

1-1-2003

Review of: Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual by Peter S. Field

William Breitenbach

University of Puget Sound, wbreitenbach@pugetsound.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs

Citation

Breitenbach, William. 2003. "Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual (Book)." *Journal Of The Early Republic* 23(2): 307-310.

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF **PENNSYLVANIA**
PRESS

Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual by Peter S. Field

Review by: William Breitenbach

Journal of the Early Republic, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 307-310

Published by: [University of Pennsylvania Press](#) on behalf of the [Society for Historians of the Early American Republic](#)

discontent and frustrations come to life and are fully fleshed out in these works.

The stories these newly emergent documents tell are often surprising. It becomes clear, for instance, that Noyes, who held patriarchal sway over the Community and who condemned “special love” (exclusivity of affection), was himself weakened by sentimental romantic attachments to two women: Abigail Merwin, who had rejected his suit in his youth, and Mary Cragin, who had been inducted into plural marriage by Noyes in the Putney Community that was the predecessor to Oneida. G. W. Noyes’s discussions of these affairs are clear-eyed and perceptive.

This volume is a valuable contribution to the available body of primary source material since much of it is unavailable elsewhere. The text is judiciously edited by Foster, who has enhanced its value by including a cast of characters, photographs of key figures, and an appendix that includes the full text of the first *Annual Report of the Oneida Association* that allows the reader to develop a fuller understanding of the manuscript. This is a work that will prove of substantial use to all students of the Oneida Community as well as those interested in the broader history of communitarianism in America.

Louis J. Kern is Professor of History at Hofstra University. He is the author of *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (1981). His current research interest is in the culture of eugenics in America in the period 1850 to 1950.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Making of a Democratic Intellectual. By Peter S. Field. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2002. Pp. xii, 272. Abbreviations. Cloth, \$35.00.)

If Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had managed to hang on another thirty-four days in 1882, he might have said on his deathbed, “Emerson still survives.” It is astonishing how vital Emerson remains more than a century after his death. Scholars today seem compelled to come to terms with his ideas and example in ways that they do not for, say, Jonathan Edwards. The result has been an unending succession of repudiations and rehabilitations as commentators employ him to deliver a message for our times.

One reason Emerson still matters is that he was America’s first modern intellectual. He abandoned the ministry, avoided the academy, and proffered his thoughts directly to the public. This is the topic of Peter S. Field’s book, which is neither a full-scale biography nor an intellectual

history, but rather a study of Emerson's character and cultural impact as he fashioned a new vocation as democratic intellectual.

In the broad division of Emerson's detractors and admirers, Field falls among the latter. He identifies as his opponents those who stress Emerson's life of the mind, whether they view him as a heroic model of Man Thinking (Stephen E. Whicher) or as an aloof, alienated, and irresponsible idealist (Stanley M. Elkins and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.). By contrast, Field gives us Emerson outside the study door: "Not the inner life, the spiritual search, the religious struggle, or the isolated, individualist odyssey but the vocational search for a public role commensurate with Emerson's awesome ambition constitutes the heart of this project" (3). Joining many recent scholars, Field describes an Emerson who was deeply immersed in the public and popular culture of his day.

In Field's telling, Emerson's public career was determined early in life. Indeed, four of the book's seven chapters focus on the years before the "Divinity School Address" of 1838. The premature death of his father pitched the family into poverty, which made Emerson feel himself an outsider among the Brahmin elite to which he belonged by ancestry and education. Inoculated by indigence against the "reflexive conservatism" (40) of Unitarian ministers and Boston merchants, Emerson developed instead "an affinity with the millions of women and men who toiled mightily to eke out a living" (40). A parricide as well as an apostate, Emerson spurned the values of his father, who is for Field the "very embodiment of the Boston elite" (13).

Despite his contempt for Unitarian snobbery and social conservatism, Emerson became, like his father, a Unitarian minister. But he did so with "grave reservations" (63), backing into the ministry for want of vocational alternatives. Soon concluding that he could not achieve his ambition to revitalize Unitarian preaching and quickly tiring of pastoral duties, Emerson resigned his pastorate, hoping to find in some new vocation "a relevance and an impact" (90) not found in the ministry. A tour of Europe politicized him, helping him understand that his distaste for Unitarianism was part of a larger struggle of democracy against aristocracy. His emerging political and social egalitarianism matched his moral egalitarianism: the conviction that all people could draw upon a universal Reason to "uncover in themselves a common set of ethical precepts" (107). After his transformative European sojourn, Emerson returned to America and began his new vocation as a secular minister to a democratic nation.

