

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

THE Emersons first appeared in the north of England, but Thomas, who landed in Massachusetts in 1638, came from Hertfordshire. He built soon after a house, sometimes called the Saint's Rest, which still stands in Ipswich on the slope of Heart-break Hill, close by Labour-in-vain Creek. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the sixth in descent from him. He was born in Boston, in Summer Street, May 25, 1803. He was the third son of William Emerson, the minister of the First Church in Boston, whose father, William Emerson, had been the patriotic minister of Concord at the outbreak of the Revolution, and died a chaplain in the army. Ruth Haskins, the mother of Ralph Waldo Emerson, was left a widow in 1811, with a family of five little boys. The taste of these boys was scholarly, and four of them went through the Latin School to Harvard College, and graduated there. Their mother was a person of great sweetness, dignity, and piety, bringing up her sons wisely and well in very straitened

circumstances, and loved by them. Her husband's stepfather, Rev. Dr. Ripley of Concord, helped her, and constantly invited the boys to the Old Manse, so that the woods and fields along the Concord River were first a playground and then the background of the dreams of their awakening imaginations.

Born in the city, Emerson's young mind first found delight in poems and classic prose, to which his instincts led him as naturally as another boy's would to go fishing, but his vacations in the country supplemented these by giving him great and increasing love of nature. In his early poems classic imagery is woven into pictures of New England woodlands. Even as a little boy he had the habit of attempting flights of verse, stimulated by Milton, Pope, or Scott, and he and his mates took pleasure in declaiming to each other in barns and attics. He was so full of thoughts and fancies that he sought the pen instinctively, to jot them down.

At college Emerson did not shine as a scholar, though he won prizes for essays and declamations, being especially unfitted for mathematical studies, and enjoying the classics rather in a literary than grammatical way. And yet it is

doubtful whether any man in his class used his time to better purpose with reference to his after life, for young Emerson's instinct led him to wide reading of works, outside the curriculum, that spoke directly to him. He had already formed the habit of writing in a journal, not the facts but the thoughts and inspirations of the day; often, also, good stories or poetical quotations, and scraps of his own verse.

On graduation from Harvard in the class of 1821, following the traditions of his family, Emerson resolved to study to be a minister, and meantime helped his older brother William in the support of the family by teaching in a school for young ladies in Boston, that the former had successfully established. The principal was twenty-one and the assistant nineteen years of age. For school-teaching on the usual lines Emerson was not fitted, and his youth and shyness prevented him from imparting his best gifts to his scholars. Years later, when, in his age, his old scholars assembled to greet him, he regretted that no hint had been brought into the school of what at that very time "I was writing every night in my chamber, my first thoughts on morals and the beautiful laws of

compensation, and of individual genius, which to observe and illustrate have given sweetness to many years of my life." Yet many scholars remembered his presence and teaching with pleasure and gratitude, not only in Boston, but in Chelmsford and Roxbury, for while his younger brothers were in college it was necessary that he should help. In these years, as through all his youth, he was loved, spurred on in his intellectual life, and keenly criticised by his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, an eager and wide reader, inspired by religious zeal, high-minded, but eccentric.

The health of the young teacher suffered from too ascetic a life, and unmistakable danger-signals began to appear, fortunately heeded in time, but disappointment and delay resulted, borne, however, with sense and courage. His course at the Divinity School in Cambridge was much broken; nevertheless, in October, 1826, he was "approved to preach" by the Middlesex Association of Ministers. A winter at the North at this time threatened to prove fatal, so he was sent South by his helpful kinsman, Rev. Samuel Ripley, and passed the winter in Florida with benefit, working northward in the spring, preach-

ing in the cities, and resumed his studies at Cambridge.

