

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 19th Century

Early 19th Century : Self-Liberators (1836-1865)

Although the autobiographical writers of the Revolution and years following had achieved (and helped the nation to achieve) national identities, they had not necessarily achieved or helped others to achieve personal and cultural independence. Approximately one-ninth of the population was, in fact, enslaved, and the native Indian population was not regarded as a part of the nation at all. They were not citizens and could not vote. Women could not vote either, and their rights to property were in most cases tightly restricted even white males frequently chafed against the nation's psychic bondage to English and European traditions and its lack of a literature and culture of its own. When Emerson said in his now famous Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837, "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" and lamented that "The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame," he was only saying what scores of American commencement speakers had said before. The United States were no longer colonies, but many people still had a colonial mentality.

What was new and liberating in Emerson's message to the Harvard graduates of 1837, however, was the linkage of a cultural independence for the nation with individual freedom from social conventions. He lined up Europe, tradition, the past, oppression, conformity, and society on one side, and America, innovation, the future, the individual, and freedom on the other. "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," he later said in "Self-Reliance." Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist," He also said, and, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." Such sentences were intentionally short. Emerson, that "winged Franklin" (as one of his contemporaries called him), replaced Poor Richard's prudential maxims with a whole new almanac of inspirational sayings that for his generation (and after) were to become personal mottoes, icons of the ego.

In the Emersonian vision, autobiography occupied a very large and lofty place, as the short selections on it that are given here indicate. Emerson saw the new age, the nineteenth century, as an age of introspection. Kant, Goethe, and Coleridge appealed most to him for their individualism, as expressed in their journals and conversations and "aids to reflection," and he valued his own journal accordingly. He also advised journal-keeping to friends, as a means of discipline and self-discovery. From his journals would later come his lectures and essays, which were unified more by their inspirational tone than by sequential logic. Indeed, one often feels that he wrote first of all to inspire people to freedom-starting with himself. Thus, his whole literary production seems an ongoing experiment in inspirational autobiography. Yet his lectures and essays inspired his audiences, took, from associations of young mechanics in Boston to farmers and lawyers in Illinois. His private reflections expressed the aspirations of pre-Civil War America, or at least the northern half of it. Thus he himself realized the comparison to Dante (or Dante as he saw him) that he made in the essay "The Poet": "he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality."

The apposition "into universality" indicates, however, the paradox in Emerson's concepts of autobiography, as in his concepts of self. The Emersonian or Transcendental "self" was not a mean or selfish ego. It was more like the Christian soul. It was "part or parcel of God," as Emerson wrote in the beginning of his first book, *Nature*. It was "a transparent eyeball," and when he suddenly transcended his ordinary being and reached this state, he said he felt "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" True autobiography should be the expression of this more noble, purer, universal self-a restriction that almost idealized it into thin air. One can read all day in Emerson's essays and never learn who his parents were, where he went to college, or how he earned his living.

Thoreau and Whitman and Margaret Fuller were equally concerned about universals and transcendence but much more inclusive of particulars in their definitions of self. The self had to have a location, like a house and a pond (and a book), a *Walden*. It could not just stand "on a bare common." Indeed, Thoreau was unlikely to see *bare* commons, or *bare* woods; he described their history, their botany and zoology, and he appropriated all these details as parts or mirrors of the self. For Whitman, the self thrived on its relations to other selves, the great democratic multitudes which he celebrated and appropriated in his poetry. For Margaret Fuller, the self had to be a woman and had to be revolutionary. It was what drove her to be different, to seek greater fulfillment, and to contend with the status quo.

In their own ways, then, all of these decidedly autobiographical writers continue to reflect some of the prejudices against autobiography which ruled during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. None wrote autobiographies in the manner of Franklin, Goethe, or Rousseau, and all had reservations about the specific egotism those autobiographies reflected. The New Englanders, in the tradition of their Federalist ancestors, also had reservations about rowdy democratic individualism, including manifestations of it in autobiography. And thus we have the curious paradox of American Transcendentalism that, as Lawrence Buell put it, "The most egoistic movement in American literary history produced no first-rate autobiography, unless one counts *Walden* as such." (1) One answer, of course, is that the kinds of autobiographies Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Margaret Fuller (as well as Hawthorne, Melville, and Dickinson) *did* write are decidedly better and more characteristic of them than if they had written imitations of Franklin, Rousseau, and Goethe. But the fact remains that autobiography of this more lengthy and directly individualistic and particular sort continued in disrepute, at least among the class of Americans who were well educated and became writers, artists, and leaders in political or professional life.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that none of the eleven U.S. presidents between Jefferson and James Buchanan wrote an autobiography (see Louis Kaplan's *Bibliography of American Autobiographies*), and Buchanan's was only a thirty-page reminiscence of his early years. Lincoln, his successor, was the first president to write what might be called campaign autobiographies, and those, one of which is included here, were primarily sketches for use by newspapermen preparing biographies of him. The first literary autobiography Lawrence Buell believes, in the sense of an autobiography written by someone whose major work was writing poetry or fiction, was Lydia Sigourney's *Letters of Life* of 1866, an excerpt of which is included below.

