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THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson is intended to provide a critical introduction to Emerson's work. The tradition of American literature and philosophy as we know it at the end of the twentieth century was largely shaped by Emerson's example and practice. This volume offers students, scholars, and the general reader a collection of fresh interpretations of Emerson's writing, milieu, influence, and cultural significance. All essays are newly commissioned for this volume, written at an accessible yet challenging level, and augmented by a comprehensive chronology and bibliography.

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Continued on page following Index

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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AND
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Bucknell University



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CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	page ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xii
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Chronology of Emerson's Life</i>	xvi
Introduction: Representing America – the Emerson Legacy JOEL PORTE	I
1 Transcendentalism and Its Times DAVID M. ROBINSON	13
2 Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Family PHYLLIS COLE	30
3 The Radical Emerson? ROBERT MILDER	49
4 Emerson as Lecturer: Man Thinking, Man Saying R. JACKSON WILSON	76
5 Emerson and Nature ROBERT D. RICHARDSON, JR.	97
6 <i>Essays: First Series (1841)</i> ALBERT J. VON FRANK	106
7 Transcendental Friendship: Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau JEFFREY STEELE	121
8 Tears for Emerson: <i>Essays, Second Series</i> JULIE ELLISON	140
9 “The Remembering Wine”: Emerson’s Influence on Whitman and Dickinson CATHERINE TUFARIELLO	162

Cambridge University Press
0521499461 - The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson
Edited by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

10	Post-Colonial Emerson and the Erasure of Europe ROBERT WEISBUCH	192
11	“Metre-Making” Arguments: Emerson’s Poems SAUNDRA MORRIS	218
12	<i>The Conduct of Life</i> : Emerson’s Anatomy of Power MICHAEL LOPEZ	243
	<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	267
	<i>Index</i>	275

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0521499461 - The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson

Edited by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTRIBUTORS

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Cambridge University Press
0521499461 - The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson
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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTRIBUTORS

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CW *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Robert Spiller, Alfred Ferguson, et al. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1971–.
- EL *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen Whicher et al. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1960–72.
- EJ *Emerson in His Journals*. Ed. Joel Porte. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1982.
- JMN *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. William Gillman et al. 16 vols. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1960–82.
- L *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton. 9 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–94.
- LJE Emerson, Ellen Tucker. *The Life of Lidian Jackson Emerson*. Ed. Delores Bird Carpenter. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.
- LMF *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*. Ed. Robert N. Hudspeth. 5 vols. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983–.
- W *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. 12 vols. Centenary Edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903–4.

PREFACE

After an initial period of hagiographic veneration, followed by a backlash of reaction, Emerson and his writings have for several decades enjoyed renewed critical appreciation. In the 1970s, prompted by Stephen Whicher's earlier emphasis on the "tragic" Emerson and Jonathan Bishop's subsequent attention to Emerson's literary craft, readers increasingly called into question the traditional representation of Emerson's texts as cockeyed-optimistic proclamations in impenetrably lapidary prose and paid attention instead to their artistic merit and deeper resonances. In the 1980s and '90s, we have come even more fully to understand both the multivalent harmonies of Emerson's work and the beauties and complexities of its rhetoric. We have also in recent years allowed Emerson to wear a variety of mantles, some of which may seem contradictory (Transcendentalist and pragmatist, prose stylist and orphic poet, theorist and prudential Yankee, social commentator and withdrawn intellectual), finally realizing the truth of his own remark, "I am not the man you take me for."

With its heightened recognition of Emerson's importance, contemporary scholarship follows the lead of a long line of American thinkers and writers. As Stanley Cavell has taught us, Emerson is *the* founding figure in the American philosophical tradition. Henry Thoreau, William James, George Santayana, John Dewey, Arthur Lovejoy, Henry Aiken, William Gass, Cornel West, and Cavell himself have all struggled to win a blessing from the Necessary Angel of Concord. Emerson has also provided a powerful impetus for American poets, whether by attraction or repulsion. Harold Bloom has focused on Emerson as "ghostly father," especially for such writers as Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and A. R. Ammons. A list of Emerson's progeny would go on to include Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, Charles Olson, and others. Social thinkers also return again and again to Emerson, as the late Yale president A. Bartlett Giamatti's condemnation of Emerson's influence on American culture attests. Finally, American fiction writers have paid a different sort of attention to

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

Emerson, both representing him directly and creating characters who are recognizably disciples of the sage. Such figures, whether of veneration or derision, make their way variously into the work of Melville, Hawthorne, Alcott, Twain, Howells, James, Cather, Santayana, and Ellison.

