Ralph Waldo Emerson (May 25, 1803 – April 27, 1882) was an American essayist, lecturer, and poet, who led the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century. He was seen as a champion of individualism and a prescient critic of the countervailing pressures of society. He was a prolific essayist and speaker. He gave over 1,500 public lectures across the United States.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston in 1803, the son of a Unitarian Minister. His father died when he was young (8 years old) and he had to support his education through doing part-time jobs. In October 1817, he went to Harvard, where he served as class poet, but he didn’t stand out as a student graduating in the middle of his class. After graduation, he went to Florida, seeking warmer climates for his delicate health.

Emerson worked as a school master and later as a pastor in Boston’s Second Church. However he gradually moved away from the religious and social beliefs of his contemporaries, formulating and expressing the philosophy of Transcendentalism in his 1836 essay, Nature. Following this ground-breaking work, he gave a speech entitled The American Scholar in 1837, which Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. considered to be America’s “Intellectual Declaration of Independence”.

When he was just 18, Emerson married Ellen Louisa Tucker, but she tragically died just two years later – an event which shook the young Emerson. Around this time, he became more uncertain over the religious beliefs of the church he worked as a pastor. He was unsatisfied with the Communion and the method of worship. To Emerson it seemed too dry. Several years later in 1838, he was invited to Harvard Divinity School, where he gave a famous address claiming early Christianity and ‘deified’ Christ and discounting the miracles in the Bible. This radical approach was heavily criticised by members of the establishment.
Emerson wrote most of his important essays as lectures first, then revised them for print. His first two collections of essays – Essays: First Series and Essays: Second Series, published respectively in 1841 and 1844 – represent the core of his thinking, and include such well-known essays as Self-Reliance, The Over-Soul, Circles, The Poet and Experience. Together with Nature, these essays made the decade from the mid-1830s to the mid-1840s Emerson’s most fertile period.

Emerson was firmly against slavery. After 1844, he became more involved in the anti-slavery movement.

“The South calls slavery an institution… I call it destitution… Emancipation is the demand of civilization”. (Emerson 1862)

He supported Lincoln in the 1860 election and expressed disappointment when the civil war seemed to be about preserving union rather than the abolition of slavery. Emerson wrote on a number of subjects.

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