But stories of religious experience and stories of adventure, like travel books and narratives of enslavement, captivity, and escape, did continue to be written, and it was out of these traditions that the new kinds of popular autobiography grew. The religious autobiographies, by and large, were "a gentry-class product," (2) such as Orestes Brownson's *The Convert* (1857). Brownson told of his spiritual odyssey from Presbyterian to Roman Catholic, passing through Universalism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and various reformist and utopian programs like Saint-Simonianism. The adventure narratives were mainly lower-class, coming from sailors, escaped slaves, and victims of Indian captivity. These lines were not rigid, however, and one of the most interesting of the full-length religious autobiographies of the period is Peter Cartwright's *Autobiography* (1856). Cartwright (1785-1872) was backwoods preacher who joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in Kentucky at age sixteen and soon began speaking at camp meetings, one-room schoolhouses, and new churches all through the Ohio Valley. Such men faced the same kinds of physical obstacles that Charles Woodmason had, as well as resistance and rivalry from atheists, agnostics, other churchmen, drunks, and frontier bullies. Thus, autobiographies of frontier preachers like Cartwright combine religion and uproarious adventure. Cartwright was no intellectual like Jonathan Edwards, and his sectarian prejudices are narrow and dated, but such autobiographies are extremely revealing documents of frontier life and culture. It was the frontier that gave American Protestant churches the room to expand and to develop a more democratic liturgy and governance, and the autobiographies of their ministers are one of their most characteristic forms of history and expression.

The frontier also provided the setting for a lot of the travel narratives of the period. Men and women traveling the overland trails to California and Oregon in the 1840's and '50s very often kept diaries in which they recorded the number of miles traveled each day, encounters with Indians, the hardships of

the journey, and the deaths of their friends and family members from diseases like cholera. A recent annotated bibliography of the diaries and memoirs of just the Platte River route contains hundreds of entries. *Women's Diaries of the Overland Trail*, edited by Lillian Schlissel, comments on the differences between the men's and women's experiences and the ways of writing about them. At the same time, upperclass easterners undertook journeys to the West as a way of breaking free from social conventions, recuperating from illness, and learning (and writing) about the new country. Washington Irving helped establish this convention with a *Tour on the Prairies* (1835) about his journey into present-day Oklahoma in 1832, after seventeen years of living in Europe. Margaret Fuller went to Illinois, via the Great Lakes, in 1843 and published her *Summer on the Lakes* in 1844. Francis Parkman followed with *The Oregon Trail* in 1849. Richard Henry Dana, meanwhile, had been one of the most daring of these eastern adventurers when he sailed for California as a seaman in 1834 and spent over a year loading hides off the beaches, before returning to Boston and graduating from Harvard Law School. His *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) encouraged Herman Melville to write about his seafaring adventures and helped arouse public sympathy for the plight of sailors.

What these many kinds of first-person accounts of travel and adventure illustrate is that by the 1840's and '50s Americans of many backgrounds did, in fact, have the freedom and the opportunity to go to many new places and engage in a much more expansive life. Their autobiographical writings became more diverse and extensive because their lives were. Meanwhile, P.T. Barnum, as impresario and entrepreneur, capitalized on such adventurers, and the curiosities they discovered by setting up his American Museum in New York in 1842. His *Life of P.T. Barnum*, which in turn capitalized on the curiosity millions of Americans had about his own tricks and adventures, was published in 1855, just in time for a reviewer in the *Knickerbocker Magazine* to write about it and *Walden* in the same column, under the title "Town and Rural Humbugs"! The contrast between Barnum and Thoreau is stunning.

But in radically different ways they had shown the range of personal freedom and freedom of enterprise in the mid-century United States.

The black and the women autobiographers of this period, however, did not have such freedoms, or had to earn them in even more daring and subversive ways. Yet, as some commentators like William L. Andrews and Jean Fagan Yellin have noticed, this makes the slave narrators and the feminist writers the period's most representative lives, in the full Emersonian sense of people who experienced in the greatest intensity and wrote most movingly about what all men and women knew. They spoke for more than just themselves.

Jarena Lee appears first in this group because her *Life and Religious Experience* was published in 1836, and because she was one of those who made religious autobiography a means of both religious witness and personal liberation. Like Peter Cartwright, she was of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but she belonged to the African-American branch of it founded in 1794 by Richard Allen, a former slave who had been born in Philadelphia in 1760 and who purchased his own freedom in 1777. Lee had not been born a slave, but, even so, "at the age of seven years I was parted from my parents and went to live as a servant maid..." At age twenty-one, she began her emancipation from his work when she became aware of, or "convicted" of, her sins. Gradually but relentlessly, she gained the rights to exhort and then to preach, finally becoming a traveling revivalist like Cartwright, operating mainly in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, also helping "to set the world on fire" for Methodism (Cartwright's words). Even more than Cartwright's *Autobiography*, her *Life* was an important part of her liberation. She sold it to help support herself; it was proof of her conversion and an example to her followers; and the fact that she had written it and published it was further evidence of her mastery of the written language-what had previously been the master's language.

Mastery of the master's language, his "script," so to speak, is also a very important theme in the writing of ex-slaves, as readers of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* or Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* know. Just to write one's autobiography was "to tell a free story"-to tell a story of (relative) freedom, in (relative) freedom. Yet there were still some things which the ex-slave could not relate, and one frequently was the specific story of how he or she had escaped. Frederick Douglass censors himself at this point in both his *Narrative* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855),

though he does tell the story in his *Life and Times...* (1881), the last of his three autobiographies. An excerpt from this work appears in the next section of this anthology.

