Getting to the Root of Bush: Nickname, Metaphor, and the Biblical “George Bush”

Richard Higgins

Concord, Massachusetts

Reading and researching Emerson in preparation for the recent bicentennial filled many gaps, corrected mistakes, and clarified at least some of the haze in my knowledge of this great American. But one puzzle that remained unsolved was how Bush, the Emerson House, got its name.

The consensus of the scholars and Emerson family members I asked was that it was either picked up from the Coolidges, which built the place, or that it was a sort of eccentric family nickname, somewhat like Emerson referring to Lydia as “Queenie,” the origins of which (Bush, not Queenie, that is) were shrouded in mystery.

I did not find a definitive answer, but I can make a suggestion that I think is sound and probable. Emerson was writing Nature when, in July 1835, he bought the square, white, high-ceilinged Coolidge house on Cambridge Turnpike. In effect, Emerson named the place (although not right away) after the main idea in his manifesto in gestation: “Bush” refers to the burning bush through which God appears to man in Exodus 3.

This occurred to me on 25 May 2003, during the Emerson family birthday party and celebration of Emerson’s legacy at Bush itself. I mentioned my interest in this dimly burning question to the folklorist, arts center director, and singer Dillon Bustin, who that day was performing his music set to Emerson’s words. He pointed out the end of Emerson’s poem “Good-bye,” which Bustin had put to music. Emerson wrote it in 1824, then rewrote it in the 1830s, around the time of his Divinity School Address, and published it in 1839 in The Western Messenger (Rusk, 273, 495). It appears in Poems (1847).

O, when I am safe in my sylvan home,
I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome;
And when I am stretched beneath the pines
Where the evening star so holy shines,
I laugh at the lore and the pride of man,
For what are they in their high conceit,
When man in the bush with God may meet?

Besides being a lovely condensation of Emerson’s faith in intuition, the poem contains a strong hint of where and why Bush got its name. The last stanza is about a “sylvan home” (around which Emerson planted pines), and where he certainly took jibes at the learned clan. Emerson loved books, but he also loved the aeolian harp in the window of his study, through which the wind played the music of the ages.

The “bush” where God and man may meet in “Good-bye” is, of course, the burning bush that Moses saw, and so, I believe, is the Bush at 28 Cambridge Turnpike. Exodus 3 dramatizes a key Emersonian motif—how people apprehend the divine. Moses ascends Mount Horab, where he has a vision of a flaming bush and hears a voice. Moses perceives that the voice in the bush is not simply a local god or spirit, but the one eternal God. The bush, a humble, vegetative, and pervasive part of the physical world, discloses God.

Emerson bought the house he was to name Bush three years after leaving his ministerial vocation and while he was in the throes of writing Nature, the premise of which is that the physical world is the body of God’s soul. Nature is, in Emerson’s thought, God precipitated into form. (Hawthorne and many others since have said that Emerson composed Nature while living at the Old Manse, where he likely began it, but I am persuaded by John McAleer that much of the writing occurred between September 1835, when Emerson moved into Bush, and September 1836, when it was published.)

Emerson paid John T. Coolidge $3,500 (even then a bargain price) for the house and two-acre lot, where he would live with Lydia for 47 years. The plain, white wooden home was called Coolidge House, and it is almost invariably described as solid but unpretentious. Emerson famously complained to his brother William (Letters, 2:447) that it was “a mean place” without the trees and gardens he would soon plant around it, and he vowed to cram it with books and friends, as he did.

Robert Richardson wrote that the new owners “deromanticized” the house by renaming it Bush, but they did not do so at first. There is no mention of the nickname Bush in Emerson’s letters before the Civil War. Initially, the Emerson family more often called the place Coolidge Castle, apparently to poke fun at social pretension (either their own or that of the Coolidges). Only in Emerson’s “later years” was Bush “a name used in the family for the Concord home,” according to Rusk (L, 6:196). McAleer also wrote in his biography: “After some years, the Emmersons, among themselves, referred to their house as Bush” (McAleer, 210).

