

Bright Circle: Five Remarkable Women in the Age of Transcendentalism

Randall Fuller

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Randall Fuller's history book *Bright Circle* reveals the often-overlooked women at the heart of Transcendentalism.

Focusing on the lives and works of a handful of extraordinary minds—Mary Moody Emerson, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, Lydia Jackson Emerson, and Margaret Fuller—this collective biography charts the contributions of women to a distinctly American movement. At the center of the narrative are the communal conversations the women had with each other over a lifetime, spanning marriages, motherhood, and deep tragedy. These are unveiled in segmented chapters rich with primary sources, illustrations, and comprehensive footnotes.

Highlighting the role of Margaret Fuller's Conversations seminar, which began in 1840 in Elizabeth Peabody's Boston bookshop, *Bright Circle* digs behind the men's names most associated with Transcendentalism to show how these women helped create the phenomena—but also how the movement's promises of progress ultimately failed its women, whose educations society at large disapproved of.

Fuller's portrait of Mary Moody Emerson, who kept a journal of her thoughts on God, nature, contemporary intellectual currents, and her "ambitious program of reading," includes the surprising observation that her nephew, Ralph Waldo Emerson, sought out her writing to use in his sermons, "modeling his prose on hers." Elizabeth Peabody "was a prodigy" who coined the word *transcendentalism* in an essay. But it was Margaret Fuller who shook the foundations of Transcendentalism with the force of her seminar and writings, both of which were highly regarded by men and women alike. Her challenge to women of her time was prescient: she "pressed the women to think hard" and, if not happy in their lives, "to imagine better ones."

Filled with coruscating insights, *Bright Circle* reintroduces the women who helped create one of America's most exciting and progressive intellectual movements.

PEGGY KURKOWSKI (January / February 2025)

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