In many respects, Field's account of Emerson's revolt against the effete, self-satisfied, conservative Brahmin establishment resembles Perry Miller's interpretation of Transcendentalism as a youthful insurrection against the stodgy alliance of State Street and Harvard Yard. But what is missing from

Field's version is Emerson's Transcendentalism—his explosive philosophical and theological principles. Indeed, Field discounts Emerson's ideas, repeatedly noting that he was not a precise, rigorous, or systematic thinker. Crucial moments in Emerson's vocational crisis are stripped of theological content. According to Field, Emerson's objections to the Lord's Supper were less doctrinal than democratic; he could not accept the "social discrimination" (89) that the sacrament involved. And the "Divinity School Address" was "less about dogma or doctrinal issues than it was a denunciation of intellectual and social elitism" (29). Never mind that the offended Unitarian clergy responded as though Emerson had launched a theological attack!

Field's desire to rescue the external Emerson from the internal one—the public figure from the private thinker—is strikingly evident in the fifth chapter, "The Transformation of Genius into Practical Power," which discusses Emerson's career as a lecturer. In it, we learn much about the money he took in, the venues he spoke at, the audiences he spoke to, and the style he spoke with, but we are told little of the ideas he spoke about. More important to Field than the content of the lectures was the fact that Emerson roamed around the country delivering them, mixing with and learning from the democratic people. Emerson becomes, in this formulation, a more cheerful, backslapping Alexis de Tocqueville, a man who felt "unfeigned admiration" for the "achievements and progress" and the "energy and ingenuity" of his audience (150). Unperturbed by the market revolution, "he envisioned his message of self-culture as the intellectual complement to Americans' headlong pursuit of material prosperity" (151). His goal was to provoke the public into discovering "their own awesome capacity for intellectual and moral development" (153); their equally awesome capacity for moneymaking they had discovered on their own.

Emerson's lecturing tours made him "relevant" and saved him from "the snobbish elitism of his erstwhile Brahmin colleagues" (142). In Field's estimation, a democratic intellectual—then as now—must be able to connect with ordinary people, communicating to them useful knowledge in language they can comprehend. Those whose learning is "merely fetishistic" (159), those who scorn the values and activities of people on the make, find themselves deservedly "isolated in academia or ignored by the public and all but irrelevant to the nation at large" (5). Although Field keeps insisting that Emerson served as the nation's conscience and critic, the democratic intellectual he portrays seems more nearly the nation's cheerleader.

Hence it is a jolt to turn to the chapter on Emerson and abolitionism, a chapter that seems unrelated to the others in methodology, topic, and tone.

One difference is that this chapter does talk in detail about the content of Emerson's ideas, carefully tracing his evolving views of slavery and race. Another difference is that it characterizes him not as a celebrant but as a radical critic of his society and then blames him for failing to carry his criticism far enough. Field shows that although Emerson overcame his youthful racism, he ultimately lacked the imagination, engagement, and will to elaborate "a genuinely multiracial vision of the United States" (198).

The concluding chapter reverts to form, reasserting Field's central claim that Emerson's alienation from Brahmin elitism and his ambition to make himself relevant drove him to devise a new vocation as an engaged public intellectual, or "optimistic meddler" (217), in which capacity he challenged his countrymen to develop the self-reliance that suited their democracy. That claim sounds right, even if Field sometimes seems uncertain whether Emerson was a radical critic or an admiring champion of American life, even if Field often seems intent on embedding Emerson in his society by denuding him of his ideas. But whatever its strengths and weaknesses, Field's book, we can be certain, is not the final word. Emerson still survives!

William Breitenbach is a professor of history at the University of Puget Sound. He is currently teaching a course about Transcendentalism and writing an article about the theology of John Humphrey Noyes.

Hearts of Darkness: Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition. By Bertram Wyatt-Brown. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. Pp. xvi, 235. Illustrations. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$24.95.)

In *Hearts of Darkness*, Bertram Wyatt-Brown traces the thread of depression through the lives and art of southern writers from Poe to Glasgow. The figures he explores are familiar enough: Poe, Tucker, Hammond, Ruffin, Simms, Lamar, Lincoln, O'Hara, Chivers, Lanier, Timrod, Porter, Harris, Twain, Woolson, Chopin, Cather, and Glasgow. What is unique is that Wyatt-Brown brings them all together in a discussion of southern art and southern sadness. Certainly the private lives of these authors comprise a tale of staggering collective grief. Of the eighteen, nine lost parents early, seven lost children early, seven lost spouses early, eight lost siblings early, and nine lost their own lives early—one jumped out a window, one shot himself, one was murdered, two died of tuberculosis, and four drank themselves to death. Then too there were tragedies that defy easy categorization. Twain witnessed his father's autopsy, Porter probably was raped in prison, and Simms lived to bury *eight* of his children. Blood flows