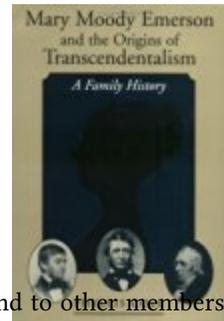


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Phyllis Cole. *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. vii + 370 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-503949-8.

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Phyllis Cole provides a compelling portrait of Mary Moody Emerson (1774-1863) and her influence on the entire Emerson family. In *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History*, Cole traces Mary Moody Emerson's life from her childhood to her death by analyzing her relationships, her intellectual life, and her contributions to New England Renaissance.

Cole writes that Mary Moody Emerson's "language of solitude, nature, and imagination directly nurtured the more renowned generation that followed hers" (p. 8). Emerson's language is portrayed through passages from almanacs, letters and conversations with siblings, nephews, and friends. MME, as she is referred to throughout the book, frequently "wrote rather than spoke her boldest thoughts" (p. 107) which she preserved and passed on to family members. These written thoughts are the basis for a fine study that brings Mary Moody Emerson to the forefront of the Emerson family.

When Mary rejected the idea of marriage in 1807, she vowed she would live a celibate and solitary life. Mary's rebellion reached beyond refusing marriage when she pushed the boundaries for acceptable female behavior through both what she read and what she thought. Though not formally educated as her brothers were, Emerson was clearly one of the geniuses in the family. She learned early that books could "[sustain] her life" (p. 87) and provide solace. Cole delineates Mary's thinking about her readings through the almanac entries and letters. Her reading included religious philosophy, with liberal tendencies, and often took the place of hearing sermons. She also enjoyed novelists such as Anne Radcliffe.

Expression of political views also provided an opportunity for Mary to push the boundaries of acceptable female behavior. The "public evil of slavery" (p. 221) was

particularly bothersome to Mary and to other members of the Emerson family.

Cole's depiction of Mary's travels and wanderings provide a picture of an independent woman who was more complicated than the eccentric Aunt Mary. Distaste for dependence dated from Emerson's early life when she was sent to live with relatives. As an adult she did not want to be a burden and sought accommodations that would provide her with the most independence until late in life when illness prevented living on her own. One of her greatest pleasures was in the solitary confinement of nature. Retreating to Waterford, Maine, she enjoyed the comforts of Elm Vale where she kept her treasures—books and mementos of family and of her life. MME returned to Concord, however, when she was needed.

Following her brother William's death, Mary helped Ruth, his widow, raise not only Ralph Waldo, but also her other nephews. While each nephew held a special place for her, Waldo, as she referred to her famous nephew, seemed to listen more intently to Mary and was influenced by her thinking and letters. Nurturing Waldo was of primary importance to Mary, and she "consciously assumed the role of mentor" (p. 164) to her nephew. Throughout Cole's study the reader sees not only the influence of Aunt Mary on Waldo's thinking and development as a poet but also the sometimes difficult relationship which ensued. Despite difficult times, Waldo depended on his aunt's almanacs and letters for inspiration and for guidance as he wrote and developed his thinking about Transcendentalism.

Mary also knew that kinship with other females was vital for survival. At an early age Martha Dexter, "the person [she said] who first gave [her] a taste for books and idea of a friend," influenced Mary (p. 86). Having a

mentor in her life may have shown Mary the importance of befriending young women as she aged. Several female friends, both related and not related, are mentioned throughout the text. This depiction of female friendship reaches beyond the usual domestic friendships to intellectual friendship. Mary was not an easy woman to befriend as Cole describes in stories about mentorships to young women. Connections with women such as Ruth, her sister-in-law, and Lidian, Waldo's second wife, are emphasized. Cole also notes that "a network of women grew up around Mary to protect her health, hear her wisdom, and comment among each other about her outrages to sense" (p. 250). Though a patriarchal family, Mary chose to pass on the history of the family to her niece, Ellen, Waldo's daughter, as it had been passed on to her. Mary was confident that the females would preserve the family history and relate stories to other family members.

This excellent biography adds a significant dimension to the Emerson family history by removing Mary Moody Emerson from the shadows. By placing her in an inner circle of influence, we can clearly see the roots of Ralph Waldo Emerson's thinking. With Cole's biography, Mary Moody Emerson is no longer only the eccentric Aunt Mary who dressed in a white shroud; rather, she is one of the important feminist and intellectual women of her era.

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