In 1829, Emerson was called by the Second or Old North Church in Boston to become the associate pastor with Rev. Henry Ware, and soon after, because of his senior's delicate health, was called on to assume the full duty. Theological dogmas, such as the Unitarian Church of Channing's day accepted, did not appeal to Emerson, nor did the supernatural in religion in its ordinary acceptation interest him. The omnipresence of spirit, the dignity of man, the daily miracle of the universe, were what he taught, and while the older members of the congregation may have been disquieted that he did not dwell on revealed religion, his words reached the young people, stirred thought, and awakened aspiration. At this time he lived with his mother and his young wife (Ellen Tucker) in Chardon Street. For three years he ministered to his people in Boston. Then having felt the shock of being obliged to conform to church usage, as stated prayer when the spirit did not move, and especially the administration of the Communion, he honestly laid his troubles before his people, and proposed to them some modifi-

cation of this rite. While they considered his proposition, Emerson went into the White Mountains to weigh his conflicting duties to his church and conscience. He came down, bravely to meet the refusal of the church to change the rite, and in a sermon preached in September, 1832, explained his objections to it, and, because he could not honestly administer it, resigned.

He parted from his people in all kindness, but the wrench was felt. His wife had recently died, he was ill himself, his life seemed to others broken up. But meantime voices from far away had reached him. He sailed for Europe, landed in Italy, saw cities, and art, and men, but would not stay long. Of the dead, Michael Angelo appealed chiefly to him there; Landor among the living. He soon passed northward, making little stay in Paris, but sought out Carlyle, then hardly recognized, and living in the lonely hills of the Scottish Border. There began a friendship which had great influence on the lives of both men, and lasted through life. He also visited Wordsworth. But the new life before him called him home.

He landed at Boston within the year in good health and hope, and joined his mother and

youngest brother Charles in Newton. Frequent invitations to preach still came, and were accepted, and he even was sounded as to succeeding Dr. Dewey in the church at New Bedford; but, as he stipulated for freedom from ceremonial, this came to nothing.

In the autumn of 1834 he moved to Concord, living with his kinsman, Dr. Ripley, at the Manse, but soon bought house and land on the Boston Road, on the edge of the village towards Walden woods. Thither, in the autumn, he brought his wife, Miss Lidian Jackson, of Plymouth, and this was their home during the rest of their lives.

The new life to which he had been called opened pleasantly and increased in happiness and opportunity, except for the sadness of bereavements, for, in the first few years, his brilliant brothers Edward and Charles died, and soon afterward Waldo, his firstborn son, and later his mother. Emerson had left traditional religion, the city, the Old World, behind, and now went to Nature as his teacher, his inspiration. His first book, "Nature," which he was meditating while in Europe, was finished here, and published in 1836. His practice during all his life

in Concord was to go alone to the woods almost daily, sometimes to wait there for hours, and, when thus attuned, to receive the message to which he was to give voice. Though it might be colored by him in transmission, he held that the light was universal.

“ Ever the words of the Gods resound,
But the porches of man's ear
Seldom in this low life's round
Are unsealed that he may hear.”

But he resorted, also, to the books of those who had handed down the oracles truly, and was quick to find the message destined for him. Men, too, he studied eagerly, the humblest and the highest, regretting always that the brand of the scholar on him often silenced the men of shop and office where he came. He was everywhere a learner, expecting light from the youngest and least educated visitor. The thoughts combined with the flower of his reading were gradually grouped into lectures, and his main occupation through life was reading these to who would hear, at first in courses in Boston, but later all over the country, for the Lyceum sprang up in New England in these years in every town, and spread westward to the new settlements even

beyond the Mississippi. His winters were spent in these rough, but to him interesting journeys, for he loved to watch the growth of the Republic in which he had faith, and his summers were spent in study and writing. These lectures were later severely pruned and revised, and the best of them gathered into seven volumes of essays under different names between 1841 and 1876. The courses in Boston, which at first were given in the Masonic Temple, were always well attended by earnest and thoughtful people. The young, whether in years or in spirit, were always and to the end his audience of the spoken or written word. The freedom of the Lyceum platform pleased Emerson. He found that people would hear on Wednesday with approval and unsuspectingly doctrines from which on Sunday they felt officially obliged to dissent.

