

VOL. XXXIII No. 3

Price 1 Dollar

VERMONT *History*



July 1965

The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Emerson Lectures in Vermont

By RALPH H. ORTH

LECTURE

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

will Lecture in the Town Hall on THURSDAY EVE., DEC. 9th, 1858. Admission 25 cents. Tickets for sale at Fuller's Book Store, Brinsmaid & Hildredth's and at the door. Doors open at 7, Lecture to commence at 8.

AMONG the winter amusements of the citizens of Vermont in the days before radio, television, and motion pictures was the public lecture. It was a source of enlightenment and uplift as much as entertainment, and many of the most famous figures of the nineteenth century appeared on the American lecture platform at one time or another—Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, for instance. To many citizens in the isolated towns of the Green Mountain State, the lectures must have been a godsend.

Certainly one of the most popular American lecturers of the time was Ralph Waldo Emerson. From 1833, when, at the age of thirty, he delivered his first lecture on "The Uses of Natural History" before the Natural History Society in the Masonic Temple in Boston, to his address on Carlyle before the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1881, only a year before his death, Emerson delivered over 1,400 lectures in at least twenty-two states including such raw and remote ones as Wisconsin, Kansas, and California.¹ Many of these lectures later developed into successful books: *Representative Men* and *English Traits*, for instance, grew out of just such series.

Closer to home, Emerson spoke most frequently in the New England states, including Vermont. It was not only as a successful public figure that he toured, but as a man of ideas committed to the concept that the country lyceums and town halls allowed him to bring culture to the

1. For a full list of Emerson's lectures and when and where delivered, see William Charvat, *Emerson's American Lecture Engagements: A Chronological List* (New York, 1961).

provinces. His first appearance in Vermont was at Middlebury College on July 22, 1845; in later years he appeared in Burlington, Rutland, North Bennington, Fair Haven, Poultney, and Brattleboro. Of these lectures, a fairly lengthy report of the one in Burlington on December 9, 1858, has been preserved in the Burlington *Free Press* for the following day.² It gives us a glimpse of the lecture circuit a century ago.

Emerson's relations with the state of Vermont make an interesting footnote to his and the state's history. A survey of his collected letters and the definitive biography uncovers bits and pieces of information.³ His earliest trip to the state apparently occurred with his brother Charles in May, 1831, after the death of his first wife Ellen the winter before, when he met President James Marsh of the University of Vermont, like Emerson a Coleridge enthusiast. In January, 1865, in Fair Haven, where he had come to lecture, he lost his purse, apparently to a pick pocket, and was forced to borrow ten dollars from a local resident, probably Mrs. S. G. Perkins. In July of the same year, when he went to Ripley Female College in Poultney (now Green Mountain Junior College) to deliver the commencement address, the girls initiated him into a secret society called the M. Y. O. B. Probably the most amusing incident is that recorded in a letter of Emerson's to his brother William on August 24, 1868, when he and his daughter Ellen stayed at the old hotel atop Mount Mansfield: "We were not quite fortunate, as we found a party of amateur players on the top of Mansfield Mt. filling the house, too, all night with violent fun. And as they were good young people, . . . perhaps the contretemps was not better. If I could have spared the time, we should have outstayed the company, & made our religious visits to the crags later." Luckily the next day was passed more serenely: "We spent a whole day on the banks or in the bed of the Winooski (Onion) River, at Essex Junction, with great content."

Emerson's lecture in Burlington was delivered at the Town Hall, built in 1853-1854 and located on the same site as the present City Hall, a building which was "ample and comely in appearance" but "difficult to hear in," according to the *Free Press* of May 14, 1855. The lecture itself, called in the review "Conduct of Life," was, from the description of its contents, actually "Considerations by the Way"; "Conduct of Life" was the name of the series. Whoever the reporter was, he was an assiduous note taker who collected many of the highlights of the lecture,

2. The *Free Press* is available on microfilm at the Bailey Library at the University of Vermont.

3. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 6 vols. (New York, 1939), and Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (New York, 1949). For what follows, see the *Letters*, V, 401, 420 and VI, 22, 30, and the *Life*, p. 154.

although his outline has several long gaps and the ending is severely truncated.

The reporter's complaint of "the want of connection & *progress* of thought" was, of course, the standard criticism of Emerson's writings; even "Self-Reliance," the most famous of Emerson's essays, is largely a succession of brilliant statements rather than a clearly developed whole. Ironically, according to Edward Waldo Emerson, Emerson's son and editor, in a note to the collected edition of his father's works, "Considerations by the Way" was designed for those of his listeners "who were attracted by his personality, or by friendship, or by his growing fame" instead of his philosophy and who would thus "have found it hard to follow his thoughts' subtle thread . . . or ascend to its higher levels."⁴ If the reporter's reaction, which can perhaps best be characterized as respectful but puzzled, is an indication of the general public response, Emerson may not always have hit his mark.

