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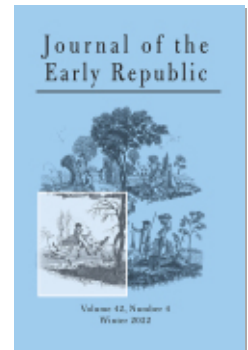
The Transcendentalists and Their World by Robert A. Gross
(review)

Camden Burd

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particularly strong in its analysis of issues relating to African Americans and Native Americans. Yet the book's real strength is Pearson's expertly woven narrative of how American culture has evolved over the last two centuries. Americans' understandings of knowledge-creation, public health, race, and labor have all been shaped by birth registration. My critiques, nitpicky in nature, are that the book can occasionally be repetitive and in a book that is only roughly chronological, it is not always clear which decade or time period Pearson is referring to. These minor critiques aside, *The Birth Certificate* is a beautifully written and well-researched book that will appeal broadly to students and scholars of American history and culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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The Transcendentalists and Their World. By Robert A. Gross. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. Pp. 864. Cloth, \$40.00.)

Reviewed by Camden Burd

Robert Gross invites us back to Concord, Massachusetts in his latest work, *The Transcendentalists and Their World*. The title should sound familiar. It echoes his similarly named and Bancroft Prize-winning work, *The Minutemen and Their World*, published in 1976.¹ In many ways, the book feels like a sequel. *The Transcendentalists and Their World* bears the hallmarks of new social history (rebuilding community profiles, outlining the divisions among group members, tracking ideas, economic shifts, cultural influences, generational change). Gross even notes that the work “began as an investigation into how the close world of the Minutemen, with its communal ethic and its inclusive institutions, gave way to the individualistic society of the Transcendentalists” (xx). The book links local happenings to this broader intellectual movement by arguing that broader social transformations were already underway by the time Emerson and Thoreau began their scribbling in Concord. Through painstaking research, Gross tracks a fracturing community in order to better

1. Robert Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976).

understand how, and why, Transcendentalism took root in *this* New England village.

In order to understand the Transcendentalists, Gross argues that we must understand Concord in the decades leading up to 1830s. In doing so, we discover a village brewing with the cultural, social, economic, political, and intellectual milieu that would eventually develop into a movement. By 1825, villagers closed the door on the old-style political presumptions of the Federalists and embraced the new democratizing spirit of republicanism. The momentary pause in political strife was replaced with religious schism as the long-standing First Parish Church experienced a wave of dissent from congregants seeking a more conservative approach to worship. Communal bonds continued to break away as the industrial revolution and the market economy chipped away at long-standing social norms. Roads and railroads connected Concord to larger markets. Commercial agricultural, industrialization, and professional specialization—the hallmarks of the burgeoning capitalist economy—all took root in Concord during the 1820s. Forests fell; creeks and rivers were dammed; debt and distrust bloomed. Ideas also spread on commercial networks. School reform, the temperance movement, and Anti-Masonry all found a welcome audience in Concord whose residents came to embrace the promise of individualism and self-improvement. The Concord of the early nineteenth century was a village questioning traditionalism, transformed by the marketplace, and immersed in new ideas about politics, education, and the individual.

Ralph Waldo Emerson arrived in Concord at a time when the community seemed to be fracturing under pressure from these new commercial and social forces. He, himself, was looking for change. Like many around him, Emerson was growing disinterested with traditional religious philosophy and soon took interest in the Transcendental reform movements that spread within the ranks of Unitarian clergy. Concord was an ideal place for him to evaluate New England and track its anxieties—all while finding a ready market for his ideas in nearby Boston. “Concord did not make Emerson a Transcendentalist,” Gross makes sure to clarify, “but it afforded ample resources with which to illustrate and apply his observations of New England life” (385–86). His essay and speeches on education, individualism, and self-reliance were infused with inspiration from local debates. Though the origins of his new philosophy could be traced to German roots, Emerson’s version of Transcendentalism was deeply local—reflecting a community at the crossroads of change in the second

quarter of the nineteenth century. Perhaps less surprisingly, Gross tracks the local influences of Henry David Thoreau's ideas. "The civic spirit and religious vision that Puritans had bequeathed to the Minutemen and thence to the leaders of Concord in the new republic were the seedbed in which the native's son vision of ecology of germinated" (608). Even Thoreau's conception of nature, a proto-ecological philosophy for man and the natural world, was the culmination of experiences with local environments, community residents, and cultural processes. In Gross's retelling of Transcendentalism, Emerson and Thoreau can be directly linked to the local community. They were intellectuals whose ideas deepened while ruminating in the milieu of Concord's strife.

In Gross's own words, *The Transcendentalists and their World* is "at once a social history of a storied New England community and a cultural history of major American writers and the ideas they professed; it highlights the interplay between the two, the links between literature and life" (xvi). As a result, those who do not fit neatly into this particular geography fade to the background in this retelling of the Transcendental movement. Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, and the community at Brook Farm are present, but not central. This might be jarring to some. However, such a criticism fails to grapple with this book on its own terms. At its core, the work seeks to historicize the particular connection between Concord, its community members, and the individuals that would develop an intellectual movement within its orbit. In this sense, Gross's work provides a powerful model for any historian seeking to understand the complex relationship between community and culture.

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Founded in Fiction: The Uses of Fiction in the Early United States.

By Thomas Koenigs. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 336. Cloth, \$45.00.)

Reviewed by Betsy Klimasmith