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Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

The Emancipation of Literature in
New England.

Emma L. Vandewater.

by a hundred years ago. What do we find? The nation is a republic, the people are the government, but now original thought is suppressed. The mind is enslaved, not to be sure as in the earlier centuries of European civilization by passive obedience to a powerful and dictatorial priesthood but by conscientious adherence to a severe and narrow religious creed. This is more strictly true of New England for here is where the seeds of Puritanism were sown in the new soil and developed with the most vigor. Here the no-

ble united with the ignoble to form a character whose strength and purity are truly honor but whose loveliness is sadly marred by bigotry and harshness.

Under such conditions it was impossible that a literature should thrive. The moral atmosphere was too freezing. Thought was in bondage. And literary life can flourish only where the intellect, warmed and inspired by the heart, may freely follow its best ideals, unrestrained except by the nobility of the author's soul. Hence from the time of the settlement of James-

town till the beginning of our national life New England had produced only a cramped and narrow literature. This was dominated by theological discussions and the air was "black with sermons." All the famous scholars of the Mather family were preachers of the sternest doctrines.

Michael Wigglesworth's poem "The Day of Doom" reveals its character in its title. Jonathan Edwards's well known sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is not less terrible in its severity.

Briefly such was the principal character of the literary inheritance of New England at the beginning of the present century. Yet even before this there were whispers of literary life, for instance the patriotic poems of Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards. These were faint heraldings of the future. As in Europe political bondage and liberty of thought could not long exist in harmony and on that account the English and French Revolutions soon followed the Reformation, so in this little corner of the New

World intellectual restraint
was found to be incompatible
with the democratic spirit
of personal independence;
therefore, though in reverse order
from that of the Old World,
one revolution involved an-
other.

However, nearly three dec-
ades of the present century
had passed away before New
England rid herself of the
shackles which had so long
bound her. Religion had been
the task-master that held
her enslaved. A reaction in
religious belief was the means

by which she obtained her freedom. It is not our purpose to compare the relative merits of Puritanism and Unitarianism as two religious systems of doctrine. The principles of Puritanism were the strength of New England life, and it might be maintained that the new school of theology has "spilled the child with the bath." But we shall here confine our attention to the effect of this reaction on the literature of New England.

The new creed, by throwing aside the old faith, made indi-

vidual reason supreme. Thus it left the mind free from all embarrassment and its disciples were at liberty to focus their minds upon what they would and were given plentiful opportunity for original research and production. According to one author "the duty of a wider culture was almost one of the articles of this creed. Another authority says, its "most remarkable quality" was "its high social and intellectual character."

Not the least important result of this new impulse was

the fact that through it the doors were thrown open to foreign influence. The new longing for knowledge and culture would not be satisfied within the old bounds. Foreign books found a ready reception. It became no longer an unusual thing for an American to travel in Europe and these travelers returned to mold over their gathered wisdom for their countrymen's instruction and pleasure.

The time was propitious, for Europe was throbbing with the life of new ideas. The spirit of transcendentalism or ideal

ism had developed in Germany and the descendants of New England Puritans found a strain akin to their own nature in the new philosophy. Edward Everett lectured upon it after his return from Germany in 1820, and it was also circulated through certain English authors. The mystical nature of transcendentalism made it fascinating to many minds. It found true reality in spirit and not in matter. It dwelt much upon the revelation of God through nature.

Besides these philosophical and religious elements it had a humanitarian side. It was as a result of this altruistic tendency that the Brook Farm was organized and endured for five years. Hawthorne was for a time one of the members of this community, but his practical experience seems to condemn his theory, for he records in his journal that after a hard days work his soul absolutely refuses to be poured out on paper, and that he believes the higher nature of man may be buried and perish in a furrow of the field just as

well as under a pile of money. Many writers, both men and women, of rare ability were interested in the progress of the farm, not the least of them was Emerson, though he was never a member.

The breadth and culture acquired by contact with other civilizations reveals itself in many poets. Longfellow and Lovell by their travels in Europe gleaned rich harvests of new ideas for New England's literature. These with other great minds gathering in and near Boston formed

a group which made not only the literary center of New England but of the United States.

We have attempted to show the causes and results of the emancipation of literature in New England. We have spoken of its condition of bondage in the early history of the country, of its liberation due to the religious reaction, and of foreign influence as a result of this reaction. It is not in our province to trace its course further. One of the poets of Cambridge sang:—
Our country hath a gospel of her own

To preach and practice before
all the world -

The freedom and divinity of
man.

New England only truly rec-
ognized this gospel when to
political liberty she joined the
liberty of thought and letters.
The result of her sermons,
Time is now writing in the
history of our nation.

