several weeks in Paris, visiting the Sorbonne and the museums.

In England, he met Coleridge and Wordsworth; and, most importantly, in Edinburgh he met Thomas Carlyle, already a well-known essayist. Perhaps more than any other single influence, Carlyle’s essays on idealism, German philosophy and literature led Emerson to the ideas that culminated in American Transcendentalism. Emerson’s reading of Carlyle’s work and their conversations helped him crystallize the ideas that would eventually be embodied in his first great essay “Nature.”

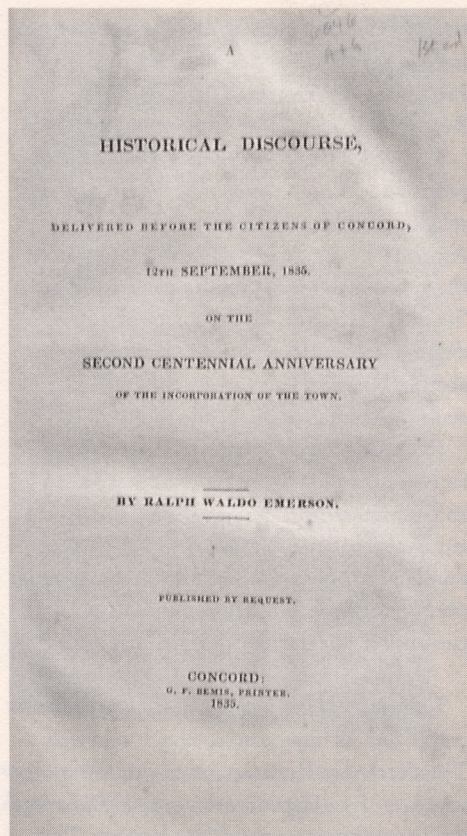
Emerson returned to Boston in early October 1833. Within a few weeks, he embarked on what would become a career as a public speaker. The “Lyceum movement” was then in its early stages, and Waldo saw an opportunity to help satisfy the demand for speakers. His initial lectures were on scientific topics; but over time, his topics broadened, to include a wide array of philosophical and literary subjects as well. He also continued to give sermons as a guest preacher.

Richardson calls 1834 “Emerson’s year of wonders.” (Richardson, 170) In February 1834, after delivering a guest sermon in Plymouth, Waldo was introduced to a member of the congregation, Lydia Jackson. He met her again many times over the next few months.

He also continued his studies — reading the works of Goethe, and Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, as it appeared in magazine installments. He began an extensive correspondence with Carlyle, which, in effect, resulted in his becoming Carlyle’s American agent. And he devoted himself to the writing of poetry, which led to his accepting the assignment of Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poet for 1834. His poetry written that year was some of his best, although it was not published for several years.

In the meantime, Waldo had to make a living. In January 1835, he gave a series of lectures on biography to a local society. These lectures, on such figures as Michelangelo, Luther, Milton, and Burke, were vigorously written and reflected his developing philosophical idealism. They also reflect the style of his later published essays, embodying a collection of lively sentences or aphorisms rather than a logically-developed sequence of thoughts. His apparent practice was to make extensive notes on his readings and musings in his journals, and then to mine those journals later for materials that could be extracted and stitched into lecture or essay form. These early lectures were preserved in his notebooks, but not then published. Emerson himself described the results of this process: “Here I sit and read and write with very little system...and as far as regards composition, with the most fragmentary results; paragraphs incompressible, each sentence an infinitely repellent particle.” (Richardson, 202) Brooks, in *The Flowering of New England*, described Emerson’s prose as suggesting that of the 17th Century authors “who had never stooped to explain their thoughts.” (Brooks, 205.)

In late June 1835, Waldo agreed to give the main speech at a program honoring Concord’s 200th anniversary. This two-hour talk, delivered on September 12, 1835, turned out to be not about German idealism or philosophy, but rather on the history of Concord, drawn largely from the page proofs of a friend’s draft history of the town. The speech was printed, and is, as Richardson properly notes, his “first real publication.” (Richardson, 206) This little pamphlet is entitled “A Historical Discourse, Delivered Before the Citizens of Concord...on



the Second Centennial Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town.” It was printed and bound in light blue paper wrappers by a Concord printer, G.F. Bemis. Charles Eliot Norton later wrote that “This discourse has become very rare, most of the copies having been destroyed many years ago in a fire at the office of the Town Clerk in Concord.” (Myerson, 7) This is the sort of thing book sellers love to repeat with respect to books they have available for sale. I’ve learned more than I care to admit about 19th Century fires in print shops and warehouses by reading 20th Century book catalogues.

Two days after his Concord address, Waldo married his fiancé, Lydia Jackson, whom he thereafter called Lidian. He was 32 years old.

V

Emerson was now preparing for a major statement of his philosophy of life. As Richardson describes it, the “gathering of forces” leading to this statement was a confluence of many ideas and influences. These included his readings in science, the writings of Hume and Coleridge, of Kant and Goethe, the distillations of German idealism via Carlyle, summaries of Swedenborg, and other deeper sources — Plato, the Stoics, and Asian and Persian religious books. All came together to support Emerson’s central theme: “the

autonomy and sufficiency of the individual consciousness” — a theme elaborated in his first great book, *Nature*.

But before he could turn his complete attention to *Nature*, he had to do a favor for his friend Carlyle, whose first major work — *Sartor Resartus* — was circulating in the form of offprints from a magazine publication two years before.

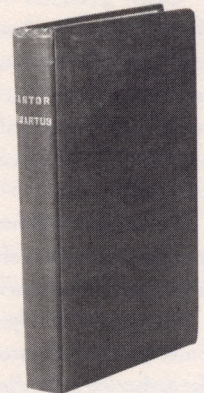
Emerson helped collect subscriptions in America for a book publication of Carlyle’s work, edited the text, negotiated publishing terms with James Munroe, a Boston printer, and contributed a preface.

