



# The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson

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## **The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson** Mary Moody Emerson

Scholars have long recognized that Mary Moody Emerson (1774-1863) had a vital influence on the intellectual development of her nephew, Ralph Waldo Emerson, during his most formative years. The extent of that influence--and the quality of Mary Emerson's own mind--are apparent, however, only through her extensive correspondence spanning seventy years.

*The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson* makes available for the first time this important collection of letters within the Emerson family papers and firmly establishes Mary Emerson as a woman of strong and independent mind. Moreover, as Emerson himself realized, his aunt's letters reveal much about the political, social, and religious concerns that dominated her age--the critical period from the American Revolution to the Civil War. Mary Emerson rejoiced in what she called a "period of wonderfull revolutions" and through her correspondence engaged actively in the disputes of the time. During these years the new Constitution was tried and tested, most severely by slavery and the Civil War but also by the War of 1812, the rapid expansion westward, and the increasingly materialistic and capitalistic pursuits of the American people.

These letters contain wide references to the people, events, and controversies of the period. They also reveal the impact of changing conditions on an individual woman--a woman of curiosity and self-reliance who sought to define herself in a patriarchal culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson once commented that in her "prime" Mary Emerson was the "best writer in New England". The letter became her art form, and she managed to transform it into a vehicle for free discussion. Her many correspondents--fifty-five in all--included her Emerson nephews William, Waldo, Edward, and Charles, as well as Charles's fiancée, Elizabeth Hoar, and Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley.

For this edition, Nancy Simmons has chosen some 333 letters that represent the contours of Mary Emerson's life and thought. A valuable contribution to literary, historical, religious, and feminist scholarship, *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson* recovers from the footnotes of literary history a woman of considerable intellectual influence.

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