



## Book Reviews

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*Building Their Own Waldos: Emerson's First Biographers and the Politics of Life-Writing in the Gilded Age.* By Robert D. Habich. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011. Pp. xxx, 186. \$29.95 paper.)

*Building Their Own Waldos* provides a perceptive analysis of the first six biographies of Ralph Waldo Emerson, which were written in a burst of memorialization that began in 1881, the year before Emerson's death, and ended in 1889. Robert Habich's study of these quite disparate books enhances our understanding of Emerson's early reception and illuminates the genre of biography, which in the 1880s "was undergoing a redefinition driven in part by commercial considerations and in part by competing purposes" (p. 10). Habich understands biography as a genre conditioned by "ideology grounded in circumstance" (p. xix), and his engaging and superbly detailed narrative of the construction of each work makes an incontrovertible case for this approach. Each biography, as he demonstrates, was shaped by a swarm of intellectual, personal, and market-driven contingencies. Sincere admiration, celebrity worship, biographical responsibility, literary aspiration, financial need, auctorial ego, and publishers' diverse goals all influenced this early appropriation of Emerson, a hot biographical property in the 1880s. Familial efforts to control Emerson's legacy further complicated the writing of these early biographies. Longtime friends of Emerson, notably Bronson Alcott, William Henry Channing, and Frederic Henry Hedge, also felt a personal stake in the representation of Emerson, thereby compromising their value as impartial sources. Facing these tricky conditions, aspiring biographers were "forced to carve out new rhetorical territories for themselves," and Habich shows that these efforts made for "a rich, unstudied episode in the politics and commerce of life-writing" (p. xxi).

George Willis Cooke, Emerson's first biographer, was, like his subject, a discontented Unitarian minister who aspired to a more encompassing spirituality. His interest in Emerson was intensified by the examples of Western Unitarian radicals like Jenkin Lloyd Jones

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and further deepened by his 1880 attendance at Alcott's Concord School of Philosophy. This experience brought him, he felt, in closer touch with Emerson's role as a universal religious teacher, and his *Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Life, Writings, and Philosophy* (1881), heavily influenced by Alcott, rendered Emerson as a mystic and a dispenser of Orphic truth. But Cooke failed to ground Emerson in a recognizably concrete local context, in large part because of a lack of sufficient access to the Emerson family and the Emerson papers.

A lack of in-depth personal information also plagued Alexander Ireland (*Ralph Waldo Emerson: His Life, Genius, and Writings*, 1882) and Moncure Daniel Conway (*Emerson at Home and Abroad*, 1882), men whose brief periods of friendship with Emerson deeply affected them. Their books were, like Cooke's, fragmentary in biographical detail, but they confirmed their subject's transatlantic reputation and portrayed a "warm and socially engaged Emerson" (p. 127), a view that would not fully return until the 1980s and 1990s when readers reappraised his later works and his antislavery commitment.

"Evenhanded and gracefully written, personal in its appreciation but objective in its treatment" (p. 97), Oliver Wendell Holmes's *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1884) improved upon its predecessors. The "vigorous marketing by America's leading literary house," Houghton Mifflin, also helped to make the book a commercial success (p. 97). Despite his lack of access to Emerson's journals, Holmes's book was well informed, given his large network of literary contacts and his "workmanlike diligence" (p. 80) as a researcher. But Holmes leaned hard on the premise, implicit in all the early biographies, that Emerson should be remembered apart from transcendentalism, the movement that he helped to define and that is now nearly inseparable from his modern reputation. "By the time of Emerson's death," Habich explains, "the 'New School' was increasingly seen as passé: disengaged, irrelevant, childlike, even comic" (pp. 8–9). To protect Emerson from being tarnished, Holmes made him utterly un-transcendental, a man whose sometimes contradictory impulses were kept in check by "a constitutional equilibrium" (p. 89) that set him apart from his transcendentalist friends. This Emerson is not the religious radical or the egalitarian reformer to whom modern readers are drawn, but neither is he, Habich notes, a "cardboard icon fashioned by Gilded Age ideology" (p. 94). Holmes portrayed "an enormously complex and dynamic personality" (p. 94) that corresponds with the many-faceted, restlessly evolving personality one found in Emerson's journals.