I was then somewhat crestfallen, but also relieved, to learn that McAleer had discovered the burning bush connection before me. In Days of Encounter, he quoted the same stanza of “Good-bye,” and concluded that the Emerson house indeed became that sylvan home where he confronted the life of the spirit, truly meriting the name of Bush” (ibid., 210).

(Continued on page 7)
Emerson Society members continue generously to join at various "patron" levels of membership. All donations above the $10 annual regular membership fees, retirements, deaths, etc.) of Emersonian scholars. We will also pay \fes for any current event—will present "Walking with Emerson at Walden," a lecture, with slides, by W. Barksdale Maynard, author of "Walden Pond: A History" (Oxford, 2004). For details on the gathering, visit www.emersonsociety.org, or call the Emerson Society at 978-369-5310.

American Literature Association

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society will present two panels on Thursday, 27 May, in San Francisco, Calif., at the fifteenth annual conference of the American Literature Association. Exact times are not yet available.

SESSION I

Emerson's Poetry: A Bicentennial View
Chair: Joel Myerson (Colby College)

"Thinking about Emerson's Poetry," Paul Kane (Nassau College)

"The Hymns: the Brahmin Sings," Saunders Morris (Bucknell University)

"Reading Emerson's Poems: The Harvard Edition," Tom Wortham (UCLA)

SESSION II

Openings from Emerson
Chair: Elizabeth Addison (Wesleyan University)

"Emerson, Vocation, and the Problem of the Female Intellectual," Tiffany Wayne (Stanford University)

"Poetry without Fetters: Emerson in Other Forms," Sarah Wool (Art and Literature)

"Was the Concord Sage a Saffronist? Emerson, the Woman's Journal, and Reformation in the Gilded Age," Todd H. Richardson (University of Texas at the Permian Basin)

The ALA conference will be held 27-30 May at the Hyatt Regency, 5 Embarcadero Center, San Francisco, CA 94111. The conference fees cover the costs of the conference including the opening and closing receptions; it does not include any food this year. Pre-registration (before 15 April) is $75 ($52 for graduate students, independent scholars, and retired faculty); after that date the cost increases by $10 for each category.

The Hyatt Regency San Francisco will offer a conference rate of $149 for a single or double room (rates are $174). For reservations, call 1-800-233-1234 before 15 April and request the American Literature Association block.

Emerson Society in Concord

The sesquicentennial of the publication of Waldenses will be the focus of the 2004 Thoreau Society Annual Gathering in Concord, Mass. On Friday, 9 July, the Emerson Society—as its annual contribution to this great event—will present "Walking with Emerson at Walden," a lecture, with slides, by W. Barksdale Maynard, author of "Walden Pond: A History" (Oxford, 2004). For details on the gathering, visit www.thoreausociety.org, or call the Thoreau Society at 978-369-5310.

MLA Program

The Thoreau Society is planning an Emerson-related session for the Modern Language Association convention in Philadelphia in December 2004. "The "Emersons" Parkers and Mrs. Thoreau's Dinner Table" will explore Transcendentalist and transcendentals as represented by those who broke bread with the Emersons and/or the Thoreaus. For details, e-mail Professor Laura Dassow Walls at walls@lafayette.edu.

Emerson Sightings/Citations

John Hersey finds Emerson cited in the moving spirit behind the 1960s, in "Let's Rock," by Joshua Glenn (Boston Globe, 30 March 2003). Glenn's article begins: "In the latest issue of the Boston University-based journal Aris, the incongruous and cosmic Camille Paglia says we have Ralph Waldo Emerson to thank for the great 'spiritual awakening' of the 1960s. In her essay 'Cults and Cosmic Consciousness,' Paglia writes that, like so many members of her own generation, the sage of Concord rejected the authority of his elders, grooved on the sacred texts of the East, and embraced 'a pagan pantheism.' But Emerson was too uptight to break on through to the other side. But in 1964, he wrote, 'America had, that completed Emerson's Transcendentalism with its sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll-fuelled quest for a new religious vision.' Paglia, however, laments the failure of the 1960s to pass along a solid legacy. Glenn writes, "New Age thinking 'has smoothly adjusted to the stubborn persistence of the social structures that the sages failed to budge.' What's worse, its 'naive promises of good and god' induce 'a benevolent relaxation that may be disabling in a world of terrorism.' As George W. Bush should have said, 'America, let's rock.'"

