

CHANNING, W. ELLERY (1817-1901), Transcendentalist poet and the first biographer of his friend Henry David Thoreau, was born in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of Walter Channing, a Harvard University Medical School professor, and himself a minor poet. Ellery is often confused with his uncle William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), the Unitarian divine. (To distinguish the two it is common practice to refer to the poet as "Ellery" or "William Ellery Channing the Younger.")

Because his mother died when he was about five, Ellery spent an unhappy childhood farmed out to live with relatives. He entered Harvard College in 1834, but dropped out after only a few months, not being willing to submit himself to its discipline. Since his father supplied him with a small regular income for his entire life, he felt no need to do anything as prosaic as earning a living, and except for working briefly on newspapers in New York and New Bedford, devoted his life to writing poetry, reading, and observing nature. In 1839 he experimented briefly with pioneer farming in Illinois. In 1842 he married Margaret Fuller's sister Ellen and the next year settled down in Concord, Massachusetts to be near Emerson, remaining there most of the rest of his long life.

Channing's most important contribution to literature was his biography Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist (Boston, 1873). Channing became acquainted with Thoreau when he moved to Concord and they rapidly became bosom friends, spending many a day wandering together in the woods and fields and on the ponds and rivers of Concord. (Channing is the otherwise

unidentified "C" of Thoreau's Journal.) He himself occasionally made attempts at journal-keeping, but they are very fragmentary and of little worth but for the occasional light they shed on his friendship with Thoreau. Channing started his biography of Thoreau shortly after the latter's death in 1862 and began serial publication of it in the Boston Commonwealth in 1863, but soon quarreled with the editor, F.B.Sanborn, and withdrew the manuscript with only a small portion of it in print. In 1873 Roberts Brothers of Boston offered to publish it, but finding it too brief, they insisted he enlarge it. This he did by arbitrarily inserting into its middle two chapters of excerpts from the unpublished journals of Thoreau, Alcott, Emerson <sup>AND</sup> Channing <sup>^</sup> without bothering to identify which speaker was which. The resulting book is <sup>1)</sup>wild, erratic, and often confusing. There is astonishingly little biographical detail--the Walden experiment and the jail incident being hardly more than mentioned. But he does include many of the anecdotes that have become standards in the Thoreau legend. His critical comments on Thoreau's writings are sharp and to the point, and his warm portrayal of Thoreau's personality serves as an excellent antidote to the cold, inhuman Stoic image that Emerson portrayed in his eulogy over Thoreau. The excerpts from Thoreau's unpublished journal that Channing included served to whet interest in them and helped to set the stage for their eventual publication. Students should however be

aware that a 1902 edition of the biography, this time edited by F. B. Sanborn, suffers from the vagaries of Sanborn's editing eccentricities and is not always to be trusted.

Channing was one of the most prolific of the Transcendentalist poets and, in fact, contributed more writings to the Dial than any other. He published seven volumes of his poetry in his lifetime: Poems, 1843; Poems, Second Series, 1847; The Woodman, 1849; Near Home, 1858; The Wanderer, 1871; Eliot, 1885; John Brown, 1886; as well as many individual short poems scattered through various newspapers and magazines. The best of his poems are probably those written in tribute to his friend Thoreau appended as "Memorial Verses" to his Thoreau biography. More polished than most of his other works, they give a warm picture of their friendship. His most successful book-length poem is The Wanderer which gives thinly-veiled sketches of his Concord friends, particularly Thoreau and Emerson. His Collected Poems fill more than a thousand pages. Unfortunately he was much more interested in quantity than quality and refused ever to polish or work over his poetry. Thoreau hit the nail on the head when he said Channing's poetry was written in the "sublimo-slipshod" style. He sometimes wrote memorable lines such as, "If my bark sinks, 'tis to another sea," that his fellow Transcendentalists loved to quote, but he virtually never wrote an antire poem that any anthologist found worthy of reprinting. His most devastating critic was Edgar Allan Poe who said of Channing's first volume, "His book contains about sixty-three things, which he calls poems, and which he no doubt seriously supposes them to be. They are full

of all kinds of mistakes, of which the most important is that of their having been printed at all."

Much of Channing's prose is little if any better than his poetry. His one other book-length prose work was Conversations in Rome Between an Artist, a Catholic, and a Critic (1847), a series of commentaries on art, religion, architecture and poetry cast into the conversational form. Although some portions of it still have life, it is for the most part too formalized and like so much of his poetry would have benefitted from heavy editing. "The Youth of the Poet and Painter," a semi-autobiographical satire published serially in letter-form in the last volume of the Dial was left unfinished when the Dial itself died. It gives some general idea of the lives and interests of the younger Transcendentalists.

There are two biographies of Channing--Frederick T. McGill, Jr., Channing of Concord (New Brunswick, 1967) and Robert N. Hudspeth, Ellery Channing (1973) which very effectively complement each other, for the former emphasizes biographical detail while the latter's emphasis is critical.

Original editions of Channing's works are difficult to find for they were printed in very small editions and sold very poorly. There is even a legend--surely apocryphal--that one of his volumes of poetry sold only one copy. But all the volumes of poetry and most of the scattered individual poems have been gathered together in The Collected Poems of William Ellery Channing the Younger, edited by Walter Harding (Gainesville, 1967). Francis B. Dedmond has superbly edited "The Selected Letters of William Ellery

Channing" (Studies in the American Renaissance, 1989-1992) and several of Channing's unfinished satires.

The largest collection of Channing manuscripts, including that of his journal, is in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. Other manuscripts may be found in the Concord Public Library, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, Brown University Library, the Boston Public Library, and the Henry Huntington Library.

Walter Harding