The resulting book, the true first edition of *Sartor Resartus*, appeared in April 1836. It preceded the English publication by two years. Despite Emerson’s extensive assistance as editor and preface writer, his name nowhere appears in the book.

During the months following publication of Carlyle’s book, Emerson worked on the essays that were to appear in *Nature*. In August 1836, he sent the proof to the printers, receiving the first of the proof-sheets back at the end of the month. On September 9, 1836, the little book appeared. There were perhaps 1,500 copies, bound in 15 different cloth bindings, with five different ornamental stampings on the cloth. Emerson earned 33 1/3 cents for each copy sold.

This is not the place for a summary of the essays that make up *Nature*, or of the ideas known as “transcendentalism.” They are well summarized in the biographies of Richardson, Buell, and others. To say that Emerson focuses the reader on the whole of nature and the relationship of each element of the universe to the whole, on the insights and revelations available to individuals alive today (rather than the recorded thought of writers in the past), and on the quasi-mystical relation between the phenomena of nature and the human mind or spirit, is to do no more than to start to suggest the themes of these essays.

Perhaps a few sentences are better than a summary: “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall [sic] me in life, — no disgrace, no calamity,



(leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." (*Nature*, 12-13.)

"Spirit" precedes — takes precedence over, is the source of — "nature." Ideas are the source or cause of substance. Things unseen are real; things seen are temporal. The universal mind is eternal; it is disclosed — one might say, "through a glass darkly" — to each individual.

Each reader will have to decide for himself to what extent these shimmering concepts correspond to realities with which he is familiar.

The day before *Nature* was published, Emerson met in Boston with friends to plan the gathering of intellectuals who were dissatisfied with the prevailing climate of opinion in places like Cambridge. The group they convened for talks and conversation became known as the "Transcendental Club," which in turn gave its name to the body of thought that emerged in the wake of the publication of Emerson's first book. (The label originated with Carlyle and was first applied as a pejorative to the Emersonian movement by its detractors, who regarded this body of

thought as errant nonsense.) The Club came to include many of Emerson's friends: Henry Hedge, George Putnam, George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, and others.

Van Wyck Brooks explained Transcendentalism as a reaction to both the intellectual and religious thinking which then prevailed in America. In the intellectual realm, it opposed the prevailing style of New England writers, "learned but narrow in their range of feeling, dry, mechanical, timid, subservient to the abstract laws that had governed the eighteenth century, children of Burke and Johnson...."

In the theological sphere, "Transcendentalism was a reaction against both Unitarianism and Trinitarianism, neither of which possessed any belief in the self-sufficiency of the human mind outside of revelation. It spoke for an order of truth that transcended, by immediate perception, all external evidence." (Brooks, 190)

VI

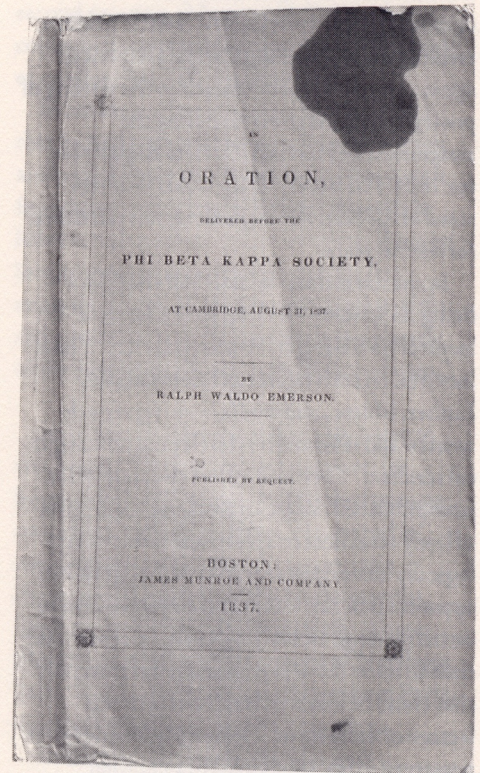
Emerson's *Nature* was well received by the critics, and, as important to him, it sold well. This encouraged him to continue his ambitious schedule of reading and writing, and it enhanced the demand for his services as a lecturer. This combination of market demand and Emerson's own talents and inclinations shaped the way he spent his time, the way he made his living, and the literary productions for which he is best remembered today.

In the months and years following *Nature*, Emerson devoted himself primarily to the preparation of lectures and essays. Most of the lectures were not published, but a few were — and they made him famous. Because these were published in small numbers and in fragile wrappers, they have often (particularly in the pre-Internet days) confounded the best efforts of generations of book collectors.

The year following the appearance of *Nature* saw the publication of one of his best lectures. In June 1837, he was asked to deliver the annual address to the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Society. Whether he knew that he was not the Society's first choice is not clear. What is clear is that he threw himself into the preparation of a lecture he titled "The American Scholar." It is known today primarily as a call for a distinctly independent American literature and point of view. Holmes later called the address "our intellectual Declaration of Independence." (Buell, 44) A more careful reading shows that the principal theme was the already-familiar one of encouraging individuals everywhere — in Europe as well as America — to rely on their own judgment and to think afresh, for them-

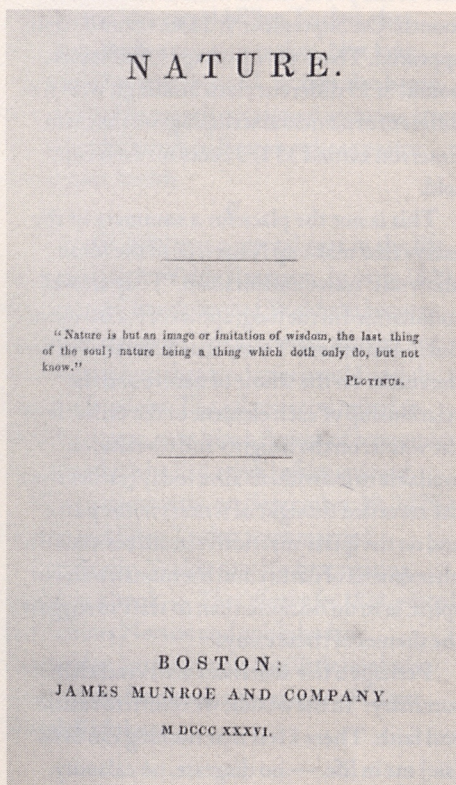
selves, without being unduly encumbered by the past.

