The Emerson Brothers: A Fraternal Biography in Letters

RONALD A. BOSCO
JOEL MYERSON

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Emerson Brothers
This page intentionally left blank
The Emerson Brothers
A Fraternal Biography in Letters

RONALD A. BOSCO and JOEL MYERSON

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006
The Emerson brothers: a fraternal biography in letters / Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson.

Includes bibliographical references and index.


Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
To
Bernadette M. Bosco
and
Greta D. Little
This page intentionally left blank
Preface

The Emerson Brothers: A Fraternal Biography in Letters is our narrative and epistolary biography based upon the life-long correspondence exchanged among the four Emerson brothers: Charles Chauncy (1808–1836), Edward Bliss (1805–1834), Ralph Waldo (1803–1882), and William (1801–1868) Emerson. Even though Charles and Edward died relatively young, this is an extensive correspondence: of the surviving letters exchanged among the brothers, there are 259 from Charles (35 to Edward, 43 to Waldo, 181 to William), 141 from Edward (9 to Charles, 42 to Waldo, 90 to William), and 368 from William (7 to Charles, 18 to Edward, 343 to Waldo). In all, there are 621 letters by Charles, 171 by Edward, and 459 by William: 1,251 letters, amounting to more than half a million words.

Because this biography is based on previously inaccessible sources, we believe it will create opportunities for general readers and specialists to approach Waldo's inner life fresh, that is, without any of the preconceptions that traditional scholarship has reinforced that make him a difficult—if not impossible—figure to imagine personally. In addition, because we portray Waldo in relation to his brothers who, on the evidence of the letters, are his intellectual equals, this biography expands on the relational nature of Waldo's intellect and imagination that has been the core of recent biographical and editorial studies of his family. Often composed as “round-robin” exchanges among and between the brothers, these letters document a formidable nineteenth-century fraternal relationship; they complement Waldo's accounts of his intellectual development, his comments on the major events and public concerns of his day, and his remarks on family history found in his letters, journals, and notebooks; and they complete an extraordinary archaeology of intellectual and personal influences circulating within the Emerson family and around Waldo from his early through his mature years.

As one might suspect from most biographical treatments of their famous brother, each of the Emerson brothers aspired to make an intellectual, if not also a social, reputation for himself. Whereas lesser figures might have faltered
under the dual burden of having been born an Emerson, with social, political, and ecclesiastic roots extending back to the first century of New England settlement, and of having been raised in reduced circumstances after the death of their father William in 1811, these letters reveal that the brothers were invigorated by their shared sense of origin as well as by a sense of duty to improve upon their father’s literary and intellectual work. Particularly in exchanges between Charles, Edward, and William and their Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, but also in the brothers’ side of their correspondence with Waldo, these letters illuminate aspects of Waldo’s character and personal and intellectual development for the first time. For instance, we learn the extent of Waldo’s debt to William for his first serious encounters with German Higher Criticism in the mid-1820s. We also find in the brothers’ remarks on the devastation he felt at the death in 1831 of his first wife, Ellen Louisa Tucker, a correction to Waldo’s own sometimes underrecorded sense of grief at her passing. As Charles, Edward, and William share thoughts about their respective careers and prospects, and as Charles, William, and Waldo draw from their own meager funds to support Edward in his declining health, and provide for both their mother and their hidden brother Bulkeley who was developmentally challenged, we realize for the first time that Waldo’s desire for financial security for himself, his mother, and his brothers was at least as powerful a motivation behind his resignation from Boston’s Second Church in 1832 as were Ellen’s death and his reservations about the Lord’s Supper. And in the body of this correspondence which extends from the early 1820s to William’s death in 1868, we mark, through the observations of those closest to him, Waldo’s self-conscious and steady progress away from the forms of institutionalized religion toward the career of lecturer, essayist, poet, and social reformer that earned him his reputation as a principal architect of American culture.

The Emerson Brothers: A Fraternal Biography in Letters attempts to bring the brothers’ relationship alive by allowing them to speak to the reader through their correspondence, while we provide contextual and interpretive materials to assist the reader to more fully appreciate the wealth of intellectual and factual information contained in our selections. In many ways, our biography is patterned after the “life and letters” format made popular in the nineteenth century, in which extensive quotations from the subject’s correspondence are woven into a continuous narrative of the subject’s life. Readers interested in viewing the entire correspondence will find it on the Web site of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society.

However, unlike earlier “life and letters” volumes, we have decided against using a chronological structure. The details of Waldo’s life are well known through the many books and articles published on that subject, and the general outlines of the brothers’ lives are similarly sketched in these works. Rather, we have chosen to focus on the emotional and intellectual interactions of the
four young men, their step-grandfather Ezra Ripley, their mother Ruth Haskins Emerson, and, above all, their Aunt Mary Moody Emerson. In this, we follow Waldo’s biographer John McAleer, who successfully divided his biography into chapters exploring various encounters comprised of separate incidents or individual friendships, rather than following him chronologically from birth to death. More important, we also have been guided by Waldo’s own dictum for reading, in which he advises to “read for the lustres, as if one should use a fine picture in a chromatic experiment, for its rich colors.” We focus on these “lustres”; indeed, it is our contention that the lives of Waldo and his brothers are formed by a series of crucial events and friendships—following Waldo’s belief that life is “a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue”—and that these “lustres,” when strung together and studied in detail, yield crucial information about the brothers, their relations with each other and with their extended family.

Fortunately for the many generations of scholars who have written on Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family, he was a keeper of family records and manuscripts. None of the great modern editions of writings by Emerson would have been possible had Emerson not kept his journals, notebooks, sermons, letters, lectures, and literary manuscripts together, as well collecting those of family members such as his father and mother, brothers, and Mary Moody Emerson. His children preserved his papers and the papers of their mother, Lidian Jackson Emerson. In turn, subsequent generations of Emersons have ensured that the family’s papers survived intact until they could finally be housed at institutions that could properly care for them. The letters used as the basis for this biography have come down through two branches of the Emerson family.

The core collection begun by Ralph Waldo Emerson and added to by his children Ellen Tucker Emerson and Edward Waldo Emerson was for many years kept at Bush, the family home in Concord. Sometime in the 1920s, Sylvester Baxter, a Boston journalist, gained access to the brother’s correspondence, and produced a number of drafts of what he called “The Other Emersons: Being an Account of the Three Brilliant and Scholarly Brothers William, Edward Bliss, and Charles Chauncy Emerson,” which he hoped the Emerson family might print; however, the project was never completed. When Edward, the last of Lidian and Waldo’s children, died in 1930, the family established the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association to care for the papers, which were kept at Bush, with various family members, and at the Fogg Museum of Harvard University, when Waldo’s grandson Edward Waldo Forbes served as director. When the Houghton Library opened in 1942, the family deposited almost all its collections there.

The William Emerson family papers were first collected by Haven Emerson, William’s grandson. Haven used the collection for a talk he gave at the
Charaka Club in 1932 and transcribed many of William’s earlier letters as part of an unfinished biographical project he worked on as late as 1933.16 Ralph L. Rusk had access to these materials in preparing his edition of Emerson’s Letters (1939), where some letters from the brothers are briefly cited in notes, and he microfilmed the papers and deposited the film at Columbia University. Karen Kalinevitch and Henry F. Pommer also used these manuscripts in their studies of Emerson’s family.17

As this brief history indicates, the manuscripts by Emerson’s brothers have not been much used by scholars; indeed, we would estimate that fewer than a dozen letters have been published in their entirety. Thus, our work on this biography owes more to the stewardship of generations of Emersons than to a long line of scholars.

