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“A clear, vibrant picture of the varieties of heroism that appear in battles for human rights.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Conflagration:

How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American
Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice

by

John A. Buehrens

On Sale Date: January 14, 2020

Many Americans meet the Transcendentalists – Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, and others – only through literature classes. History reveals them as much more than mere writers or individualists, however. In the decades before the conflagration of civil war, they were also religiously committed social activists. Their moral idealism was a response to materialism and inequality. Activists today – for racial, gender, social and environmental justice – inherit their legacy, but often do not know the stories of their heroism.

In *Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice*, author and former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations John Buehrens offers a reinterpretation of the Transcendentalists. In addition to inspiring a shift in writing and philosophy at the time, Transcendentalists were religious activists working in service of one another’s commitments to anti-slavery, women’s rights, educational reform, and creativity in the nineteenth century.

In the book Buehrens introduces the idea of spiritual friendship, which he describes as transcending differences in temperament, class, ideology, gender, and—particularly radical for the time—race. These friendships were central to their theory and practice of social change. These are exemplified by life-long friendships between Margaret Fuller and James Freeman Clarke (America’s first professor of comparative religion); between Boston’s leading black abolitionist Lewis Hayden and Governor John Andrew; and between Frederick Douglass and Theodore Parker—the source of phrases about “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” and faith that “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

“It is also almost impossible for many in our secular culture to realize how influential churches were in mid-nineteenth-century America, especially in Boston.” To a degree often overlooked, Transcendentalism was a movement almost entirely within the congregational churches of the Boston area that had become Unitarian, he explains. “It was a spiritual and moral renewal movement among ministers and laypeople in those churches.”

Transcendentalism called for a more liberal approach to religion that was more genuinely democratic and more effective in bringing about the many reforms needed to make society more democratic as well. The movement featured important nineteenth-century figures such as William Ellery Channing, founder of American Unitarianism; mental health reformer Dorothea Dix; education former Horace Mann; and Harvard professor and Unitarian abolitionist minister Charles Follen.

Buehrens writes that the Transcendentalist “ideal stemmed from the conviction that only by helping others realize their moral, spiritual, and creative potential can one fulfill one’s own; and that only through mutual concern can just communities begin to emerge.” The Transcendentalists created disciples whose heritage, whether acknowledged or not, now includes all those who support interfaith cooperation for social justice and planetary sustainability. “The Transcendentalists of this narrative are not long ago and far away,” he concludes. “They are actually quite *near*. Their hopes live on in all of us who are variously inspired by their prophetic insight, courage, and example.”

PRAISE FOR *CONFLAGRATION*

“*Conflagration* is brightly written, deftly organized, and strikingly well-informed narrative history. Where many, perhaps most, accounts of the Transcendentalists center on Concord, and on ideas and personal lives and on writing, Buehrens’s focus is sharply on the larger world of Boston and on ‘fervent activists and their work.’ His grasp of narrative is sure, his stories very readable indeed, and he aims not just for the scholars and specialists but for the general reader. Anyone dismayed by America’s current problems can take heart from this passionate examination of some of our better angels.”

—Robert D. Richardson, author of *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*

“*Conflagration* is a fresh and stimulating history of transcendentalism, the radical religious and political movement that has remained enigmatic over the decades despite volumes of scholarly analysis. Rather than asking what transcendentalism means, John Buehrens asks instead what did the transcendentalists do? They led a dramatic shift of the course of American history, he answers, toward an ethos of world-inclusive spirituality and egalitarian social reform. His biographical perspective and his eye for the shared sympathies circulating among transcendentalist adherents enlarge and enliven our understanding of the movement’s legacy. *Conflagration* is the book that makes it clear that transcendentalism was indeed a movement. Its dedication to justice, comprehensive knowledge, and universal compassion are values that now seem of critical importance.”

—David M. Robinson, author of *Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism*

“Transcendentalism was more than Concord! While Thoreau meditated at Walden and Emerson lectured at the lyceum, their spiritual friends fought slavery, created communes, empowered women, and imagined new forms of religious community. The spiritual friendships forged in the early gatherings of the Transcendentalist Club allowed the movement to ripple outward, transforming their own time and our own. Now John Buehrens has told many forgotten Transcendentalist stories in one of the most wide-ranging histories of the movement ever written. Buehrens places Boston’s Church of the Disciples and its pastor, James Freeman Clarke, at the center of his multifaceted story. These “Disciples,” among the women’s rights champion Julia Ward Howe and the Republican politician John Andrew, built bridges between Christian liturgy and post-Christian mysticism, between armed resistance to slavery and the political establishment, and between Boston and the nation. Their legacy challenges us to transform both our understanding of Transcendentalism and our own lives.”

—Dan McKanan, author of *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition*

“Buehrens skillfully traces the relationships between the Transcendentalists and other leading activists of the nineteenth century, demonstrating how vital these relationships were in shaping not only the individuals involved but entire reform movements. *Conflagration* provides one of the most extensive portraits of the Transcendentalists to date and helps explain why they continue to fascinate and inspire us.”

—Nicole C. Kirk, Frank and Alice Schulman Professor of Unitarian Universalist History at Meadville Lombard

About the Author

John Buehrens was the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations from 1993 to 2001. His previous books include *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals*; with Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*; and with Rebecca Ann Parker, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*.

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Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice by **John A. Buehrens**

On Sale Date: January 14, 2020

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A detailed account of how the New England transcendentalists and their church allies promoted and supported the battles of abolitionism and women's rights. Buehrens (Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People's History, 2011, etc.), the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations and author, returns with an inspiring history of men and women devoted to various forms of liberation. Some of the author's principals are well-known—Emerson, Thoreau, Julia Ward Howe, and other notables of the era and movement—but numerous others step out from history's shadows and reveal themselves to be quite deserving of the attention Buehrens awards them. Charles Follen, Frederic Henry Hedge, James Freeman Clarke, Caroline Wells Healy Dall, Lydia Maria Francis Child—these and numerous others played key roles in abolitionism and/or women's rights, and the author gives them their due. Some other celebrated names appear, as well: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Darwin (many transcendentalists embraced *On the Origin of Species*), Frederick Douglass, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson, and, especially, John Brown. Buehrens follows him from Ohio to Kansas to Boston (two visits there, including one to the bedside of Charles Sumner, who was recovering from his assault in the Senate by Preston Brooks) to Harpers Ferry and to his death. The transcendentalists, though troubled by Brown's violence, supported his goals, and both Emerson and Thoreau paid tribute to him after his death. "Brown was no religious liberal," writes the author, "but rather a staunch Calvinist, with the feel of an Old Testament patriarch and the fervor of a prophet." The tone of the text is somewhat academic, occasionally dry, but the stories themselves, as Buehrens points out, tell us as much about ourselves as about those long gone. These people remain, he writes, "quite near," and we can take inspiration from "their prophetic insight, courage, and example." **A clear, sometimes-vibrant picture of the varieties of heroism that appear in battles for human rights.**