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TRANSCENDENTALISM

IN

NEW ENGLAND

A HISTORY

BY

OCTAVIUS BROOKS FROTHINGHAM

Author of "Life of Theodore Parker," "Religion of Humanity," &c., &c.

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PREFACE.

WHILE we are gathering up for exhibition before other nations, the results of a century of American life, with a purpose to show the issues thus far of our experiment in free institutions, it is fitting that some report should be made of the influences that have shaped the national mind, and determined in any important degree or respect its intellectual and moral character. A well-considered account of these influences would be of very great value to the student of history, the statesman and philosopher, not merely as throwing light on our own social problem, but as illustrating the general law of human progress. This book is offered as a modest contribution to that knowledge.

Transcendentalism, as it is called, the transcendental movement, was an important factor in American life. Though local in activity, limited in scope, brief in duration, engaging but a comparatively small number of individuals, and passing over the upper regions of the mind, it left a broad and deep trace on ideas and institutions. It affected thinkers, swayed politicians, guided moralists, inspired philanthropists, created reformers. The moral enthusiasm of the last generation, which

broke out with such prodigious power in the holy war against slavery; which uttered such earnest protests against capital punishment, and the wrongs inflicted on women; which made such passionate pleading in behalf of the weak, the injured, the disfranchised of every race and condition; which exalted humanity above institutions, and proclaimed the inherent worth of man,—owed, in larger measure than is suspected, its glow and force to the Transcendentalists. This, as a fact of history, must be admitted, as well by those who judge the movement unfavorably, as by its friends. In the view of history, which is concerned with causes and effects in their large human relations, individual opinions on them are of small moment. It was once the fashion—and still in some quarters it is the fashion—to laugh at Transcendentalism as an incomprehensible folly, and to call Transcendentalists visionaries. To admit that they were, would not alter the fact that they exerted an influence on their generation. It is usual with critics of a cold, unsympathetic, cynical cast, to speak of Transcendentalism as a form of sentimentality, and of Transcendentalists as sentimentalists; to decry enthusiasm, and deprecate the mischievous effects of feeling on the discussion of social questions. But their disapproval, however just and wholesome, does not abolish the trace which moral enthusiasm, under whatever name these judges may please to put upon it, has left on the social life of the people. Whether the impression was for evil or for good, it is there, and equally significant for warning or for commendation.

As a form of mental philosophy Transcendentalism may have had its day; at any rate, it is no longer in the ascendant, and at present is manifestly on the decline, being suppressed by the philosophy of experience, which, under different names, is taking possession of the speculative world. But neither has this consideration weight in deciding its value as an element in progress. An unsound system requires as accurate a description and as severe an analysis as a sound one; and no speculative prejudice should interfere with the most candid acknowledgment of its importance. Error is not disarmed or disenchanted by caricature or neglect.

To those who may object that the writer has too freely indulged his own prejudices in favor of Transcendentalism and the Transcendentalists, and has transgressed his own rules by writing a eulogy instead of a history, he would reply, that in his belief every system is best understood when studied sympathetically, and is most fairly interpreted from the inside. We can know its purposes only from its friends, and we can do justice to its friends only when we accept their own account of their beliefs and aims. Rénan somewhere says, that in order to judge a faith one must have confessed it and abandoned it. Such a rule supposes sincerity in the confession and honesty in the withdrawal; but with this qualification its reasonableness is easily admitted. If the result of such a verdict prove more favorable than the polemic would give, and more cordial than the critic approves, it may not be the less just for that.