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# 'Three Roads Back' Review: The Freedom to Mourn

How the experience of sudden loss—and its unpredictable consequences—shaped the work of Emerson, Thoreau and William James.



'Study of a Coming Storm on Lake George' (1863) by Sanford Robinson Gifford.

PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

*By Christoph Irmscher*

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On Feb. 8, 1831, Ellen Tucker Emerson died, at the heartbreakingly young age of 19. Her husband, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the junior pastor of Boston's Second Church, felt "unstrung, debilitated by grief," his life weighed down by the "heaviness of the fact of death." He embarked on daily walks, five miles each way, to Ellen's tomb in Roxbury, Mass. In his journal, he cried out to her as if she could still hear him. On March 29, 1832, when Ellen had been dead for over a year, Emerson did something unexpected—he opened her coffin. Two months later, he informed his congregation that he no longer believed in the "theological scheme of Redemption." By the end of the year, he had quit the ministry and was on his way to Europe. Wandering through the Jardin des Plantes, the celebrated botanical garden and natural-history collection in Paris, Emerson reveled in his ties with nonhuman nature: "I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle fox."

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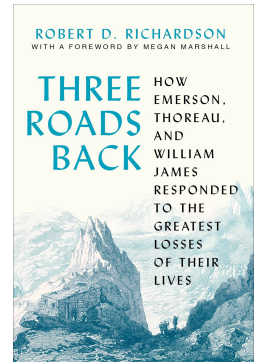
## Three Roads Back: How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James Responded to the Greatest Losses of Their Lives

By Robert D.

Richardson

Princeton University  
Press

128 pages



We don't know what exactly Emerson saw that day in Roxbury, though we may safely assume it wasn't pretty. "No resurrection there, just visual evidence of decay," comments Robert D. Richardson in "Three Roads Back," a concise exploration of how three major 19th-century thinkers (Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and William James) overcame the experience of personal tragedy. Ellen Tucker Emerson's death is the first in Richardson's gallery of losses, and her husband's intense response provides a kind of model for the two subsequent ones: Thoreau's attempt to cope with his brother John's shockingly swift death from tetanus in January 1842, and the despair felt by the aspiring philosopher William James (the youngest of the trio) when, in March 1870, his 24-year-old cousin Mary "Minny" Temple succumbed to tuberculosis, the same illness that took Ellen Emerson.

As Richardson demonstrates, his three protagonists refused to let their grief overwhelm them, with Thoreau offering perhaps the strongest rebuttal. "What if you or I be dead," he wrote in his journal, "God is alive still." And for Thoreau, as for his mentor Emerson, God was nature, the source of perpetual renewal. Which is also why Thoreau's own death, when it came in May 1862, was no great matter to him. His voice reduced to a whisper, he declined to speculate on what would come next: "One world at a time." The pages devoted to the great naturalist's final weeks in Richardson's 1986 book "Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind" are among the most moving in any biography I have read.

Richardson himself died in 2020, before this book could go to press. Equipped with an admiring preface by Megan Marshall, herself an accomplished biographer, "Three Roads Back" is Richardson's legacy condensed, his grace note to posterity, the massive effort behind his three great books—"Henry Thoreau," "Emerson: The Mind on Fire" (1995) and "William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism" (2006)—refracted in the shimmering

prism of a hundred pages of perfectly polished prose. Among biographers, Richardson ruled supreme. His books were like Henry James novels—tightly constructed despite their size, saturated with finely observed detail, intimate in tone yet panoramic in the historical and intellectual contexts they unfolded. His voice was unmistakable—deeply empathetic and humane yet detached enough to guide the reader through the labyrinth of emotions that, under scrutiny, can be shown to make up anyone’s life. These qualities are on display also in “Three Roads Back,” where Richardson’s unsurpassed grasp of the material allows him to pinpoint, in the space of a paragraph or two, what unites and what separates his characters.

Nature regenerated both Emerson and Thoreau. That said, where the former glimpsed an extended “metaphor of the human mind,” the latter discovered exuberant wildness, a power that healed precisely because it had no regard for human affairs. When Thoreau watched “a very slight and graceful hawk” ascend, explains Richardson, he became that hawk, rising and falling through the air, wings gleaming like ribbons of satin in the sun, a spectacle of divine self-reliance. While Emerson experienced his ecstatic connection with centipede, caiman and carp in the halls of a French museum, Thoreau found his salvation among living things, in the woods of Concord, Mass. Even so, his moments of rapture were proudly solitary ones, too: Thoreau’s soaring bird was, he emphasized, alone, not lonely.

Of the three roads back from loss mapped out in Richardson’s last book, the one glimpsed by William James’s cousin Minny might be the most practical. There was no point in going after an “impossible Ideal,” she told William a month before she died. “What is one’s true life?” she asked. Her own answer, spoken like a pragmatist: “We must each try & solve it for ourselves.” Headstrong and independent (a famous photograph shows her at age 16, when she had cropped her hair to half an inch), Minny impressed everyone who met her. She was, gushed Henry James, William’s novelist brother, a “dancing flame of thought,” her memory the occasion of continuing delight to him decades later, inspiring such heroines as the terminally ill but resilient Milly Theale in his late masterpiece “The Wings of the Dove” (1902). William, by contrast, felt Minny had taken a large part of him with her into her grave.

However, as Richardson shows, Minny had left William an even larger part of herself. Seven weeks after her death, he honored her by announcing: “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.” Released from brooding, he would dedicate himself to “doing and creating and suffering,” the active cultivation of “moral freedom.” Refined into a principle, the idea that the good life would depend, not on what we believe, but on our decision to believe at all served as one of the cornerstones of William’s philosophy. Being human meant, as William clarified in “The Varieties of Religious Experience” (1902), his most popular book,

the “willingness to live on a chance”—the possibility that there was something larger than us where we would find “our greatest peace.”

Richardson doesn't presume to tell us which of his three roads might lead to such peace. Yet he ends this lovely, uplifting book with an excerpt from Emerson's Montaigne essay (published in “Representative Men,” 1850), in which the philosopher optimistically suggests that time will offset all losses and ensure that “general ends are somehow answered”—if not in our own lives, then later. And when Richardson asks us to take that Emersonian “somehow” as a cause for hope, it's hard not to think that here this dedicated biographer, after a lifetime of representing others, is speaking for himself.

*—Mr. Irmischer is the author of “The Poetics of Natural History,” available in a new edition with photographs by Rosamond Purcell.*