
Joel Myerson, ed. *A Historical Guide To Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 322p.

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Reading R. W. Emerson's philosophical essays and attending his lyceum lectures, Americans found wisdom to order their daily lives. His opinions about topics such as the individual, nature, religion, antislavery and women's rights now appear in a new collection of essays, *A Historical Guide To Ralph Waldo Emerson*. This book is one in a series about American authors. Each book in the series contains both a short biography and a chronology of historical events that occurred in context with important events in the author's life.

The book commences with an introduction by its editor Joel Myerson, Carolina Distinguished Professor of American Literature at the University of South Carolina, who recently received the Distinguished Achievement Award from the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society. Myerson also composed a useful "Bibliographical Essay" that appears at the end of the book and itemizes not only biographies and collections of essays about Emerson, but also books about Transcendentalism, Unitarianism, Philosophy, Literary History, and Concord (291-309).

Myerson states, in the introduction, these historical essays "show us how Emerson was a product of his time" (4). They also demonstrate Emerson's timelessness, because his views continue to have meaning for twenty-first century Americans. The introduction is followed by "A Brief Biography" by Ronald A. Bosco and a section entitled "Emerson in His Time," which contains five essays by Emerson scholars Wesley T. Mott, William Rossi, David M. Robinson, Gary Collison, and Armida Gilbert.

In the first essay, entitled "Emerson and Individualism," Wesley T. Mott discusses Emerson's concept of self-reliance. Today some readers may connect self-reliance to self-aggrandizement or commercialism, but according to Mott, Emerson meant to minimize the "predatory qualities" of man by emphasizing the concepts of "enduring individualism founded on reflection, principle, and ethical action" (88).

Many Americans of the nineteenth century certainly needed a man who could tell them how to balance the materialism of their times with a philosophical viewpoint that encouraged a union with God and nature. Modern readers who desire to reassure themselves of the accuracy of Emerson's rejection of self-aggrandizement should recall the famous image of the "transparent eye-ball" in Emerson's essay "Nature." He explains that only when man stands upon the "bare

ground” and loses his egotism does the eye-ball become transparent and allow the man to become one with God and nature (qtd. in Robinson 159).

In the essay “Emerson and Religion,” David M. Robinson asserts that “moral action” for Emerson constituted “the fundamental end of religious experience” (152). Emerson counseled people to seek an unselfish form of immortality by surrendering egotism and contributing to something larger than the self (173). Gary Collison also discusses Emerson’s concept of “moral action” in his essay “Emerson and Antislavery.” Emerson believed that when a law of society conflicted with a higher moral law, the moral law should be obeyed. He stated “an immoral law makes it man’s duty to break it at every hazard” (qtd. in Collison 198). He urged residents of Concord and Boston to disobey the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 during various attempts of the authorities to enforce it (198-204). Emerson publicly renewed his convictions against abhorrent laws, and ultimately he called upon Americans to celebrate the great success of the Emancipation Proclamation (Collison 204).

This historical background to Emerson’s lectures and writings fosters the belief that his philosophy does not exist in a vacuum. The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, for example, served as a stimulus for Emerson’s determination to write and deliver public statements that contributed to the split between the states leading to the Civil War. According to Collison, Emerson allowed his image to be compiled along with William Lloyd Garrison’s and other abolitionists in an 1857 lithograph print, which identified him as one of the “Heralds of Freedom” (207).

“Emerson, Nature, and Natural Science” by William Rossi describes Emerson’s attempts to explain nature to his readers. As a young man, Emerson became fascinated with botany, and the exhibits at the Paris Museum d’Histoire Naturelle. Emerson, who delighted in the power of the mind to classify and understand nature through implied connections, wished to become a naturalist (113-14). He continued to analogize the relationship of the “‘morals’ or mind” to the physical sphere of nature” (138). Rossi states that “specialization” of the sciences and the demand for “professional expertise” made it increasingly difficult for Emerson to preserve the unity he originally represented in *Nature* (119, 138). Emerson’s early inspirational writings in his book, *Nature*, received more publicity during his lifetime and are better-known today than his later lectures on the “Natural History of the Intellect” given at Harvard in 1870.

Even though Emerson devoted most of his time to writing about subjects such as nature, the soul, and the mind, he also became involved in the woman’s rights conventions by the invitation of suffragists. He never wrote extensively about

women's rights, but he did deliver an address in 1855 at a woman's rights convention. Fortunately, the 1855 address and the essay "Discourse Manque. Woman," which contains some of the statements made at the convention, will be available in June of 2001 in *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1843–1871* (Gilbert 212, 214, fn. 7), published by the University of Georgia Press and edited by Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson. Because of the lack of published information about Emerson's views on women's rights, the arrival of this book will certainly be welcomed.

Armida Gilbert, author of the essay "Emerson in the Context of the Woman's Right Movement," explains that Emerson's opinions about woman's rights evolved over the span of his lifetime. Some of his early remarks suggest a lack of interest in the movement (220, 221); however, Emerson's discussions of women's rights with the brilliant Margaret Fuller and other activists over the years led him to a more supportive stance (211-12). Emerson wrote in an 1851 journal that while women "have not equal rights of property & right of voting, they are not on a right footing" (qtd. in Gilbert 213).

Following the five essays by Emerson scholars, and the Chronology of his life, Ronald A. Bosco contributes the essay "We Find What We Seek: Emerson And His Biographers." Professor Bosco categorizes biographers according to the time period in which they wrote. Biographies published in close proximity to Emerson's death offered uniformly positive reports of Concord's sage (276). Later biographers emphasized Emerson's "adaptations" of the thinking of world famous philosophers such as Plato, Coleridge, and Goethe (277).

The psychological portrait of Emerson, published by Professor Stephen Whicher in 1953, still remains influential today. Bosco argues that "serious study" remains to be completed on the part of Emerson's late career that has been lost to the "present generation" mostly due to Whicher's influence of valuing only Emerson's work from the period 1830-1860 (277-79, 283).

Fortunately the new volume, *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1843–1871* will include lectures from the final productive decade of his life. Scholars may question the extent of the editing performed by the Emerson family because of Emerson's aphasia. However, cautions regarding the editing may be brought out without causing the work to be disregarded.

The scholars who contributed to *The Historical Guide* have enriched the readers of Emerson's texts by taking the opportunity to explain changes in his opinions over time by placing the statements in context with events in his life, including his interactions with brilliant literary figures as well as various special interest groups that shaped the history of America. In addition, the reader of this

guide gains an opportunity to perceive the historical importance of Emerson's actions that might not be revealed within the text of his essays and lectures. For example, Emerson's writings about slavery, read in isolation, would not necessarily indicate the weight of his influence or exactly what he did as a citizen of Concord to act as an advocate of freedom for all.