Book Reviews


In his second biography, John Matteson, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father (2007), amply succeeds in his effort to comprehend the “Force” (p. xi) that is the transcendental activist Margaret Fuller. Matteson sees Fuller's life itself as her “greatest creation” and argues that it unfolded in a “series” of personal and professional “identities” (pp. xiv–xv): prodigy, misfit, “Margaret Goodchild,” apostle, conversationalist, ecstatic editor, seeker of utopia, advocate, lover, critic, internationalist, inamorata, revolutionary, victim, and “Margaret-ghost.” Such multiplicity suggests that Fuller was a presciently modern creature, quick to adapt to new circumstances and to open herself up to major life changes. As Matteson observes, “to a degree far greater than any other member of her social and literary circle, Fuller possessed a genius for the reinvention of self. With a tremendous awareness of what she was doing, Fuller lived her life as an ongoing occasion for growth and change” (p. xiii). Throughout this impressive work, Matteson hones a sense of how Fuller’s “chameleon[ic]” impulses both aligned her with the larger transcendentalist effort of self-culture and ran counter to it, as she achieved not perfection but expansion of her sphere of action from Boston to the transatlantic world.

Fuller has been the subject of a host of excellent biographies, the most recent by Charles Capper (in two sizeable volumes) and Meg McGavran Murray, but seasoned admirers, Americanist scholars, and curious readers alike will find much in this newest exploration to captivate and to instruct. Matteson’s ability to present a balanced portrait of Fuller is particularly compelling. This “prismatic” (p. xv) method does not place undue emphasis on any one aspect of her personality or phase of her career but admirably attempts to examine all of her incarnations: hence, Fuller’s generous devotion to family members will surprise the reader who knows her as an egotistical “mountainous ME,” and those who are intimidated by her abstruse

prose will instead be impressed with her hands-on care for wounded soldiers in a Roman hospital.

Matteson begins his narrative with, as he puts it, “endings,” expressing his regret at the fact that common knowledge of Fuller is often confined to the tragedy of her untimely death. However, he contributes to that limited focus by overemphasizing Fuller’s references to water throughout her life, making many of her experiences seem like grim preludes to her eventual drowning in a shipwreck just two hundred yards off Fire Island, New York, in 1850.

In stylistic terms, this biography is lucidly, absorbingly, and even grippingly written, deftly incorporating a wealth of material from Fuller’s letters, diaries, and published works. In particular, Matteson’s detailed attention to the Fuller family papers at Harvard’s Houghton Library and to unpublished materials from the Boston Public Library sheds fresh light on our understanding of her childhood environment and adult alliances, just as his inclusion of two previously unpublished images of Fuller reveals her in new guises. On matters of scholarly doubt or debate—such as Fuller’s bold marriage to Italian aristocrat and revolutionary soldier Giovanni Angelo Ossoli—Matteson enters into thoughtful conversation with other biographers and critics and generates his own persuasive interpretations. His writing complements and draws strength from Fuller’s own; yet this dialogue constitutes a subtle counterargument to his early assertion that “Fuller’s essence was life, not writing” (p. xiv).

Beginning with her study of Plato, Shakespeare, Molière, Cervantes, and Goethe, Fuller developed a formidable fund of knowledge that would serve her well as the literary editor of Horace Greeley’s New-York Tribune, a position she held from 1844 to 1846 and in which she was astonishingly productive, publishing two hundred fifty reviews and cultural commentaries. Digging deeper into the past, Matteson discovers a young Fuller who won the “Eye of Intelligence” in school but failed miserably in her attempts to mingle with her Cambridge peers. Nonetheless, she cultivated early and intense friendships with such equally intellectual men as Frederic Henry Hedge and James Freeman Clarke—each a future Unitarian minister and university professor—as well as transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Matteson pays careful attention to Fuller’s tumultuous relationship with Emerson, whose loyalty to Fuller held firm even when his reserve and detachment could not match her emotional pyrotechnics. In recognizing her as a driving force of an international women’s movement to which she helped
give voice in Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845)—the book that made her famous—the author also puts her in vivid relation with Anna Barker, Caroline Sturgis, George Sand, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Costanza Arconati Visconti.

It was in these social bonds that Fuller most definitively departed from her transcendentalist cohort, with whom, as Matteson notes, she has been almost exclusively linked in studies of American literature and history. A talented conversationalist, courageous journalist, and Italian freedom fighter, Fuller was “a woman whose passion for social justice would eventually equal her intelligence” (p. 444). Both curious and fearless in her investigative reporting on the conditions of imprisoned American prostitutes and the European working classes, Fuller walked the streets of New York and Rome ready to appreciate their human variety but conscious of the need to correct the social inequalities she perceived. Sensing both “the complacent materialism of a money-minded society” and the reality that “true transcendental idealism was a luxury of gender and class” (pp. 173–74), Fuller used her influence as a writer to bridge what we would now recognize as the gap between elite cultural values and the “ninety-nine percent” of an America (and a world) in whose democratic potential she fervently believed. It is this Margaret Fuller that Matteson urges us to adopt as our own: a model for impassioned thinkers and global citizens of the twenty-first century.

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The American Renaissance, Larry J. Reynolds shows, was heavily influenced by the “violent times” (p. 201) of the nineteenth century. In this well-researched volume, Reynolds examines seven authors’ struggles with the morality of political violence, largely framed by, as the cover illustration suggests, the iconic, troublesome figure of John Brown. Reynolds carefully historicizes and discusses Margaret Fuller’s