Emerson delivered his lecture on August 31, 1837. Shortly thereafter, he published the talk at his own expense, printing 500 copies, which were soon sold out. He later reprinted it in a book of his essays. In time, it became one of the most famous addresses in American intellectual history.



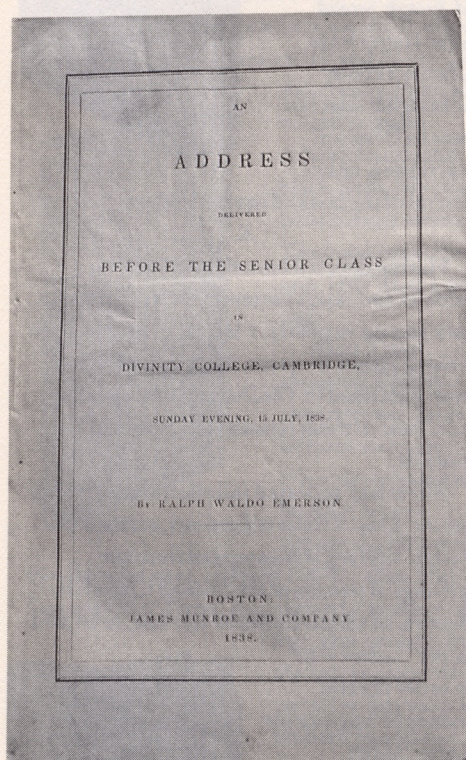
Throughout the remainder of 1837 and into early 1838, Emerson continued to write and deliver lectures setting out his main themes. These lectures were not published at the time. He also became acquainted with a young graduate of Harvard named Henry Thoreau, with whom he developed a close intellectual and personal relationship. They shared walks and long talks together, and Thoreau often stayed in Emerson's home. Thoreau was the better classical scholar of the two, choosing to read his classics in the original Greek and Latin.

In March 1838, Emerson accepted an invitation to give another address at Harvard, this time to the six graduating seniors of the Harvard Divinity School and their families and friends. His subject was, again, the need for independent thinking and the centrality of living today, rather than being bound by the doctrines of institutions or the writings of past generations. The "Divinity School Address," one of his most famous, was delivered July 15,



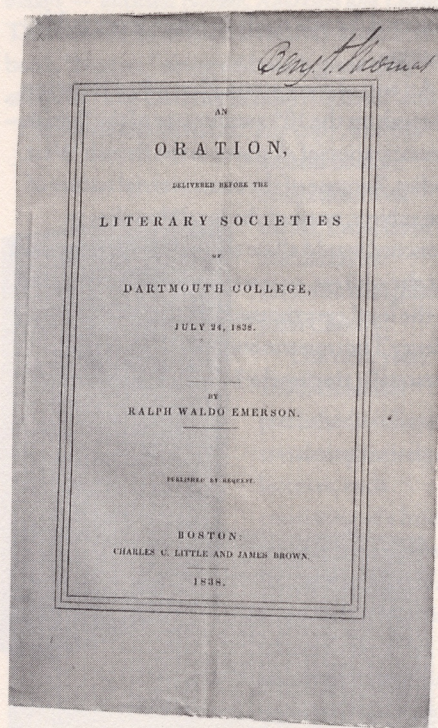
1838, and was an explicit attack on the authority of any church, as well as the elevation of personal religious consciousness over the Bible or any historical doctrine. After the lecture, Emerson arranged for it to be published by the same firm that had published his earlier Phi Beta Kappa address, in the same form, with paper wrappers. Apparently, 1000 copies were commercially published.

This Divinity School lecture elicited a much more critical response than either his



book *Nature* or the Phi Beta Kappa address. One of the more hostile responses was that of Andrews Norton, Harvard Professor of Theology, who considered Emerson's religious views both "incoherent" and "insulting." (Richardson, 299) (You may remember that Norton had edited the little 1829 gift book in which Emerson's first writings had appeared.)

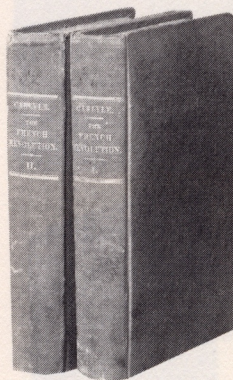
Less than two weeks later, on July 24, 1838, Emerson delivered the sequel to the Phi Beta Kappa address to the Literary Societies of Dartmouth College. Entitled, "An Oration Delivered Before the Literary Societies of Dartmouth College," Emerson's theme was that individuals should seek to understand the attributes of their common humanity, and to see the world anew and independently. He was not arguing, as has occasionally been suggested, that the current American generation should ignore what had previously been thought or



written. He was far too great a reader for that. Again, 1000 copies were printed.

VII

Emerson continued not only to work on his own literary endeavors, but to promote the interests of his friends. Carlyle had sent him a copy of the first edition of his volume, *The French Revolution*. He arranged for, financed, advertised, and reviewed the two-volume work (three volumes in two), published by Charles Little and James Brown in 1838, although Emerson's name nowhere appears in either of the two volumes. He was likewise responsible for the publication of a four-volume collection of Carlyle's magazine



essays. As sales of these works increased and as Emerson remitted the proceeds to Carlyle, along with a detailed accounting, Carlyle became even more respectful of his American colleague and agent.