Mr. Myerson made preliminary transcriptions of most of the letters in the William Emerson collection, as well as the ones at Harvard University, during the early 1980s; both authors then completed and perfected the transcriptions. Dr. Ethel Emerson Wortis, William’s great-granddaughter, encouraged Mr. Myerson in the early stages of the work, and her son Dr. Michael Wortis and his wife, Ruth Emerson Wortis, helped us as we reached its conclusion. The Wortises have been most generous in sharing the superb collection of William Emerson family papers with scholars (now at the Massachusetts Historical Society).18 Louis L. Tucker was instrumental in obtaining this collection for the Society, and we thank him, Peter Drummey, and William Fowler for facilitating our access to it. Leslie A. Morris, curator of manuscripts, greatly facilitated our use of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association collection at the Houghton Library, and we thank her and the staff there, including Denison Beach, Tom Ford, Susan Halpert, Jennifer Rathbun, Virginia Smyers, Emily Walhout, and Melanie Wisner. Materials from these collections are published by permission of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association, the Houghton Library of Harvard University, the Massachusetts Historical Society, Michael Wortis, and Ruth Emerson Wortis. Materials from The Letters of Ellen Tucker Emerson, The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson, and The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson are quoted by permission of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association. Materials from The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson are quoted by permission of the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, copyright by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. The miniature of Ellen Louisa Tucker Emerson is reproduced by permission of the Concord Museum, Concord, Massachusetts.

Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller shared unpublished notes from her pioneering work on Elizabeth Hoar with us, as well as assisted us with genealogical research. Nancy Craig Simmons provided us with transcriptions of letters from Mary Moody Emerson to the Emerson brothers that were not included in her edition of The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson. Albert J. von Frank shared
with us his unpublished comprehensive chronology of Emerson’s life, which we have used in preparing the chronology to this work.19 We have benefited from the assistance and advice of Lawrence Buell, David R. Chesnutt, Phyllis Cole, Francis Dedmond, Rodney Dennis, Travis Gordon, Edith E. W. Gregg, Robert N. Hudspeth, Karen Kalinevitch, Lewis Leary, Kenneth Lohf, Wesley T. Mott, Ralph H. Orth, Robert D. Richardson, Jr., David M. Robinson, Merton M. Seals, Jr., Eleanor M. Tilton, Leslie Perrin Wilson, and Thomas Wortham.

Mr. Bosco would like to thank Gareth Griffiths, chair of English, former Dean of Arts and Sciences V. Mark Durand, and current Dean Joan Wick-Pelletier, Provost Carlos Santiago, former President Karen R. Hitchcock, and Interim President John R. Ryan of the University at Albany, State University of New York, for providing him with the intellectual space to work on this volume. He would also like to acknowledge the conscientious work of his research assistant, Susan H. Kayorie of the University at Albany.

Mr. Myerson would like to thank Alan Brasher, Ward Briggs, Caroline Bokinsky, Bert Dillon, Armida Gilbert, Scott Gwara, Trevor Howard-Hill, Jennifer Hynes, Alfred G. Litton, Michael McLoughlin, Chris Nesmith, Robert Newman, Todd Richardson, Daniel Shealy, Susan Stone, and especially Chris Heffner. Steven Lynn, chair of the Department of English of the University of South Carolina, continues to generously support Mr. Myerson’s Emerson research. He is also grateful to the American Philosophical Society for a research grant, the University of South Carolina for a sabbatical leave, and the South Carolina Committee for the Humanities for a summer fellowship to work on this book.

Both Mr. Bosco and Mr. Myerson gratefully acknowledge the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association, and especially Margaret Emerson Bancroft and Roger L. Gregg, for their financial support of this work. Both authors are grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent federal agency, for awarding us a Collaborative Research Program grant to complete this book.

T. Susan Chang brought this book to Oxford University Press, and we appreciate her early enthusiasm and support. Elissa Morris shared Susie’s enthusiasm and we thank her for helping us to bring this project to a successful conclusion.

Our wives have been amazingly patient with us as over the past fourteen years we have brought our several projects dealing with the Emerson Family Papers into our homes and casually commandeered whole rooms, hallways, and most recently garages as our newest versions of expanded office space. More often than we would like to remember, together we have made William, Waldo, Edward, and Charles Emerson conversational guests at dinners and family outings both in this country and abroad. Throughout it all, the love, support, and generous good cheer of our wives have made it possible for us to do our work and remain somewhat sane in the process. With profound gratitude to them, we dedicate this fraternal biography to Bernadette M. Bosco and Greta D. Little.
Contents

Abbreviations  xv

Chronology  xvii

1  “What poems are many private lives”: The Emerson Brothers  3

2  William in Germany  75

3  Edward and Charles  113

4  Aunt Mary and the Brothers Emerson  189

5  Charles and Elizabeth  265

6  William and Waldo: Finances and Family  315

Notes  359

Index  403

A photo gallery appears after page 188
Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are employed in this book:


MH Houghton Library, Harvard University

MHi Massachusetts Historical Society

This page intentionally left blank
Chronology

1796 25 October Reverend William Emerson marries Ruth Haskins
1798 9 February Phoebe Ripley Emerson born
1799 28 November John Clarke Emerson born
1800 28 September Phoebe Ripley Emerson dies
1801 31 July William Emerson born
1802 20 September Lydia Jackson born
1803 25 May Ralph Waldo Emerson born
1805 17 April Edward Bliss Emerson born
1806 Spring William and Waldo attend Mrs. Whitwell’s School
1807 11 April Robert Bulkeley Emerson born
26 April John Clarke Emerson dies
1808 27 November Charles Chauncy Emerson born
1811 26 February Mary Caroline Emerson dies
12 May Reverend William Emerson dies; the family remains in
the parsonage house until 1813, when a new minister for
the First Church is appointed
1813 22 January William delivers an “Essay in English Prose” at the
Boston Latin School’s “Semi-Annual Visitation”
8 June William goes to Waltham to be examined by Sophia
Alden Bradford Ripley in preparation for Harvard
1814 14 April Mary Caroline Emerson dies
14 July Elizabeth Sherman Hoar born
26 August Waldo is a participant in “A Latin Dialogue, ‘Augustus
Caesar and Lucius Junius Brutus;’ translated from
Hughes” at the Boston Latin School Exhibition
30 September William enters Harvard College
1 November? Ruth Emerson arrives in Concord with her family

xvii
1815  25 March?   Emerson family returns to Boston
      25 August  Waldo reads “Poetical Essay—Independence” at a Boston Latin School Exhibition
      Winter    William helps in Samuel Ripley’s school in Waltham
1816  21 August  Waldo reads his “Poem on Eloquence” at a Boston Latin School Exhibition
      14 October Edward enters Phillips Academy in Andover
1817  4 January  Waldo reads his “Poem on Eloquence” at a Boston Latin School Exhibition
      10 October Waldo enters Harvard College
      12 December William leaves for Kennebunk, Maine, to keep school
1818  7 January  Waldo assists at the Waltham school of Samuel Ripley
      14 March    Waldo returns to Harvard
      26 August  William participates in a “Conference—Upon architecture, painting, poetry, and music, as tending to produce and perpetuate religious impressions” at the Harvard commencement ceremonies
      16 September Waldo teaches school in Waltham
1820  25 January Waldo begins the first of his regular journals, Wide World I
      September  Waldo wins a Bowdoin Prize for his “Dissertation on the Character of Socrates” as well as a Boylston Prize for public speaking
      1 October? Edward enters Harvard College, rooming with Waldo (a senior)
1821  24 April  Waldo delivers “Indian Superstition” at the College Exhibition
      29 August  Waldo participates in “A Conference, ‘On the Character of John Knox, William Penn, and John Wesley’ ” at the Harvard Commencement
      Summer?   Waldo stays at the Old Manse with Ezra and Sarah Ripley, where he meets and gives Greek lessons to seven-year-old Elizabeth Hoar
      Fall?     William teaches a girls’ school in Boston
1822  January  Waldo assists in William’s school
      13 July    Charles recites an “Extract from North-American Review on English Universities” at a public declamation at the Boston Latin School
      2 August   Charles goes to Kennebunk, Maine, for his health
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>“Thoughts on the Religion of the Middle Ages,” Waldo’s first publication, appears in the <em>Christian Disciple and Theological Review</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1823 December?</td>
<td>Edward teaches school at Sudbury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 December</td>
<td>William sails for Europe; Waldo takes over his school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824 5 March</td>
<td>William reaches Göttingen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 April</td>
<td>Edward presents a mathematic chart “Calculation and projection of a solar eclipse in May, 1836” at the Harvard Exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Edward teaches in a school in Roxbury, where Bulkeley is being boarded out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 July</td>
<td>Waldo completes the quarter at William’s Boston school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 July</td>
<td>Edward wins a Bowdoin prize for his essay “Antiquity, Extent, Cultivation, and Present State of the Empire of China”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 September</td>
<td>William, during a walking tour of Germany, meets with Goethe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Bulkeley is boarded out at Waterford, Maine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Bulkeley returns home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 December</td>
<td>Waldo closes his school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1825 18 January</td>
<td>Edward enters his name to study law at Daniel Webster’s office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 February</td>
<td>Waldo enrolls in the Harvard Divinity School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 March</td>
<td>William leaves Göttingen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 August</td>
<td>William sails from Liverpool, reaching Boston in mid-October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 September</td>
<td>Waldo opens a school in Chelmsford, Mass. (closes it at end of year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 October</td>
<td>Edward sails for Europe for his health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 December</td>
<td>Bulkeley is boarded out in Roxbury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1826 3 January</td>
<td>Waldo takes over Edward’s school in Roxbury (closes it on 28 March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 April</td>
<td>Waldo opens a school in Cambridge (closes it on 23 October)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 August</td>
<td>Charles wins a Boylston prize in elocution at the Harvard Commencement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>William goes to New York to apprentice as a lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 October</td>
<td>Waldo preaches first sermon before Middlesex Association of Ministers and is approbated to preach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 October</td>
<td>Edward returns from Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 November</td>
<td>Waldo sails to Charleston, S.C., and St. Augustine, Fla., for his health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>3 June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>1 January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29 April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 July</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17 December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>9 January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19 January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>3 February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 May?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 December</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>8 February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 May</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
30 May  Waldo and Charles leave for Vermont, returning on 14 June  
31 August  Charles receives his law degree  
19 October  Charles' tuberculosis bothers him again  
7 December  Charles sails for Puerto Rico for his health  
22 December  Charles arrives at St. Johns  