Another representative life from this period of the American Renaissance, as F.O. Matthiessen called it over fifty years ago, was the life of Fanny Fern. Matthiessen and his contemporary discoverers of the "great" American literature would never have called her so significant. They dismissed her as just a tearful newspaper columnist. But her fight to support herself and her children, as told in her autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall*, is a story of the trials and prejudices a woman faced. Writing newspaper columns was her way up from poverty. The columns were also autobiographical, and they were so moving and so satirical and sassy that they made her "the first woman columnist in the United States" and also one of the best-paid writers in the United States. (3) Just as for ex-slaves, therefore, autobiography for Fanny Fern was a means of protest. Within her columns and her novels, she could attach the men who had struck the poses of sentimental regard for women without delivering the substance. She could also expose their demeaning condescension and misinformed notions of women's experience and sensibility, while boldly writing about her own true feelings.

For those who like to collect telling historical trivia, there is an unexpected coincidence in the lives of Fanny Fern and Harriet Jacobs. Nathaniel P. Willis, Fanny Fern's selfish brother, who would not help support her when she was destitute, who printed her columns without paying her, and whom she satirized as "Apollo Hyacinth," was Harriet Jacobs' employer. Willis and his wife had hired Jacobs as a children's nurse, shortly after her escape from North Carolina. When his first wife died, Willis took her to England with his children, and she continued working for him after he remarried. But all this time Jacobs sensed that he was pro-slavery, so she hid her manuscript of *Incidents* and only worked on it in secret.(4) Thus, for both Fanny Fern and Harriet Jacobs (or "Linda Brent," to use her pseudonym), autobiography was not only a means of protest but something written under circumstances of secrecy or subversion, also something that had to be written under a "nom de plume," as book reviewers elegantly said.

Lydia Sigourney did not face such immediate physical and familial obstacles. As her autobiography makes abundantly clear, she led a highly privileged, financially secure life, and her parents and husband did not oppose her literary activity. Still, she had anxieties about writing her own life history, just as forty years before, in 1815, she says she had compunctions about publishing her first book. That book, *Moral Pieces in Prose and Verse*, had been published at the urging of Daniel Wadsworth, the backer of the school she ran in Hartford, Connecticut, and Wadsworth "took upon himself the whole responsibility of contracting with publishers, gathering subscriptions, and even correcting the proof-sheets." (5) Publishing a book was then "a novel enterprise for a female," as she puts it, and Wadsworth, whom she calls "my kind patron" and the book's "disinterested prompter," shielded her from these sordid details (325). Such were the restrictions of gender and gentility in 1815!

By 1865, when she wrote *Letters of Life*, many of those restrictions had fallen. The descriptive catalogue of her own books which she gives in the last chapter of *Letters of Life* lists fifty-five titles. She had also edited religious journals and children's magazines, until what she delicately calls "the financial feature...which at first supplied only my indulgences, my journeying, or my charities, became eventually a form of subsistence" (378). But she still had hesitations about writing an autobiography. "You request of me, my dear friend, a particular account of my own life," she begins, thus adopting the formula of a series of letters written to oblige someone else. She is also cautious to be modest and to insist that as in all writing "two principles" are "ever kept in view." The writing will not "interfere with the discharge of womanly duty" and will "aim at being an instrument of good" (324). In addition, as the record of her "earthly pilgrimage," this book "might impart some instruction to the future traveler, and set forth His praise, whose mercies are 'new every morning, and fresh every moment'"(5)

Lydia Sigourney thereby made domesticity, beneficence, and piety the ends of the first American literary autobiography—a woman's equivalent of Benjamin Franklin's promotion of industry, doing good, and modestly instructing his "son" (or sons) in the ways of Providence. But where Franklin repeatedly stressed his active roles of going into business, promoting good causes, and seizing one opportunity after another, there is a heavy passivity in the life and style of Lydia Sigourney.(6) She accepts responsibilities because she is asked; she writes because she was a lonely child; and she publishes to oblige Wadsworth, as she later wrote many obituary poems because someone asked her. Indeed, at the end of

her list of her fifty-five books, she adds nearly ten pages listing some of the requests she has had from readers asking for odes, elegies, epitaphs, book dedications, and hymns for them, their families, and charities! No other kind of laborer, she protests, gets asked for such donations. And yet her sense of woman's literature, like women's work, as a service to others inflicted these obligations on her.

Nevertheless, Lydia Sigourney's *Letter of Life* also projects her solid satisfaction with her domestic and literary accomplishments. There is a difference, after all, between just being passive-serving others, being genteel, and living a life of self control-and successfully writing books commending the woman's passive role. The writing is active, and the success leads to a greater pride, to financial independence, and to a sense of individual fulfillment. As Jarena Lee had gone into the pulpit and preached, and as prominent early feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had stepped onto the platforms and begun to lecture, so had Sigourney walked into the literary marketplace (however hesitantly at first), using her own name and becoming famous. Moreover, unlike most women of her time, she had written histories and biographies on public events and figures, and not merely on women's matters. As Nina Baym has pointed out, Lydia Sigourney became a major voice in the interpretation and celebration of the American Revolution, providing her readers with images of patriotism, dedication, and sacrifice. Thus, despite her modesty and caution, she was a public figure's right to tell her own story, in her own words, from childhood to old age. It was a new freedom, both for women and for American authors.