Emerson also assisted and promoted the literary career of a new friend, Jones Very, a young student at the Harvard Divinity School and a budding young visionary, essayist and poet. Very visited Emerson for five days in the fall of 1838, and impressed him as a simple, almost Christ-like figure. Richardson regards

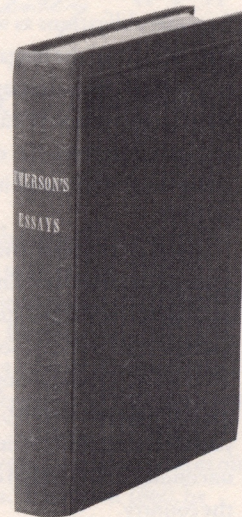
Very as one of the finest writers of sonnets in America during the 19th Century. (Richardson, 306) When Emerson learned that Very had produced 200 or so poems, he reviewed them, selected several essays and enough poems to make up a volume, edited the text, and arranged for publication in 1839 by Messrs. Little and Brown of an edition of 500 copies.

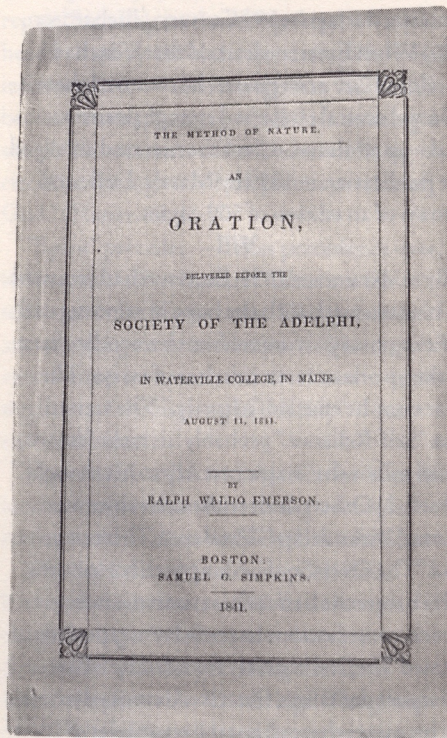
VIII

By mid-summer 1839, Emerson had returned to his own work with the hope of selecting and refining enough material from his notebooks to make up one or more volumes of essays. The first essay he entitled "History." The second was "Self-Reliance," probably his most famous. Buell calls it the "single best key to his thought." (Buell, 2) Others dealt with such subjects as "Love," "Friendship," "Prudence," "Heroism," and "The Over-Soul." Along with his lectures, which were the basis of his economic independence, contributions to a new literary periodical named *The Dial*, recently founded by fellow Transcendentalists, Emerson continued to work on his essays throughout the remainder of 1839 and 1840.

On the first day of the new year, January 1, 1841, he sent his first volume of essays off to the printer. It was published in mid-March 1841, in several different kinds and colors of cloth, with varying blindstamps. This volume, unimaginatively entitled simply *Essays*, and its sequel three years later are generally regarded as two of the greatest collections of essays in American literature.

Essays was to have included a new essay on "Nature," but at virtually the last minute, Emerson decided to remove it because he was not satisfied with it. He continued to work on this essay throughout the summer, and took the occasion to deliver the finished product as a lecture on August 11, 1841, to a literary society at Waterford College in Maine. Entitled "The Method of Nature," this new paper reflected Emerson's broadening interest in Pythagoras, Plato, and certain works of Asian religion. Richardson calls it Emerson's "essay on ecstasy." (Richardson, 354) Emerson published this essay





in a separate paper-wrapped pamphlet in October. Myerson says “possibly” 500 copies were printed.

IX

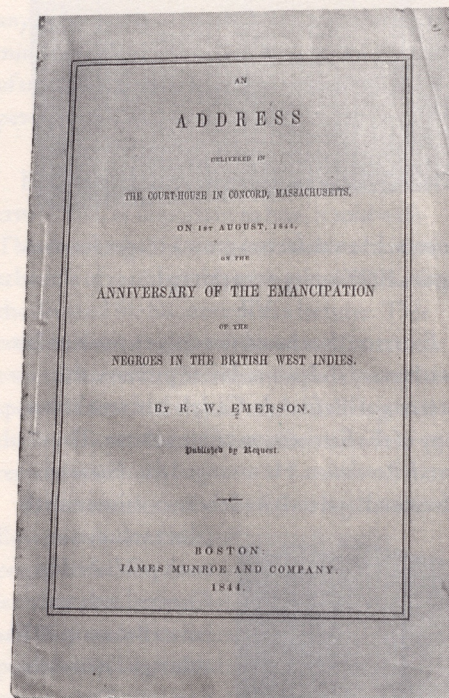
In early March 1842, Emerson’s friend, Margaret Fuller, decided that she could no longer continue to serve as editor of *The Dial*. Emerson undertook the responsibility, apparently assuming some of the magazine’s financial obligations as well. For two years he not only edited the magazine but wrote much of it himself — including dozens of lectures, essays, and poems. What a treasure it would be to have a complete run of *The Dial* from its inception in 1840 until its demise in the spring of 1844.

During the 1840s, the controversy over abolition stirred New England more than anywhere else in the country. Since 1831, when the first Anti-Slavery Society was established in New York, William Lloyd Garrison had been publishing the *Liberator*, in which, for over 30 years, he uncompromisingly advocated the unconditional abolition of slavery throughout the country.

Emerson’s private opposition to slavery was never in doubt. Following the murder of Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, IL, he had first addressed the abolition issue in a talk in 1837 that has not survived. By 1844, although the issue was highly controversial, even in Emerson’s hometown of

Concord, he was ready to take a more public position.

An anti-slavery association asked Emerson to speak on the 10th anniversary of the British emancipation of all slaves in the British West Indies. Because of the controversial nature of the subject, none of the local churches in Concord would allow their facilities to be used for the address, so it was scheduled to be given in the local courthouse. On August 1, 1844, Henry Thoreau announced the speech by personally ringing the bell of the First Parish



Church of Concord. The talk itself was a combination of straightforward history and emotional oratory denouncing the horrors of slavery. Unlike many of his speeches, this one was heavily researched.

