

---

Cecile Anne De Rocher. *Elizabeth Manning Hawthorne: A Life in Letters*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 211p.

JILL LARSEN  
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

Cecile Anne De Rocher's epistolary compilation *Elizabeth Manning Hawthorne: A Life in Letters* exposes a talent reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's "Judith Shakespeare." This text about Nathaniel Hawthorn's sister Elizabeth sheds further light on the life of her celebrated brother, yet a closer reading shows a woman of extraordinary talent and ability in her own right. De Rocher argues that Elizabeth is a "striking, intelligent, highly literate woman" who "recorded the home front of the American Civil War; critiqued new works of literature by authors whom history has since judged; and captured the changing seasons in a manner worthy" of Thoreau (191). The letters present insight into Elizabeth and Nathaniel's 1836 collaboration on the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*. Elizabeth Manning Hawthorn's letters reveal a domestic historical view of the 19th century: a unique slice of American history from an intelligent introspective woman's perspective.

De Rocher's text contains a chronology outlining Elizabeth's life, a preface overview of former biographical works about the Hawthorn family crediting Elizabeth's letters as source material (either credited or uncredited) for much of the perspective we have on Nathaniel Hawthorn. The close relationship between Nathaniel Hawthorn and his sister Elizabeth led many biographers to appeal to her for insider family information following the author's death. She hesitated to comply, arguing, "I have an aversion, always, to see a surviving relative of any man tell the public about him" (127). Luckily her prolific correspondence has provided much of the needed material.

The book includes an introduction, by the author, that argues Elizabeth's worthiness as a literary figure in her own right. The bulk of the work contains 118 of Elizabeth's 288 surviving letters divided into three sections: the early years, 1814-1842, of Elizabeth's life up until Nathaniel's marriage to Sophie Peabody; 1851-1871, the largest section, beginning and ending with Nathaniel's marriage; and the last twelve years of Elizabeth's life. Elizabeth Hawthorn's main correspondent is her niece Una Hawthorn (Nathaniel Hawthorn's daughter); many of the remaining letters are addressed to her Manning cousins.

Elizabeth Hawthorne's letters are lively and entertaining. There are delightful vignettes about 19th-century life, such as, "Did you know there was a new library in Salem? It is kept in a trunk at school" (46). Her sharpness, wit, and perception are displayed throughout as in her early explanation of her character: "I am perfectly

---

willing to be ruled and managed, but it must be done dexterously, and not by open rebuke, or repulsive frowns” (57); her later comments on women’s rights: “If women are paid as much as men for the same work, and have free disposal of their earnings, I think there is no other right worth contending for” (103); and her comment on religion: “We can only be safely guided by the light that comes from above” (103).

The work is enlightening and thought-provoking. The letters appear with few changes, and most alterations in the manuscript are reported in the notes. Unfortunately the text is not without its flaws. The annotations are sparse and the index inadequate. De Rocher’s commentary is extremely limited and leaves the reader with more questions than answers. While De Rocher briefly identifies some individuals mentioned in the letters, too many people are not identified and too little context is provided for significant historical events. More precise historical and biographical information would make this work more valuable, interesting, and entertaining. ✱