

SOME IOWA LECTURES AND CONVERSATIONS OF AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT

[This is the third article by Mr. Hoeltje on the general subject of lectures in Iowa. *Notes on the History of Lecturing in Iowa 1855-1885* appeared in THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS for January, 1927. *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Iowa* was printed in the April, 1927, issue of the same periodical.—The Editor]

In 1870 *Little Women* had already been written, and the famous authoress was traveling in Europe upon the proceeds of the sale of a hundred thousand copies of her various writings. Fruitlands had become only a family memory and a classic incident in the history of ideal communities. The Abel Lamb of "Transcendental Wild Oats" had turned his face from the wall and was finding new courage in the career of his talented daughter. Mrs. Hope was no longer a beast of burden.¹ The year 1870 found the most beloved literary family in America in fairly happy circumstances.

THE VISIT IN 1870-1871

It was in 1870 that some small printed cards were circulated in several cities of Iowa. They bore this legend:

"Mr. Alcott's Conversations for 1870-71.

IDEALS

General Course:

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| I. Personal | III. Political |
| II. Social | IV. Industrial |
| V. Spiritual | |

Occasional:

New England Authors. East and West"

¹ A humorous account of Fruitlands (a proposed ideal community) and the part played in it by her father (Abel Lamb) and her mother (Mrs. Hope) is to be found in Miss Louisa M. Alcott's *Silver Pitchers* in the chapter entitled "Transcendental Wild Oats".

Unable to gain recognition in the East, Amos Bronson Alcott was seeking his fortune in the West.² Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alcott's neighbor and friend, had come to the West to be acclaimed a great lecturer and writer, to find in the West the highest point of his popularity.³ Alcott, whose eastern audiences listened gladly when there was no financial consideration,⁴ came west and found more liberal friends.

At Dubuque. — At Dubuque, where he was a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Austin Adams, Alcott spent a fortnight during December, 1870. He gave three parlor conversations, with from forty to sixty men and women present at each. He addressed the young women of Lee Seminary and met with Mrs. D. N. Cooley's Palestine Sunday School class of some seventy young men and women. The business men's literary club — the Round Table — entertained him and were entertained by his conversation. He spoke before the Ladies' Conversation Club, and was a frequent visitor in the Dubuque Young Men's Library. Everywhere he was greeted with kindness, and the various organizations to which he had spoken vied with one another in claiming the greatest favor in his esteem. As a philosopher he was regarded as a compeer of Emerson; his conversations were the literary event of the season.⁵

At Davenport. — After a Christmas spent in Dubuque,

² The writer is indebted for his first knowledge of Alcott's Iowa visits to Mr. Ralph Waldo Lamson, Fairfield, Iowa. Inasmuch as Alcott's journals are inaccessible to scholars, this account of the philosopher's conversations in Iowa is avowedly incomplete.

³ See Halvorsen's *Growth of the Reputation of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. (Iowa City, 1925).

⁴ Cheney's *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters and Journals*, p. 273.

⁵ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), December 16, 1870; "Letter from Dubuque" in *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 9, 1871.

the "Sage of Concord"⁶ left for Davenport, where for a week he held conversations at the home of Mr. and Mrs. George H. French. Miss Alice French (Octave Thanet), their daughter, said of Alcott: "I remember him distinctly, a long, lean, large-framed man with a gentle clean-shaven face, graying hair, worn rather long, and a benignant eye. He had a kind of tolerant wisdom; and he had brought out of many disillusion a humorous charity. . . . His conversations were delightful. They were held at our house and a number of our friends and his made up a purse of such generous proportions that he was vastly pleased. 'This will please Mrs. Alcott', said he, smiling; 'she will be surprised, too. She didn't expect so much, she is contented with a little; she knows I am not worth much.' "

He was somewhat of a problem to his liberal hostess when she arranged her menus. By principle he was opposed to eating meat, or soup made from meat. "But I fear", said Miss French, "that my mother by christening each soup from its predominant vegetable and never mentioning its evil companion, rather smuggled soup past his scruples." However, he was "a gentleman as well as a sage; and not to incommode his hostess he explained that he ate oysters and eggs, and drank milk even if it were stolen from the calf. . . . Certainly he won our hearts. No one could have shared some of his views less than my own people, but we all had both affection and admiration for him; and we were all charmed by his talk."

It was Alcott's fate from the date of his first visit to Iowa to be introduced as "the father of Miss Louisa M. Alcott". He was not unaware of the humor in this situation, and in his letters home wrote that he was "riding

⁶ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), December 16, 1870.

