

Eccentrics

"I Accept the Universe!" Fuller Proclaimed

By Chloe Lizotte

Margaret Fuller met Ralph Waldo Emerson in the summer of 1836 just before transcendentalism began, when Emerson was finishing writing "Nature." At first, Emerson was unimpressed with her. He thought Margaret very "plain" and found himself distracted by her "nasal voice." Yet Margaret eventually won him over such that Waldo grew to appreciate her level of intellect and her personality. "I remember that she made me laugh more than I liked," he later said, "for I was, at that time, an eager scholar of ethics, and had tasted the sweets of solitude and stoicism, and so I found something profane in the hours of amusing gossip into which she drew me."

Before meeting Emerson, Margaret had attended several schools where she learned German and Italian. But before long she decided she was unchallenged by other people she knew, viewing most women as beneath her level intellectually. Because of this, Margaret came to be thought of as quite vain. At one point, she proclaimed "I accept the universe!" as if the universe should feel like it had earned her respect. She also once announced one day that she had "never met her intellectual equal."

In 1839, Margaret began to sponsor a series of seminars for women called "Conversations." She invited women from areas around Boston, from wives of famous intellectuals to women working on starting up their own careers, often-times as writers. The women debated many subjects, including mythology, art, education, and women's rights. The

many resulting discussions inspired provided Margaret's cardinal work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Written in 1845, her book is still considered a classic piece of feminist writing today.

In 1840, Margaret became the first editor of transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*. She spent much time in Concord attempting to persuade less-than-eager writers to write for the publication. But upon reading what was submitted, she frequently became disgusted, rejecting the material outright and replacing it with her own essays. Consequently for about two years, she wrote the lion's share of each issue herself. Emerson then took over as editor, although sources say Margaret actually continued to do most of actual editing. In 1843, Margaret contributed to *The Dial* a clarion call for women's equality titled "The Great Lawsuit: Man vs. Men and Woman vs. Women."

In 1844, Horace Greeley asked Margaret to become book review editor for the *New York Tribune*. Margaret accepted and became very successful in this position. She began writing reviews not only on books but on New York art and culture as well.

In May of 1850, after three years of living in Italy with a man 10 years younger than she (records are unclear if they actually married) and their young son, Margaret and her family boarded a ship to America. Tragedy however struck when the ship's captain died of smallpox



and his less experienced replacement crashed the ship into a sandbar within sight of Fire Island, NY. The powerful current claimed the lives of Margaret and her family and other passengers. Henry David Thoreau was sent to search the wreckage for her remains but none were found. A manuscript she had been working on about the Italian revolution was lost forever as well.

For the 40 years Margaret Fuller was alive, she did her best to make a difference in the world, and it worked. Was she a true eccentric or merely a fierce pioneer dedicated to the principle of equal rights? Whatever the case, her work as a transcendentalist and a feminist certainly propelled the state of American culture miles forward, one of many reasons Emerson had been happy to know her. No less than Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote that Margaret "possessed more influence on the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time." I'm sure if Margaret were alive today she'd be pleased to see that many of her dreams of gender-equality have finally come true, although she'd most likely also feel we've still got a way yet to go.

Margaret Fuller's legacy lives on at the Margaret Fuller Neighborhood House in Cambridge. For more information, visit <http://www.margaretfullerhouse.org/>

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