Thoreau helped arrange for publication of the address. Sometimes referred to as “Emancipation in the West Indies,” the address was published a month after it was delivered, in the familiar pamphlet form, with paper wrappers. There seem to have been two printings, each of 1000 copies. (BAL, 5199) My copy does not contain the statement “Second Thousand” on the wrapper, so it was from the first printing.

Within a month, Emerson’s second volume of essays, *Essays: Second Series*, appeared, on October 19, 1844. Richardson believes that the quality of this second volume is uneven, but

affirms that it contains two of the best essays Emerson ever wrote: “The Poet” and “Experience.”

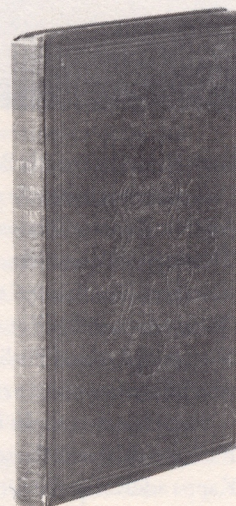
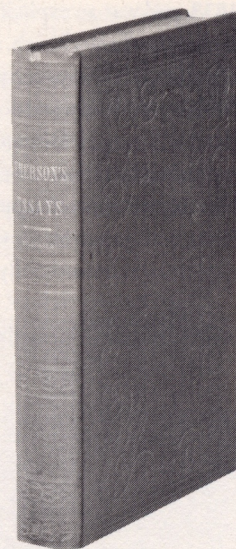
Emerson gave copies of several of his books to a Concord friend and neighbor named John M. Cheney. My copy of *Essays: Second Series* comes from Cheney’s library although it does not bear an Emerson inscription, unlike several of the books discussed below.

X

Having devoted himself primarily to lectures and essays for several years, Emerson now turned to poetry. He had, of course, been writing poems for years. Although a few had been published in *The Dial* and other periodicals, most of them remained buried in his journals.

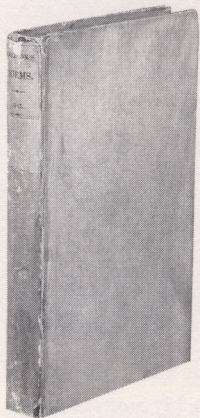
A few had appeared in collections edited by others. One of these collections, entitled *Our Pastors’ Offering*, was compiled from the writings of pastors of the Second Church in Boston, of whom Emerson was one, to be sold at the “Ladies’ Fair” in order to raise money to help pay for a new church building. This little volume appeared in March 1845 and contained two poems by Emerson (as well as one erroneously attributed to him, but in fact written by his brother, Edward). (BAL, 5203; Myerson, 602)

Throughout 1845 and 1846, Emerson continued to work on his poems, as well as his lectures, and to broaden his reading. He became interested in a 14th Century Persian lyric poet, Hafez, and worked on translations of his poetry. By the fall of 1846, he had collected enough material. He sent off to the printers a substantial manuscript — two translations of Hafez’ poems, and many great



poems of his own, including "The Sphinx," "Bacchus," and "Mithridates." The lead poem was "The Sphinx," which Richardson characterizes as Emerson's "poetic declaration of the fundamental identity of all things." (Richardson, 431) As in virtually everything Emerson wrote, the sympathetic reader finds passages that are unintelligible but sparkling with bright images, ecstatic sensations, and vivid expression. Brooks concluded that Emerson at his best "had an intensity like nothing else in American verse." (Brooks, 266)

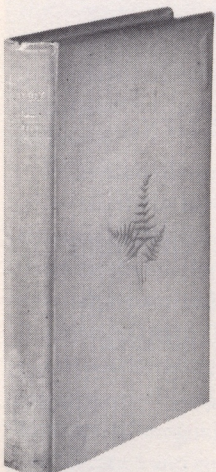
Poems, Emerson's fourth book, was published virtually simultaneously in London and Boston in December 1846. (BAL, 5210 and 5211) The



American edition was bound in cream-colored boards and black cloth. My copy is the former version. The book bears the year 1847 on the title page.

After *Poems* appeared, Emerson concentrated on his lectures and essays. His only subsequent book of poetry

appeared a little over two decades later, in April 1867. Called *May-Day and Other Poems*, it contained a number of



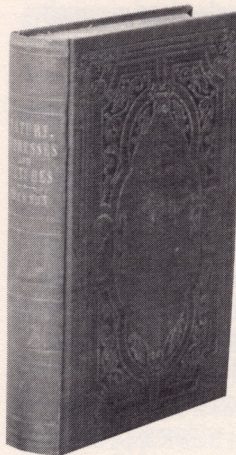
fine, short poems, but the longer pieces do not show Emerson at his best. In addition to the regular cloth bound issue, there were 100 copies in a gift binding of white cloth, of which mine is one. It was inscribed by Emerson and presented to his Concord neighbor, John Cheney.

XI

In 1849, a mixed volume appeared — part lectures, and part

*J. M. Cheney -
from
R. W. Emerson
1 May, 1867.*

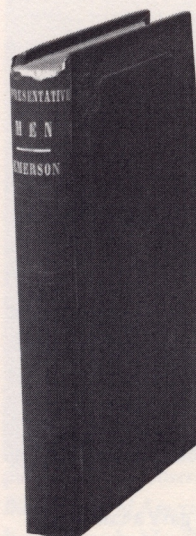
essays — entitled *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*. This volume included the entirety of his first book, "Nature," along with such great early essays as "The Divinity School Address," and "The American Scholar." My copy, like the



second book of essays described earlier, came from the library of Emerson's neighbor, John Cheney.

The next year, 1850, Emerson published a volume consisting entirely of lectures, each consisting of a brief biography of a person Emerson regarded as eminent. Unlike his friend Carlyle, however, he was not interested in writing the biography of men

regarded as "heroes." Nor did he use his new book as the occasion to write about great Americans. Emerson's subjects were "representative" men who had become great through the development of their gifts in a particular area of life — men like Plato (the "philosopher"), Shakespeare (the "poet"), Napoleon (the "man of the world"), and Goethe (the "writer"). His book, *Representative Men*, consisting of seven such lectures, was published in 1850. It was the first book for which he ever received any money. Brooks tells the nice story of how Emerson, when he received a check from the publishers, called on them to ask if he was free to use the check.