⁷ From a letter from Miss French to the writer dated March 31, 1926, Pass Christian, Mississippi.

in Louisa's chariot, and adored as the grandfather of *Little Women*.'⁸ Nevertheless, the venerable philosopher made a distinct appeal of his own. As he sat in the parlors where he held his *conversazioni*, in the center of an admiring group, there was a gentle dignity and command in his presence. It was a picture of the ancient mode of teaching — Plato sitting among his disciples, talking, asking and answering questions. Alcott was happy in such meetings. He liked to repeat that in such a group earnest thoughts and mutual sympathies found better expression than in the lecture or the sermon. In the parlor, said he, woman reigned, and formality gave way to grace.⁹

On successive evenings in the French home he talked on "New England Authors", "Social Life", "Culture", and "The Pagans and Their Doctrines".¹⁰

In referring to books, libraries, and literary clubs as a means of culture, Alcott spoke with feeling of the Dubuque Round Table, the Ladies' Conversation Club, and the unusual library there. He expressed the opinion that he had met in Dubuque a gifted woman who promised to win recognition as a leader of her sex.¹¹

The conversation on "The Pagans and Their Doctrines" brought to the home of Mr. and Mrs. French the largest number of listeners present at any of the conversations. The topic embraced a discussion of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, their personal peculiarities, beliefs, teachings,

⁸ Cheney's *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, p. 275.

⁹ *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 5, 1871.

¹⁰ See pages 393-399 for synopses of conversations on "New England Authors", "Culture", and "The Pagans and Their Doctrines".

¹¹ *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 9, 1871. It is probable that Alcott referred to Mrs. Austin Adams, at whose home he had been a guest and with whom he had corresponded. She was a prominent woman of the State, a member of many societies and clubs, an earnest worker for equal suffrage.

and methods of instruction. Their teachings, too, were compared with those of the Jews, who made the first direct affirmation of the immortality of the soul.

This conversation aroused unusual interest, and many questions were proposed with reference to the origin of the doctrine of immortality, the belief in the resurrection, and the changes taking place in the religious world. There was no controversy, however. With the grace and dexterity of a firm hand, the philosopher wielded the scapel with which he amputated a prejudice here, a preconceived opinion there. He had apparently discovered a mental chloroform which prevented the operation from hurting, for his patients awoke to discover their antipathies gone, and to feel a common belief in the universal Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of the race.

Upon the occasion of the Davenport visit, Alcott also spoke before the students of Griswold College — on January 6, 1871 — relating many reminiscences of his distinguished daughter.

Those who sat at the feet of this Gamaliel listened with wrapt attention. When he left for the East, affection accompanied him, and behind him remained many happy memories. Still, there were a few practical souls to whom Alcott's views did not seem altogether workable. "His ideal church", said one of these, in speaking of Alcott's sermon in the Davenport Unitarian Church on January 8, 1871, "is what all liberal minds must desire, but which we imagine will arrive 'when cockle shells turn silver bells, and jewels grow on ilka tree.'"¹²

THE VISIT OF 1872-1873

Almost two years passed. Fall came and found the

¹² *The Davenport Daily Democrat*, January 9, 1871; *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 9, 1871.

peripatetic philosopher again making preparations for a western tour. On November 1, 1872, he wrote to Mrs. Austin Adams of Dubuque about his plans:

I am leaving for the West soon after the elections are over, and hope to reach Dubuque by the 16th. 'Tis later by a whole fortnight than I wished, but a freeman is unwilling to forego his suffrage in times like the present. I shall stop a train or two at Syracuse, Buffalo, Detroit and Chicago, to arrange for conversations on my return homewards. These are now fairly advertised in most of the western cities Should invitations thicken I may prolong my stay into the new year

Should you have anything to communicate before I reach your city, you may address me at Detroit, where I shall stop a day with the Governor and his family on my way out.

Two editions of Concord Days are nearly sold, and a third proposed for the holidays. Mr. Emerson and Ellen sailed for England on the 23rd to be gone till spring. [Emerson had been a visitor in Mrs. Adams' home early in January, 1871] Tyn-dall's lectures were fascinating. Froude and other Englishmen I have not seen.

I am looking West with hope and interest, and shall soon (the Forces permitting) be with you and yours.

Very truly

A. Bronson Alcott¹³

Louisa Alcott was now at home after her European trip. Her father's preparations for western conversations engaged her interest, too. In her journal she wrote:

November (1872) — Got Father off for the West, all neat and comfortable. I enjoyed every penny spent, and had a happy time packing his new trunk with warm flannels, neat shirts, gloves, etc., and seeing the dear man go off in a new suit, overcoat, hat, and all, like a gentleman. We both laughed over the pathetic old times with tears in our eyes, and I reminded him of the 'poor as poverty, but serene as heaven' saying.¹⁴

¹³ This letter is in the collection of the Historical Department of Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa.

¹⁴ Cheney's *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, p. 267.

At Dubuque.—By the middle of the month Alcott was in Dubuque, the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Austin Adams once more. On November 18th he spoke before the members of the Round Table in their rooms in the Facade. It was observed that he wore his gray hair like a true philosopher.¹⁵

At the request of Professor Beach, he visited the high school the following morning after recess and held the attention of the young people for an hour. The former teacher, whose experimental pedagogy had once shocked the residents of Boston, reminded his young audience of his Dubuque visit of some months ago and told them how pleased he was to visit the schools wherever he went, and thus renew his own youth by association with bright sunny faces, lit up with eyes beaming with intelligence.

