THE ROAD TO CONCORD

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IT was VanWyck Brooks who introduced me to that little New England town with the attractive name of Concord. In the pages of *The Flowering of New England* and *The Life of Emerson* he has made many people acquainted, in a most fascinating way, with that lively scene of a century or so ago when literary and philosophical New England had its great coming to birth. In few places has such a striking phenomenon been seen; in few places such a sudden flowering of literary, artistic and scientific talent in so new a land. But the rough edges were already beginning to be worn away—the revolution was not long past, and the revolutionary spirit was still in the air while already a stimulating tradition was being formed, a tradition free from outworn theories and age-old discussions, but a tradition full of lively enquiry and free opinion. It was a hardy atmosphere, and the puritan spirit made the most of it and produced a rugged, intelligent type, voracious of learning, beginning to acquire an admiration for the achievements of the old countries of Europe, never tired of exploring and experimenting, above all unhampered by the blasé distaste for enthusiasm which was arising elsewhere. Enthusiasm worked wonders, and it was the soul of the village of Concord.

Concord is by no means inaccessible. I went out from Boston by train on a sunny spring morning. Buds were beginning to be visible on the trees, and the smoke rose slowly above the chimneys of the little Massachusetts towns with their clean white houses and green shutters. Concord is just as it should be. I came out of the little station into a quiet, shady street of white houses, sedate and dignified, set back from the road among trees. This was Thoreau Street, named after one of Concord's best-known sons. It runs, as all the streets do, on to the village green, the centre of all these New England villages; there is the town hall and the fire hall, the Free Library where everyone meets, the Unitarian Church in the fine, simple colonial style, the old village inn which was the stopping-place of the Boston stagecoach long before the War of Independence.

It seemed like old Europe to see the signpost "To the Battlefield". It was not far. Along the street and down a short lane and there is the little bridge over the Concord river where were

fired the first shots of the war when the Concord farmers, armed with muskets and spades, made the first stand against the British troops; not far from the statue of the "minute-man" standing with rifle ready to defend his home and his fields are the graves of several British soldiers who fell in that first clash of the war. Round these low-lying meadows Thoreau and Emerson often wandered, and it was from this point that Thoreau set out on his exploration of the river and its tributaries which he described in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers.*

Close to the battlefield is an old, high wooden house, empty and close-shuttered, a little forlorn with the last of the winter's snow in little heaps in the shadow of the walls. I walked up to look at it more closely, for this is the Old Manse—here Hawthorne lived and wrote *Mosses from an Old Manse*; here too Emerson was brought up, close to the battlefield; indeed the battlefield was on the Manse property, and the Emerson cows were pastured there. From the Manse windows as a child Miss Mary Moody Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt, had watched the manoeuvres of the minute-men in the meadow by the bridge, and the sun had glinted on the barrels of their guns. Miss Emerson was known as one of the town's eccentrics. She lived in her shroud long as a constant reminder of mortality, and was seen on horseback once in Concord, attired for the grave. Writing was already in the Emerson family; for this strange member of it wrote a great diary, prayers, ejaculations and dreams in a rugged Calvinistic style. Ralph Emerson called her the true "aunt of genius". It was she who after his father's death taught him to write, and strictly supervised his studies. Hers is perhaps the most interesting of the many ghosts which must haunt the Old Manse.

From the Manse it is not far to the Cambridge turnpike road—another quiet street of old white or yellow houses, many of which were built when the land was still British. Indeed one of them has the date of its erection carved above the door; it is 1696, when Concord was but a small settlement on the road through the woods to Boston. It is built in the strong type of those days—fine, square windows, small sturdy porch, and already the fanlight which became so characteristic of the old colonial architecture. Not far along the road on the right is a large, square house with a long, low ell at one side. Big elms and oaks surround it; behind and at the side is an apple orchard, and underneath the trees the grass is green. Here Emerson lived for many years, and Thoreau paid long visits "never out of ear-

shot of the Emerson dinner-bell." It was from this house that the famous essays advocating plain living, high thinking and self-reliance came; here the transcendental philosophy was formulated, and it was from this house that the man who was known all over New England and even in the old land went forth on his journeys, the journeys which brought him friendship with the great English literary figures—Carlyle, Tennyson, Ruskin, Browning. To this house his fellow townsfolk drew his carriage home in state, for he had made Concord renowned on two continents. Here we can imagine Emerson coming, as he used to come, on Sunday afternoons to the front entry at four o'clock and calling for the children, and they went out to Walden, the Cliffs or Peter's Field, or to some new spot which Emerson had discovered during the week.