1832  
29 March  Waldo visits Ellen's tomb and opens the coffin  
10 April?  Charles leaves St. John's, returning on 1 May  
21 June  Waldo travels with Charles to Portsmouth, N.H.; Charles returns alone on 6 July  
13 August  Edward comes to New York for a visit, returning to Puerto Rico on 6 October  
16 August  William announces his engagement to Susan Woodward Haven  
11 September  Waldo resigns from his position at the Second Church  
2 October  Charles is sworn in as an attorney of the Court of Common Pleas and opens his office at 17 Court Street, Boston  
25 December  Waldo sails to Malta, arriving there on 2 February  

1833  
1 January  Ruth Haskins Emerson and Charles raise $951.68 by auctioning the family's household goods  
9 January  Charles lectures on "One of the West India Islands" at the Concord Lyceum  
7 April  Susan Haven meets Ruth Haskins Emerson and Charles for the first time  
27 June  Charles writes Waldo that his suit over the Tucker estate has been settled in his favor  
2 August  Charles becomes engaged to Elizabeth Hoar this weekend  
26 August  Waldo visits Jane Welsh and Thomas Carlyle in Scotland  
4 September  Waldo sails from Liverpool, arriving in New York on 7 October  
5 November  Waldo delivers his first lecture, "The Uses of Natural History," in Boston  
3 December  William marries Susan Woodward Haven at Portsmouth, N.H.  
10 December  Waldo moves to 276 Washington Street, Boston, where Charles also lives  
18 December  Charles lectures on "The Life, Death, and Character of Socrates" at the Concord Lyceum  

1834  
1 January  Charles gives Elizabeth a pin with a braid of Ellen Emerson's hair  
March  Waldo meets Lydia Jackson of Plymouth, Mass.  
16 April  Susan meets Waldo for the first time
13 May   Waldo receives a partial inheritance of $11,600 from Ellen Emerson’s estate

1 July    Ruth Haskins Emerson moves from Newton to the Old Manse to keep house for Ezra Ripley

1 October Edward dies in Puerto Rico

9 October Waldo moves to Concord, Mass.

18 October Waldo learns of Edward’s death

29 October Charles lectures on “Civil, Political, and Religious Duties” at the Concord Lyceum

1835 9 January Charles lectures on “Modern Society” at Plymouth, Mass.

17 January Charles lectures at Waltham

20 January Charles lectures at Plymouth

22 January Charles lectures before the Boston Lyceum at Boylston Hall

24 January Waldo proposes Lydia Jackson, who accepts on 28 January

29 January Squire Hoar offers Charles his Concord law practice while he serves as a Congressman in Washington, which Charles accepts on 12 February

3 February Charles lectures at Plymouth

8 April   Charles lectures on “Socrates” at Lowell

29 April  Charles completes “Lecture on Slavery”

18 June   William Emerson, Jr., is born to Susan and William

7 July     Waldo buys the Coolidge House in Concord, to be called “Bush” by the family

12 September Waldo delivers a discourse on Concord’s history (published in November)

14 September Waldo marries Lydia Jackson (whom he calls “Lidian”) in Plymouth

15 September Waldo and Lidian return to Concord to live

15 December Charles lectures at the Cambridge Lyceum

1836 6 January Charles rooms with George Partridge Bradford in Boston during the Court sessions

4 March   Elizabeth stays at the Beacon Hill home of the Reverend David Greene

21 April  Waldo cancels his lectures at Salem to take Charles to New York

26 April  Waldo and Charles arrive at William’s house at New York, where Ruth Haskins Emerson is staying

9 May     Charles dies

10 May    Waldo and Elizabeth set out for New York, arriving the next day, when the funeral takes place

15 May    Elizabeth comes to Bush to spend a week
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 August</td>
<td>Waldo is appointed administrator of Charles’ estate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 September</td>
<td><em>Nature</em> published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 October</td>
<td>Waldo Emerson is born to Lidian and Waldo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>30 March Bulkeley visits Concord from Chelmsford</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
elate July | Waldo receives the remainder of his inheritance (another $11,675) from Ellen Emerson's estate |
| 31 August | Waldo delivers an address on the “American Scholar” at Harvard (published 23 September) |
| 1838      | 2 January Ruth Haskins Emerson visits William in New York              |
|           | 10 June Bulkeley is back at the McLean Asylum                          |
|           | 15 July Waldo delivers an address at the Harvard Divinity School (published 21 August) |
|           | 19 July William moves into his house on Staten Island                  |
|           | 24 July Waldo delivers an address on “Literary Ethics” at Dartmouth College (published 8 September) |
| 1839      | 24 February Ellen Emerson is born to Lidian and Waldo                  |
|           | 28 May Ruth Haskins Emerson returns to Concord                          |
| 1840      | 15 April John Haven Emerson is born to Susan and William               |
elate July | Bulkeley comes to Concord for a month’s visit before going to Lowell  |
| 1841      | 19 March *Essays [First Series]* published (and in England on 21 August) |
|           | June William is made a judge of the Richmond County court               |
|           | 11 August Waldo delivers “The Method of Nature” at Waterville College, Maine (published 21 October) |
|           | 21 September Ezra Ripley dies                                           |
|           | 14 October Bulkeley is at the McLean Asylum                            |
|           | 22 November Edith Emerson is born to Lidian and Waldo                  |
|           | 15 December Charles Emerson is born to Susan and William               |
| 1842      | 27 January Young Waldo dies                                            |
| 1843      | February William helps arrange Waldo’s lectures before the Berean Institute |
| 7 May     | Henry David Thoreau arrives in Staten Island to stay with William and tutor Willie; he returns to Concord on 23 November |
| 1844      | 10 July Edward Waldo Emerson is born to Lidian and Waldo               |
|           | 1 August Waldo delivers an address on “Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies” at Concord Court House (published 9 September and in England in October) |
|           | 19 October *Essays: Second Series* published (and in England on 9 November) |
1845 December  Waldo enlists William's help in publishing a book by Carlyle
2 December  Waldo purchases forty-one acres at Walden Pond
1846 12 December  Poems published in England (and in America on 25 December)
1847 5 October  Waldo sails for Europe, arriving at Liverpool on 22 October
1848 7 May  Waldo arrives in Paris
2 June  Waldo returns to England
15 July  Waldo sails from Liverpool, arriving at Boston on 27 July
1849 11 September  Nature; Addresses, and Lectures published
7 December  William asks Waldo, on behalf of the New York Mercantile Library, for one or two lectures in January
1850 1 January  Representative Men published (and in England on 5 January)
1853 16 November  Ruth Haskins Emerson dies at Concord
1856 6 August  English Traits published (and in England on 6 September)
1858 April  William Emerson, Jr., is engaged to Sarah Gibbons; William becomes the guardian of 13-year-old Emily Jenks
1859 27 May  Bulkeley dies
1860 4 March  William rents out his Staten Island home for three years and boards in New York City
8 December  The Conduct of Life published (and in England on 8 December)
1862 6 May  Thoreau dies
1863 1 May  Mary Moody Emerson dies
25 November  William Emerson, Jr., is married
1864 29 January  William leases the Whiting house in Concord
29 February  William Emerson, Jr., dies
1865 Spring  Susan and William are living in Concord
3 October  Edith Emerson marries William Hathaway Forbes
1866 10 July  Ralph Emerson Forbes, Waldo's first grandchild, born
1867 29 April  May-Day and Other Pieces published (and in England on 8 June)
1868 6 February  Susan dies; William returns to New York to live with Haven
2 June  Haven marries Susan Tompkins
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 September</td>
<td>Waldo arrives in New York in time to speak to William before he dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870 5 March</td>
<td><em>Society and Solitude</em> published (and in England on 5 March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872 24 July</td>
<td>Bush is severely damaged by fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872 23 October</td>
<td>Waldo goes to Europe and Egypt with Ellen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873 26 May</td>
<td>Waldo and Ellen return to America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874 19 September</td>
<td>Edward Waldo Emerson marries Annie Shepard Keyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874 19 December</td>
<td><em>Parnassus</em> published, a poetry collection edited by Waldo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875 15 December</td>
<td><em>Letters and Social Aims</em> published (and in England on 8 January 1876)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878 25 February</td>
<td>Waldo delivers an address on “Fortune of the Republic” in Boston (published 10 August)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882 7 April</td>
<td>Elizabeth Hoar dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882 20 April</td>
<td>Waldo catches cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882 27 April</td>
<td>Waldo dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882 30 April</td>
<td>Waldo is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Emerson Brothers
This page intentionally left blank
Chapter 1

