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Bouncing back

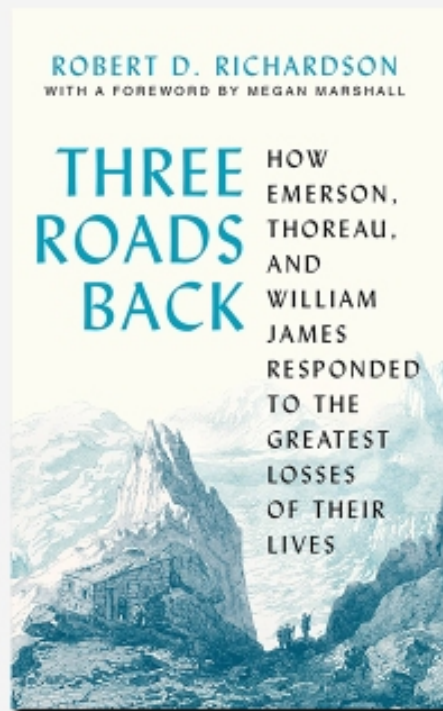
How Emerson, Thoreau and James found their way back to terra firma

By [Gordon Fraser](#)



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IN THIS REVIEW

THREE ROADS BACK

How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James responded to the greatest losses of their lives
128pp. Princeton University Press. £18.99 (US \$22.95).

Robert D. Richardson

After the death of his wife, Ellen, in February 1831, Ralph Waldo Emerson suffered a profound physical and emotional collapse. When he boarded a ship bound for Europe in December of the following year, he was still so weakened that the ship's captain feared he would not survive the crossing. Emerson's protégé, Henry David Thoreau, experienced a similar crisis in 1842 after losing his

brother, John, to tetanus. He was stricken by a sympathetic illness and confined to bed for days. Years later still, in 1870, William James's beloved cousin Minny Temple - who would serve as partial inspiration for the heroines in three of his brother Henry's novels - succumbed to tuberculosis. Probably recalling the loss of Temple, James later wrote that "I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before".

Emerson, Thoreau and James's experiences left them unmoored. Yet each found a way back to terra firma. In this slim, moving study, the late Robert D. Richardson - who has written biographies of all three men - considers what beneficial lessons we might extract from the tragedies that beset his subjects. "In dark times", he writes, "one way I have found to fight back against what is going wrong is to re-examine the lives and works of figures from the past." A grieving reader is invited to re-examine alongside him. In the foreword the biographer Megan Marshall writes that Richardson sent her the manuscript shortly after the death of her partner. He wrote to Marshall of his hope that the short book, then called "Resilience", would provide consolation. It did. Marshall reports that the manuscript answered one of her great fears: "Would the fog ever lift?"

Transformation, Richardson suggests, may be the key to lifting that fog. For Emerson the pivotal moment came as he stood in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. He wrote that the garden made a visitor feel "as calm and genial as a bridegroom", a striking choice of words from a man mourning the loss of his wife. He quit the ministry and wrote *Nature* (1836), a book that expressed his belief in a fundamental interconnection of human beings and the world around them. Thoreau similarly realized that people are merely part of a natural drama that existed before us and will continue after we are gone. And the experience of grief led James to explore the close ties between our emotions and our bodies. How we process loss depends in part on how we respond to it physically.

We accumulate losses merely by living. In *Three Roads Back* Richardson demonstrates how Emerson, Thoreau and James each came to understand resilience as a natural part of us. He suggests that we can find insight in our losses and, perhaps, transcendence.

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