Mr. Lowell, in his essays, has spoken of these early lectures and what they were worth to him and others suffering from the generous discontent of youth with things as they were. Emerson used to say, “ My strength and my doom is to be solitary ;” but to a retired scholar a wholesome offset to this was the travelling and lecturing in cities and in raw frontier towns,

bringing him into touch with the people, and this he knew and valued.

In 1837 Emerson gave the Phi Beta Kappa oration in Cambridge, *The American Scholar*, which increased his growing reputation, but the following year his Address to the Senior Class at the Divinity School brought out, even from the friendly Unitarians, severe strictures and warnings against its dangerous doctrines. Of this heresy Emerson said: "I deny personality to God because it is too little, not too much." He really strove to elevate the idea of God. Yet those who were pained or shocked by his teachings respected Emerson. His lectures were still in demand; he was often asked to speak by literary societies at orthodox colleges. He preached regularly at East Lexington until 1838, but thereafter withdrew from the ministerial office. At this time the progressive and spiritually minded young people used to meet for discussion and help in Boston, among them George Ripley, Cyrus Bartol, James Freeman Clarke, Alcott, Dr. Hedge, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody. Perhaps from this gathering of friends, which Emerson attended, came what is called the Transcendental Movement,

two results of which were the Brook Farm Community and the *Dial* magazine, in which last Emerson took great interest, and was for the time an editor. Many of these friends were frequent visitors in Concord. Alcott moved thither after the breaking up of his school. Hawthorne also came to dwell there. Henry Thoreau, a Concord youth, greatly interested Emerson; indeed, became for a year or two a valued inmate of his home, and helped and instructed him in the labors of the garden and little farm, which gradually grew to ten acres, the chief interest of which for the owner was his trees, which he loved and tended. Emerson helped introduce his countrymen to the teachings of Carlyle, and edited his works here, where they found more readers than at home.

In 1847 Emerson was invited to read lectures in England, and remained abroad a year, visiting France also in her troublous times. *English Traits* was a result. Just before this journey he had collected and published his poems. A later volume, called *May Day*, followed in 1867. He had written verses from childhood, and to the purified expression of poetry he, through life, eagerly aspired. He said, "I like my poems

best because it is not I who write them." In 1866 the degree of Doctor of Laws was conferred on him by Harvard University, and he was chosen an Overseer. In 1867 he again gave the Phi Beta Kappa oration, and in 1870 and 1871 gave courses in Philosophy in the University Lectures at Cambridge.

Emerson was not merely a man of letters. He recognized and did the private and public duties of the hour. He exercised a wide hospitality to souls as well as bodies. Eager youths came to him for rules, and went away with light. Reformers, wise and unwise, came to him, and were kindly received. They were often disappointed that they could not harness him to their partial and transient scheme. He said, My reforms include theirs: I must go my way; help people by my strength, not by my weakness. But if a storm threatened, he felt bound to appear and show his colors. Against the crying evils of his time he worked bravely in his own way. He wrote to President Van Buren against the wrong done to the Cherokees, dared speak against the idolized Webster, when he deserted the cause of Freedom, constantly spoke of the iniquity of slavery, aided with speech and money

the Free State cause in Kansas, was at Phillips's side at the antislavery meeting in 1861 broken up by the Boston mob, urged emancipation during the war.

He enjoyed his Concord home and neighbors, served on the school committee for years, did much for the Lyceum, and spoke on the town's great occasions. He went to all town-meetings, oftener to listen and admire than to speak, and always took pleasure and pride in the people. In return he was respected and loved by them.

Emerson's house was destroyed by fire in 1872, and the incident exposure and fatigue did him harm. His many friends insisted on rebuilding his house and sending him abroad to get well. He went up the Nile, and revisited England, finding old and new friends, and, on his return, was welcomed and escorted home by the people of Concord. After this time he was unable to write. His old age was quiet and happy among his family and friends. He died in April, 1882.

EDWARD W. EMERSON.

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