



Emerson: The Mind on Fire

Robert D. Richardson Jr. , Barry Moser (Adapted by)

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Ralph Waldo Emerson is one of the most important figures in the history of American thought, religion, and literature. The vitality of his writings and the unsettling power of his example continue to influence us more than a hundred years after his death. Now Robert D. Richardson Jr. brings to life an Emerson very different from the old stereotype of the passionless Sage of Concord. Drawing on a vast amount of new material, including correspondence among the Emerson brothers, Richardson gives us a rewarding intellectual biography that is also a portrait of the whole man.

These pages present a young suitor, a grief-stricken widower, an affectionate father, and a man with an abiding genius for friendship. The great spokesman for individualism and self-reliance turns out to have been a good neighbor, an activist citizen, a loyal brother. Here is an Emerson who knew how to laugh, who was self-doubting as well as self-reliant, and who became the greatest intellectual adventurer of his age.

Richardson has, as much as possible, let Emerson speak for himself through his published works, his many journals and notebooks, his letters, his reported conversations. This is not merely a study of Emerson's writing and his influence on others; it is Emerson's life as he experienced it. We see the failed minister, the struggling writer, the political reformer, the poetic liberator.

The Emerson of this book not only influenced Thoreau, Fuller, Whitman, Dickinson, and Frost, he also inspired Nietzsche, William James, Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Jorge Luis Borges. Emerson's timeliness is persistent and striking: his insistence that literature and science are not separate cultures, his emphasis on the worth of every individual, his respect for nature.

Richardson gives careful attention to the enormous range of Emerson's readings—from Persian poets to George Sand—and to his many friendships and personal encounters—from Mary Moody Emerson to the Cherokee chiefs in Boston—evoking both the man and the times in which he lived. Throughout this book, Emerson's unquenchable vitality reaches across the decades, and his hold on us endures.

Emerson: The Mind on Fire Details

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From Reader Review Emerson: The Mind on Fire for online ebook

Tom says

As with RR's excellent Thoreau: A Life of the Mind," this is a bio of a reader more than a chronological account of a life, and if indeed we are what we read, then RR provides a fascinating portrayal of one of the country's most important thinkers. (one small but intriguing detail: RWE often didn't finish books he was reading; rather, he claimed to have developed an ability to find what he considered most useful in a given work, and put aside the rest. That's quite liberating for any devoted reader who feels guilty for not finishing every book started!)

In addition to a moving account of RWE's life, RR provides an intellectual history of the century. His accounts of how ideas evolve through conversation and especially correspondence provides an important picture of the process of public and private intellectual debate. In RR's detailed but accessible renderings, such debates become the stuff of brainy thrillers.

For all the high-powered intellect on display here, RR never loses sight of the fact that ideas don't mean much without flesh and blood people to embody them. The Prologue's opening description of RWE visiting and opening the coffin of his deceased wife Ellen is more than just a bit of gothic detail to hook the reader; rather, RR uses it to explain a central motif in RWE's work throughout his adult life -- the need for "direct, unmediated experience" as a means of "striv(ing) for an original relation to the Universe."

Though purely as a matter of personal taste for the respective figures, I preferred RR's bio of Thoreau, but in all honesty, I think the Emerson is the greater achievement. Nonetheless, I would recommend reading both. Far from repeating key points and ideas -- since T and E knew each other well -- these works complement each other very well.

Intellectual bio's just don't get any better than this.

Though I've never been particularly attracted to the work of William James, I plan on reading RR's recent bio of that man, figuring that if it's anywhere near as good as this book, it will be an equally enlightening and enjoyable read.

Steven says

For a man who believed that biography is the only history worth reading, Emerson must have smiled in his grave when Robert Richardson, a modern master of the genre, published *The Mind on Fire*. Richardson is discriminating, tasteful, honest, rigorous, empathetic, and to the point. Whereas scholars tend to crunch and collate the Essays, Richardson gives us what we really want: a story. *The Mind on Fire* is about the unique, irreducible experience of Emerson: what he read, who he loved, where he walked, how he imagined, and why he wrote. To say this book satisfies doesn't quite do it justice. Rather, as only the best biographies can do, Richardson's book sends us dashing back to the source.