“What poems are many private lives”
The Emerson Brothers

The world looks poor & mean so long as I think only of its great men; most of them of spotted reputation. But when I remember how many obscure persons I myself have seen possessing gifts that excited wonder, speculation, & delight in me; when I remember that the very greatness of Homer, of Shakspeare, of [Daniel] Webster & [William Ellery] Channing is the truth with which they reflect the mind of all mankind;¹ when I consider that each fine genius that appears is already predicted in our constitution inasmuch as he only makes apparent shades of thought in us of which we hitherto knew not . . . and when I consider the absolute boundlessness of our capacity—no one of us but has the whole untried world of geometry, fluxions, natural philosophy, Ethics, wide open before him.

When I recollect the charms of certain women, what poems are many private lives, each of which can fill our eye if we so will, (as the swan, the eagle, the cedar bird, the canary each seems the type of bird-kind whilst we gaze at it alone,) and then remember how many millions I know not; then I feel the riches of my inheritance in being set down in this world gifted with organs of communication with this accomplished company. (8 December 1834, JMN, 4:353–354)

The combined intellectual and imaginative instincts of a philosopher, a historian, and an idealist steeped in humanistic tradition and possessing the rarest sensibility are required to conceive and then express in so few words a sentiment that acknowledges the poetry residing in the recesses of “many private lives.” For Ralph Waldo Emerson, a master of humanistic tradition who
possessed the liberal sensibility of one conversant in multiple disciplines, the ability to articulate this sentiment in 1834 meant that he had personally assimilated two fundamental truths about human experience.

The first truth, which he had to witness before he could personalize and assimilate it, was the relatedness of all things in the universe. Waldo experienced this truth first hand in 1833, when, during an extended European tour following the death of his first wife, Ellen Louisa Tucker, in 1831 and his eventual resignation from the pulpit of the Second Church in Boston in 1832, he visited the Jardin des Plantes in Paris over a period of several days. There, on 13 July 1833, he spent the day wandering through the rooms of the Cabinet of Natural History. His account of the thoughts that occurred to him as he studied case after case of specimens preserved in the museum identifies this as the moment he literally saw and fully understood how all objects in the universe were ultimately related. Nature struck him as suddenly and unexpectedly large and thoroughly organic; observer and observed became one as the objects he studied came to life as extensions of the mind that beheld them and as symbols of the imagination that interpreted them. In that moment, Waldo experienced a classic epiphany; seeing the world anew, he discovered that he could access the accumulated wisdom of the ages, comprehend exactly how “each fine genius that appears is already predicted in our constitution,” appreciate “the riches of [his] inheritance in being set down in this world . . . with this accomplished company,” and then reason toward an ethical and metaphysical doctrine he eventually labeled “the infinitude of the private man” (JMN, 7:342). Reflecting a few days later on what he had seen and learned in the Cabinet of Natural History, Waldo wrote in his journal, “How much finer things are in composition than alone.”

’Tis wise in man to make Cabinets. When I was come into the Ornithological Chambers, I wished I had come only there. The fancy-coloured vests of these elegant beings make me as pensive as the hues & forms of a cabinet of shells, formerly. It is a beautiful collection & makes the visiter as calm & genial as a bridegroom. The limits of the possible are enlarged, & the real is stranger than the imaginary. . . .

In other rooms I saw amber containing perfect musquitoes, grand blocks of quartz, native gold in all its forms of crystallization, threads, plates, crystals, dust; & silver black as from fire. Ah said I this is philanthropy, wisdom, taste—to form a Cabinet of natural history. . . . Here we are impressed with the inexhaustible riches of nature. The Universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms . . . & the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient in the very rock aping organized forms. Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent
in man the observer,—an occult relation between the very scorpions and man. I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle, & fox. I am moved by strange sympathies. (JMN, 4:198–200)

Even though he did not acknowledge them as such, the “strange sympathies” Waldo felt moved by while reflecting on his experience in Paris were not entirely new. They were the sympathies he had been quietly feeling and assimilating throughout his life in the private world of family and friends and in the love he shared with Ellen during their seventeen-month marriage. They were sympathies that he knew through the devotion of his parents to their children, as the preparation of a world and identity for him by ancestors and elders whose lives, thoughts, and works represented tangible investments in his own, and as the bond of fraternal love he shared with his brothers, a bond so profound that Waldo often professed that he was complete as a person only to the extent that his brothers constituted, literally, parts of himself.

“Strange sympathies”: think of them as forms of love, affection, devotion—but Waldo and his brothers thought of them in terms of their fraternal relationships. Once recognized, once felt, once acknowledged, they served as measures of who they were as individuals, and how, only as extensions of each other, the Emerson brothers could think of themselves as whole. This was the second truth about human experience that Waldo had to witness and assimilate, and although it would not be exactly accurate to say that he and his brothers were “obscure” persons, his and his brothers’ ability to excite “wonder, speculation, & delight” in each other for as long as they lived was the principal means through which Waldo understood how “many private lives” were “poems.” The existence and importance of wonderful sympathies shared among family, friends, and even strangers was a truth that informed his entire life, and as late as the last years of his active career as a lecturer, Waldo held this truth so dear that he referred to it as “the rule of life”:

You shall not go to the sermons in the churches for the true theology, but talk with artists, naturalists, and other thoughtful men who are interested in verities, and note how the idea of God lies in their minds; not the less, how the sentiment of duty lies in the heart of the “bobbin-woman,” of any unspoiled daughter, or matron, in the farmhouse. These are the crucial experiments, these the wells where the coy truth lies hid.