Len Gougeon sends a lengthy "NYTimes.com" article—"After 25 Years, a Road Map for Diversity on Campus," by Jacques Steinberg (24 June 2003)—that concludes: "For supporters of affirmative action like Mr. [James O.] Freedman, the former Dartmouth president, yesterday was a disappointment. The Supreme Court's decision that students learn much from living and studying with a broad cross-section of classmates. Mr. Freedman said he traced the idea not only to Justice Powell but as far back as the 1940s, in his famous dictum from a quotation from Emerson. "I pay the schoolmaster," Emerson wrote, "but 'tis the schoolboy that educates my sons.'"

Joel Myerson reports that on 16 December 2003 the Web site "GoolgeDuel" [www.sfu.ca/ggbertuzzi/google Duel] yielded the astonishing statistic that: "there are 118,000 web references for Ralph Waldo Emerson, but only 73,600 for Henry Thoreau. [By 31 January 2004, both authors’ totals had slipped but the Sage of Concord had widened his lead over the Hermit of Walden, 114,000-66,800. As of 19 February 2004, Waldo still held a solid edge over Henry, 103,000-66,400.]"
A Bibliography of “Emerson in 2003” in the Popular Media

Compiled by MARGARET EMBRACHT, Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association

WESTLEY T. MOTT, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

DAVID M. ROBINSON, Oregon State University

Ralph Waldo Emerson is a national icon, and the bicentennial of his birth was observed not only in scholarly conferences and in formal public events but throughout the popular print and electronic media as well. What follows is a listing of newspaper, TV, radio, and Internet items, as well as exhibit catalogs and musical performances, submitted by friends and members of the Emerson Society. (All items are from 2003.) This feature will continue to appear in ESP as long as more pieces are identified.

An Invitation: Please send any items we have missed to Wes Mott, Emerson Society Papers, Dept. of Humanities & Arts, Western New England College, USA; wmp269@wne.edu. Be on the lookout also for different versions of entries already listed below—newspapers print syndicated articles under different titles, often with unique photos and local commentary. All contributors will be acknowledged. Please supply dates and section/page numbers if they are not visible. Bibliographical citations will appear in future issues of ESP and original items may be deposited in the Emerson Society Collections at the Thoreau Institute in Lincoln, Mass. Researchers during the bicentennial will be grateful for our efforts!


Church, Forrest. “Emerson’s Shadow.” UW World (March/April), 29-31.

CNN Headline News. “Ralph Waldo Emerson Essayist born in Boston on this date two hundred years ago” Kyron televised throughout 25 May.


Gougeon, Len. Interviewed by Erika Funke on “Art Scene.” WVLA (Scranton, Pa., NPR), 22 May, 11-12 a.m. (rebroadcast 25 May, 11-12 a.m., and on 26 and 29 June ).

Grant, Steve. “Emerson Revisited: 200 Years After His Birth, Sage of Concord Is Being Rediscovered.” Hartford Courant, 9 July, pp D1, D5. [Online at www.ctnow.com and syndicated as follows:]

• “In the footsteps of Emerson, the people’s philosopher.” Seattle Times, 25 May, p. 9F.

• “In the footsteps of Emerson, the people’s philosopher.” Seattle Times, 25 May.


• “Celebrating the birth of an ‘endless seeker.’” Boston Sun, 14 May, p. 9.

• “The Infinitude of the Private Man”: A bicentennial appreciation of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson Society Papers, Dept. of Humanities & Arts, Western New England College, USA.


Italie, Hillel. “Emerson Bicentennial: Ralph Waldo Emerson, the ‘sage of Concord’ and leading American thinker, was born 200 years ago this spring.” Salon [Mass.] News, May 15. [Associated Press feature article appearing also in follows: “The Great ‘Ennobler.’”]