Jean says

Richardson says he wrote an intellectual biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) but had to include the normal biography information so the reader would have context to the events. Richardson has, as much as possible, let Emerson speak for himself through his published works, his journals and note books, his letters and reported conversations. The author not only covers Emerson's writings and his influence on others but his life as he experienced it. Richardson gives careful attention to the enormous range of Emerson's readings and to his friendships. Richardson goes into Emerson's founding of the Transcendentalist Club.

The author points out the wide range of people that Emerson influenced such as, Thoreau, Alcott, Dickerson, Fuller, Whitman, and Frost. He also inspired Nietzsche, William James, Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and Jorge Luis Borges.

Richardson did meticulous research for the book. The book is more or less easy to read but I felt there were too many repetitions and diversions that were unnecessary to the main point of the biography. I did enjoy learning more about Emerson. I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. The book was 27 hours long and Michael McConnohie narrated the book.

Michaela Wood says

"Emerson: A Mind on Fire" by Robert Richardson gives the intellectual journey of Ralph Waldo Emerson, from his days at Harvard, through a brief - though successful - church career, and to his celebrated radical writings - revolving a fiery abolitionist, staunch idealist, and sometimes feminist, transcendentalist. Emerson himself is portrayed as a fearless, good-humored, deeply interested philosopher as well as a prophetic reader. He seems wonderfully open to new information, growing his journals and his intellectual questioning; he connects his theories in eloquent ways, and keeps us interested, in his joyful salute to each new idea. Surprising to me was his varied and prodigious reading as well as an interest in Hindu, Sufi, and Buddhist philosophies, and his love of Persian poetry. This book blesses us with a healthy dose of discussion concerning a writer in his public vs. private life, and how the effects of fame can mangle the deeper tenants of a subtle man's work. Richardson makes good use of Emerson's extensive journals and with a discerning eye follows his reading list and influences.

Caroline says

This is a very difficult book to review because there's so much to talk about; I'm going to condense it and just say: read it.

The Mind on Fire is an intellectual biography of Emerson, although Richardson says that he ended up including more routine biography than he intended to in order to help the reader understand the development of his thought. Also to the point for Goodreads members: you'll end up doubling or tripling the length of your 'to-read' list. I started off listening to this, but quickly headed to the library so I could have a hard copy as well to source the sources.

Luckily for Richardson, Emerson left a biographer's dream: a vast journal that recorded his readings and reflections from his boyhood onward. Emerson himself indexed the journals repeatedly and drew on them

heavily for his speeches and essays.

And he read everything. The classics of course, but he also read widely in Asian religion and philosophy (Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism), German biblical criticism, Swedenborg, de Stael, botany, government studies of social conditions, Goethe, translations from Arabic and Persian etc etc. He was heavily influenced by Hafez and Swedenborg, among so many of the others he read. He also returned again and again to books previously read to study them again in light of what he had read since.

Richardson's exposition details the wide span of the reading but grounds it by embedding the books in well-selected examples of how a particular author shaped his next speech or essay.

Put simply, I highly recommend this book both for its illumination of Emerson's writings and as a portrait of New England during his lifetime. He knew everybody who was anybody in New England, and a good chunk of 'anybody' in England. His friendships with Carlyle, Thoreau, Fuller, and others are thoroughly discussed here, along with how they expanded his reading.

Bruce says

In this fine biography Richardson not only presents factual data about Emerson's life but also explores the philosophical strands and influences that played upon him, summarizing and explicating those influences so that the reader can in turn begin to appreciate how they wove themselves into Emerson's existing ideas to make an ever richer tapestry of thought. It is difficult not to reflect upon one's own ideas and the process of one's own intellectual and philosophical development in response to what Emerson was experiencing, even as one learns more and more about the process of his intellectual growth and the many and varying books, persons, and ideas that drove him.

Richardson has Emerson using the word "reason" in a way that initially seemed odd to me, ie to mean "intuitive graspings." I have always thought of intuition being the opposite of reason. But Richardson goes on to say that Emerson came to accept that the highest, most trustworthy knowledge consists of intuitive graspings, moments of direct perception, then summing these up as "reason." Richardson again: "The political trajectory of transcendentalism begins in philosophical freedom and ends in democratic individualism.... Transcendentalism in general and Emersonian idealism in particular offer an alternative to utilitarian liberalism, to leader worship, and to collectivism." For Emerson, a number of issues and convictions seem recurrently to emerge: 1) all present forms of education and religion are outdated and inadequate; 2) a person's only truth is that which emerges from his own experience and understanding; 3) ultimately, all phenomena and ideas are part of a Universal Mind; 4) everything is constantly in a state of change. Emerson wrote, "The purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself." "The end of being is to know; and if you say, the end of knowledge is action, - why, yes, but the end of that action again, is knowledge."