Only a little farther on, down the Cambridge turnpike, is another house of curious shape. It is not big, but in the centre of it rises a single square tower with windows on all sides. The house is Hawthorne's "Wayside"; he had, he said, always wanted a tower to write in, and so he built this small, high room above the roof. From it he could see the woods and the road. Up the ridge behind the house, disappearing in the trees, is the path he wandered so often. From those windows he could see the farmers' waggons setting out early in the morning for Boston and the market; over that road the Concord boys who went to Harvard College came home at the week-end, and carriages brought Boston's élite, Harvard's professors and occasionally European men of letters—Clough, for instance—to meet Mr. Emerson.

All the houses along this pleasant road are under the shelter of the Ridge; there is still another, a little distance down the road to Cambridge. When I reached it, workmen were busy putting new shingles on the roof and repairing the front steps. It looked dull and drab, large and awkward, but it must have looked attractive when the lilac bushes which surrounded it were in bloom. This was the home of Bronson Alcott, the Yankee peddler who gave up his journeys from farmhouse to farmhouse of New England and the South for larger traffic in ideas. He seems to have been another Concord eccentric—the place was rich in them—irresponsible yet likeable, continually in a state of excitement over some new, brilliant intellectual fancy. Often he originated them himself. Yet he was not a crank, for behind all his curious traits was a lively intellect, eager to experiment, always anxious to arouse his neighbours and all his contempor-

aries to a new intellectual freedom. It was largely Alcott who was responsible for the Brook Farm experiment, when all the enlightened of Concord banded themselves together and determined to try for themselves the new communistic life on the land a few miles from Concord. Here Thoreau and Alcott and all the *illuminati* might be seen working with spade and hoe, the while discussing Goethe and Kant, Plato and Aristotle. In the evening in the Brook Farm living room the long, serious discussions were continued after the women had finished their tasks, and attempt was made to wrestle with the great problems of thought. But it was hard work on the land, for few of the group were real farmers, and theory met difficulties when confronted with the hard soil of Brook Farm; however congenial all might seem, they saw too much of one another, and several could not endure the rigorous vegetarianism of some of the group. One by one they departed, and finally the Brook Farm experiment came to an end. But it was not merely a joke; it was a serious endeavour to carry out in practice the new communism, the life of self-reliance, close to the fundamental elements.

With such an eccentric and unpractical paterfamilias, the Alcott family must have led a precarious existence; it was because livelihood was so uncertain that Bronson's daughter Louisa turned to writing as a means of earning some extra money. Here *Little Women* and *Good Wives* were written, and it is in a Concord setting that we can best imagine the scenes of these books which have attained such great popularity. How annoyed with the perversity of human nature Bronson Alcott would have been, had he known that Louisa's writing would be remembered and would be popular when he and Brook Farm were forgotten or recalled merely as an outlandish curiosity. Close to the house is another rather dismal reminder of another Alcott experiment—a large, barn-like building with Gothic windows, close under the Ridge. Inside are rows of hard seats with plaster busts of the great philosophers around the walls; this was Bronson Alcott's School of Philosophy, and here the studious folk of Concord came to imbibe the doctrines of transcendentalism; a small, select group, but terribly in earnest.