Jarena Lee (1783-1849?) *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady*

The *Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel*, was first printed in Philadelphia in 1836, Lee paying thirty-eight dollars for a thousand copies which she could distribute at camp meetings and other places where she preached. A second edition, published in 1849, added her record of these places, with the scriptural texts she preached from, miles travelled, and number of converts. But otherwise very little is known of her. She was one of hundreds of itinerant preachers and "exhorters" who roamed the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. They held revivals, established new congregations and also helped to establish social order on the frontier and in urban areas unrepresented by other churches.

One of these churches was the African Methodist Episcopal church, which had been founded by Richard Allen, the man who converted Lee in 1804. Allen was also glad to accept her as someone who could hold prayer meetings and "exhort," that is, encourage congregations to heed the sermons and the scriptures; but like other clergymen of the time, he resisted accepting women preachers.

Lee's autobiography, therefore, is both a spiritual autobiography, with powerful accounts of her visions and her promptings to speak and pray, and also an account of her progress in attaining greater social autonomy, until she becomes one of the first non-Quaker woman preachers in America. Indeed, the two stories come together at many points. The visions call her out of a life of submissiveness, and once they are answered and described, they give her power. Religion liberates her from a life of sin (and the status of a "servant maid"). Religion provides her with a way of supporting herself after her minister-husband dies and of having a very active, eventful life. In 1827, for example, she gave 178 sermons, travelling 2325 miles. The religious autobiography allows her to repeat this story—and make her plea for women preachers.

The text is from *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986). For discussion of Lee in the context of other black autobiographers, see Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986).

Reading

Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee
http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/www9716/@Generic_BookView

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) From *The American Scholar*, *The Poet*, and *History*

On the surface, Emerson was the least revolutionary of men. One of eight children of a Unitarian minister, who died when Emerson was still a boy, he was raised by his mother and his father's sister, went to Harvard, and became a Unitarian minister, too. In September, 1832, however, he announced to his congregation that he could no longer in good conscience serve communion, or the "Lord's Supper." He had decided that it was a form which Christ did not intend should be continued for century after century, and resigning from his post, left in December for Europe.

Such "independent judgment," as Alexis de Tocqueville might have called it, was highly characteristic of Emerson and can be seen in most of his early writing. He was impatient with tradition, formalism, and orthodoxy; and he sought inspiration and individual freedom. The "duties" of the American scholar, he told the students at Harvard in 1837, consciously turning the words of John Calvin and his own Puritan ancestor's downside up "may all be comprised in self-trust."

A faith in "self-trust" and "self-reliance," as he later called it made Emerson a predestined journal-keeper. The first edition of his own Journal, published 1909-14, filled ten volumes, and the modern, scholarly edition fills over twice as many. Equally important, from the perspective of American autobiography, was his role as a sort of propagandist for all kinds of personal writing. It was he who urged Thoreau to keep a journal, which he started in 1837 and kept till 1861 (1st ed. 1906, 14 volumes). And Emerson's enthusiastic endorsements of transcendental individualism and autobiographical poetry (see below) helped inspire the young Walt Whitman.

The paradox of Emersonian individualism is that he and his fellow Transcendentalists expected the fully developed individual to be universal. The individual would become a part and an expression of a transcendent mind or soul or spirit that ran through all individuals, present and past. "There is one mind common to all individual men," he said in "History." How one can be one's self and also be like all others is a problem. Nevertheless, the underlying self-confidence and optimism are very clear.

There are many biographies of Emerson. For a searching discussion of Emerson and other Transcendentalists' relation to the autobiographical tradition, see Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973).

Reading

Essays and Poems Online

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/texts.htm>

Lewis Clarke (dates unknown) From *Leaves from a Slave's Journal of Life*

One of the most stirring moments at anti-slavery meetings was when recently escaped slaves told their own stories. Their testimony was specific and fresh, and anti-slavery writers often reported it in abolitionist papers. As a result, there are actually far more of these shorter, oral or dictated autobiographies than there are book-length slave narratives, making them an important source of information about slavery. They also provide insight into the interests and attitudes of abolitionists.

This speech has all these values. First, it was written by Lydia Maria Child, a long-time white abolitionist who was later the editor of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Her opening description of Lewis Tappan, a founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, reveals some of his mannerisms as well as her differences from him. Yet both she and Tappan are directly concerned with the credibility of Clarke, which builds up to Clarke's still more emphatic points about slavery, manhood, and truth. "A SLAVE CAN'T BE A MAN!"—because "He daren't tell what's in him," because "slavery's the father of lies." In turn, these points not only justify Clarke's testimony, they underscore the great importance of testimony to Clarke in establishing his freedom and manhood.

Clarke's speech and Child's account also reveal many other features of slavery and the southern and northern white interests it, such as the treatment of women and girls, the vicious "patter-rollers," the prurience of some anti-slavery "boys," and the misery of slave children.

