

ple who shared a largeness of spirit and a stubborn distaste for cant that make even their oldest work seem bracing. But they also lived in more capacious times. Both enjoyed long associations with the *New Yorker*, which encouraged their individualistic bent and eclectic interests and gave them the freedom to write whatever they wanted to. If, by comparison, their professional progeny seem to be

starvelings who have been forced to breathe thinner air, that's because they are, and have.

>LIS HARRIS is the author of *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family* (1985), *Rules of Engagement: Four Couples and American Marriage Today* (1995), and a forthcoming book about an eight-year effort to build a paper mill in the South Bronx. She teaches writing at Columbia University's Graduate School of the Arts.

Feminist Foremother

*MARGARET FULLER, CRITIC:
Writings from the New-York Tribune,
1844–1846.*

Edited by Judith Mattson Bean and Joel Myerson. Columbia Univ. Press.
491pp. plus CD-ROM. \$75

*“MY HEART IS A LARGE KINGDOM”:
Selected Letters of Margaret Fuller.*

Edited by Robert N. Hudspeth.
Cornell Univ. Press. 368 pp. \$29.95

*MARGARET FULLER'S CULTURAL CRITIQUE:
Her Age and Legacy.*

Edited by Fritz Fleischmann.
Peter Lang. 296 pp. \$55.95

Reviewed by Elaine Showalter

The editors of these three books make a vigorous case for the cultural importance of Margaret Fuller (1810–50). “Given the range of her interests and the sophistication of her writing, no other American woman of her time, with the possible exception of Emily Dickinson, so commands our attention,” writes Robert Hudspeth, a professor of English at the University of Redlands. Fuller is “today established as a canonical figure,” according to Fritz Fleischmann, a professor of English at Babson College in Massachusetts. The past 20 years have seen the publication of Fuller’s letters, essays, journals, and translations, and in 1992 the first volume of Charles Capper’s magnificent biography, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, both positioned her in the larger context of

American intellectual history and illuminated the extraordinary scope and drama of her life. Consequently, suggests



Margaret Fuller

Current Books

Fleischmann, Fuller “may no longer require advocacy.”

As the mother of all American feminist intellectuals and the author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Fuller should be well known, yet to most educated Americans she is nothing more than a name in a textbook. There is no Margaret Fuller Memorial, no museum, no national holiday, not even a postage stamp. Despite enormous academic interest in her life and work, Fuller has not captured the American historical imagination. From Nathaniel Hawthorne to Louisa May Alcott, her Concord neighbors enjoy a popular acclaim that she has yet to receive. Advocacy of her importance is still very much required.

Why has Fuller faced so much resistance as an American intellectual heroine? It's not because her life lacked excitement. She managed to be in all the right places at the right times, from high-minded New England to brawling New York to revolutionary Italy. With inspiring courage, she transcended the limitations of her environment and upbringing to live a truly epic woman's life. She wrote the most influential American feminist tract of the century, visited women prisoners at Sing Sing, met the leading intellectuals and radicals of Europe, and made the daring decision to have a child in a secret affair with a young Italian revolutionary.

But summarizing her credo is a difficult task, one she herself never managed to accomplish. When taken together, her essays, pamphlets, poems, and reviews demonstrate a powerful, original mind. One by one, though, they are unlovable, too often stiff or prolix or rambling. She didn't have Thoreau's folksiness or sententiousness, or Alcott's narrative gift.

Judith Mattson Bean, an English professor at Texas Woman's University in Denton, and Joel Myerson, a professor of American literature at the University of South Carolina, add significantly to the Fuller canon with their selection of more than a hundred articles she wrote as literary editor of the *New-York Tribune* in the 1840s (all 250 of her *Tribune* articles are included on the CD-ROM that accompanies the book). During the two

years she wrote analytical pieces for the paper, Fuller tried to establish the parameters of a responsible literary criticism, defended the novel as the representative American literary genre, and, in the editors' words, “embarked on a process of reshaping her identity.” In columns that displayed her increasing political confidence and radicalism, she wrote about the turbulent daily life of New York and about work of all kinds, including intellectual work. In so doing, she “explored the full range of the essay as a genre: the character sketch, parable, prose epistle, journalistic essay, periodical essay, hortatory essay, and book review.”