This initial outpouring of biographical work culminated in two quite different books, both of which carried the authority of the Emerson family: James E. Cabot's *Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1887), the biography written by Emerson's literary executor and sanctioned by the Emerson family, followed two years later by *Emerson in Concord: A Memoir* (1889), a book authored by Emerson's son, Edward Waldo Emerson. While Cabot was making steady progress on his biography, Edward Emerson was preparing his memoir for "the Social Circle in Concord, 25 influential men who met each Tuesday evening from October through March" (p. 108). Edward began presenting parts of this work just before the publication of Cabot's official biography, which suggests that a subtle "rivalry" (p. 109) had developed between the men during Cabot's editorial work on Emerson's papers. This friction was further exacerbated by the Emerson family's sense that Cabot's intellectually oriented, scrupulously accurate narrative did not quite bring Emerson to life. In response, Edward Emerson determined to use anecdote and family recollection to re-create his father as a husband and parent, a friend and neighbor, and a citizen of Concord. Thus, his "much more localized" (p. 113) version of Emerson made information public that Cabot did not have or had regarded as outside the official biographer's sphere.

From a critical standpoint, both Holmes's and Edward Emerson's perspectives are valuable, as are the insights of each preceding biography. Taken as a whole, these early works create a portrait of "a diverse, complicated, deeply human Emerson" (p. 134), one that modern biographers and critics have since confirmed. Habich contends, however, that at the time this cumulative achievement had a surprisingly weak impact on Emerson's cultural reception. With the rise of "celebrity" (p. 127) as a marketable commodity in the early twentieth century, the richly complex Emerson of the first biographies was "supplanted by bland narratives of Saint Waldo" (p. 131) in the periodical press. As a result, "Emerson's cultural significance gradually flattened into an iconic monotone" (p. 126). Lost to the archives for a century or more, the early Emerson biographies now show us a "'whole-souled' Emerson" who is "startlingly alive and surprisingly modern" (p. 134).

David M. Robinson is *Director of the Center for the Humanities at Oregon State University and author of EMERSON AND THE CONDUCT OF LIFE (Cambridge University Press, 1993) and NATURAL*

LIFE: THOREAU'S WORLDLY TRANSCENDENTALISM (*Cornell University Press, 2004*).

*Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries.* By Stephen C. Taysom. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. Pp. xvi, 260. \$35.95.)

In his comparison of nineteenth-century Shakers (The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing) and Mormons (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Stephen Taysom focuses less on doctrine than on how "boundary markers" became vital to each group's religious self-definition (pp. 2–3). These boundary markers—Shaker celibacy and Mormon polygamy, for example—are defined as practices that "set [Shakers and Mormons] apart from the broader culture" (p. 203). Ultimately, Taysom argues, the two groups developed separate and distinct models of "outsiderhood," which served to promote and strengthen internal bonds and religious identities. Nineteenth-century Mormons, he claims, aggressively sought out conflict with mainstream America because their leaders relied on an "episodic crisis-driven tension model." By means of this approach, leaders fostered communal cohesion by (1) adopting doctrines that would elicit a strong negative response from "the host culture," then (2) ramping up tensions with belligerent rhetoric, thereafter (3) capitulating to external demands in the moment of crisis, and eventually starting the process all over again (p. 199). Shakers, on the other hand, adopted a "stable high-intensity moderate-risk tension model" by selecting boundary markers that would generate manageable tensions short of crises, and then encoding mainstream American culture's less extreme negative responses into their self-understanding as a persecuted and chosen people of God (p. 200). Although Taysom's focus on boundary markers addresses an important and often neglected element of religious identity formation, his models are nevertheless flawed because they are largely based on inconsistent and overly narrow analyses.

In the first two chapters, Taysom compares the physical boundaries of nineteenth-century Shaker and Mormon communities. In chapter 1, he conceptualizes Shaker space in terms of a "culturally postulated world" and an "experienced world" in order to explain the differences between Shaker rhetoric, which posited the outside world as evil, and Shaker practice, which negotiated ways in which