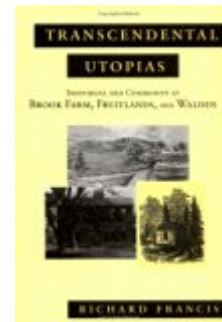


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Francis. *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. xiii + 256 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3093-0.

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Not long ago, a student who was preparing a presentation for an English class asked me what I knew about Charles Fourier and the Brook Farm experiment. Though I had never really learned a whole lot about Brook Farm or Fourierism in my graduate classes, I was sure I could be of some assistance to the student, fully entrenched as I was in my reading of *Transcendental Utopias*. However, much to our mutual disappointment, I was unable to shed any real light on Fourier or the Brook Farmers, largely because, as our conversation revealed, I was not exactly sure what the experiment was all about. This disappointment revealed the central truth about Francis' book: it is rugged terrain for the non-specialist.

*Transcendental Utopias* has lofty goals. Francis seeks to show that Transcendentalists were bridgers of the gap between individual and community, not victims of it as most scholars have argued. To that end, he studies the movement's three most notable experiments in communal living: the large community of Brook Farm, the smaller community of Fruitlands, and the "community of one" as Francis calls it, Thoreau's Walden. Living in a Communal Utopia, Francis argues, was how Transcendentalists reconciled the duality of the ideal and the real. The utopian community, properly constructed and operated, was the first step toward knowing and understanding the forces of history. A clearly outlined ideology regarding the relationship between nature and history could enable man to reorder society so that it operated in harmony with cycles of history and nature. This, in turn, would bridge the gap between the world of matter and the world of mind.

Particular personalities and their ideologies dominate Francis' portrayal of each of the three experiments.

More than half of the book is devoted to the story of Brook Farm, as Francis traces the community's evolution from its founding under the direction of George Ripley to the ideological inroads of Fourierism. Likewise, Francis' story of Fruitlands revolves almost entirely around Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane, while the study of Walden, as one would expect, is a story of the enigmatic Henry David Thoreau. In fact, the deep coverage of key leaders and their thoughts is perhaps the book's greatest strength. Readers looking for in-depth detail on the Law of Groups and Series that defined the ideological discourse at Brook Farm will not be disappointed here, nor will readers seeking the conflicts of leadership that prevented the communities from fully attaining their goals. Francis' chapter on the role of masquerade at Brook Farm is particularly strong. Lucidly written, the chapter analyzes both class distinctions among Brook Farmers and the importance of dress and performance as forms of entertainment at Brook Farm. "Masquerade," argues Francis, "provided a ludic paradigm of the interchangeability of the role that was part of the institutional fabric of Brook Farm from its earliest days...Because the human race can be seen as a single organism, we all play any and every role in the ongoing drama" (pp. 64-65). Francis provides a solid analysis of performance and entertainment at Brook Farm, and in doing so makes a most convincing argument regarding the early days of the Brook Farm experience.

Despite these strengths, the book has significant weak points. Most notably, the author's thesis is often lost amid the myriad of detail on the ideologies and individuals who directed these communities. Exactly how the ideas formulated and practiced at Brook Farm and Fruitlands aided in bridging the gap between the indi-

vidual and the community is not entirely clear. Rather than support the central thesis, the evidence Francis uses dominates in ways that convolute the story, and it is not certain to the reader how the evidence presented speaks to, supports, or proves the thesis. As a result, the focus of the book often drifts from its stated purpose. This problem exists within individual chapters as well. In the chapter entitled "Brook Farm as Sacrifice," for example, it is not clear exactly what Francis means by "Sacrifice." In fact, the term "sacrifice" does not even appear in the index, leaving the reader even more perplexed.

In addition, while the reader may expect a lengthy analysis of the issues surrounding the founding of these communities, no such analysis is found here. In fact, the communities happen on the scene rather uneventfully, as though they were foregone conclusions, and they fade from the scene almost as easily. There is no sustained discussion of the struggles to found them, nor do we find a close analysis of how they ultimately faltered. Moreover, while the book's main purpose is to study the communities' leaders and their ideas, no sustained discussion of other members of the communities takes place. While a discussion of conflicts based on social class at Brook Farm is mentioned in the chapter on masquerade, no further mention is made of the non-leadership core of these communities. Social historians will find no clues as to how the ideas embraced by community leaders were perceived, received, or rejected by many of the people at whom they were targeted.

*Transcendental Utopias* is very much a vertical history of a particular social institution, and as a result historians will encounter frustration at the lack of broader social context in the book. The individuals and the ideas Francis tracks are very much disconnected from the larger social environment in which they operated. Here,

the book could have done more to integrate the work of historians of both the Transcendental movement specifically and the social history of nineteenth-century New England generally. Passing mention is made of Anne Rose's *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement*, but there is no attempt to address Rose's portrait of Transcendentalists as activists and not mere thinkers. In addition, the book fails to discuss what "community" and "individualism" meant in nineteenth-century New England. As historians such as Michael Firsch and Hal Barron have shown, New Englanders in the nineteenth century were continually forced to assess and reassess what defined community, who was included in that definition, and how the individual gained a sense of identity from association with a given community.

Admittedly, Francis outlined a difficult task. Understanding Transcendental notions of history and nature, the ideal and the real, and the individual and the community all in one sitting lends itself to a reasonable amount of confusion. Indeed, Transcendentalists themselves (if we can use such a broad term for such a large, diverse group of people) go a long way toward creating much of the confusion in Francis' book. However, by focusing so intensely on the ideas that shaped the nature of these communities at the expense of analyzing what kind of an impact those ideas, and the movement as a whole, made on the broader social landscape of nineteenth-century New England, Francis has missed an opportunity to plug a historiographical gap that is in great need of being filled.

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