Child's report of Clarke's speech was originally printed in two issues of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 20 and 27, 1842. We have cut most of the second part, except for Clarke's memories of his childhood experiences.

For a complete text of "Leaves from a Slave's Journal of Life," see John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 151-64. Blassingame also supplies further information about general conditions and about the conventions of speeches by ex-slaves.

Reading

Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of America. Dictated by Himself
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/clarke.html>

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) From *Mariana*

Like many other New England writers, Margaret Fuller kept diaries and wrote lengthy letters. She also wrote a very important book in the history of feminism, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and a very good travel book, *Summer on the Lakes* (1844), about a trip to the Middle West in 1843. But as autobiography none of these writings seems as original as the following romantic sketch, which she included in *Summer on the Lakes*, introducing it as about “an old schoolmate” back East. By using such a frame and such other fictional devices as the third-person narration and the Shakespearean name (*Mariana* was Angelo’s rejected but forgiving betrothed in *Measure for Measure*), Fuller managed to talk about her adolescent anguish without seeming to be morbidly self-conscious or self-pitying.

Today the bildungsroman is a common form. Fuller, however, had only one example to follow, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, and upright Americans looked askance on it, just as they disapproved of Fuller’s feminism and thought her interest in Goethe and German philosophy an affectation. So, “*Marina*” is in some ways primitive: a sketch rather than an intensely written short story or confessional essay. But the story of *Mariana*’s misery at boarding school, arising from her ardor and her friends’ conformity and cruelty, is archetypal. Nothing in “*Mariana*” is better drawn than the moment at dinner when she looks up and sees all the other girls wearing her rouge!

Fuller thus opened the way for countless later stories of adolescence, and in the process extended our very concept of individual uniqueness and the necessity for freedom of self-expression. The romantic individual is like (and partially derived from) the plight of a bright adolescent in a company of peers who are all boorish and mean.

The story is taken from *Summer on the Lakes*, in 1843 (Boston and New York, 1844), and omits the less autobiographical ending about *Mariana*’s marriage. For more on Fuller, see Bell Gale Chevigny, *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller’s Life and Writings* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1976).

Reading

Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli. v.1 1852. Fuller, Margaret, 1810-1850.

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044009687435;page=root;view=image;size=100;seq=6;num=v>

Fanny Fern (1811-1872) from *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*

"Fanny Fern" was the pen name of Sara Payson Willis Eldredge Farrington Parton (to add the names of her first, second, and third husbands to her family and given names). Her father, Nathaniel Willis, was a Presbyterian deacon and the founder of *The Recorder*, the nation's first religious newspaper, and also of *The Youth's Companion*, the first children's paper. Her brother, N.P. Willis, became a very popular poet and journalist. But Sara did not start writing for money until left practically destitute by the death of her first husband, Charles Harrington Eldredge (in 1846) and her separation from her second, Samuel P. Farrington (in January, 1851). She could make no more than seventy-five cents a week as a seamstress and could obtain no post as a teacher. Her wealthy father had remarried, and he contributed very little to her. Nor did her first husband's parents help her much, despite their being grandparents to her children. But on June 18, 1851, she published her first sketch, anonymously, in a Boston paper called the *Olive Branch*, which paid her fifty cents. In September, she began using the pen name Fanny Fern, and her sketches were being pirated by other papers, including her brother N.P. Willis's *Home Journal*, which had turned them down when Sara had sent them to Willis under her own name! Moving to other papers, at increasingly better pay, she was soon one of the best-paid columnists in the country—and published, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, and in the next year it earned her nearly ten thousand dollars.

As a columnist, she both wrote in the first person and told other stories that were often disguised autobiography. In the persona of Fanny Fern, she also developed the style of a woman who was vulnerable to sentiment and yet leery of it and, frequently, sharp-tongued and irreverent. At times she cried and brought tears to her readers; at other times she shocked. "A Widow's Trials" is tearful and obviously based on the cruel treatment she had received from her father. "Apollo Hyacinth," June 18, 1853, satirized her well-known brother N.P. Willis as a self-centered, dandified hypocrite. But while "Fanny Fern" acquired fame and notoriety, Sara's own identity was safely secret-until December, 1854, when one of the people satirized in *Ruth Hall*, the autobiographical novel she had just published, started a series of articles exposing her. Male journalists soon attacked her for being so vindictive towards the father, brother, and in-laws who had refused to support her when she was a poor widow, and though interest in *Ruth Hall* as a scandal grew and sales zoomed, the game was over...or the rules had changed. The hurt and sensitive Sara, who had once hidden behind the pseudonym, now used it as both shield and sword. She also was a personage in it, Fanny Fern come to life.

This change shows up in later sketches like "A Law More Nice than just" (1858) and "How I look" (1870). In the first, James Parton, whom she had married in 1856, appears as "Mr. Fern," assisting in her experiment in wearing men's clothes. In that piece, incidentally, the man to whom she bears such a close resemblance is her brother. In the second, she enjoys the mistake a man makes in identifying her as another woman, dressed in diamonds and lace. (In other sketches, too she alludes to "Fanny Fern" as being dark and sinister, while she, the real Fanny, is blonde.) Thus, even though she increasingly called herself "Fanny Fern" (and this is the name now used in most library catalogues), the mystery over who this autobiographer really was continued. Indeed, until the recent rediscovery of nineteenth-century women's writing, literary historians cast her as just "sentimental," the "grandmother of all sob sisters." They seem to have judged her only by the flowery name, without bothering to read her books. She and her writings are fascinating studies in the interactions of autobiography, fictions, and pseudonyms.