The "grandfather of *Little Women*" concluded his talk, which touched on various phases of education, with a modest reference to the works of his daughter, of the many admirers of her work in this country and abroad, and of the additional writings she was then preparing for the press.¹⁶

On the evening of November 23, 1872, Mrs. R. A. Babbage entertained the members of the Round Table at her home. Invitations had been extended, also, to a large number of ladies and gentlemen who were not members of this club, among these being Bishop Alfred Lee, Hon. W. B. Allison, and Major G. L. Torbert. The occasion was a conversation on "Character" led by Alcott. The guests included many of the leading people of Dubuque.

The gracious hostess made the entertainment a pleasant and agreeable success. There was one man present, however, who had his own thoughts about the views of the

¹⁵ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), November 19, 1872.

¹⁶ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), November 20, 1872. See pages 399-401 for a synopsis of this talk.

philosophic conversationalist, and that man reported the event for one of the Dubuque papers and gave his opinion of the philosophy of Alcott.

This man was accustomed to the immediate realities of life. He knew newspaper thought, he was acquainted with politics, with business, with the motives that move the world around from day to day. Mist and moonshine were not in his field. Yet he was not unkind, and he respected the leaders of his community. Alcott must have read his review with mixed feelings.

We do not propose any report of what was said, for the general public are not up to that elevated plane where they would appreciate it; nor could we succeed in a report did we attempt it, for like the rest of the public we have not yet arrived at that place where we could appreciate it. The character that was discussed was not the character of ordinary men, men who live in this world, eat and drink, and get rich and poor, and are born, and die, who love and hate, laugh and weep, real men of flesh and bone, men like you and I, reader; but it was an able and learned disquisition upon some imaginary character, such as was never seen upon this earth and never will be. The character discussed was not that which we call good, bad or indifferent, and such as we meet with every day; but was traced back to a somewhere or a Something of the most ethereal nature such as could not be touched, tasted nor handled by people of this world or any other world, not of the earth earthy, nor of the heavens heavenly. Mr. Alcott is one of those gentlemen whose conversation soars into the regions of the unattainable and dives into the depths of the unfathomable, but is not of the kind that ever makes two blades of grass to grow where but one grew before.

Still Mr. Alcott is a pleasant talker and a genial gentleman, perhaps ahead of his day in thought, mind and culture, but that is his good fortune and the misfortune of the rest of mankind.¹⁷

On Sunday morning Alcott attended the Sunday School of the First Universalist Church, of which J. N. Pardee

¹⁷ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), November 24, 1872.

was pastor. His address to the children that morning is unrecorded.¹⁸

It must not be imagined that the Alcott conversations were stiff, formal affairs at which people solemnly gathered to sit in a strained silence to listen to Wisdom. Not only ethereal food was eaten; frequently there was cake and coffee, and such other refreshments as are grossly craved by men who "love and hate, laugh and weep". If the conversations now and then ran to monologue, that was not Alcott's purpose. He encouraged lively comments and questions.

And questions were often proposed that required considerable tact and ingenuity in the answering. When Mrs. D. N. Cooley invited her Palestine Sunday School class to her home on Monday evening, November 25, 1872, to meet the Concord sage, one of the "press gang" was present. This guest listened eagerly when the query was asked — "What do you think, Mr. Alcott, of newspaper reading?"

Alcott was a philosopher, and he answered wisely. He could not entirely refrain from speaking ironically of the moral tone and literary value of newspapers; nevertheless, he thought it advisable to read newspapers if the reader were careful in making his choice of papers. It would be well, during political contests, such as the one just past, to read a number of papers to get a view of various sides of public questions. Newspapers had been useful in making knowledge general; they had made pulpit oratory migratory. Perhaps newspapers after all could not be blamed for the tone of their publications, since they but represented the thought and sentiment of the age. If newspapers did not present the kind of reading matter people wanted, they could not very well exist. It has not been the

¹⁸ *The Dubuque Daily Times*, November 24, 1872.

disposition of men of judgment to run contrary to public sentiment if they have desired success. Doubtless many editors were personally dissatisfied with their papers.

On the question of reading in general, Mr. Alcott thought it well to limit one's reading. Great readers were generally great dunces, and bookworms intolerable. He did not condemn novel reading, for young ladies *would* read novels in spite of what old folks might say.

The conversation, the coffee and the cake, and the general stirring about, occupied the evening. It was eleven o'clock when Mrs. Cooley's guests took their departure.¹⁹

November 29, 1872, was probably the happiest day that Alcott spent in the West. In her journal Louisa wrote: "December (1872) — Father very busy and happy. On his birthday had a gold-headed cane given him. He is appreciated out there."²⁰

This cane was inscribed "A Birthday Gift to A. Bronson Alcott — From His Dubuque Friends, 1872". It was presented with an apology that was a compliment, that "the cane was intended not as a stay for his declining years, but as an appreciable invitation to journey westward again." This present was one of a number.