I think, as I go. Life is always rich; spontaneous graces and forces elevate it, in every domestic circle, which are overlooked, whilst we are reading of something less excellent in old authors. I go through the streets; each one of these innumerable houses has its own calendar of domestic saints, its unpublished anecdotes of courage, of patience, of wit, of cheerfulness. For the best, I know, were in the most private corners.
Everything draws to its kind, and frivolous people will not hear of noble traits; but let any good example of this secret virtue come accidentally to air . . . and you shall hear of parallel examples in every direction. From the obscurity and casualty of those which I know, I infer the obscurity and casualty of the like balm, and consolation, and immortality in a thousand homes which I do not know, and all 'round the world. Let it lie hid in the shade there from the compliments and praise of foolish society: it is safer so. All it seems to demand, is, that we know it, when we see it.2

Although Waldo Emerson is one of the principal figures in the biography that follows, in a departure from the direction of virtually all Emerson studies published since Waldo’s death in 1882, he is not the principle figure. This is a “fraternal biography,” and as such, he will share the stage as one of four principal figures whose lives “made but one man together.”1 Those other figures are his older brother William Emerson and his younger brothers Edward Bliss Emerson and Charles Chauncy Emerson. Under normal circumstances, Robert Bulkeley Emerson (1807–1859), a fifth brother who lived to maturity, also would have been a central figure in this biography; however, because Bulkeley, as he was familiarly known within the family, never really entered the relationship shared among his brothers, his presence in this biography is peripheral at best.

Seemingly normal at the time of his birth and a handsome and cheerful boy for the first few years of his life, by the time Bulkeley turned nine, he appeared to be developmentally challenged and incapable of taking his place in the coterie of young scholars that was forming around his brothers. All of Waldo’s biographers have labeled him mentally retarded, and then dismissed him from any further consideration in their studies. However, a growing number of Emersonians have speculated privately that Bulkeley may have been a victim of what is now known as “Tourette’s Syndrome”: a disease that manifests itself in various involuntary “tics,” including neck-jerking, shoulder-shrugging, facial grimacing, barking, hissing, coprolalia (the blurring out of, typically, obscene words), and palilalia (the repeating of sounds or words).4 Unfortunately, because members of the Emerson family, including Bulkeley’s brothers, were never specific in their characterization of his symptoms, it is impossible to determine the exact form of defect or disease that he endured. In the letters exchanged among William, Waldo, Edward, and Charles on which this fraternal biography is largely based, Bulkeley is a shadowy figure. He appears only as the subject of, at most, a sentence or two, but the substance of those sentences invariably amounts to a tallying of the costs of his care either in institutions for the insane such as the McLean Asylum in Charlestown, Massachusetts, to which Bulkeley was periodically committed by his family, or on local farms in Littleton and
Chelmsford, Massachusetts, where he was boarded out by his brothers as a
day laborer. When Bulkeley died on 27 May 1859, Waldo asked Henry David
Thoreau to arrange for his brother’s funeral and burial in the Emerson family
plot in Concord’s new Sleepy Hollow Cemetery; on 30 May, the day after the
ceremonies, Waldo provided his brother William, who had remained in New
York, with the following account of them.

Yesterday morning [29 May] . . . Bulkeley’s body was brought to my
house . . . . His face was not much changed by death, but sadly changed
by life from the comely boy I can well remember. His expression was
now however calm & peaceful . . . . Mr Thoreau kindly undertook the
charge of the funeral and Rev Mr Reynolds to whom I explained what
I thought necessary,5 & whom Lidian [Waldo’s wife] visited afterwards
lest he should not do justice to Bulkeley’s virtues, officiated . . . . The
afternoon was warm & breezy half in sun half in shade and it did not
seem so odious to be laid down there under the oak trees in as perfect
an innocency as was Bulkeleys, as to live corrupt & corrupting with
thousands. What a happiness, that, with his infirmities, he was clean of
all vices! (L, 5:149–150)

A few months later, Waldo had a tombstone placed over Bulkeley’s grave on
which he ordered this line from Matthew 25:23 to be carved: “Thou has been
faithful over a few things.”

Three other of the brothers’ siblings born to the brothers’ parents, the Rev-
erend William and Ruth Haskins Emerson, do not appear in this biography,
two having died in infancy and the third as a young boy: Phebe Emerson
(1798–1800), John Clarke Emerson (1799–1807), and Mary Caroline Emerson
(1811–1814). Although no records survive to state the causes of either Phebe’s
or Mary Caroline’s early deaths, John Clarke’s death from what appears to have
been complications of tuberculosis in its early stages, together with Bulkeley’s
infirmities, introduces a difficult subject that dominates all aspects of the Em-
erson brothers’ personal history. The subject, which makes its appearance
in the earliest epistolary accounts the brothers’ provide of themselves and their
relations with each other, involves the presence of tuberculosis, mental disease
and defect, and extreme psychological distress in the generation of the immedi-
ate family into which they were born.

Because it dominates their narratives about themselves, every chapter that
follows deals with one or more aspects of this subject as a recurrent element
in our narrative of the brothers’ lives. Thus, although this is not the place for
an exhaustive treatment of this subject, it is worth observing that prior to their
father’s death from tuberculosis in 1811, there is no recorded evidence of the
disease in the brothers’ paternal or maternal family histories. In addition to John
Clarke, each of the Reverend William Emerson’s sons suffered from a form of the disease during his life with the exception, so far as we can tell, of Bulkeley. In the 1820s, William, who of all the brothers had consistently enjoyed the most decent health as a young man, created a stir in the family when he confessed that he had experienced tell-tale symptoms of the disease—a prolonged cold accompanied by a severe cough and headaches—in the winter of 1828; although William ultimately died of pneumonia forty years later, his first son, also named William, did die of tuberculosis, and his second son, John Haven, experienced small pulmonary hemorrhages as a young man on two occasions. Edward, who had been ill with precursors of the disease throughout his childhood and early adult years, had major outbreaks of tuberculosis that required him to interrupt his studies and his entrance into the law; these occurred in the winter of 1820, when he had to leave New England for the warmth of Alexandria, Virginia; in the spring of 1822, when he retreated from Boston inland to the drier climate of Worcester, Massachusetts; and in much of the first half of 1825, when he finally accepted his doctors’ advice and left New England for Europe for an entire year. Edward eventually died of tuberculosis—or “galloping consumption” as it was called in its terminal phases—in 1834, with his death in Puerto Rico ending a four-year exile from his family. In the 1820s, Waldo, too, exhibited symptoms of the disease both during and after his student years at Harvard. By the middle of the decade, his symptoms had become severe enough to prompt him to seek refuge in Charleston, South Carolina, and St. Augustine, Florida, during the winter of 1826–1827. Although Waldo lived until 1882, dying a relatively serene death that followed several years of declining memory, his letters and journal entries suggest that he was wary of coughs, colds, and sore throats accompanied by hoarseness throughout his life, and he was also concerned about the health of his children. His concern was not misplaced; of his four children, Waldo (1836–1842), Ellen Tucker (1841–1909), Edith (1841–1929), and Edward Waldo (1844–1930), Waldo died suddenly of scarlatina or scarlet fever in January 1842, and Edward had to be withdrawn from Harvard during his freshman year, and spent most of 1861 and 1862 regaining his strength at home and on a purposely slow overland journey to California after what appears to have been an early eruption of tuberculosis. Finally, although he had been in good physical health for much of his life, Charles, the youngest of the brothers, experienced serious symptoms of tuberculosis in the autumn of 1831. When the symptoms became so severe that he and his family worried whether he would survive, Charles left Boston in December 1831, and after spending the next four months with his brother Edward in San Juan, Puerto Rico, he returned home in May 1832 with his health apparently restored. Charles remained in good physical health until the winter of 1835–1836, when his symptoms recurred, and he succumbed to tuberculosis in a few weeks at his brother William’s home in New York City on 9 May 1836.
In addition to dealing with a history of tuberculosis in the family that began with their father, which affected them individually and collectively throughout their lives, and extended into the next generation of Emersons as well, the brothers also had to contend with various manifestations of mental and psychological illness from which only William and Waldo appear to have been wholly exempted. The situation the brothers faced with Bulkeley has already been explained, and because of its early onset and extremity, they never had to fear that the condition that plagued Bulkeley might some day plague them too. However, to the extent they genuinely believed that as brothers they together constituted “one man,” William, Waldo, and Charles had to face the implications of the extreme display of insanity that required them to temporarily institutionalize Edward at the McLean Asylum in 1828. Moreover, William and Waldo had to face, after Charles’s death, their recognition of the depth of depression and despair that their brother had secretly endured for roughly the last six years of his life. An undated poem by Charles, inscribed in his hand and found by Waldo among his brother’s papers after his death, suggests the severity of the forms of mental suffering that not only Charles, but also his brother Edward, endured during the last years of their lives.