A further selection of sketches is in *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1986). For a biographical and critical study, see Nancy Walker, *Fanny Fern* (New York: Twayne, 1992).

Reading

Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433076060734>

P.T. Barnum (1810-1891) from *The Life of P.T. Barnum and Struggles and Triumphs*

P(hineas) T(aylor) Barnum is crucial to the history of American autobiography, both for what he wrote and for what he did to establish enduring popular attitudes towards truth and deception, self-advertisement and commerce, and other values surrounding it. One of the great national tricksters, he helped define appearance and reality in America.

On the simplest level, his life is a success story. Born in the little town of Bethel, Connecticut, in 1810, he rose from being a clerk in the country stores to being the owner of "Barnum's American Museum" in the New York City, to being the greatest impresario of his time (ushering Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale," on her famous 1850-52 tour), and to being co-owner of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. But where Benjamin Franklin somewhat deceptively attributed his success to virtue and industry, Barnum, in *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1855) virtuously attributed his to deception. Half rogue that he was, he realized (as had Stephen Burroughs and as would later tricksters like Richard Nixon) that a rogue admitting his tricks is taken as a sinner repenting—he is believed. Or if he is not, he is still discussed, and as a great showman, Barnum watched the crowds come.

But there are still deeper levels to Barnum's understanding of the American psyche and the American public's responses to him. At a time when Americans were very eager to gain refinement and education, as expressed in appreciation of art and nature, Barnum still recognized their insecurities and their need for relaxation and fun. Thus he made his American Museum an attractive palace where wonders and curiosities of all kinds were assembled: in his words, "educated dogs, industrious fleas, automatons, jugglers, ventriloquists, living statuary, tableaux, gipsies, Albinos, fat boys, giants, dwarfs, rope-dancers, live "Yankees," pantomime...models of Niagara...fancy glass-blowing, knitting machines and other triumphs of the mechanical arts..." In such a collection, the popular issue, as Neil Harris has written, came to be "an aesthetic of the operational, a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth."¹ Visitors did not have to think about beauty or taste or spirituality, values with which they felt uncertain. Instead, they focused just on the facts and the problems of truth—where a freak came from, how a machine worked, whether something was fake or genuine.

The consequence in Barnum's autobiography is a similarly overwhelming flood of anecdotes, giving the story of each curiosity and wonder, and a confession of how it was found, authenticated (or not), and publicized. The Feejee Mermaid story is an example. But as the story of the great Hoboken Buffalo Hunt illustrates, audiences also came to like Barnum's tricks. Being able to shout that the hunt "was the biggest humbug you ever heard of!" was part of the pleasure. Barnum was likewise quite willing and proud to reveal several days later that he had made his money by chartering the ferry boats. It won him further respect (and publicity) and gave those who told the story the thrill of feeling in the know. All the while, as perhaps the first story of Ivy Island best demonstrates, there is an important moral lesson to be learned from having been deceived, or from having believed inflated promises, from having false hopes, and then seeing the modest truth. The boy-innocent finds he is not rich and privileged but like everyone else.

In 1869, Barnum published a second version of his autobiography, *Struggles and Triumphs*, which did not paint himself as quite such a confidence man—and interesting difference. Adding chapter after chapter, he republished it so many times that one scholar has estimated that after the Bible, Barnum's autobiography was the most widely read book in America. Copies were given away free with circus tickets, as if the book was a part of, or the background to, the circus. Thus did Barnum further contribute to the popular expectation (a mainstay of autobiography) that behind every appearance is a reality in the form of yet another personal story.

Copies of the 1855 *Life* are rare. This text is taken from the reprint, *Barnum's Own Story*, edited by Waldo R. Browne (New York: Dover Publications, 1961). Which also contains the material from *Struggles and Triumphs*. For biography and criticism, see G Thomas Couser, *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), 52-69; and Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973). 1...Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 79.

Reading

The Life of P.T. Barnum

<http://archive.org/details/lifeoftbarnum00barn>

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) *To Jesse W. Fell, Enclosing Autobiography*

Lincoln's humility and brevity are legendary, and at first glance this "little sketch" seems to confirm both. But we might also ask how this sketch illustrates the condition of autobiography in America in 1859.

According to Louis Kaplan's *Bibliography of American Autobiographies*, none of the eleven U.S. presidents between Jefferson and James Buchanan (Lincoln's immediate predecessor) wrote an autobiography. There are many possible reasons for this, but one is that autobiographies were often the objects of suspicion. Of the roughly eight hundred written between 1800 and 1870, approximately seventy per cent were written by either clergymen or people who had experienced some unusual adventure or distress.¹ Persons in the mainstream of American life, including political leaders, did not write their life stories. Lincoln's reticence, therefore, may be due more to social-literary conventions than to inherent modesty.