The birthday was observed by a party of friends who gathered at the Adams home in the evening. Alcott was in a mood of elation. Many of his seventy-three anniversaries had not been so happy as this one. Across his mind, perhaps, flitted a memory of his early ventures in conversations — a picture of a half-frozen wanderer returning home at night to be embraced by five white-gowned female figures, all longing to ask if he had made any money, yet fearful of the reply. All that he had had to bring them

¹⁹ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), November 26, 1872.

²⁰ Cheney's *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, p. 268.

was a single dollar — that and the news that his overcoat had been stolen, and that they were even poorer than before.²¹ How dark the world had seemed then, and how bright it seemed now!

After coffee, the company being seated, it was suggested to Mr. Alcott that many of those present would like to hear his estimate of the West as compared with the East. Only Fate could have made that suggestion then and there!

Mr. Alcott first thanked his friends for their remembrances and then complimented Dubuque, as in his estimation, the choicest part of the West.

We are just beginning to find out in the East that we are slow, he said. In the West a young man gains a position for his talents ten or twelve years sooner than he does in the East. In the West people think more independently than in the East. The East is more learned, perhaps, but the West is doing more for civilization. In the West people are more ready to listen to the diviner minds.

Mr. Alcott praised the West for its evidences of thought and learning, and mentioned specifically the Plato Club at Jackson, the Woman's Club at Quincy, and the Journal of Speculative Philosophy at St. Louis, which had at first startled the East but which was soon recognized in England and Germany as a publication of national character.

The clergymen of Dubuque, he thought, manifested a large, broad, catholic spirit in going beneath their creeds for the underlying strata of common truth. The West was famous for its clergymen — it had trained the most influential preacher of the East.²²

When this birthday conversation was reported the next day, the review contained this comment:

²¹ Cheney's *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, pp. 69-70.

²² The writer who reported this conversation thought Alcott referred to James Freeman Clarke. It is possible that H. W. Beecher was meant.

Such a character as Mr. Alcott's — though he may not have made "two blades of grass grow where but one grew before" — by showing men and women how much they believe in common; how easy it is for them to unite in the choicest fellowship, while disagreeing on intellectual propositions, is doing as great a work as he who stimulates the productions of the soil, or increases the wealth of the nations. This life of ours cannot be made so rich in material things that we can afford to lose an opportunity for improving the quality of our minds, or the conditions of our social natures.²³

On Sunday evening, December 1, 1872, Alcott lectured in the Universalist Church, speaking to a very large audience on "The Religious Tendencies of the Times". All peoples in all ages, he asserted in this lecture, have had their incarnations, of which Jesus, the son of Mary, was one. He rejoiced in the progress of the liberal spirit in religion and the oneness of spirit toward which religious tendencies were working. He hoped for the time when church edifices would be arranged with more intelligent reference to the special needs of the people.²⁴

At Fort Dodge. — After his conversations in Dubuque, Alcott went to Fort Dodge. There, on Sunday afternoon, December 9th, he addressed the children of the Progressive Lyceum. Many men and women, beside those regularly attending to witness the children's exercises, were present, attracted by the opportunity to hear the noted visitor. His conversations in Fort Dodge created an increasing interest as the evenings passed. He was frankly admired. His views were thought broad, and his spirit Christian and benevolent. The methods employed in his conversations, although regarded as novel, were heartily approved.²⁵

²³ *The Dubuque Daily News*, December 1, 1872.

²⁴ See *Concord Days*, pp. 266, 267, for Alcott's elaboration of this idea; *The Dubuque Daily News*, December 3, 1872.

²⁵ *The Fort Dodge Messenger*, December 12, 1872.

At Iowa City.— On the morning of December 24, 1872, Alcott arrived in Iowa City. He was announced as the literary associate of Longfellow and Hawthorne, in philosophy the peer of Emerson. It was observed that he had recently been in Dubuque entertaining the people of that city with his conversations.

His first appearance in Iowa City was at the home of Professor and Mrs. James Edmunds, where he gave a conversation on "Character". This was on Wednesday, Christmas Day, December 25th. Saturday evening a formal reception was given him at the Edmunds home, to which professors and their wives and students had been invited. Charles H. Preston, then a student in the medical college of the University, a few days later entered this in his diary: "Last Sunday Mr. Alcott, father of the author of *Little Women*, lectured in Rev. Ijam's pulpit on 'The Ideal Church'. I had conversed with him a little while the evening before at the reception given for him by Mr. and Mrs. Jas. Edmunds. Alcott is a curious ancient. Believes in evolution downwards. Transcendentalist."²⁶

On Friday evening, December 27th, Alcott spoke on "New England Authors" in Irving (South) Hall.²⁷ The attendance was large. Talking without formal introduction, the speaker asked to be pardoned if he showed some partiality in dwelling rather lovingly upon the authors resident in Concord, his home town, since he had a pride in the place and its people. There occurred the first battle of the Revolution; there, to quote Emerson, "was fired the shot heard round the world." At the close of his talk he was requested, as he frequently was, to tell somewhat of the author of *Little Women*.

²⁶ This diary entry from her husband's diary was given by Mrs. Ruth Irish Preston, Davenport, Iowa.