Emerson was profoundly influenced by Quakerism. "In the convergence of Quakerism and science with the Platonism and the Stoicism that already form the central stream of Emerson's thought we can see a common principle: the crucial illumination that the spiritual is not a realm apart from the natural but is instead revealed - and alone revealed - through the natural." Increasingly Emerson's thought reminds me not only of Quakerism but of the Tao Te Ching (especially 15) and Zen; there are indeed common roots to so many sources of wisdom around the world, and this is akin to the Perennial Philosophy expounded by Aldous

Huxley in his book with that title. For Emerson, God is communication rather than a being that communicates with us. He launched an attack on formal historical Christianity, denying personality to God because “it is too little not too much.” In its place, he offered a “gospel of the present moment, a belief not so much in pantheism as hypertheism, a declaration of the divinity of the human,”

Richardson fascinatingly explores the relationships between Emerson and his contemporaries, clarifying the influences both intellectual and artistic among them all. I found it his discussion of Emerson’s relationship with Thoreau particularly interesting, both their similarities and differences. None of his friendships was more important than that with Thoreau, and Richardson does a fine job of tracing the vicissitudes of that fascinating relationship.

Richardson does not present Emerson as a static thinker, as one who formulates a philosophy and sticks to it without modification through thick and thin. No, Emerson does change over time, but the changes tend to be ones of emphasis and nuance, his core beliefs remaining much the same, often indeed reinforced by his endless and relentless reading, thinking, lecturing, and writing as well as his fruitful and continuing conversations with the many bright and creative people in his vast circle of friends. As he aged, Emerson looked more and more to science as the source of certainties. Richardson summarizes the state of Emerson’s thought as he approached fifty years of age: “If there was less freedom in the world than appeared, there was also more order.” Indeed, although he lived for another thirty years or so, after 1850 Emerson’s thought and writing take on a more somber tone, consistent with his seeing the world more soberly and his experiencing not only national tragedies but the inevitable deaths of those closest to him. One can hardly expect his philosophical trajectory to be different from that of many others as they age, and it is interesting to learn about and reflect on Emerson’s ideas and experiences in light of one’s own. Yet there are themes from which Emerson never varied; here is Richardson speaking:

“When the storms of illusion clear, in the moments at the top of the mountain, these are the perceptions that Emerson retracts:

The days are gods. That is, everything is divine.

Creation is continuous. There is no other world; this one is all there is.

Every day is the day of judgment.

The purpose of life is individual self-cultivation, self-expression, and fulfillment.

Poetry liberates. Thought is also free.

The powers of the soul are commensurate with its needs; each new day challenges us with its adequacy and our own.

Fundamental perceptions are intuitive and inarguable; all important truths, whether of physics or ethics, must at last be self-evident.

Nothing great is ever accomplished without enthusiasm.

Life is an ecstasy; Thoreau has it right when he says, “Surely joy is the condition of life.”

Criticism and commentary, if they are not in the service of enthusiasm and ecstasy, are idle at best, destructive at worst. Your work, as Ruskin says, should be the praise of what you love.”

As the chapters of this biography draw toward an end, as Emerson’s memory and abilities decline, the reader, at least this reader of 66 years of age, experiences the poignancy if not the anguish of loss. Richardson’s work has made Emerson so alive that he has become a real person, almost a personal friend. This work is a splendid introduction to this pivotal American thinker for those unfamiliar with his writings, if there be any, and a wonderful overview for those who have read Emerson’s writings but know little about his life itself.

J says

Let's face it. I'm never going to finish this book. Too many distractions. I should just click five stars and call it a day.

From the preface:

? ?This book was originally planned as an intellectual biography, a companion piece to Henry Thoreau; A Life of the Mind. My approach to both Thoreau and Emerson has been to read what they read and then to relate their reading to their writing. The story, however - and it is a story - of Emerson's intellectual odyssey turned out to be incomprehensible apart from his personal and social life. The result is an intellectual biography as well as a portrait of the whole man. A great deal of newly available material has brought to light an Emerson strikingly more lively than the plaster sage of Concord.