Jesse W. Fell was secretary of the Illinois Republican State Central Committee and a Lincoln backer. He asked for this biographical information for use by a newspaper in Pennsylvania. The article based on it was published February 11, 1860, and reprinted by other papers. As a man who had not held previous national office (except for one term in Congress, 1847-49) and who had not acquired a national reputation until his debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858, Lincoln needed to be better known. In June 1860, following his nomination for President (on May 18, 1860), he wrote a second sketch much like this one for a Chicago newspaperman, and it was used in preparing a campaign biography. Significantly, it was four times longer, but written in the third person. So Lincoln appears to have gladly cooperated with the publicists who were helping to advance his candidacy, but he also wanted to make sure that the publicity "must not appear to have been written by myself."

There are many other interesting features to this sketch, such as the emphasis on his humble education, his frontier background, and his pleasure in being elected captain by his fellow volunteers in the Black Hawk War. The sketch skillfully performs self-promotion by means of the self-irony and humor that are sympathetic to his audience.

There are many Lincoln biographies. For a documentary of his life, see Earl Schenck Miers, et al., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960).

Reading

Speeches & Letters of Abraham Lincoln, 1832-1865
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14721>

Lydia Sigourney (1791-1865) *From Letters of Life*

Lydia Sigourney was born in Norwich, Connecticut, where her father, Ezekiel Huntley, was the head gardener for a wealthy widow who set the social and moral tone for the town. She published her first book in 1815, *Moral Pieces in Prose and Verse*, and went on to write over fifty-more histories, biography (many honoring Revolutionary War patriots), a long descriptive poem on American Indians, children's books, travel sketches, and religious verse. Nevertheless, what she later was known for was the writing of lugubrious funeral verses, in the manner of Huckleberry Finn's Emeline Grangerford, who was said to be modeled after her. New research in women's literature is reassessing her work.

Letters of Life (1866) is especially important because it was "the first full-dress autobiography written by an American author of either sex whose primary vocation was creative writing."¹ Before Sigourney, American poets, novelists, and essayists-however autobiographical their work-did not write autobiographies at least not in the sense of a full-length biography written about one's self. *Letters of*

Life, therefore, is a landmark in the history of American autobiography and the remote forerunner of works like Henry James's *A Small Boy and Others* or Lillian Hellman's *Pentimento*.

One justification of her project, which she notably refuses to make herself, is that she was in her time an extremely popular writer. Her meticulously correct grammar and diction and unassailable character were models for genteel women. In England, she was compared to the popular Mrs. Felicia Hemans: in America she deluged with fan mail, and an Iowa town was even named after her. (In response she donated fifty volumes to the town library and directed the planting of trees around the courthouse square.) So she could presume interest in her life. But her declared strategy in the autobiography was to write "letters" to a "dear friend" who had requested "A particular account of my own life." Her goal was to be instructive and, as in all her writing, "not to interfere with the discharge of womanly duty, and to aim at being an instrument of good."² In these ways, she nominally placed autobiography within a kind of personal writing which women had already published (letters and travel narratives) and also made it line up with the kinds of didactic literature she had already written.

The *Letters* is about evenly divided between a narrative of her childhood and education, leading up to her first experiments in writing (chapters 1-8) and (chapters 9-14), a record of her experiences as a teacher of young ladies, her marriage to Charles Sigourney (a Hartford, Connecticut, hardware merchant and banker) their happy life together till his death in 1854, and an account of her other books. Throughout, she presents herself as extremely cognizant of social proprieties, pious, frugal, hard-working, self-disciplined, and eager to educate and improve herself. In some ways she seems like a terrible prig, just as her language seems insufferably polished. But she also seems highly aware that all these virtues are expected of her and that, having acquired them, she has the authority to play.

In this chapter, "Letter V," subtitled "Removal—Household Employments," she describes the responsibilities she had at age fourteen when her parents moved from Mrs. Lathrop's mansion to their own "new abode." A confident young lady, she supervises the moving in of the furniture and then resumes her domestic occupations, the ultimate of which is making clothes for her father. In addition to telling about being a dutiful, loving daughter, however, the author also has a little fun, as in her riddling description of the "quadruped member of our establishment...scarcely mentionable to ears polite." In this playfulness she might be compared to Franklin, Caroline Kirkland, or Fanny Fern. She is also very aware of her responsibility as a social historian: *Letters of Life* is a veritable time capsule of her culture.

The text of "Letter V," given here in its entirety, is from *Letters of Life* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1866). An important critical essay is Nina Baym's "Reinventing Lydia Sigourney," *American literature* 62 (September 1990): 385-404.

1. Lawrence Buell, "Autobiography in the American Renaissance," in *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 60.
2. Lydia Sigourney, *Letters of Life* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1866), pp. 5, 324.

Reading

Letters to Young Ladies

<http://www.librarycompany.org/women/portraits/sigourney.htm>

B) Late 19th Century : Survivors and Self-Teachers (1965-1915)

When the Civil War ended in 1865, approximately two million men had served in the Union Army, out of a population of twenty-three million: 750,000 had served in the Army of the Confederacy, out of a population of nine million, which included 3,500,000 slaves. Northern casualties had been 640,000 dead and wounded; those of the South 450,000. In addition, 220,000 Confederates had been captured by the North and 200,000 Union soldiers had been captured by the South. Measured against the size and wealth of the country, it was the bloodiest and most expensive war in American history. (1)

It was also a war that was recorded and remembered in hundreds of memoirs, diaries, letters, and other kinds of autobiographical writing. The index to Louis Kaplan's *Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (1961) lists 542 autobiographies from the Civil War, roughly 8 ½ percent of all the 6377 books listed. That, of course, does not include shorter pieces or unpublished material, and a great many more Civil War diaries, letters, and autobiographies have been published since 1945, the cut-off year for the *Bibliography*.