²⁷ Admission to this lecture was fifty cents.

The student publication at the University considered Alcott "a suggestive and very pleasing speaker" and his lecture on New England or Concord authors was especially regarded as a "rich treat".²⁸

On Sunday morning, December 29th, the philosopher occupied the pulpit of the Congregational Church.²⁹

At Davenport. — Once more the "Sage of Concord" turned his steps toward Davenport, where he arrived on December 31, 1872. The following evening, when a number of the members of the Unitarian Church gathered at the home of their pastor, Rev. N. S. Seaver, Alcott's host, to tender the minister a New Year's gift, the occasion was taken to invite Mr. Alcott to give one of his conversations, a request with which the sage kindly complied with a seasonable discourse on "Time".

Two conversations, on "Culture" and "Character", were held at the home of Richard B. Hill, No. 1 Clinton Place. Cards of admission had been obtainable from George H. French, John C. Bills, and from Mr. Hill.

On Sunday evening, January 5, 1873, Alcott spoke in the Unitarian Church on "The Aspect and Tendencies of Modern Religious Thought". The following Wednesday this church was the scene of a lecture on "Brook Farm and the Concord Literati".³⁰

At Muscatine. — The Scientific Club of Muscatine met on January 10th to consider inviting Mr. Alcott to come to their city, and it was agreed to ask him to deliver a lecture and to give a conversation as soon as he might find it convenient to do so.³¹

²⁸ *The University Reporter* (Iowa City), January, 1873.

²⁹ *Daily Press* (Iowa City), December 24-28, 1872.

³⁰ *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 1-3, 1873. To the last lecture, single admission was 50c, gentleman and lady, 75c.

³¹ *Muscatine Weekly Journal*, January 17, 1873.

Accordingly on January 18th a conversation was held at the home of Mr. Musser. The following evening Alcott lectured in Tremont Hall. This conversation was on "Culture" and had been given in Iowa before, but the event was significant, for in his opening remarks Alcott spoke more highly of the West than he had done upon any previous occasion. He asserted now that the West was in advance of the East in everything constituting American culture. He spoke of the West's more liberal thought, its freedom from shackling traditions — women as teachers in its schools, the admission of both sexes to its colleges and universities.³²

Alcott's 1872-1873 Iowa conversations, it seems, ended at Burlington, where, among other places, he spoke at the Public Library on Friday evening, January 24th.³³ He had been in Iowa two and one-half months.

The happiness of Bronson Alcott in his success in the West was not without alloy. Mrs. Alcott was failing in health. The darkening shadow hung over the family and cast its gloom into the heart of the philosopher. Louisa confided in her diary:

November and December (1873). — Decided that it was best not to try a cold, lonely winter in C(oncord), but to go to B(oston) with Mother, Nan, and boys, and leave Father free for the West.

Took sunny rooms at the South End, near the Park, so the lads could play out and Marmee walk. She enjoyed the change, and sat at her window watching people, horse-cars, and sparrows with great interest

January, 1874. Mother quite ill this month. . . . The slow decline has begun, and she knows it, having nursed her mother to the same end.

Father disappointed and rather sad, to be left out of so much that he could enjoy and should be asked to help and adorn. A

³² *Muscatine Weekly Journal*, January 24, 1873.

³³ *Daily Press* (Iowa City), January 29, 1873.

little more money, a pleasant house and time to attend it, and I'd bring all the best people to see and entertain *him*.³⁴

THE VISIT OF 1874

To entertain others, however, was still Alcott's fate. In mid-December, 1874, he arrived in Davenport, made arrangements for several conversations, and on January 18th was registered at the Lorimier House, Dubuque.³⁵

Two days later — Sunday — he was again in Davenport to speak at the Unitarian Church, of which the Reverend S. S. Hunting was now pastor. The Tuesday evening following, he once more lectured in this church on "New England Authors".³⁶ On the intervening evening, December 21st, Alcott was the guest of the Davenport Academy of Sciences. To members of this organization he addressed a half hour's talk on "Reading". Many questions were asked after his address. His answers showed "an extreme familiarity with the leading authors and a depth and clearness of philosophical reasoning seldom met with in a lifetime."³⁷

The hurried journey to Dubuque had been made to prepare for a more extended visit. Christmas was again spent in Dubuque. Again in his lectures and conversations Alcott was the admired of many friends.

THE VISIT OF 1881

What was, perhaps, Alcott's last visit to Iowa was made in March, 1881, when, according to his own voluminous diary,³⁸ he seems to have visited Burlington, Mt. Pleasant,

³⁴ Cheney's *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals*, p. 272.

³⁵ *The Dubuque Daily News*, December 19, 1874.

³⁶ *The Davenport Daily Democrat*, December 22, 1874.

³⁷ *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, December 22, 1874.

³⁸ Consulted for me by its present owner, Mrs. F. Alcott Pratt, Concord, Massachusetts.