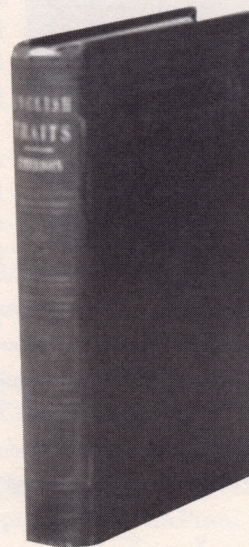
The publisher had to show him how to endorse it. (Brooks, 204) My copy comes from John Cheney's library, but this time it is a presentation copy from Emerson.

The next book to appear, *English Traits*, 1856, was the outgrowth of several years of thought and preparation.

Emerson had last visited England in late 1847 and early 1848. While he was

there, he gave over 60 lectures, and visited with dozens of eminent literary, scientific, and political figures. And he continued his wide reading of books written by English authors, as well as English journals and periodicals.

Richardson writes that this was Emerson's "least characteristic" book because instead of dealing with the general human condition, he dealt with the facts and details of English life and English people. (Richardson, 518-519) Separate

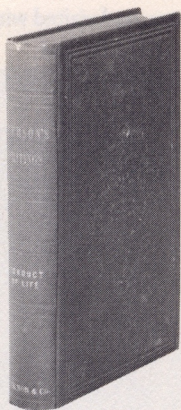


chapters covered his visits to England, the abilities and manners of the English, their wealth, their universities, even Stonehenge. Brooks thought that this work on England was Emerson's "masterpiece" and described it as "the work of an intellect that was always dominant and always open. One felt as if the eye of God had fallen upon England..." (Brooks, 467, 423.) My copy of *English Traits* is the presentation copy from Emerson to his neighbor, John Cheney.

*J. M. Cheney. Esq.
From the Author.*

In the early 1850s, Emerson had planned a new course of lectures to be called "The Conduct of Life." His inaugural presentation of these talks occurred in Pittsburgh in 1851, and he continued to refine and work on them over the next decade. Lectures covered such topics as "Wealth," "Economy," "Culture," "Worship," and "Fate." Over the years, he added lectures on "Beauty" and "Illusions." Finally, in 1860, he published a volume containing these lectures and called it, appropriately enough, *The Conduct of Life*. Again, my copy is the presentation copy from Emerson to Cheney.

Also in the spring of 1860, Emerson's friend Theodore Parker died in Florence. Emerson's remarks in tribute to Parker were collected in

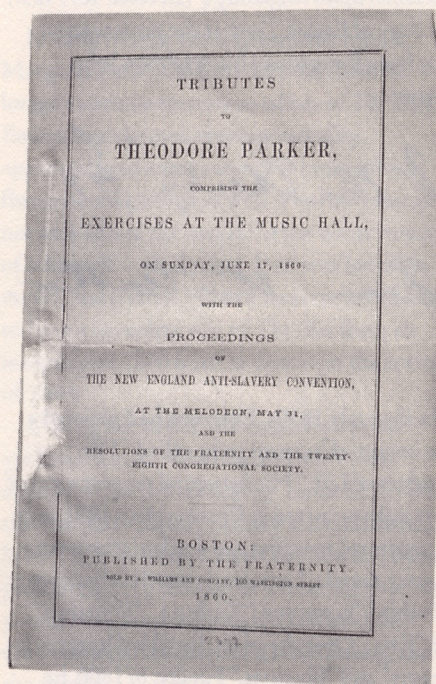


Tributes to Theodore Parker, given at the end of the proceedings of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention, June 17, 1860.

Parker was not the only friend Emerson lost during this period of his life. His best friend was Thoreau, who died of tuberculosis in

*J. M. Cheney -
From the Author.
Dec. 7, 1860*

May 1862. Emerson delivered the eulogy at his funeral, May 9, 1862. It was not separately published, but appears in his *Collected Works*. Richardson calls it his "last sustained major

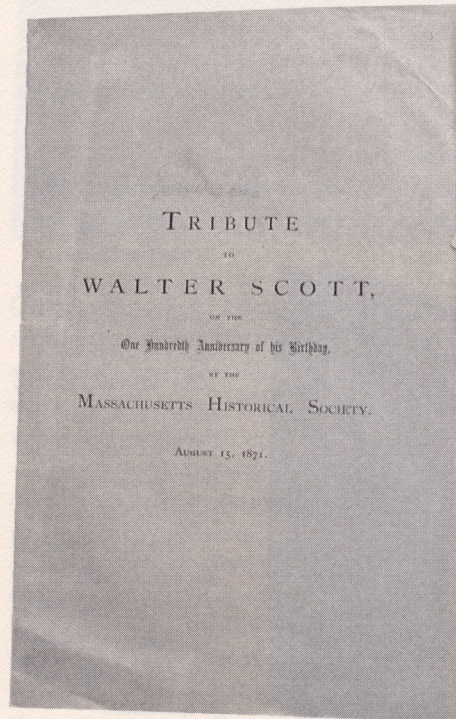


piece of writing." (Richardson, 548) He also wrote separate "stanzas" to be sung at the funeral; and these were separately published at the time, in a small four-page pamphlet. I wish I had it.