• “Celebrating the birth of an ‘endless seeker.’” Boston Sun, 14 May, p. 9.

• “A way with words: In town that spawned many great writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson stands out.” Altoside [Pa.] Mirror, 27 May, p. D1, 3.

• Also in Washington Post, 25 May.


Lyons, Christopher. Web interviews:

• Harold Bloom [http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/bloom Sanford/2003/09/03/a293]


• Audio version of salute to Emerson [http://www.hufner.org/emersoniana/html]


McGroarty, Cynthia J. “Honoring Emerson’s timeless lessons.” Philadelphia Inquirer, 5 September, “North Neighbors” section, p. 3. [With photo by Phyllis Cole]


Philosophy Foundation (Waltham, Mass.). “Emerson and the Examined Life.” Fansull Hall, Boston, 28 June. Includes reading by Robert Pinsky and essays by Richard Geldard and M. Robinson. [Filmed by C-Span 2 and shown on www.BookTV.org, as well as www.wgbh.org/forum. See also www.fansullhillo gium.org/mfevit.html]


Robinson, David M. Interviewed by online magazine Web page Beliefnet. [www.beliefnet.com/sunday/127story, 12742.html]


• “In the footsteps of Emerson, the people’s philosopher.” Seattle Times, 25 May, p. 9F.

• “At age 200: Concord is awash in Emerson.” New Orleans Times-Picayune, 3 May, p. A5.


• “Celebrating the birth of an ‘endless seeker.’” Boston Sun, 14 May, p. 9.

• “A way with words: In town that spawned many great writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson stands out.” Altoona [Pa.] Mirror, 27 May, p. D1, 3.

• Also in Washington Post, 25 May.


The following individuals contributed to this bibliography:

The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform.

This collection of eleven essays provides an excellent survey of a recent major development in Emersonian scholarship and criticism: the conflict between Emerson the serene transcendentalist, preaching the reform of the individual soul, and Emerson the social activist, working with others for the abolition of slavery. Here we see what happened in time he came around to thinking that they should have the suffrage, whether or not they all exercised it. Most of the leaders of the movement that he was basically on the side of the South have died as one of their heroes. But later this was often overlooked, and some-times even misrepresented.

Jeffrey A. Steele's "The Limits of Political Symphony: Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Women’s Rights" demonstrates that the shift in Emerson’s approach to the problem of social reform was a result of his growing personal commitment to the cause and his speech at the Boston Women’s Rights Convention in 1855 was largely due to the influence of Margaret Fuller, though she had died in 1850. But though he now fully supported almost everything she had demanded (including the "exercise of the professions"), there was one profession to which he never agreed that they should be admitted—namely, the ministry, or the right to preach and interpret the Scriptures. He even, in part of her Memoir that he wrote, downplayed her views on this subject, attributed them to her "occasional enthusiasm," and even dismissed them as "pagan" (p. 119).

In "Emerson, Slavery, and the Evolution of the Principle of Self-Reliance," Michael Strysick points out numerous expressions of Emerson’s hatred of slavery in his earliest journals, the "Wide World" series (LNN 1 and 2). Thus, "it becomes clear that Emerson’s inevitable [later] anti-slavery activity did not mark the beginnings of his evolution as an abolitionist, but was instead the evolution of the principle of self-reliance" (p. 141), in which self-reliance was merged with a sense of duty to help his fellow human beings.

Len Gougeon, in "Emerson’s Abolition Conversion," suggests that the principal turning point in Emerson’s decision to become more active in social reform, and to cease being an opponent of slavery, was the research he did for his 1844 address "On the Emancipation of the Negroes in the West Indies." He had long hated the idea of slavery, but his original conviction of its evil had never come close to his personal experience; and he had thought that the way to eliminate it was for every individual to reform himself. Now, however, the interest of the poet is not in the complete historical or philosophical perspective of the address showed him what slavery was really like, and its effects not only on the slave but also on the slaveholder.

