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# **Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature**

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Edited by

[Bron Taylor](#)

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- See also: Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Heathenry – Ásatrú; Middle Earth; Odinism; Seidr (adjacent to Heathenry – Ásatrú); Trees (Northern and Middle Europe).

## Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1803–1882)

Ralph Waldo Emerson can rightly be called the first American "man of letters." By the end of his life, Emerson had published nine books of essays, had served as the editor of the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*, had traveled and lectured in Europe on three occasions and had regularly delivered a series of lectures on the Lyceum circuit almost every year between the mid-1830s to the late 1860s.

The son of a Boston Unitarian minister and heir to a long ancestral line of Protestant leaders, Emerson trained for the same career in his early youth. Nevertheless, significant personal losses (the early death of his father and of his first wife Ellen Tucker) helped to shape his increasing theological doubt, which included a growing disbelief in the idea of immortality, in the "miracles" of Christ's ministry and in the efficaciousness of such rituals as the Lord's Supper (Communion, the Eucharist). Emerson's intellectual development also turned him away from his early fascination with Scottish "Common Sense" theologians and philosophers and toward the writings of Plato, Swedenborg, Kant and the European Romantics. These personal, theological and intellectual transformations all mutually reinforced Emerson's growing sense that he must re-create his life according to his own sense of intellectual and spiritual truth.

Emerson was perhaps the single person most responsible for what has come to be called "The American Renaissance," a flowering of literary and artistic production of the mid-nineteenth century which consciously strove to establish a unique "American voice," distinct from the constraints and conventions of European culture. His two most famous lectures, both delivered at Harvard,

established his particular contribution to this Renaissance. In "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson voiced the call for American intellectual independence from Europe, urging on his audience the importance of individual self-expression, though importantly, a kind of self-expression that is contained and tempered by the disciplined pursuit of self-culture (a theme he later elaborated in his essay, "The Poet"). His 1838 Divinity School Address was much more controversial, challenging not only the theological orthodoxy of the time, but even its most liberal expressions in the form of New England Unitarianism. Calling the Unitarianism of his day "corpse-cold," Emerson literally faced-down his ancestors and teachers, arguing for the spiritual authority of individuals in communion with their own consciences and deemphasizing the role of Jesus as a source of authority. He emphasized the importance of discerning spiritual truth from everyday life, a wide range of reading and ongoing experience in nature.

Emerson's first published work, the extended essay *Nature* (1836), is particularly important for our understanding of Emerson's contribution to the many and varied "spiritualized" visions of nature in American culture. While one of Emerson's first career ideas (after rejecting the ministry) was to become a naturalist, it is clear that his understanding of nature is weighted more toward nature's symbolic, rather than scientific importance. Throughout his life, however, Emerson continued to weave together a complex reading of nature that was informed by both his own amateur experiments as a botanist and his more sophisticated intellectual meditations on the meaning of nature as a source for human, spiritual growth.

Written as he was setting into a second marriage, a new home in Concord, Massachusetts and a newly launched career as a writer and lecturer, *Nature* can be seen as Emerson's personal manifesto, a claim to his self-fashioned spiritual and intellectual vocation. While entitled "Nature," the essay is much more than a study of the natural world (though it includes moments of precise, naturalist observation); rather, it is a broad-ranging inquiry into language, art, beauty and spiritual experience as these are informed and illuminated by what we commonly think of as "nature" (landscape, mountains, rivers and so on).

While physical nature is the touchstone throughout the essay, Emerson's text ultimately concerns itself with the figure of the ideal Poet (whom Emerson both creates and embodies) whose task it is directly to experience the spiritual lessons inherent in nature and then to transform the language of the natural world into the written word for a wider audience. The Poet, in Emerson's view, replaces the minister as the modern version of the ancient biblical prophets, open to direct, spiritual experience and called to share that experience with others.

While drawing on the Christian concept of the “Book of Nature,” Emerson disavows Christian traditionalism and argues that the human mind (consciousness) and the natural world are the only necessary foundations for genuine, spiritual experience and the cultivation of the self. Nature is portrayed by Emerson as a democratic medium, available to all, for a broad range of uses. The common use of nature is that of “commodity,” nature as a resource for shelter, food, tools and other human creations. But nature’s more important and authentic uses, Emerson argues, is as a medium for immediate, spiritual revelation that provides each individual with a vision of truth, beauty and goodness. Like other Romantic and Transcendentalist thinkers, Emerson includes in his definition of nature almost anything that can be defined as the “not me.” Not surprisingly, then, his essay is as much about the effects of the “not me” on the development of self as it is about bio-physical nature as such.

The vision of “The Poet” (and his or her proper relationship to the natural world) that Emerson first outlined in *Nature*, would become a centering point in his life and his writing throughout his career. At the same time, while *Nature* can be said to be more “about” the self than about the natural world as such, it played a significant role in a growing shift in American culture toward attentiveness to nature, rather than seeing the physical world as primarily a stage in the human–Divine drama, or as a resource for human use.

Emerson’s writings set the intellectual foundation for Henry David Thoreau’s, John Burroughs’ and John Muir’s own arguments on behalf of nature as a beneficent force which must be respected, studied and protected. While it would be a mistake to see Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), Burroughs’ *Locusts and Wild Honey* (1879), or Muir’s *My First Summer in the Sierras* (1911) as merely “Emerson put into practice,” all are “conversion narratives” that testify to finding a new spiritual life “close to nature” which depend heavily on Emerson’s earlier insights. In this sense, the ripple effects of Emersonian thinking about nature extended far beyond the reach of his immediate contemporaries to include early conservationists such as George Perkins Marsh, as well as environmentalists Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson in the twentieth century. While Emerson is remembered most broadly as a literary figure who set the terms of a new flowering of American writing in the nineteenth century, his influence on liberal religious life and his unintentional contribution to American environmentalism continue to this day.

Rebecca Kneale Gould

#### Further Reading

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See also: Back to the Land Movements; Book of Nature; Burroughs, John; Muir, John; Pantheism; Romanticism; Thoreau, Henry David; Transcendentalism; Whitman, Walt.

## Emissaries of Divine Light

In the 1930s, Lloyd Meeker, also known by the spiritual name Uranda, gained a following as a lecturer on human potential. In 1939, he met Martin Cecil, a hereditary British Lord, and together the two visionaries began to develop a network of intentional communities. The first was opened in 1945 at Sunrise Ranch, near Loveland, Colorado. By 1948, a second community, known as 100 Mile House, had opened in the remote interior of British Columbia. By the 1980s, the movement had about a dozen intentional communities worldwide and well over 100 other organized centers, although later some of the communities and centers closed. A distinctive type of New Age spiritual outlook that embraces both body and soul characterizes the Emissary movement, which sees its central task as the spiritual regeneration of humankind and attempts to embody its spiritual values in all parts of daily life.

A strong connection to the natural world has always been central to the Emissary outlook. Individual members seek to attune themselves with the divine force that is held to permeate everything. The communities have worked toward self-sufficiency, with extensive organic gardening and farming operations, including hydroponic installations. Through a strong outreach program of publications, seminars, and retreats they have spread their spiritual message to the general public.

Timothy Miller