XII

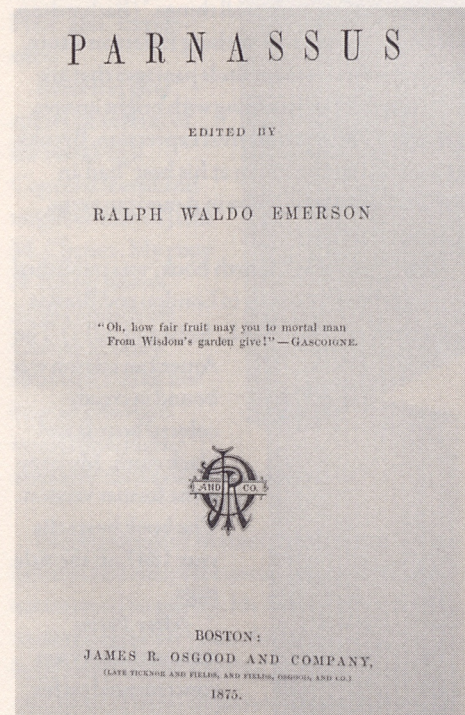
Emerson was now (in 1862) 59 years old, far too young to retire from speaking or writing. Harvard had recognized him by making him a visiting professor and by elevating him to the Board of Overseers. But just as his fame and the demand for his services as a lecturer crested, in the late 1860's and early 1870's, his creativity or energy seemed to lag. As Richardson put it, delicately, his creative moments "came at greater and greater intervals." (Richardson, 553) He edited a volume of Thoreau's *Excursions* and another volume of his letters and poems. In 1867, he published his own volume of verse, *May-Day*, described above. And he continued to give lectures. But he had problems with his eyesight, which affected his ability to read. And, most troublesome of all, his intellectual powers weakened and his memory began to fade.

There were still occasional addresses. In 1867 he delivered the Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard; and in April, on the anniversary of the British attack 92 years before, he delivered a talk at the dedication of the soldiers' monument in Concord. In August 1871, he gave a tribute to Walter Scott to the Massachusetts Historical Society, which was privately printed. And

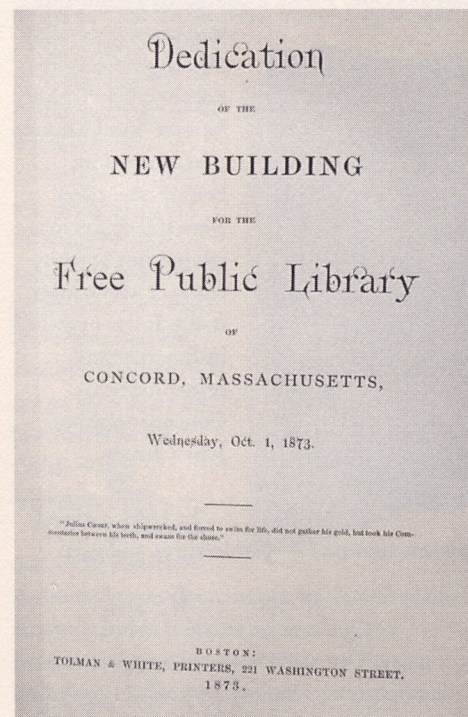


two years later, in 1873, he gave a talk at the dedication of the new public library in Concord.

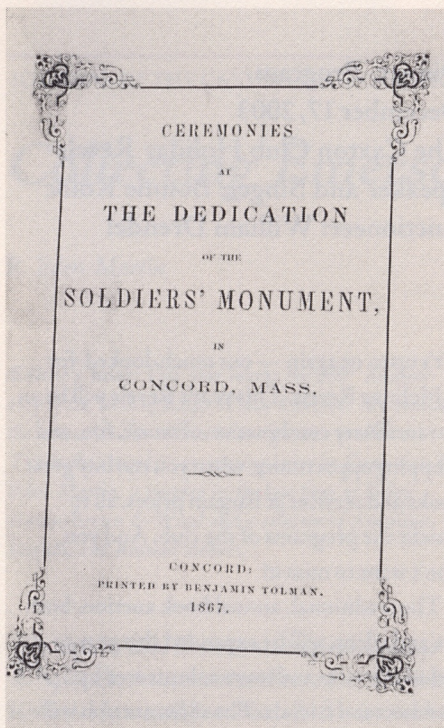
Emerson's last books were collections. *Society and Solitude*, in 1870, consisted almost entirely of essays dating back to the late 1850s and thereafter. *Parnassus*, which he edited in



1874 and published in early 1875, consisted of his family's favorite poems. He omitted poems, which he had written, as well as those of Whitman, whom he had once so admired.



Letters and Social Aims, which appeared in 1876, consisted of a miscellany of old lectures not previously published. Emerson could not finish



the editing himself, and brought in someone to finish the task. His memory was seriously failing; his working days were over. He died from pneumonia on April 27, 1882, a month shy of his 79th birthday.

XIII

So what of Emerson's influence or reputation today? And should they matter to a book collector?

Influence and reputation change over time, of course. In the latter part of the 19th Century, Emerson's influence was considerable. Buell notes the decline during the 20th Century, pointing in particular to Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941). (Buell, 291) But he also points out the resurgence, particularly in the assessment by Harold Bloom, who regarded Emerson as "the guiding spirit of our imaginative literature and our criticism for some time to come." (Harold Bloom, "Emerson: Power at the Crossing," in *Poetics of Influence*, ed. Hollander, New Haven, 1988, 314, 321) Buell's own conclusion seems fair to me: "So long as serious-minded people feel the need to question arbitrary authority, official wisdom, and their own internalized dutifulness; so long as they feel the unsatisfied desire to rise above themselves without compromise to integrity or perfectionism; so long as they desire to see

others feel empowered to do the same, Emerson's words will continue to provoke, challenge, surprise, inspire." (Buell, 334)

But from the standpoint of the book collector, does reputation really matter? If one collects as an investor, with a view to possible inflation in book values, then I suppose it does. The higher the estimate of the writer, all other things being roughly equal, the higher the value of his or her first editions. But most collectors will be the first to tell you that collecting as an investment is a very bad idea. In any event, trends in literary reputations are long-term and highly unpredictable.