Des Moines, Ames, Cedar Rapids, and Dubuque. Although Alcott was at this time eighty-two years old, and though he walked with "the uncertain step of age", his presence was possibly more attractive and imposing than ever before. His tall, spare figure, dressed in clerical black, at once made him conspicuous. A high collar and black satin stock of a mode of a past generation suggested a pleasing remoteness. Any intimation of austerity, however, was relieved by the softened outline of his long white hair, and by the kind and restful expression of his face. His auditors attest to a not unfrequent quiet laughter that put them at their ease and gave evidence of Alcott's own repose.

As upon previous occasions, Alcott's conversations were in part concerned with Hawthorne, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Emerson. Certainly he did much to spread the fame of those New England celebrities. In his talks on Emerson, Alcott acknowledged his indebtedness to his friend and neighbor with a gratifying forthrightness.

There was, however, a new note in what Alcott had to say. He made his appearance now not merely as one who could testify concerning the New England authors, nor merely as the father of Louisa Alcott, but in his own right as the founder of the Concord School of Philosophy. His listeners were interested in this venture, which was, of course, dear to Alcott's heart—the culmination of many dreams. Alcott spoke with great respect of Professor Harris of St. Louis, editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, who had been prominent in the Concord School. He pointed out as a major advantage of the School the opportunity it provided for discussion, a method of learning, he thought, much superior to that of acquiring knowledge from the printed page.³⁹

³⁹ *Iowa State Register* (Des Moines), March 27, 29, 1881.

This emphasis upon the oral word, it might be said in passing, was at once the cause of Alcott's success in informal groups and the reason for his almost total neglect today. He wrote but little (save in his journals), and, if we are to believe Emerson, did not appear at his best in his writings. It is evident from his own *Concord Days*⁴⁰ that he himself was convinced that the conversation was his *forte*. Unless we are to assume that the leading people in the communities in which Alcott spoke were dupes, we must believe that as a conversationalist he was fascinating and inspiring. Unfortunately he lacked the reporter enjoyed by Socrates and Docter Johnson; consequently his reputation has depended largely upon unsympathetic listeners who have stressed only the oddities of his character.

In the history of Iowa lecturing, certainly, no speaker more thoroughly won the affection of his listeners. Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass were heroes, but their popularity was not of the heart; John B. Gough touched chords of sentiment, yet he merely spoke and moved on, memories of his oratory, not of his personality, lingering; Ralph Waldo Emerson, reserved, detached, admittedly the leading literary figure of America, whom all wanted to see and hear, for the most part pursued a lonely way. Alcott, gracious, benign, moved familiarly among those to whom he spoke. He was a congenial person as well as a philosopher, and if his views sometimes seemed too ethereal ever to become embodied, he was none the less admired, the charm of his conversation quite compensating his temporary departures into the regions of the unattainable or into the depths of the unfathomable.

His conversations were seldom fully reported, but fragments of these talks may be found in local papers. Some of these are given below.

⁴⁰ *Concord Days* (1888 Edition), p. 177.

REPORTS OF ALCOTT'S CONVERSATION ON
NEW ENGLAND AUTHORS⁴¹

The fact that an author is born in America is not necessarily evidence that he is American. Most of us, authors and all, are only very slightly removed from European associations. Thoreau, with his intensity of democratic feeling, was perhaps the only one truly American; but perhaps it would be best to have only one Thoreau in the world, constituted as it is at present.⁴² Distinctive Americanism began with the nineteenth century; it is only since then that American genius appeared in our literature and life. Doctor Channing first developed it through his fresh ideas in theology. It was his belief that there was in the soul of man something that theology had not before regarded or represented.

After Channing came Emerson, a man with a certain feminine grace, a gentleness which one expects in a woman and is the strength of genius. He is a tall, slender man, with a remarkable head, of which phrenology can make nothing, since he contradicts all its theories. His power, perhaps, lies in the quality rather than in the quantity of his brain.

Emerson's church consists of one member — himself. He waits for the world to agree with him. He is not a proselyter, he presses his opinions upon no one, not even upon his children, for Ellen, his daughter, is a pillar of Concord church, as is his son, both believers in the Everlasting Word — with their own interpretation.

Emerson is an idealist, the prince of idealists. An ideal-

⁴¹ Except where references to other sources have been made, the material bearing upon the conversation on "New England Authors" is taken from the *Daily Press* (Iowa City), December 27, 1872, where the conversation is reviewed with a fair degree of fullness.

⁴² *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 5-9, 1871; *The Davenport Daily Democrat*, January 7-9, 1871.

ist is one who sits in the clouds on a mountain top, where he can see what passes in the valleys below better than those in the valleys themselves. His ideas must run the gauntlet of time and experience. If they win, they are true; if they lose, they must pass as dreams and visions.

The literature and manners of America, its institutions, almost, have been influenced by the ideas of Emerson. He lives to think. When a thought occurs to him, he records it in his commonplace book. Presently he assembles the recorded thoughts relating to one idea and reads them as a lecture. That page which is read first today may be read last tomorrow, and the next day's beginning may be what was in the middle the day before. Finally he crystallizes the whole into a printed essay, which one may read backward or forward — no matter. Does it make any difference where one begins to look at the firmament? Does one search for the logic of the stars? Are not the Heavens all, and in each constellation, beautiful?