_Thekla’s Song._

The woods are sighing, The clouds are flying,
   The maiden is walking the grassy shore;—
And as the waves break with might, with might,
   She sings aloud through the darksome night
But a tear is in her troubled eye.
For the world feels cold,—and the heart gets old,—
   And reflects the bright aspect of nature no more.
Then take back thy child, Holy Virgin, to thee—
I have plucked the one blossom that hangs on Earth’s tree,
   I have lived, & have loved, & die.10

As the brothers’ history unfolds in this biography, Waldo’s belief in the poetry inherent in private lives, which he expressed at the very time Edward was dying and Charles was suffering inward torment while outwardly exhibiting a relatively pleasant and optimistic demeanor, was a truly remarkable expression of faith and idealism on his part.

Our primary resource for developing the Emerson brothers’ lives in this biography is the extraordinary archive of previously unpublished letters that over the course of their respective lifetimes they exchanged among themselves and with others in their immediate family. Although the Emerson family has generally been gifted with fair and thorough biographers, lacking access to the
complete resource we have had at our disposal, none of them has been able to portray all of the Emerson brothers speaking in their own right. In these letters, we hear the brothers’ voices and witness the character and personality of each brother emerge slowly over time, responding to the epistolary thoughts, queries, fancies, and fears of his brothers. The content of these letters runs the gamut of life’s comedy and tragedy, and as the last person to have read them in their entirety before we did, Waldo must have felt confirmed that in the epistolary company of his brothers he discovered “the absolute boundlessness of [his own] capacity” and had “the whole untried world of geometry, fluxions, natural philosophy, Ethics, wide open before him” (JMN, 4:353). Collectively, the brothers’ letters are chatty and gossipy, but also learned in their regular allusions to lines borrowed from a host of classical and contemporary writers, philosophers, and religious thinkers; they demonstrate their authors’ capacity for flights of imagination as well as serious introspection, intellectual reasoning, and close attention to those large and small details of life—finances, career prospects and career reversals, births and deaths—that the brothers, like everyone else, had to face every day. Given the time in which they lived, the atmosphere in which they were raised, and the close settings in which they lived even after leaving home, the brothers obviously enjoyed engaging in conversation with each other first and foremost; however, when they could not speak to each other, their letters filled the void. Repeatedly, the brothers end their letters to each other with a hope that a particular letter’s recipient will write back soon. Even when they found themselves forced apart by business or pleasure or the pursuit of studies, the brothers’ loneliness, which they always expressed in their correspondence as a form of homesickness, was significantly lessened by a letter.

Even though letter writing was the Emerson brothers’ second-choice approach to retaining and reinforcing the feeling of fraternal closeness whenever they were apart, and even though on more than one occasion Waldo and Edward grated at the time it took them to engage in extended correspondences, all the brothers were capable of using the medium to great advantage. Waldo eventually constructed a theory that made letter writing in general a truer form of honest personal expression than conversation.11 Writing to his brother Charles from St. Augustine, Florida, on 23 February 1827, when he was himself feeling homesick during his forced retreat to the south for his health, Waldo remarked,

I have not yet recd your letters. . . . Write half a dozen. The world is before you for topics & when sense is not to be had, nonsense is a thousandfold better than nothing. You are in the heyday of youth when time is marked not by numbering days but by the intervals of mentality, the flux & reflux of the soul. One day has a solemn complexion the next is cheerful, the south wind makes a third poetic, and another is ‘sicklied
What poems are many private lives,” 11

but all are redolent of knowledge & joy. The river of life with you is yet in its mountain sources bounding & shouting on its way. . . . Vouchsafe then to give to your poor patriarchal exhorting brother some of these sweet waters. Write. write. I have heard men say . . . they had rather have ten words viva voce from a man than volumes of letters for getting at his opinion.—I had rather converse with them by the interpreter. Politeness ruins conversation. You get nothing but the scum & surface of opinions. . . . Men’s spoken notions are thus nothing but outlines & generally uninviting outlines of a subject, & so general, as to have no traits appropriate & peculiar to the individual. But when a man writes, he divests himself of his manners & all physical imperfections & it is the pure intellect that speaks. There can be no deception here. You get the measure of his soul. Instead of the old verse, “Speak that I may know thee” 13 I write ‘Speak, that I may suspect thee; write, that I may know thee.’ Brandish your pen therefore, & give me the secret history of that sanctuary you call yourself. (L, 1:191)

Ironically, of his brothers, Charles was probably Waldo’s worst choice to instruct and exhort in the virtues of open epistolary exchange; as their letters reveal, Edward and William were far better candidates to receive Waldo’s exhortation, because their own practices confirm that they were already believers of his theory. But although he was as affected as any of his brothers by their periods of separation, and as an adult often felt a profound sense of loneliness when left by himself, Charles seems to have had mixed feelings about how much of himself to expose in his letters to his brothers. On a page inscribed on 16 September 1835 and preserved in his secret diary, Charles admitted to overwhelming personal insecurities, and in doing so, he explained—at least to himself—his ambivalence toward full epistolary exposure:

Oh God keep me from losing sight of thee. Keep me from the sealed slumber of the sensual & worldly. If to distrust or even to loathe oneself were a sign of grace, my condition how full of hope! But it is quite otherwise, a mark of a restless, estrayed soul—tending downwards, or but freshly awakened out of its doltish sleep.

The days teach me nothing but despair. Men do but repeat over to me the formulas of life that I have long since learned. Even Duty contracts her infinite horizon, & so ineffectual & phenomenal seems my existence, so sluggish & dull to the motions of the will my moral energy, that I wonder why the sun continues to rise morning after morning upon such a thing as I. Were it not for the desire so strong to live . . . I should look to be blown off the face of this planet to which I have so loose holdings, as chaff from the threshing floor.
How I dare to write is proof how callous & reckless I have become—This page might tally with the confessions of cells in hospitals & prisons.14

Nevertheless, Charles could and often did take his paternal aunt Mary Moody Emerson into his confidence in his letters to her, and he was similarly open in his letters to step-grandfather Ezra Ripley, but he stopped short of granting his brothers complete admission into that “sanctuary” he called himself except in conversation. For instance, when Waldo resigned from the Second Church in 1832, Charles was devastated, yet his devastation was not over his brother’s decision to leave the pulpit, which he considered an act of intellectual and ethical heroism, but over the effect his decision would have on the pleasant domestic setting that Waldo and he were then sharing with their mother in a house on Chardon Street in Boston. On 10 December 1832, he expressed his feelings in nearly identical terms to their paternal aunt Mary Moody Emerson and step-grandfather Ezra Ripley. “We shall break up housekeeping immediately,” he wrote to Ripley, adding, before repeating himself by saying yet again “our household [will soon be] broken up,” that though their future plans were still unsettled, he thought Ripley would appreciate hearing the news from him rather than second-hand from someone else.15 But, barely two months later, when Charles wrote his first letter to Waldo, who by then was in Italy, the real cause of his anxiety over his brother’s European journey finally emerged. Not only did Charles miss Waldo’s presence, he especially missed his brother’s conversation.

You have now been gone so long that I feel better assured in writing to you that my letter will be welcome. If I knew how to be simply eyes & ears for you—& could telegraph to you all good news, I should be glad. But I do not easily fall into that train—& am used when my pen is in my hand to say something from myself—Yet although I would fain believe there is some chamber of my spiritual house wherein you might find a moment’s entertainment exploring the imagery on the walls,—I have been so accustomed to talk with you face to face—eye to eye—& conversation between people who understand one another is so elliptic & allusive,—that now I come to write, I seem to introduce myself as a stranger, & widen instead of lessening the distance between us. I often wish like the little Waltham Pyrrhonist ‘that I was not I’16—that the elements had been differently mixed in me—I think women must be happier than men, since it is their nature to forget themselves, & there live where they have garnered up their hearts. I continually pine & pray for some all absorbing exalting principle, idea, cause, in which I may be bound up & lose this ever wakeful consciousness that is so private & personal. I long for action or contemplation in the energy of which I
shall altogether forget that I have any individual stake in the universe. But how coldly am I constituted—And with how many pitiful reserves do I give myself to so many charitable work! I am in much worse plight than the infant philosopher abovementioned—I am ashamed,—yea wo is me, that I am I. How tired of life the selfish man must get to be—And what a mean thing is it to deal with God as a merchant, looking only to secure our own advantage, in the overflows of his bounty—& to use his Divine indulgence—these ingenious faculties of His inspiration—& all He leads us to know & hope, as the architects only of our own fate, the machinery of a studious self aggrandisement. . . .