"Emerson, John Brown, and ‘Doing the Word’: The Enactment of Political Religion at Harpers Ferry, 1859" by David M. Robinson, in "Emerson’s Other America: Abolition and the American Novel in the Nineteenth Century," suggests that the principal turning point in Emerson’s decision to become more active in social reform, and to cease being an opponent of slavery, was the research he did for his 1844 address "On the Emancipation of the Negroes in the West Indies." He had long hated the idea of slavery, but his original conviction of its evil had never come close to his personal experience; and he had thought that the way to eliminate it was for every individual to reform himself. Now, however, the interest of the poet is not in the complete historical or philosophical perspective of the address showed him what slavery was really like, and its effects not only on the slave but also on the slaveholder.

Robert Richardson Jr., Emerson: The Mind on Fire
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But in a letter to Lydia from Hanover on 25 July 1838, right after the events of 1846, Emerson perhaps was more frank. He clearly was a firm supporter of the original essay in expressing Emerson’s political philosophy and his relation to his views. In the end, he was, as his grandfather used to say, "a nickname in hand is worth two in the bush."
IN MEMORIAM
John J. McAleer
1923–2003

Our colleague and friend Professor John McAleer died at his Lexington home on 19 November 2003, after a long illness. A distinguished Emersonian and Thoreauvian and a scholar/teacher of American Transcendentalism, he had taught at Boston College for nearly fifty years. As my friend, colleague, and neighbor, his learning and his commitment to generations of students, to his beloved academic community, and to his parish church was always a shining example. And his valued involvement with Emerson Society events and affairs was a great gift to his associates.

John's major Emersonian work was, of course, his Pulitzer Prize-nominated Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter as well as his essays on Emerson and Thoreau. But his rare biographical skills and the amazing range and variety of his interests are also evident in his notable books Rex Stout: A Biography and Theodore Dreiser: An Introduction and Interpretation.

He was also well recognized as a novelist for his Unit Pride, a Korean War story, and Coign of Vantage: The Boston Athenaeum Murders, a thriller that showed off his considerable gifts as a student and practitioner of the mystery genre. At the time of his death he was nearing completion of what was surely to be a major biographical study of Jane Austen.

At Boston College John taught a remarkable variety of courses—from surveys of American Literature, to offerings in “American Transcendentalism,” “Literary Boston,” and “Novels of the Sea.” He was continually designing new courses to enrich our curriculum.

As my professional associate from Harvard Graduate School days, where we received the Ph.D. in English, to our Boston College careers into a new century, John was the complete professional. As my Lexington friend and neighbor, he was a model husband, father, and grandfather. I have rich memories of his kindness and generosity.

—John L. Mahoney

Emerson Exploited
The following letter, dated 16 February 2004, was received by Joel Myerson.

Dear Emerson Lovers—

Please be informed that a hotel has been built in the Catskill Mountains of New York State by Dean Gitter of Crossroads Ventures. It is named “The Emerson” and capitalizes grossly on the reputation of R.W. Emerson in advertising brochures. Mr. Gitter is regarded widely as a greedy, ruthless developer. His new project, the proposed “Belleayre Resort at Catskill Park,” would clear-cut over 500 pristine wilderness acres of mountaintop in the center of protected watershed lands of New York. There is enormous opposition to this plan regionally, and it is suspected to be a front for casino gambling.

Mr. Gitter is in the process of renaming his unsuccessful “Catskill Corners” (a shopping mall adjacent to “The Emerson” hotel) to “Emerson Place,” a crass distortion of everything R.W. Emerson stood for. (This spot once sported a billboard-sized image of sacred Buddhist eyes, until the nearby Zen Monastery sued him and had it removed.)

While I do not suggest you sue for the good name of Emerson, perhaps you could spread the word about Mr. Gitter’s shameless exploitation of Emerson’s reputation, and ask your members to support our efforts to stop the Belleayre Resort from being built.

Please visit www.friendsofcatskillpark.org for more information.

Sincerely,
Dave Channon

Greetings from the staff of ESP—
front, editorial assistants Sharon Chou and Binyam Tsegaye (missing from photo, Nik Waggner); back, production designer Peggy Isaacson and managing editor Wes Mott.