No danger that his essay will not succeed. He has tried it in the lecture room before fifty audiences. If they have not approved, it is not printed.

Emerson lives in a plain house — but then Concord is a plain town, too. Running through it is a river which flows both ways, it is said, after the manner of its leading genius. Concord has recently been enlarged by the annexation of Boston.

Hawthorne's books have become widely read. Hawthorne himself was in various ways the very opposite of Emerson. An olive-tinted man, hanging brows, clumsy body, but grand in his chair, a Websterian head, hazel eyes, and bashful as a maid. He seemed like a girl whose spirit had been caught and imprisoned in his body and was trying to escape from those strange quarters.

His genius was dark and sombre. He loved to paint sin.

Get a good strong sinner and he was the man for Hawthorne. Apparently he had a strong desire to meet somebody, although he never let himself satisfy this desire. A taste for his works is largely governed by temperament; dark complexioned people are more disposed to read and appreciate his books than blonds, because brunettes are naturally more melancholy.⁴³

Hawthorne was Mr. Alcott's next-door neighbor, but was in his house only twice. The first time the stove was too hot, the second time the clock ticked too loud. He had but few intimate acquaintances, and was fond of old woodchoppers and salts and sinners. He wanted characters for his writings, but since there were so many common people in the world, he wanted uncommon ones. He seldom left his home; it is said that he was never seen on the street by daylight until after he was married. On his house was a tower into which he retreated when he wrote, sitting upon the trapdoor to avoid intrusion by callers.

After his consulate in England he was once induced to meet with the Atlantic Club, but never went again, because, he said, he could find better company. One day he ventured to leave his home in company with his old friend and classmate, former President Franklin Pierce, to make a visit in New Hampshire. The next day he was found dead in bed.

Henry D. Thoreau was devoted to a study of nature. In this he was aided by eyes so large that they seemed to protrude behind him. True, he owed something to Harvard, yet after graduating he would not stay for his diploma, because he thought a dollar and a half more than it was worth.

Henry said he did not know about churches and creeds and schools, but he did know something about Henry

⁴³ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), November 26, 1872.

Thoreau, and he proposed to know him better. So one day he borrowed Mr. Alcott's axe, went into the woods on Emerson's land near Walden pond, and built himself a cabin in which to live the life of a hermit. He studied the pond, the birds, and the animals in the adjoining forest, and wrote *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. After eighteen months he returned to Concord. When he was asked to pay his pew tax, he refused, and was put in jail, where he found a number of prisoners, upon whom he immediately went to work. They liked Henry because he seemed to understand them so well. He read them as he had read the animals about Walden. A friend discharged the tax and Henry was released. When arrested he was on his way to get a shoe mended. When he left the jail he continued on his way to the shoemaker, got his repairs, and went home and wrote a satire on society.

Margaret Fuller ranks with Emerson. A plain woman with auburn hair, blue eyes, and a remarkable voice full of power, she charmed the greatest men of her day. Her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, concluded the controversy with which it dealt. Mr. Greeley had the merit, among his many merits, to employ her on the *Tribune*, where for the first time a woman's thoughts were given to the world through a great journal. Married in Italy to the Marquis d'Ossoli, she was the historian of the Italian revolution of 1848 and the friend of Mazzini. On her return to America the vessel on which she and her husband and child had taken passage was wrecked. Before the ship sank, she was the last one seen pacing the deck. She had refused the possible rescue offered, asserting that her husband and child were aboard and that she chose to perish with them. Women lost more than they knew in her. She has no equal.

Whittier is the most truly American poet⁴⁴ and is likely to be remembered as long as any of our poets. Longfellow is our most cultured poet, his verses follow the speech all over the world, and abroad he represents our poetry's greatest popularity. Doctor Oliver Wendell Holmes, eminent in medicine as in literature, has a reputation of trying to keep from being as funny as he can.

So the philosopher chatted kindly and familiarly about his neighbors and about the authors of the day. Charles Sumner he regarded as toweringly great in his chosen field, Wendell Phillips as the moving spirit in almost every reform. He talked, too, of Lowell, Choate, Garrison, Prescott, Miss Phelps, Mrs. Howe, Harriet Hunt. To the West he gave credit for producing Abraham Lincoln, a truly representative American, whose intellectual and moral strength invalidated the Boston notion that a knowledge of Greek and Latin was absolutely necessary to human development.⁴⁵

At the close of his talk he was asked to say something about his daughter Louisa, the author of *Little Women*. He responded that she had charged him not to talk about her, although he had not promised her he would not. He knew something about her early history, he presumed, and from this knowledge gave many interesting incidents from her childhood, the dawning of her genius, her method of writing.

When she set about to write *Little Women* her sisters supplied the female characters, but they had no brother, and there must be a boy in the story. So four boys were called in who sometimes came to see them. However, since none of them alone would suit, Louisa took the best characteristics of each of the boys and out of these constructed the ideal boy of the story with whom the young ladies fall in love.

