

## Eccentrics

# Bronson Alcott:

## An Educator Apart from the Rest

By Chloe Lizotte

Perhaps the most education-oriented transcendentalist in the movement's heyday was Louisa May Alcott's father, Amos Bronson. This turned out to be quite ironic given that the Alcott family's patriarch himself experienced almost no formal education as a child. Later to become renowned for his boundless determination, a young Bronson was able to teach himself to read and write merely by scrawling letters on the floorboards of his kitchen with charcoal. Then, as a teenager, Bronson traveled to the southern United States as a solicitor of books and various goods, intent on earning some money for his destitute family. This action plan however left Bronson in significant debt despite exposing him to an upper class Southern lifestyle that he had never seen in his native Connecticut. Perhaps influenced by this exposure, upon returning to New England, he elected to switch careers and pursue a job in education.

Bronson worked in various schools for about ten years before he opened the Temple School in Boston in 1834. His progressive and radical approach quickly set him apart from other schoolteachers of his day. Bronson considered it his job

not to merely dictate facts to the children but to guide them as they discovered and developed their own abilities. Students were encouraged to be inquisitive and open-minded in class, and Bronson attempted to expose them to art, music, and nature, subjects which were rarely mentioned in other schools. Furthermore, Bronson was famously opposed to corporal punishment. Rather than striking the children when they were disobedient, he would reverse the roles and ask students to strike his own hand – if the students were not paying attention, Bronson assumed that this was his own fault. Despite the innovation of Bronson's teaching, his ideas perplexed the public. Many parents pulled their children out of his school, and the Temple School was closed after a mere five years.

A true transcendentalist, Bronson quickly became friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Henry David Thoreau, among others. He wrote a number of books as well as a column in the Concord-based transcendentalist publication *The Dial*, featuring his "Orphic Sayings" – bizarre,



enigmatic, philosophical statements which unfortunately often only confused readers instead of enlightening them. But his friends had great faith in him, particularly Emerson who pushed the Concord school board to appoint Bronson its first superintendent, a position he enthusiastically accepted despite a miniscule salary. Needless to say, he completely reinvented the Concord school system's curriculum, something which the town welcomed.

1879 saw the opening of Bronson's School of Philosophy where he held various lectures for adults, quite possibly the first adult education center in America. In stark contrast to the Temple School he opened forty years earlier, the press greeted the School of Philosophy with glowing reviews. His star was finally on a rise, a testament to his lifelong dedication to well-meaning unorthodox ideas.

**To learn more about Bronson Alcott, visit Orchard House in Concord:**  
<http://www.louisamayalcott.org/>

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