

Matkailututkimus 10: 2, 69–71 (2014)

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Kirja-arvosteluita

Travel Changes Thought and Men – A Fresh Perspective on the Travels of a Literary Icon

Koch, Daniel (2012). *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe. Class, Race and Revolution in the Making of an American Thinker*. London, I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd.

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Daniel Koch successfully attempts to shed light on an often forgotten part of Ralph Waldo Emerson's life. Emerson was a highly influential author and public speaker, and he has even been called the first American writer. The founding member of the Transcendentalist movement made three trips to Europe during his lifetime. The first trip in 1832–33 took him to Malta, Sicily, Italy, Switzerland, France and Britain. The second journey, studied here by the author, was a lecture and leisure tour in Britain with less than a month spent in the revolutionary Paris of 1848. The third and last visit was made after Emerson's house burned down in 1872, and included England, France, Sicily and Egypt. During Emerson's first tour he was an unknown young American with a desire to meet great writers of the time. His last trip has not received much attention as Emerson was already old, had problems with his memory, and did not produce any significant works during or after it.

Koch is fully concentrating on the second tour. He studies in detail Emerson's journals, letters and notebooks from the time in England and Paris. Another perspective is gained by the study of how Emerson was received in England. For this purpose the author has studied the newspapers that carried stories of the lecture tour, going all the way to describing the political view and background of some of the papers in question. The last part of the book is dedicated to the legacy or the effect of Emerson's European experience.

The author, in facing a vast amount of sources, has managed to keep the material somewhat in order. Still, he has not always been able to avoid the factor best described by the Emerson scholar Ronald A. Bosco quoting the playwright Arthur Miller:

“We find what we seek.” Koch’s knowledge of the subject matter and the history of England of 1848 have come to good use when setting up his interpretation of events and Emerson’s reaction to them. Use of secondary sources is always problematic when studying Emerson. The hundreds of books and thousands of articles are not easy to master. The author has here taken some unprejudiced steps by referring to some previously almost unreferenced sources. However, the main part of the text is still leaning on the findings of such known Emerson experts as Len Gougeon, Lawrence Buell, Robert E. Burkholder, Joel Myerson, and Larry Reynolds. Another interesting feature is the re-acceptance of Kenneth Walter Cameron and Townsend Scudder III, and their fundamental research into the history of Emerson. Koch’s primary printed sources are relevant and help make his case of Emerson’s mind changes and hesitations. Still, e.g. the use of James Elliot Cabot’s *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* from 1887, in cases where much more relevant and recent sources are available to illustrate points made, is puzzling.

Filling a gap in Emerson research is Koch’s main goal. He declares that “*This book aims to provide for the first time a satisfying explanation of how Emerson became both a literary phenomenon in Britain and Europe, and of how his experiences there contributed to the making of a celebrated abolitionist who inspired countless thousands of Americans in the struggle against slavery.*”

The explanation of becoming a literary phenomenon in Britain is clear, logical and thorough, including the piracy in printing, literary agents, and the “thirst” for Emerson’s works. However “Europe” is used in a bloated sense as very little is told about events outside of Britain and France. The same is true about the title of the book; “Ralph Waldo Emerson in Britain and France for the second time” would be a more honest but less saleable heading. The subtitle’s word “making” gives an idea of a thinker that is coming out with his most remarkable work after visiting Europe. However, Emerson had already written his main work *Nature* (1836), given the oration called *American Scholar* (1837), and published his first series of essays (1841) that included *Self-Reliance* and other celebrated pieces. Traveling in Europe changed Emerson’s views on several subjects but he was definitely already an American Thinker before he arrived in Liverpool in 1847.

The book’s structure is peculiar. Koch justifies well the use of chronology as the basis of his work. Then he goes on to break it by having a chapter on the British reaction to the lecture tour before the chapter that actually describes the tour. These faults, or interesting choices, do not overshadow the important undertaking that Koch has initiated: studying the effects European tours had on Emerson and his writing and public speaking. Koch does not settle for finding bits of Emerson text here and there to support a pre-existing theory of Emerson’s visit (as some of earlier scholars have done), but painstakingly rakes through all relevant sources to show a very diverse path of thought Emerson took across turbulent Britain and France. In doing so, Koch proves that travel changes thought.

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