It seems that all of us – students, scholars, writers, cultural commentators, political scientists – continue to be pursued by this ex-Unitarian minister turned lecturer, essayist, diarist, philosopher, and poet who helped provide the vocabulary that enables us to think about who we are and what we might become. Indeed, as we approach the bicentenary of Emerson's birth in 2003, the pace of interest in his writing is likely to gain still more momentum. So this seems a good time to offer a guide and companion to Emerson studies. Ours embodies the research and reflections of a baker's dozen of seasoned Emersonians, all of whom have challenged themselves either to cast a new light on familiar topics or to strike out into less familiar territory.

Thus, for example, Phyllis Cole demonstrates that the family milieu that nurtured Emerson – and in particular the presence of his aunt Mary Moody Emerson – had far more to do with the work he produced than we would have expected, especially given Emerson's own strong belief in the singularity of individual genius. Along similar lines, Julie Ellison turns her attention to the conditions of Emerson's life as a writer who mainly worked at home – in the midst of a household run by his wife and daughters and regularly frequented by other children, friends, collaborators, and relatives. How, she asks, did these relationships and presences affect (the *affective* traditionally being coded “female”) Emerson's stance as an abstract thinker? How do they influence the way we respond to Emerson's writing and especially to “Experience” – the great meditation freighted with its allusion to the death of Emerson's five-year-old son?

Other new approaches to Emerson in this collection include a reading of *Essays, First Series*, by Albert von Frank that focuses on the subversive and unsettling strategies embedded in that text, as well as a fresh look at Emerson on the Lyceum platform by Jackson Wilson that emphasizes the nimble dance Emerson regularly performed wherein the meeting of conventional audience expectations was offset by controversial critical sallies. Robert D. Richardson leads us through a topic – Emerson and “Nature” – that seems so self-evident as scarcely to demand attention; but he manages to provide an unusual twist to a familiar subject. David Robinson lucidly explores the always tangled history of the Transcendental movement. And Catherine Tufariello revisits the question of Emerson's influence on Whitman and Dickinson without resorting to Harold Bloom's model of influential “anxiety”; rather, she focuses on enabling strategies employed by the

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

two poetic epebes to transform their mentor from antagonist to facilitator. Robert Weisbuch surprises us with a treatment of Emerson vis-à-vis England and Europe that places the American author in a “post-colonial” posture. Jeffrey Steele investigates the alternately icy and steamy world of Transcendental “friendship” with an eye to revising our sense of Emerson’s relations with Fuller and Thoreau. And in strongly argued essays, Robert Milder and Michael Lopez reframe views of Emerson’s political ideology and the shape of his writing career that have been in place for a long time – Milder by conceiving of a “radical” Emerson, Lopez by reconsidering what it means to view *The Conduct of Life* as Emerson’s “mature” wisdom. Finally, the editors of this collection reopen the questions of Emerson’s place as a figure in American culture and his achievement as a poet.

The *Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* is not intended to exhaust its subject or even, in the end, to provide conventional instruction. Rather, following Emerson himself, its aim is provocation. Describing his own aspirations as a lecturer, Emerson once wrote in his journal: “I said I will agitate others, being agitated myself.” Similarly, the authors of these essays would like to inspire a sense of renewed excitement about Emerson’s perpetually inexhaustible presence. Recent literary theory encourages readers to appreciate texts for their lack of closure and to explore in them whatever is most suggestive, inconclusive, and evolving. Emerson’s work seems to thrive in this critical and analytical environment, inviting, as it always does, our active engagement. This collection, designed for a wide range of audience, participates in and, we hope, furthers the contemporary interest in a multifaceted and unresolved Emerson – one who, more and more, reminds us of his own Sphinx’s “unanswered question.”

For support toward the completion of this volume, the editors thank Anne Sanow and Phyllis Berk, of Cambridge University Press; Bucknell and Cornell Universities, for research grants; student assistants Kristen Hawley, Diana Leech, and Sean Teuton; Myrna Treston, secretary of the Bucknell Department of English; Jeannette Little, Administrative Assistant in the American Studies Program at Cornell; and their families. Heather White prepared the index.