It is easier to read than to think, & to think than to write. When I hear men speak what they have written, I wish to take the word out of their mouths—to have guided the pen as they wrote. But to my single self, the desire to write almost never comes & would never so I had the means of delivering the mind by any more expeditious midwifery. Now a days I have scarce any nest wherein to lay the conversational egg.

Although transitions and separations were always disruptive to the bonds that held the Emerson brothers together, unlike their brother Charles, Waldo, Edward, and William were constituted in ways that removed the risk that a disruption of those bonds could lead to a displacement of their fraternal sympathies. In the chapters that follow, it will be apparent that Edward physically and mentally suffered the anxieties of separation as much as any of his brothers. Although Charles had access once again to Waldo’s company and conversation when he returned from Europe in October 1833, and William had both a career and, by the mid-1830s, a family of his own in New York, Edward was literally exiled from his family and the comfort of his mother’s hearth for the last four years of his life. To his credit, however, and to the credit also of the “strange sympathies” he shared with his brothers, Edward actually became emotionally—if not physically—stronger on his own by, as he explained to Waldo in a letter written from San Juan on 20 January 1833, relying on “our little brotherhood . . . turn[ing] my thoughts homeward & assure[ing] myself of fraternal sympathy.”

I am thinking that if the old rule of ama, si vis amari be true nowadays I must be a great pet with my brothers; my affection towards them, perhaps, being as strong as if it had been exhibited in good deeds, instead of arising in so great a degree from gratitude & instinct.

I never read the treatises about friendship which ancients & moderns have written without thinking of our little brotherhood—and when most feeble, most straitened, least esteemed, I feel strong if I can turn my thoughts homeward & assure myself of fraternal sympathy. I don’t know
why the ancients did not say more about brothers, unless it was taken for granted that these were friends—and so needed not to be set forth in the glowing pictures drawn of “Amicitia” & “amici” in prose & poetry.—Perhaps they had got “behind” instinct & common domestic attachments. Be it so—the practical age having come back again, we’ll revive the old fashion of brotherly love.—But all this what doth it avail me at the present moment, & what doth it avail you, which is the politer inquiry reading as you may be this letter with the sea between us? But as the Spaniard says “que quiere usted,” what do you wish, or “what would you,” a frequent expression to signify that all has been done that could be done—; having nothing in the way of adventures either chivalric or mercantile to relate, I have filled the first page without them and now I am so entirely at a loss in respect to your present situation, health, intentions & wishes that I can only half speak to you. . . . I pray for you & hope daily for the best news.—

If you could travel a little while after the fashion of Martiny the French poet, who says, (according to the newspaper) when about visiting Palestine, Greece &c. &c. “I do not calculate on writing much—I go to read before I die some of the beautiful pages of the material creation. If poetry sh’d find new inspiration & images I shall gather them into the silence of thoughts; they may color what remains of my literary career;” if you could slacken the speed & augment the volume of your powers by a tour in any strange land—it would be most excellent; but if means are wanting, why the feast & the consolation of the Christian still abide—the faith the hope & the Charity which the apostles received they have transmitted.—I will not preach to the preacher.

The focus of this biography is on the lives of the Emerson brothers from the time of eldest brother William’s birth in 1801 to the deaths of Edward and Charles in 1834 and 1836, respectively. In the remainder of this chapter, we introduce three important subjects that establish the contexts for much of what follows. The first subject is the influence of the Emerson and Haskins families’ past and the extent to which the lives of the Emerson brothers were shaped by assumptions about their place in family history and position in the world-at-large. These assumptions had been developed over nearly two centuries prior to the brothers’ birth and were reinforced in the lessons on family history passed down to the brothers by their Aunt Mary and Ezra Ripley. The second subject is the relationship between the brothers and their mother, Ruth Haskins Emerson, and the third introduces the brothers as Harvard men and examines how Edward and Charles, especially, were remembered by others long after their deaths as a means to contrast them with their brothers William and Waldo (who survived them for three and nearly five decades, respectively). Chapter
examines William's life and studies in Germany, and his eventual rejection of the ministerial mantle that had been passed to him by several generations of Emerson forebears who had made the family's reputation by serving in New England’s pulpits from the earliest days of settlement. Chapter 3 considers the lives of Edward and Charles over the few years they each lived after graduating from Harvard. Chapter 4 examines the brothers’ relationship with their Aunt Mary, and recognizes her as the figure who exerted the most considerable and sustained influence on the brothers’ personal and psychological development during their formative years. Chapter 5 examines “the brothers in love” by first considering Waldo’s marriages to Ellen Louisa Tucker—who remained a force not only in Waldo's life but also in the lives of his brothers for decades after her death in 1831—and Lidia Jackson, who succeeded her, and William’s marriage to Susan Woodward Haven, before taking up the intense and extended engagement between Charles and Elizabeth Sherman Hoar, which began in 1833 and lasted until Charles’s death three years later. Finally, for the first time in Emerson family studies, chapter 6 examines William and Waldo’s oversight of the family’s finances.

As opposed to the typical biography of Waldo Emerson in which the subject is surrounded by and developed through reference to a cast of increasingly renowned characters, this fraternal biography maintains its focus by emphasizing the Emerson brothers in relation to each other. Although Waldo took his first steps toward what would become a world-wide audience for his lectures and writings in the 1840s and 1850s when he met figures such as William Wordsworth, Alexander Ireland, and Thomas Carlyle during his journey to Europe in 1833, the persons with whom we are primarily concerned here were neither party to those meetings nor particularly influenced by them. The major figures with whom the Emerson brothers were engaged in study and working relationships were first and foremost each other and members of their immediate family, and then with occasional luminaries of their day such as Daniel Webster, in whose law office Edward briefly worked and whose son he briefly tutored; Edward Everett, one of America’s foremost orators of the day, whose public speeches the brothers greatly admired and whose lectures on Greek literature at Harvard Waldo enthusiastically attended; and “Squire” Samuel Hoar, one of the leading citizens of Concord, Massachusetts, who supported the brothers’ careers and successfully recruited Charles to his law office after his engagement to the Squire’s daughter Elizabeth.

Thus, throughout this fraternal biography, our view is the one to which Waldo himself drew our attention when, in the journal selection that opens this chapter, he remarked on the capacity of essentially “obscure persons” to “excite wonder, speculation, & delight” in him. His mother Ruth, his Aunt Mary and step-grandfather Ezra Ripley, his sons and daughters and a number of his uncles, aunts, cousins, and other relations who will make their appearance in
the brothers’ letters that follow, and especially his brothers William, Edward, and Charles, were just such persons. Though all were certainly less well known than either Homer and Shakespeare or Daniel Webster and Dr. Channing, the “wonder” that each of these individuals represented for Waldo was that the better he knew them, the more he believed any one or all of them could have spoken to Homer, Shakespeare, Webster, and Channing as equals. The individuals with whom we are most concerned in this fraternal biography confirmed the famous Waldo’s moral sense, and the actions they undertook in their obscurity represented for him the noblest aspirations of the human race. In the prime of his intellectual life and public reputation, these were the individuals with whom Waldo himself was most concerned, and as he remembered them as Providence’s special gift to him, he conferred on them his choicest praise:

When a man is born with a profound moral sentiment, preferring truth, justice and the serving of all men to any honors or any gain, men readily feel the superiority. They who deal with him are elevated with joy and hope; he lights up the house or the landscape in which he stands. His actions are poetic and miraculous in their eyes. In his presence, or within his influence, every one believes in the immortality of the soul. . . .