? ?Emerson lived for ideas, but he did so with the reckless, headlong ardor of a lover. He associated the human mind and its capacity for thought with activity and energy. He hated the passive notion of the mind as a blank slate. He concentrated instead on the individual's sources of power, on access to the central fires that ignite the mind. His main image of the creative mind is of a volcano. "We must have not only hydrogen in balloons and steel springs under coaches," he wrote, "but we must have fire under the Andes at the core of the world."

Kate says

Do not read. Unreadable.

Neil says

Every couple of days I would read a chapter or two to get some food for thought. I recommend keeping a highlighter ready (if you do that sort of thing) because there are gems from Emerson and others you'll want to look back at when you skim through on a re-read (again, if you do that sort of thing.) The actual biography itself ranges from ok to good—Richardson's depth of research garners respect—but I felt it was the aphorisms and poems that kept me engaged throughout this two-pound paperback. Excerpts from Emerson hit that sweet spot between head-buzzing poetry and statements of everyday truths. He is at his best transforming abstract thought into accessible language, and every other page keeps you smiling in agreement.

Emerson draws up two columns. In one there are fate, nature, determinism and circumstance. In the second column stand power, thought, freedom, and will. The two columns relate in a process Emerson is now willing to call 'history.' "History," he says, "is the action and reaction of these two, Nature and Thought"...there is unity and there is advance. The unity lies in the fact that the entire second column...is just as necessary, as fated, as the first column...For Emerson is at last convinced that the universe can be understood as "advance out of fate into freedom."

Emerson began by asking, "How should I lead my life?" The answer given...is "Pursue freedom."

i.e. What doesn't kill you...

You go through good times and bad, and emerge wiser for it. The experience of both states are encoded in your DNA of understanding. Keep adding to the building blocks of your understanding, not wither away because of it. Emerson lost many loved ones, so when he affirms life by saying "pursue freedom," for me it carries a lot of weight.

This tome of one of the all-time greats expanded my perspective and lead me to some of Emerson's best works: "Self-Reliance", "Fate", "The Poet", "Illusions" and "Representative Men." I like this guy Emerson, I'm indebted to him and I'm grateful his writings live on.

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Mark says

Those Blasts of a Trumpet

I've recently finished reading Robert Richardson's engrossing biography, Emerson: The Mind on Fire. The author regularly highlights the exuberant reading Emerson did throughout his life. Robertson not only identifies authors and titles of what Emerson read; he also notes how Emerson read. Twice, Robertson quotes Goethe, a dramatic influence on Emerson: "What is genius but the faculty of seizing and turning to account any thing that strikes us... every one of my writings has been furnished to me by a thousand different persons, a thousand different things." Emerson was a proponent of skimming books: "The glance reveals what the gaze obscures. Somewhere the author has hidden his message. Find it, and skip the paragraphs that do not talk to you." At another time, Emerson suggested to "learn to divine books, to feel those that you want without wasting much time on them." Reminding me of the Yiddish writer Melech Ravitch who called for the creation of a "second Bible," Emerson advised, "Make your own Bible. Select and collect all those words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of a trumpet out of Shakespeare, Seneca, Moses, John, and Paul."

In Part 3 of The Book of Mev, I included a chapter called Reading/5. It consisted of excerpts, fragments,

lines from works that I read from 1988 to 2004.* This week I recognized myself in the Richardson's biography...

Your eyes! Turn them away for they dazzle me. — Song of Songs

The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character. — George Eliot

But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent. — William Butler Yeats

Everything in the world exists to end up in a book. — Stéphane Mallarmé

At that time of my life, all sorts of changes were taking place, and in particular I came to the realization that ever since I had first begun to write I had been living a real neurosis. My neurosis — which wasn't all that different from the one Flaubert suffered in his day — was basically that I firmly believed that nothing was more beautiful than writing, nothing greater, that to write was to create lasting works, and that the writer's life ought to be understood through his work. And then in 1953, I came to the realization that that was a completely bourgeois viewpoint, that there was a great deal more to life than writing. All of which meant that I had to rethink the value I placed on the written word, which I now felt was on a whole other level than where I had previously placed it. From that point of view, I was, somewhere 1953-54, cured almost immediately of my neurosis ... And so wrote *The Words* ... Had I been more honest with myself, I would still have written *Nausea*. Then, I still lacked a sense of reality. I have changed since. I have served a slow apprenticeship ... I have seen children die of hunger. In front of a dying child, *Nausea* has no weight.
—Jean-Paul Sartre