Joel Porte
Sandra Morris

CHRONOLOGY OF EMERSON'S LIFE

- 1803 May 25: born in Boston
- 1811 May 12: father dies, age 42
- 1812 Enters Boston Public Latin School; begins writing poetry
- 1817 Enters Harvard College
- 1820 Begins keeping a journal, a practice that will continue into the 1870s
- 1821 Graduates from Harvard; teaches in Boston at his brother William's school for girls
- 1822 Continues to teach; publishes essay on "The Religion of the Middle Ages" in *The Christian Disciple*
- 1825 February: admitted to Harvard Divinity School; studies interrupted by eye trouble; teaches in Chelmsford
- 1826 Teaches in Roxbury and Cambridge; October 10: approbated to preach; lung trouble; November: voyages south to improve health
- 1827 June: returns to Cambridge; December: meets Ellen Tucker
- 1828 Brother Edward becomes deranged; December 17: Emerson engaged to Ellen, who is already ill with tuberculosis
- 1829 Ordained junior pastor of Boston's Second Church (Unitarian); September 30: marries Ellen
- 1831 February 8: Ellen dies, age 19
- 1832 Increasing ill health; decides he can no longer serve communion; resigns pastorate; December 25: sails for Europe
- 1833 Travels to Italy, France, and Great Britain; meets British literati, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle; back in Boston, begins career as lecturer with talks on "natural history"
- 1834 Continues to preach; spring: receives first half of Tucker inheritance; October: Edward dies
- 1835 Lectures in Boston on biography; August 15: buys home in Concord; September: marries Lydia Jackson

CHRONOLOGY OF EMERSON'S LIFE

- 1836 Completes lecture series on English literature; May: brother Charles dies; July: Margaret Fuller visits; September: *Nature* published anonymously in Boston; October 30: Waldo born; winter: lectures on the philosophy of history
- 1837 July: receives final portion of Tucker estate; August: Thoreau graduates from Harvard, where Emerson delivers "The American Scholar" before the Phi Beta Kappa Society; fall-winter: lectures on human culture
- 1838 April: writes letter to President Van Buren protesting displacement of Cherokee people from their ancestral lands; July 15: delivers address at Harvard Divinity School that causes him to be banned from speaking at Harvard for many years; July 24: Dartmouth Oration ("Literary Ethics"); winter: lectures on human life
- 1839 January: preaches last sermon; February 24: Ellen born; winter: lectures on "The Present Age"
- 1840 July: first issue of Transcendental journal *The Dial*, edited by Margaret Fuller
- 1841 March: first series of *Essays* published; spring: Thoreau joins household; November 22: Edith born; winter: lectures on "The Times"
- 1842 January 27: Waldo dies; Emerson succeeds Fuller as editor of *The Dial*; September: takes walking trip with Hawthorne; December: delivers lecture series in New York, during which his "Poetry of the Times" is reviewed by Walter Whitman
- 1844 July 10: Edward born; April: last issue of *The Dial*; October: *Essays, Second Series* published
- 1845 July 4: Thoreau moves to Walden Pond and builds cabin on Emerson's property; winter: lectures on "Representative Men"
- 1846 December: *Poems* published
- 1847 October: begins second trip to Europe; away 10 months
- 1849 Lectures on "Mind and Manners in the Nineteenth Century"; *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* published
- 1850 January: *Representative Men* published; July: Margaret Fuller Ossoli, returning from Italy, drowns with her husband and son off Fire Island
- 1851 Excoriates Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster for supporting Fugitive Slave Law; winter: lectures on "The Conduct of Life"
- 1853 Mother dies, age 84
- 1854 Lectures on "Topics of Modern Times" in Philadelphia; heavy lecture schedule throughout the country

CHRONOLOGY OF EMERSON'S LIFE

- 1855 Antislavery lectures in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia; July 21: sends letter to Whitman praising first edition of *Leaves of Grass*
- 1856 August: *English Traits* published
- 1860 December: *The Conduct of Life* published
- 1862 Lectures on "American Civilization" in Washington and meets President Lincoln; May 6: Thoreau dies
- 1864 May 23: attends Hawthorne's funeral
- 1865 April: eulogizes the slain Lincoln
- 1866 Lectures in the West; receives Doctor of Laws degree from Harvard
- 1867 April: *May-Day and Other Pieces* published; named Overseer of Harvard College; delivers second Phi Beta Kappa address ("The Progress of Culture")
- 1870 Writes preface to *Plutarch's Morals*; publishes *Society and Solitude*; lectures at Harvard on "Natural History of Intellect"
- 1871 April-May: travels to California by train; meets Brigham Young and John Muir
- 1872 Speaks at Howard University; July 24: house burns; October: sets out for Europe and Egypt with Ellen
- 1874 December: publishes *Parnassus*, an anthology of his favorite poetry, which omits Poe and Whitman
- 1875 December: *Letters and Social Aims* published, edited by James Elliot Cabot
- 1876 Fall: publishes *Selected Poems* with help of Ellen and Cabot
- 1882 April 27: Emerson dies of pneumonia in Concord; Whitman visits his grave and observes: "A just man, poised on himself, all-loving, all-inclosing, and sane and clear as the sun."