A chief event of life is the day in which we have encountered a mind that startled us by its large scope. I am in the habit of thinking—not, I hope, out of partial experience, but confirmed by what I notice in many lives—that to every serious mind Providence sends from time to time five or six or seven teachers who are of the first importance to him in the lessons they have to impart. The highest of these not so much give particular knowledge, as they elevate by sentiment and by their habitual grandeur of view.22

“THE SPIRIT OF OUR FATHERS”
Sons of the Present, Specters of the Past

During the nearly two decades that separate William and Waldo’s boyhood years from Edward and Charles’s collegiate years at Harvard, the Emerson brothers may well have thought that they were living in two worlds, with each world constantly vying for their attention and allegiance. Their visible world was the bustling environment of early nineteenth-century America, a world in which, as members of the first generation born after the Revolution, the brothers were as much engaged as their contemporaries in negotiating the national and personal terms of American character and identity. But they possessed—and, to borrow a phrase from New England’s Calvinist liturgy, they were pos-
sessed by— an “invisible world” as well. The brothers’ invisible world consisted of their family’s past, which was occupied by the specters of heroic ancestors. The men and women from the Emerson and Haskins lines had settled in the New World, and served religion to generations of pre-Revolution Englishmen (as well as native inhabitants) or competed in the spheres of commerce and real estate speculation. The brothers’ forbears in commerce had successfully accumulated wealth and land and achieved fair social standing. Each successive generation raised the bar of expectation higher for the next, so that by the time the Reverend William and Ruth Haskins Emerson were married in October 1796 and settled first in the rural town of Harvard, Massachusetts, where the liberal minister and his new wife began their family, and then, in 1799, in Boston, where the proprietors of the First Church had called William to succeed the Reverend John Clarke as their pastor, they and the children they would have were the inheritors of nearly two centuries’ worth of increasingly elevated New World piety and ambition.

In nineteenth-century middle- and upper-middle class America, the legacy of a family’s past was often transmitted to members of its new generation by family elders. Boys would be schooled in family traditions and directed toward the occupations that seemed most suited to them by their grandfathers, fathers, and uncles, whereas girls would be instructed in their future roles as wives, mothers, and, particularly in the early years of the new Republic, as the guardians of a literate citizenry by their grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. This pattern emerged out of Old World customs, and with little modification, it had served New Englanders well from the earliest days of settlement.

In brief, at the time the Emerson brothers were born, their paternal grandfather, the Reverend William Emerson (1743–1776), pastor of the church in Concord, Massachusetts, had been dead for a quarter of a century; their paternal grandmother, Phebe Bliss Emerson (1741–1825), still resided in Concord, where she had married her late husband’s successor, the Reverend Ezra Ripley (1751–1841), and produced a second family with him. The eight children born to Phebe Bliss during her two marriages were all alive at the opening of the nineteenth century. They included the brothers’ father William; Aunt Hannah Emerson (1770–1807), who was married to William Farnham of Newburyport, Massachusetts; Aunt Phebe Emerson (1772–1839), who was married to Lincoln Ripley of Waterford, Maine; Aunt Mary Moody Emerson (1774–1863); Aunt Rebecca Emerson (1776–1845), who was married to their maternal uncle Robert Haskins of Waterford, Maine; step-aunt Sarah Ripley (1781–1826), who was unmarried; step-uncle Samuel Ripley of Waltham, Massachusetts, who was married to Sarah Alden Bradford; and step-uncle Daniel Ripley (1784–1825), of Concord, Massachusetts, who was married to Susan Fitts. Of these relations on the brothers’ father’s side, step-grandfather Ezra Ripley, Aunts Mary Moody and Rebecca Emerson, and step-uncle Samuel Ripley along with his wife Sarah were
significant presences in the brothers’ lives, and they exerted the most sustained influence on them as boys and young men. More than two dozen first cousins produced by aunts and uncles on their father’s side make appearances in their letters from time to time.

On their mother’s side, the brothers’ grandfather John Haskins (1729–1814), one of Boston’s most prominent citizens, who made his fortune as a distiller in the West Indies trade and a speculator in real estate, married Hannah Waite Upham (1734–1819) of Malden, Massachusetts, on 6 May 1752. Their marriage was officiated over by the Reverend Joseph Emerson, the brothers’ paternal great-grandfather, and it initiated a friendly association between the Emerson and Haskins families of which William and Ruth’s sons were among the beneficiaries. Grandfather John, a pew-holder at King’s Chapel and, later, at Trinity Church in Boston, preferred the Episcopal service (as, in fact, did his daughter Ruth for most of her life24), whereas grandmother Hannah had come from a long line of Congregationalists, and after their marriage she worshipped—separately from her husband—at Boston’s New South Congregational Meeting House. When the thirteen of their sixteen children who survived infancy became old enough to decide on a form of worship for themselves, John Haskins presented them with the choice; roughly half decided to follow their father’s preference and the remainder their mother’s. John Haskins’s democratic application of the principle of religious freedom and the ideal of individual conscience, together with his kindness (which his children universally acknowledged), must have become family lore by the time of his death, for on that occasion his eleven-year-old grandson Waldo Emerson composed this brief elegy on “the aged saint”:

See the calm exit of the aged saint,
Without a murmur and without complaint;
While round him gathered, all his children stand,
And some one holds his withered, pallid hand.
He bids them trust in God, nor mourn, nor weep;
He breathes religion, and then falls asleep.
Then on angelic wings he soars to God.
Rejoiced to leave his earthly, mortal load;
His head is covered with a crown of gold,
His hands, renewed, a harp immortal hold;
Thus clothed with light, the tuneful spirit sings—
He sings of mercy and of Heavenly things.25

Like the Emersons who, with a few exceptions along the way, were a long-lived line, the Haskins side of the brothers’ family was large and its members enjoyed remarkable longevity. In his account of the Haskins family, David Greene
Haskins remarks that at his death on 27 October 1814, grandfather John—or “Honest John Haskins” as he was known about Boston—was survived by the same thirteen children to whom he had put the question of religious preference years before as well as by forty-six grandchildren; Haskins found it further remarkable that John Haskins’ death was “the first that had taken place in his immediate family for nearly fifty-three years, and that from Nov. 5, 1761, to Dec. 14, 1822, not a death occurred among the thirteen children who survived him.” Of John and Hannah Upham Haskins’s thirteen surviving children, six, in addition to the brothers’ mother Ruth, would themselves, and in several instances their children, become visible figures in the Emerson brothers’ lives and make regular appearances in their correspondence: Uncle John Haskins (1762–1840) of Newton, Massachusetts, who was married to Elizabeth Ladd of Little Compton, Rhode Island; Aunts Elizabeth Haskins (1771–1853) and Fanny Haskins (1777–1854) of Boston, who were unmarried; Uncle Robert Haskins (1773–1855) of Waterford, Maine, who was married to the brothers’ maternal Aunt Rebecca Emerson; Uncle Thomas Haskins (1775–1853) of Boston, who was married to Elizabeth Foxcroft; and Uncle Ralph Haskins (1779–1852) of Boston, who was married to Rebecca Greene.

Haskins family history was transmitted to William, Waldo, Edward, and Charles mostly through their mother, her brothers Robert, Thomas, and Ralph, and, especially, her sisters Elizabeth and Fanny, all of whom appear frequently in the brothers’ correspondence. The death of their paternal grandfather during the Revolutionary War and of their maternal grandfather when the Ruth and William’s sons were still young, together with the various infirmities from which their paternal and their maternal grandmothers suffered, deprived the brothers of some of the more usual sources of instruction in the Emerson or Haskins families’ respective pasts. Yet it will become clear that on the Emerson side of the family the place of these elders was admirably filled by two figures who loom large in many of the brothers’ letters—including those that they exchanged with persons outside of their fraternal circle—and often in their daily lives as well. They were the boys’ step-grandfather Ezra Ripley and their paternal aunt Mary Moody Emerson, and the lessons in Emerson family traditions and ideals they delivered to their young charges were invariably punctuated with a challenge to live up to the ideals of their forefathers, a challenge only moderated by anecdotes of their illustrious ancestors’ success in surviving the harsh realities of this world while preparing themselves for the glories of the next. The influence of these two individuals on the brothers’ personal, intellectual, and moral development was profound and enduring.

As the brothers’ letters reveal, the one constant in all the lessons they received from both Ripley and Aunt Mary during their schooling in Emerson family history was the importance of religion to the emergence of the family’s reputation and financial security in the New World. Indeed, religion and the