Yet Fuller was still uncertain of her stance as a feminist writer. In a review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she adopts a masculine disguise: “What happiness for the critic, when, as in the present instance, his task is mainly to express a cordial admiration.” The review goes on to characterize women as prone to sentimentality and excessive attention to minor details. Praising much of Browning's work, Fuller nonetheless concludes, referring to the poet's epics, that “we shall never read them again, but we are very glad to have read them once.” Much the same sentiment, alas, applies to Fuller's critical writings. Despite their learning, they lack fire.

By contrast, Fuller's personal writings, her journals and letters, show her at her passionate best, unsparingly using her intellect to explain her life. Hudspeth edited the monumental six-volume edition of her letters, and he provides a sampling of them in “*My Heart Is a Large Kingdom*.” Fuller made the personal letter a “literary form,” he argues, one that she used to “bring news, both about herself and about her world.” While Fuller scholars will welcome the collection of her *Tribune* criticism, as well as Fleischmann's collection of essays on her intellectual affiliations and legacies, Hudspeth's selection of the letters is likely to win her new readers and admirers.

The great drama of Fuller's life came during its last years, from 1848 to 1850, when she was in Italy with her younger Italian lover, Giovanni Ossoli (no one knows for sure whether they ever married), and their baby

son, Angelino. The letters from these years, describing the political upheavals of the Italian revolution, but also trying to explain her choices and her emotions to friends at home, are almost too moving to read. Here Fuller brings all her intelligence to bear on the circumstances of her life: a woman of genius, accepting the love and tenderness of a man far beneath her in intellect, daring to bear his child, and finding herself profoundly changed by maternity.

"I thought the mother's heart lived in me before, but it did not," she wrote to her sister Ellen. "I knew nothing about it." To a friend, she wrote: "You would laugh to know how much remorse I feel that I never gave children more toys in the course of my life. . . . I did not know what pure delight could be bestowed." She begged her sister to ask her friends to write: "I suppose they don't know

what to say. Tell them there is no need to say anything about these affairs if they don't want to. I am just the same for them I was before." The honesty and clarity of these letters is especially poignant in light of what lay ahead: Having decided to brave public disapproval and make a life back in the United States, Fuller and Ossoli, along with their son, were drowned in a shipwreck off Fire Island.

Had she survived, her public writings might have grown more like her private letters, capable of touching readers' emotions as well as their intellects. Perhaps the tragic story revealed in these letters will move Margaret Fuller beyond the textbooks at last.

>ELAINE SHOWALTER is a professor of English at Princeton University. She is an advisory editor of the Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English (1999) and the author of *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (forthcoming).

ARTS & LETTERS

SIDETRACKS: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer.

By Richard Holmes. Pantheon. 420 pp.
\$30

Most of the time, we read biographies for no better reason than that their subjects appeal to us. We simply want to know more about Emily Dickinson or Michelangelo or Edison. But now and again a biographer comes along who transmits in-depth scholarship through an ingratiating style, who approaches the writing of a life as an opportunity for self-expression, even for literary distinction. Don't we return to James Boswell and Lytton Strachey largely for the urbane pleasure of their company?

Certainly I do, just as I eagerly pick up anything by Holmes, best known for his prize-winning biographies of Shelley, Coleridge, and Dr. Johnson's doomed poet friend Richard Savage. Drawn to artists susceptible to "loneliness and despair," this self-described romantic biographer generates such novelistic excitement that one races through his books as if they were intellectual

thrillers. Which, in fact, they are. Not that Holmes (suggestive name) doesn't do all the usual detective work of research, going through the archives, consulting sources, marshaling his notes. But when he starts to write, the sentences are those of an artist rather than an academic.

Listen to just a bit of his description of the Victorian philosopher John Stuart Mill, an "administrative piston" at the East India Company for 35 years: "Most of his active life was passed at the end of that 100-yard-long gaslit corridor in Leadenhall Street, behind a thick green baize door, in a high bare office smelling of coconut matting and ink and coal dust, inditing the sealed instructions of Imperial administration. He wrote erect at a mahogany lectern, and gazed through windows overlooking a brickyard wall, where a City clock could be heard but not seen. He dressed habitually in a black frockcoat of old-fashioned angular cut, with a black silk necktie pulled tight round a white cotton wing-collar. He was a tall, bony, slightly stooping figure who shook hands stiffly from the shoulder and was pre-