⁴⁴ *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 7, 1871.

⁴⁵ *The Davenport Daily Gazette*, January 7, 1871.

REPORTS OF ALCOTT'S CONVERSATION ON CULTURE

Culture differs from education. Culture is what affects us from without, while education represents what is drawn from us. Education therefore adds nothing. A college is successful just in the measure that it succeeds in this drawing-out process. There was a time when the mind was thought to resemble a blank piece of paper, to receive only what was written upon it, without record of the unseen and imperishable. But man is a metaphysical being, with instinct, reason, fancy, speech, and common sense.

Culture should be beautiful, charming, divine — religion in its highest aspect. It should be remembered that the soul makes the body and not the body the soul. Friendship as an element of culture elevates us most. Manners are the most perfect outward sign of culture, although they may deceive for a time and be but a foil for real culture. The art of conversation, which the people of the West seem better to understand, probably more readily distinguishes the social character than anything else.

Much has been said about culture as related to the Darwinian theory. Apehood may be a degradation of manhood, but it is unlikely that manhood is an exaltation of apehood. Such a theory can hardly agree with our theology.⁴⁶

REPORT OF ALCOTT'S CONVERSATION ON THE PAGANS
AND THEIR DOCTRINES

A knowledge of Plato is essential to an understanding of Christianity, since so much Platonism is to be found in the New Testament. Christianity itself is essentially Greek, though it came through the Jews. The ancient Hebrews were hard, materialistic, standing for law and will; the Greeks were more spiritual — more thoughtful, going deep-

⁴⁶ *The Davenport Daily Democrat*, January 7, 1871; *Muscatine Weekly Journal*, January 24, 1873.

er into the mysteries of religion. The mother of Jesus might well have been a Greek. Of the New Testament writers, John saw the spirit of Jesus most clearly. He was a Jew with a Greek mind. Without him the New Testament would lose much of its spirituality and become but a collection of facts.⁴⁷

REPORT OF ALCOTT'S TALK BEFORE DUBUQUE
HIGH SCHOOL PUPILS⁴⁸

You can hardly realize what changes your school work will bring to you. The day may come when you will not recognize your present selves. Remember now that virtue and ability rise to the top, that vice and ignorance will clog the mind of man and sink him into insignificance. Only that which is wise, good, and beautiful can last to the end.

It is not those who sit in palaces who rule the world, but those, no matter how lowly their situation, who properly cultivate their mental faculties.

Let me impress you with the importance of thinking. Some commit their lessons to memory easily and repeat them without knowledge; others appear dull and must spend much time in pondering their studies, yet can tell what the lesson means. There is a great difference between knowing a lesson and reciting it. To know a lesson is to be able to give the ideas contained therein in your own language.

The mind is not merely a bowl to be filled simply by pouring knowledge into it from outside; rather it is a spring from which ideas should flow out. If the mind were a bowl ever receiving, and not like a spring ever flowing outward, how would we reach a knowledge of religion or of conscience?

Your mental capacity is measured by the ideas you give

⁴⁷ *The Dubuque Daily News*, December 1, 1872.

⁴⁸ Given on November 19, 1872.

out. Your teacher does not take a pair of calipers to measure the external head and thus classify you according to the size of your head; he classifies you according to what he thinks your head contains. It is far better to bring something out of the head than constantly to be cramming things into it.

Concrete things are useful only as employed to demonstrate ideas. Science consists of facts, but poetry is fancy, and inward. So, too, is art. The artist shuts his eyes to external facts, seeing the thing in his mind, throwing it outward and giving it form. He who works with ideas will make the greatest mark in the world.

We are reasoning and imaginative beings, but there is another and higher faculty of which we are possessed, and without which we should be like animals — conscience. It is conscience that shows you the difference between right and wrong, that makes you what you are, that raised you above the animal creation. Would you be happy? Then preserve a consciousness of doing right, for you will always be unhappy when you know that you have done wrong.

All your lessons have a purpose. If you study science, you are studying outward things; if you study the mind, you are learning of inward things. Both studies should be cultivated to maintain a proper balance. Arithmetic and logic will help your reasoning powers; the imagination is cultivated by reading poetry and by studying works of art, paintings and statuary, or even such trifling things as your own costume, its shapes and varied colors.

You can see things only by really using your eyes. Two boys go to see a picture. One will see right into it, and comprehend its lights and shades, finding beauty in every touch of the artist's pencil; the other will turn aside without having seen anything to admire. Those who write books, as, for instance, the author of *Little Women*, first gain the

faculty of writing by using their eyes, and then describing what they see around them. Let me advise you to practice letter writing. The more letters you write, the better. Do not at first choose abstract things for your compositions, but describe the things you see around you — the Mississippi River, for instance, or incidents of everyday occurrence.⁴⁹

HUBERT H. HOELTJE

STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA
IOWA CITY IOWA

⁴⁹ *The Dubuque Herald* (Daily), November 20, 1872.