There was another spot which I must see. I had lunch at a little restaurant near the village green, and set out on the three-mile walk to Walden Pond; the road passed by more of those quiet, dignified NewEngland houses, the homes of retired Boston merchants. The garages which housed their cars had obviously been designed for the carriages and horses with which once they

had visited Boston and Cambridge. From a slight rise there is a good view of Concord; it reminded me of many an English village; it might have been Cranford or Alexander Smith's Dreamthorpe or White's Selborne. But Concord seemed brighter and newer; white houses rather than dark stone; high white steeples on the churches; American rather than English, it seemed new and yet strangely old and mellow. It seemed not inappropriate that here the first shots of rebellion against the old had been fired, for underneath that quiet exterior was the hum of lively thought and discussion of new ideas, new attitudes. I could still see the windows of Emerson's house, and a distant figure on the lawn might have been the man himself, tall and gaunt, returning from a visit to the Manse.

Walden Pond is still untouched by too much civilization, and not much visited by tourists. You leave the busy highway by a rough cart-track through the woods. Presently the trees thin out, water appears, and nearby is the cairn marking the spot where Thoreau's hut was. From reading and re-reading *Walden* I knew exactly how it must have looked; the axe which I heard in the wood might have been his own. But that was a hundred years ago. Still, there has been little change here; that small lake is still surrounded by the rocky, wooded Massachusetts hills; as in Thoreau's time, the only paths are those of the wood-cutters and occasional visitors. Slavery was the lively issue of the moment then, and not a few of Concord's inhabitants were known to be on the side of liberation; the underground railway was active; Thoreau was certainly interested in the case of the runaways, and it is not unlikely that here at the hut he sheltered some of them on their way through the woods to Canada and the border which meant freedom. I sat down on a fallen tree-trunk and tried to recall all I could remember of *Walden*. The hut was another experiment of self-reliance like Brook Farm and the School of Philosophy, but it has more of an appeal, for we know more about it from the pages of Thoreau's own account, and many of us have felt that same call to solitude and quiet thought which the young Concord man felt—the need to get away from one's fellow men to collect scattered thoughts and to think things out.

It was the whistle of the afternoon train from Boston as it rounded the bend and appeared for a moment among the trees across the lake which reminded that I must get back to Concord, for I had one last visit to make. I went out the road past the Manse, a road which all Concord's townsfolk took at least once. On the wooded slopes on the left, among tall elms and oaks, is

Sleepy Hollow where are the graves of all the Concord worthies. It was Author's Ridge which I was looking for. The gravel paths were wet and there was still a little snow under the trees, but on the high ridge it was dry. Here are the graves of Emerson's family and of Ralph Waldo Emerson himself; quite near are the Alcotts and the Channings, the family which produced the great Unitarian leader; there too are Hawthorne's parents, Hawthorne himself, his wife and children. The sight of the graves of the Hoar family reminded me that it had been Judge Hoar who said that it was no wonder that the Creator had endowed Concord so wonderfully with the gifts of nature; had he not read in the Prayer Book "O God who art the Author of Peace and Lover of Concord"? Here too I imagined Hawthorne's funeral approaching up the slope under the trees on that May afternoon. Longfellow and Lowell were there from Cambridge, and Oliver Wendell Holmes and Agassiz and Alcott. As Van-Wyck Brooks has said, these mute green banks are already full of history. The whole of Concord's great past is there.

From the train on my way back to Boston I looked out again at Walden Pond before the trees and the rocky hills hid it from sight. I knew exactly where the cairn must be across the Pond, although it was now getting too dark to see the point where Thoreau's path reached the water's edge. Surely when I had visited it, Thoreau had merely been away on one of his walks through the woods; now perhaps he was home again, and from the bank of the pond watched the train curve round the hill as he had often watched it years ago. Tomorrow I would be attending lectures at the great university where some of the Concord worthies had also been, the university which had once rejected Emerson in his youthful, rebellious exuberance, and which received him again years afterwards.

But I had been that day at another university; Emerson and Hawthorne had talked of the University of Concord, and on their long walks had already had in their minds names of the great figures—some of them quite unappreciated by their contemporaries—of two continents who would adorn the community. Alcott's School of Philosophy, even if Emerson's mother called the old barn "a ruin", grew and grew in their minds until they imagined Concord the new centre of free intellect for the New World; had not the first shot fired for liberty echoed over the meadows by the Concord river? And, even though their ideas were nothing but cloud-pictures, they built better than they knew.