MR. EMERSON'S LECTURE

A select and intelligent audience assembled in the Town Hall last evening, to hear Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson, of Concord, Mass., and found themselves repaid for going. They may not remember much of what they heard—may find it difficult to state to-day even what his subject was, and may, consequently, not be conscious of any great amount of instruction gained or impulse received; but they know that they listened with pleasure, unmixed with a moment's tedium, to the speaker; that many of his sentences seemed filled with wisdom, and many more with a dry and quiet humor; and that, if there was nothing that thrilled, neither was there any thing that repelled. His hearers will agree one and all, that it was a *good* lecture, and so it was. We failed, for ourselves, to discover throughout, the subtle thread of connection on which Mr. Emerson strung his thoughts, and our abstract of the lecture will be, what the lecture was to most of his hearers, we fancy—a collection of scattered aphorisms.

The subject was *The Conduct of Life*. Mr. Emerson said he did not wish life to be cheap;—we have something more to do than to draw in our breath and puff it out again; it is something more than the lime in our bones that holds us together. That by which each one conquers is a secret to all others. Fine society starves us; fine souls save us. Nothing is impossible to the man that can *will*—who can say, that needs to be, therefore it shall be. A good deal of every man is rubbish, and a great

4. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition, 12 vols. (Boston and New York, 1903-1904), VI, 400.

part of mankind are rubbish. How many politicians, quack doctors, aldermen, dandies, border ruffians and the like, might be advantageously spared. "I do not care for the masses," said Mr. Emerson, "I only wish to tame, divide and break them up—to draw out of them the individuals. Give me only honest men and sweet women—not the boisterous, headstrong, unthinking, gin-drinking masses." There is a difference in individuals; hence the absurdity of the custom of 'pairing off' in vogue with our legislators, as if the failure of one man to vote wrong, could release another man from the duty of voting right; suppose the 300 at Thermopylae had paired off with as many Persians, would it have been all the same to Greece? Nature is chary of great souls. She showers an acre of sour crabs where she gives one good dessert apple. She gives shoals of Indians, with but two or three good heads in a nation of them. Each good available man has fifteen to twenty inefficient ones depending on him. Do you say, then, the rabble may be done without! Not so; the mass are neuters, each of which *may*, in a given conjunction of circumstances, become a queen bee. Moreover, the masses exist; and if a man is, it is because he is wanted. If we are here, it is because we have right to be here—as good a right as Cape Cod has to be there.

The first lesson of History is that Good is a good doctor but Bad is often a better one. The grand results of History are all brought about by disgraceful tools. Out of Sabine forays real Romes arise. God hangs greatest weights on slenderest wires. Every deformity is a good passion out of place, and every man is sometimes indebted to his vices. Poisons make good medicines; God makes the wrath of man to praise him. We cannot ask that the individual shall be faultless, but only that Man shall steadily ameliorate. All great men come of the middle classes. It is a fatal disadvantage to be cockered and to eat too much cake. Bad times have a scientific value; we learn geology the morning after the earthquake. Thus in human life everything—folly, disasters, blunders, bad boys and border ruffians, as well as virtues and philanthropists—is worked up and comes into use.

The greatest necessary of life is *health*. To gain that no exertion must grudge; for sickness is a hungry cannibal that devours soul and body. Dr. Johnson said "every man is a rascal as soon as he is sick." As the best part of health, cultivate a kind disposition. When we are sincerely pleased we are nourished. Goodness hath ever a smile. "Paint costs nothing," say the good housekeepers; but sunshine costs less and is the finer pigment of the two. "Be merry and wise" is an old and good proverb. I know and I hate, those fellows who always see a black star in the zenith. Hope puts us in a working mood.

There are three wants which are never satisfied,—that of the rich man who wants more, that of the sick man who wants something different, and that of the traveller who says ‘any where but here.’ Mr. Emerson does not believe in wandering; he thinks there is a bad restlessness in our people. A prominent instructor of girls had told him that an idea of an education now adays, was whatever qualified one for going to Europe. But why go from home? The stuff of all nations is the same. In all lands they scald milk-pans, and swaddle infants and burn brushwood.

Mr. Emerson next talked of conversation. He did not object to levity upon occasion. Like Talleyrand, he found nonsense often refreshing; but a strong viscous virulent fool was no joke. A blockhead makes blockheads of his companions and when the case is a bad one, the only remedy is amputation—cut and run.

Our chief want in life is of some one to make us do what we can. We provide good houses and good food and good clothing; but too often neglect to provide good friends. If you deal generously by others they will deal generously with you. Let not your service be mercenary though paid for in money. Remember that wherever there is failure some step is omitted. You can boil granite as easily as you can water, and braid rock strata as easily as you do candy, if you only *take all the steps*.

The above will give our readers some idea of the Lecture. It was decidedly Emersonian,—many things being well and truly said, and many sentences containing in a curious device of words a common place or worthless idea. The great lack as it seemed to us, as we have intimated, was the want of connection & *progress* of thought through the discourse, and this, if we mistake not, is a characteristic want in much of Mr. Emerson’s writing and talking.

We were glad to hear Mr. Emerson, & feel obliged to the young gentlemen, who at a considerable expense, of which a large share must come from their own pockets, gave the public the rare pleasure of hearing that distinguished gentleman.

The slippery walking doubtless kept numbers from the lecture, and we presume a large audience will greet him, if he shall ever lecture here again.