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## The Transcendentalists and the Making of the Modern Mind

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Transcendentalism constitutes one of the most significant moments and movements in the making of the American mind. As a matter of fact, we cannot understand the contours of American thought without reference to this formative period and intellectual movement. Now, we have a book that serves as a truly useful introduction to the Transcendentalists and their ideas. In *American Transcendentalism: A History*, Philip F. Gura takes us into the minds and times of the Transcendentalists.

Gura, who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, offers a pleasing and stimulating combination of historical analysis and the study of ideas. In addition, he is a good writer whose style will keep readers attentive and interested.

In essence, Transcendentalism was a movement that transformed American individualism from a reflex into a religion. As Gura explains, “Transcendentalism thus was another in a long line of attempts to redirect the still incomplete American experiment, in this case by anchoring it in the sanctity of each individual’s heart.”

The Transcendentalists included, most famously, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, along with Margaret Fuller. They were associated with Unitarianism, Harvard University, Boston, and the early history of the American republic. They were eccentrics — but eccentrics with vast influence, then and now.

Gura adds spice to his narrative, citing Annie Russell Marble (who knew the Transcendentalists first-hand) as “a race who dove into the infinite, soared into the illimitable, and never paid cash.” Nevertheless, the movement was hugely influential in moving the center of meaning into the realm of the individual consciousness. Traditional theism gave way to panentheism and a vague spirituality. The path was set for the development of individualism as a total worldview — and for the shaping of the American mind.

Gura’s *American Transcendentalism* is a book that helps to explain the present, as well as the past.