Il pleure dans mon Coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville — Paul Verlaine

I like kissing this and that of you. . . — E. E. Cummings

It will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. —Samuel Beckett

I have sometimes dreamt that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards — their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble — the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, "Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them. They have loved reading. — Virginia Woolf

Comforter, where, where is your comforting?/ Mary, mother of us, where is your relief? — Gerard Manley Hopkins

Worlds of eloquence have been lost.—Rene Char

For only that book can we read which relates to me something that is already in my mind. — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Keith Skinner says

I read this several years after reading Richardson's biography of Thoreau, *A Life of the Mind*, and after my first visit to Concord. In fact, I found this book in one of the Concord bookstores and immediately snatched it up, motivated partially by my memory of the Thoreau book and and partially by my visit to Emerson's house earlier that day.

The title of this book says it all. When you crack open the cover and turn past the flyleaf, you will embark upon an incredible journey in witnessing the deeds and transformations of a man who must rank as one of the most intriguing thinkers of all time. Richardson lets the story unfold in two different tracks, showing us the external world that influences Emerson while deftly allowing us to explore Emerson's emerging thoughts through the use of journals, letters and published works. We see a man who constantly struggles with the reconciliation of his New England Christian principles and the truths that he distills from his constant examination and re-examination of the world around him.

This book completely changed my earlier impressions of Emerson. Rather than a principled but somewhat despotic voice of Transcendentalism, he was a seeker and his written work was simply Waldo the man working through his feelings and perceptions, perhaps without a hope of ever arriving at a conclusion. If he spouted platitudes, he was his own intended audience rather than the world at large.

Yesterday's Muse Bookstore says

This is THE biography of Emerson. Not only does it cover the complete expanse of Emerson's life and work, it accurately and unapologetically follows the development of Emerson's skills as a writer and thinker.

Many biographies adopt a perspective of adulation towards their subject, which in some cases can cloud the reality of things. Richardson maintains an objectivity that allows him to paint an accurate portrait.

In addition, Richardson's decision to approach Emerson in this way highlights how effective was Emerson's famous work ethic in honing his talents and progressing towards new ideas.

For the scholar, this book also provides an extensive bibliography of works read by Emerson throughout his life, as well as a chronology of when he read them, which lends important insight, and gives readers an opportunity to walk in Emerson's footsteps.

Sher says

THE cultural and intellectual biography about Ralph Waldo Emerson. It wasn't planned, but I read this book concurrently with *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, and so I was able to consider closely how the Emerson bio related events in comparison to the more recent Fuller biography. The authors took the primary

sources in many of the same ways, but they did not agree across the board--especially in the personal relationship between Emerson and Margaret Fuller and other female Transcendentalists of the period. Plus the Fuller biography is less sympathetic toward Emerson, which was helpful, because Richardson biography does not present Emerson in relationship to feminist interests of the day. The Richardson biography glosses over Emerson's troubled second marriage and fails to present the darker side of his male nineteenth century persona. And, the Fuller biography stresses these areas, so I was able to see Emerson somewhere in the middle. My understand is much more complete having read these books concurrently.

This biography is comprehensive and detailed: it covers every literary and religious influence, all of Emerson's writings, and each major and minor figure having anything to do with Emerson and the Transcendental movement.

Victoria Weinstein says

This is the definitive bio on Emerson and well-deserves all the praise it has earned. A marvelous and gripping read, not to be missed by any of RWE's admirers.

Ashley Adams says

Robert D. Richardson also wrote a biography on Thoreau that got great reviews. Indeed, Richardson knows what he is talking about. His facts are solid, and his story clear. I finished the reading with a greater appreciation for the relationships Thoreau cultivated with other transcendental figures of his time.... It was kind of boring.

Emerson himself put a strong emphasis on the art of writing biography. Boldly, Emerson said, "All history is biography." With that in mind, I think Richardson's biography lacked the... luster needed to adequately depict Emerson's place in history.
