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Emerson: The Mind on Fire

Robert D. Richardson

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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 chapters 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.

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