More important, it seems to me, is the collector's own view of the writer — and of his or her place in our common literary and intellectual heritage. If you value highly someone's essays or poetry (not to mention novels or biographies), or if you believe his or her contribution to the life of the mind in this country is important, then this value or belief sufficiently explains an interest in how the books of essays or poetry first saw the light of day, and sufficiently justifies — to the extent anything ever can — the search for such copies, and the instinct for their custodianship. Emerson's books and addresses are undeniably at the core of the intellectual heritage of the people of the United States. ❖

* The basic biographical facts of Emerson's life are well known. In this paper — which is mostly about his books — I draw most heavily on Robert Richardson's fine book, *Emerson, The Mind on Fire*. Another study which I have used is Lawrence Buell's recently published *Emerson* (Harvard, 2003). However, it is less biographical, and focuses more on major facets of Emerson's thought and the writers who influenced him. A beautifully-written book about the New England writers of the pre-Civil War period is Van Wyck Brooks' *The Flowering of New England* (1936).

The principal sources of information on the publication of Emerson's books are the *Bibliography of American Literature*, compiled by Jacob Blanck, New Haven, 1959, and *Ralph Waldo Emerson, A Descriptive Bibliography*, by Joel Myerson, Pittsburgh, 1982.

Saints & Sinners Corner



Caxtonian Martin F. Starr has published his first book, *The Unknown God: W. T. Smith and the Thelemites*. The book is an account of the followers of the English occultist and poet, Aleister Crowley in Canada and the United States. Caxtonian Robert Williams designed the book, which was issued in November 2003, by Starr's own small press, The Teitan Press, Inc.

Caxtonian Alice Schreyer has assembled, with Les Schreyer, a political, protest, and propaganda poster collection, which was donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The collection was exhibited in London, December 9, 2002, through March 23, 2003. The gift and exhibition were featured in four-color, illustrated article in the *Victoria & Albert Magazine*, September-December 2002.

Caxtonian Helen Sclair discussed cemetery design, including Chicago's Graceland Cemetery entrance gate. She gave her lecture at the Morton Arboretum on November 16, 2003.

Several Caxtonian names were omitted from the piece on the West Coast FABS meeting (October 2003). In addition to those listed in the article, the following Caxtonians also attended the meeting: Dan and Kathleen Hayman, John Blew, and Bernard Rost. We regret the initial omission.



Truman Metzel

Bookmarks...

Luncheon Program

December 12, 2003

Junie Sinson

"The Caxton Club Nobel Prize in Literature Committee"

One of the excellent additions to The Caxton Club in recent years has been the creation of the standing committee, the Nobel Prize in Literature Committee. The energy and idea for this important new endeavor in Caxton activities is Caxtonian Junie Sinson.

Junie will report on the creation and life of this committee and comment on its history, its intrigues, and the excitement during its first two years of existence. He will also describe the activities and discussions that take place four times a year, when the committee meets to review literature. The committee has a protocol for selecting its annual candidate for the prize. The submission, written by Professor and Caxtonian Robin Metz of Knox College, is made in late fall each year.

Junie will also present a comparative study of the Booker, National Book, Nobel, and Pulitzer Prizes in Literature. He will address each prize, its history, its leadership, its processes, and its standards. He will make comments, as well, on the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature winner.

This will be a fine time to get caught up in the excitement generated by this committee. Join your friends for lunch and bookish dialogue.

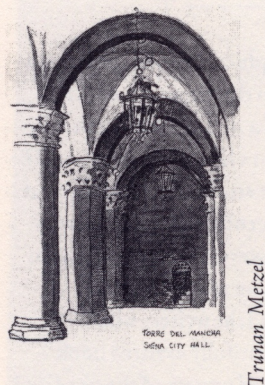
Edward Quattrocchi & Leonard Freedman
Co-Chairs

All luncheon and dinner meetings, unless otherwise noted, are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th floor of BankOne, BankOne Plaza, Madison & Clark, Chicago. Luncheon and discussion, 12:30pm. Dinner meetings begin with spirits at 5pm, dinner at 6pm, lecture at 7:30pm. **Members planning to attend luncheons or dinners must make advance reservations by phoning the Caxton number, 312/255-3710.** Luncheon for members and guests, \$25. Dinner, for members and guests, \$45.

January Luncheon and Dinner programs

On Friday, January 9, 2004, Caxtonian scholars Emily Reiser and Jill Summers will present a program, originally scheduled for October 2003, on their work in the book arts at Columbia College.

On Wednesday, January 14, 2004, Sid H. Huttner, formerly of the University of Chicago and now head of Special Collections, University of Iowa library, will talk about "Lucile: The Other Woman in My Life." A novel-length poem, *Lucile* was offered in more than 2000 editions between 1860 and 1938. You will want to hear all the delectable details about this collectible edition.



Torre del Manica, Siena
City Hall

Dinner Program

December 17, 2003

The Caxton Club Holiday Revels
Speaker and Singer: Bonnie Koloc
Auctioneer: William Drendel

It's upon us again — our much-looked-for Holiday Revels. This year's Revels will be an extraordinary combination of music, fun, and shopping opportunity, when you can buy great books and services at bargain prices, all to benefit the programs of the club. And you won't want to miss it!

The traditional, annual book auction, both live and silent, will be expanded this year to include services and tours volunteered by members and friends. The silent auction will take place before dinner and continue in the after-dinner break. There is a rumor that Caxtonian editor Cotner will recite a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem again this year.

After the break, noted singer Bonnie Koloc will tell us about her recent book project and sing selections from it. The book, a loose-leaf bestiary, is composed of 13 poems set to music by Bonnie and 19 block prints. Copies of the complete boxed set and individual prints from the series will be available for purchase.

Performer Koloc was one of Chicago's most famous singers during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1988, she moved with her husband Robert Wolf to northern Iowa and has seldom performed here since. This evening will provide a rare opportunity to hear this gifted musician and talented artist.

After Bonnie's presentation, Caxtonian Bill Drendel will conclude the evening with his entertaining live auction of selected items. This is the dinner program we all look forward to: don't miss it!

Robert McCamant
Vice President and
Program Chair