

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Lucy Larcom (1824-1893)

Mountain Friends

“To many, the word “autobiography” implies nothing but conceit and egotism,” Larcom wrote in her preface to *A New England Girlhood* (1889). “But these are not necessarily its characteristics...For does not the whole world, seen and unseen, go into the making up of every human being?”

Such a theory of autobiography perfectly suits the story Larcom tells, which centers on her experiences in the Lowell, Massachusetts, cotton mills.

The mills had been started in 1822 by Francis Cabot Lowell and some associates, harnessing the water power of the Merrimack River and hiring farm girls as their workers. They wished to make the mills into a model of profitable and enlightened Christian enterprise. And for twenty or twenty-five years, until competition forced them to lower wages, the mills were. Anthony Trollope, one of the many foreign visitors, called Lowell an “industrial Utopia.”

For Larcom, her Lowell years, approximately 1833-43, were an illustration of communal self-help and self-education. The girls all wanted to improve themselves and did it together. They attended classes and lectures, took music lessons, wrote poetry, and edited magazines. They also enjoyed the mill work, because it was preferable to housework, to which Larcom briefly returned to help her sister and to get relief from the factory’s cotton dust. The hours were long, but strictly designated, the workers earned money, and they had more independence, companionship, and stimulation. Housework was respectable and important to Larcom, but Lowell broadened her horizons—among other things, it gave her “*Mountain Friends*.”

“*Mountain Friends*,” the whole of which is given below, is the ninth of the twelve chapters of a *New England Girlhood*. The beginning of this book tells of her childhood in Beverly, Massachusetts. The end tells of her going to pioneer in Illinois with her sister and brother-in-law and then studying at Monticello Seminary, from which she returned to the East in 1852 to teach at Wheaton Seminary. She later became a very popular poet and essayist.

The book was very well received, and, according to Daniel Dulany Addison, her first biographer, she intended to write a sequel covering her years of teaching, writing, and editing, and also her religious ideas.¹ But it is doubtful that another book could have been so good. The experience at Lowell united her ideals of “the mutual bonds of universal womanhood” and her ideals of autobiography. A later book might have contained more of the piety and Pollyannaish-ness that sometimes mars accounts of this kind, while at the same time laching its sense of close female bonding.

The text below is from *A New England Girlhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889). Shirley Marchalonis’s *The Worlds of Lucy Larcom, 1824-1893* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1989) is a modern biography. For a stimulating critical article, see Carol Holly, “Nineteenth-Century Autobiographies of Affiliation,” in Paul John Eakin, ed., *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

1. Daniel Dulany Addison, *Lucy Larcom: Life, Letters, and Diary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), p. iii

Reading

A New England Girlhood: Outline from Memory
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2293/2293-h/2293-h.htm>