

## Eccentrics

# William Ellery Channing: A Poet Misunderstood

By Chloe Lizotte

The life and career of the poet William Ellery Channing defied and rejected many of the social standards of his time. Ellery's life began in 1817 in Boston, Massachusetts, sharing his name with his great-grandfather, who signed the Declaration of Independence, as well as with his uncle, a Unitarian minister. Growing up, the younger William Ellery had quite a rebellious streak and was even expelled from Harvard University in 1834 before the end of his freshman year! This did not bother young Ellery, though – he quickly discovered that he preferred spending time on more free-form activities rather than the denser subjects he had been studying at Harvard. Just a year later in fact, he had already begun to publish quirky essays under a pen name, an exercise that made it clear to Ellery what his true calling was—to become a poet.

Shortly after this revelation, Ellery decided to relocate to rural Illinois. While there, he constructed a floorless log cabin where he could farm and live in isolation from the public. However, after only a year, he moved to the metropolis of Cincinnati where some of his extended family resided. In this more energetic environment, Ellery resumed writing poetry. Much of his material in those days was inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature*, which explains why Ellery chose to send his poetry to be

published in the transcendentalist journal *The Dial*, of which Emerson was a member of the staff. At that point, Margaret Fuller was the editor of *The Dial*, an extraordinary coincidence in that Ellery, around that same time, happened to meet Margaret's younger sister, Ellen, in Cincinnati. The two married a year after meeting and left Cincinnati to live in Concord, Massachusetts, the home base of *The Dial*.

Ellery's poetry, however, was not particularly popular, such that he could only survive financially from donations from family and friends. In fact, he was more often criticized than praised for his work, his poems striking many as quite abstract as well as progressive in terms of transcendentalist thinking, concepts that tended to lead his readers astray. One of his more well-known critics was Edgar Allan Poe, commenting that "it may be said in [Ellery's] favor that nobody ever heard of him." However, Emerson praised the beauty of Ellery's writings, and continued to publish his transcendentalist philosophizing in *The Dial*.

Ellery generally disliked the limits society placed on him, preferring to live in seclusion from others. Decidedly eccentric and inclined to wander rather than to stay still, his wife chose to leave him in 1853 as he continued to be



incapable of providing any sort of security or income for her or their four children. Despite his shortcomings as a husband, however, his personality made him a worthy companion of Concord's most famous eccentric Henry David Thoreau. For a time, the two were practically inseparable. In fact, it was Ellery who first suggested that Thoreau experiment with a hermit lifestyle by building a cabin at Walden Pond. Their remarkable friendship led Ellery to become the first biographer of Thoreau, writing *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist* in 1873.

Ellery passed away two days before Christmas in 1901 and was buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord. Fittingly enough, his grave is directly across from that of Thoreau on Author's Ridge. Emerson once noted, "In walking with Ellery you shall always see what was never before shown to the eye of man." Though misunderstood by many, Ellery's legacy exists for those who revel in the magic of nature as the same way that he did and who seek a refreshing perspective on the natural world.

**To learn more about William Ellery Channing, visit <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/channing/>**

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