The classic Civil War memoir has long been Grant's *Personal Memoirs*. Thanks to Mark Twain, whose American Book Company published it by subscription in 1885-86, its two volumes had an immense sale, and they became, in a sense, the Union veterans' official history. But the *Memoirs* also received critical praise from contemporaries like Matthew Arnold and Henry James; and many later readers have praised it, too, notably Gertrude Stein and Edmund Wilson. Its plain style, its unromantic view of the war, and Grant's own directness and lack of military pomp make it a very appropriate record of a war that was won by the endurance and sacrifices of common men. No novels written about the war, with the exception of John William DeForest's autobiographical novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, and Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, are nearly so sobering and realistic.

Nevertheless, a general's memoirs cannot possibly give the common soldier's or civilian's view of a war. He gave the orders: the soldiers and civilians had to carry them out and bear the suffering. It was they who were most likely to become casualties and prisoners, or to lose their homes and families. Writing their own stories was their way of insuring that these experiences would not be forgotten and that the parts which they played in the great epic struggle would be suitably recognized. Writing their own stories, which, thanks to increased literacy, a large portion of the population now could do, was also a way of helping themselves to remember and of leaving physical records for their children and other readers. Some diarists like Mary Boykin Chesnut and Cornelia Peake McDonald also went on to *rewrite* their stories, because parts of the original diary were lost and because they wanted to edit and polish them and make them more worthy of publication and thus celebration and preservation.

So much writing not only contributed to the total body of American autobiography, it also had a marked effect on concepts of the self and so on the history of autobiography.

Before the Civil War, as we have already noted, most Americans were reluctant to write their personal histories. It took the leadership of Transcendentalists, escaped slaves, abolitionists, feminists, and other people of outstanding talent who had had unusual experiences to start the ante-bellum self-liberation movement. Americans may have been inclined, as Tocqueville observed, towards "independent judgment," towards thinking for themselves and judging the world from their own perspective, but they were equally inclined, he noted, to conformity and a fear of appearing different from or better than their neighbors. (2)

And their concepts of self corresponded to this fear. "The self stood as no accommodating channel to enhancement or perfection," Lewis O. Saum said in his study of *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America*, "it stood rather as an endlessly frustrating, dark-hued impediment." (3) The shadow of Puritanism was long and dark, and the newer, more optimistic lights of religious and political liberalism did not fully penetrate its gloom, because liberalism taught that for the self to become generous, refined, and sincere it also had to be disciplined. These virtues might be natural; but they still required nurture.

Veterans of the Civil War, however, were likely to have a different view, if not of human nature, then at least of themselves and their comrades. The very fact of disinterested sacrifice for a noble

cause-for preservation of the Union and emancipation of slaves, or for the Right of Secession and love of country-was proof of some higher kind of benevolence. The war's polarization of opinion further encouraged each side to celebrate its own heroes in these terms, leaving the enemy as the embodiment of evil: of selfishness, ignorance, crudity, and the forces of darkness. One's own motives and character were generous, sincere, and noble; the enemy's were the opposite. In this way, in fact, it was even possible to maintain both the old Puritan and the new liberal views of human nature. From the northern perspective the northern self was selfless, enlightened, and modern, while the southern self was dark and sinister. Contrariwise, the Southerner saw himself as noble and free and the Northerner as a tricky, deceptive, money-grubbing Yankee.

Because testimonies about wars inevitably require a way of dealing with one's own pain and suffering, as well as the suffering and death of others, these views of self and non-self, or Self and Other, were deeply inscribed into Civil War autobiographies. They were an integral part of the whole elegiac strategy with which writers justified pain and death and tried to make sense of the war. Here is the way, for instance, that Warren Lee Goss, a Massachusetts sergeant and the author of *The Soldier's Story*, elegized a man in his company who died at Andersonville, the Georgia prison, where nearly 13,000 men died in 1864-65.

C.H.A. Moore was a drummer...the only son of a widowed mother...In him all her hopes were centered, and it was with great reluctance that she finally agreed to his enlistment. A soldier's life, to one thus reared, is at best hard; but to plunge one so young and unaccustomed even to the rudiments of hardships into the unparallel miseries of Andersonville, seemed cruelty inexpressible...The day previous to his death I saw and conversed with him, tried to encourage him; but a look of premature age had settled over his youthful face, which bore but little semblance to the bright, expressive look he wore when he enlisted...He spoke of home and his mother, but his words were all in the same key, monotonous and weary, with a stony, unmoved expression of countenance...It seems to me that God's everlasting curse must surely rest upon those who thus knowingly allowed hundreds of innocent young lives to be blotted out of existence by cruelties unheard of before in the annals of civilized warfare. It seems to me that in the future the South, who abetted so great a crime against civilization and humanity, against Christianity and even decency, must stand condemned by the public opinion of the world...(4)

The drummer boy is thus eulogized for his youth, innocence and devotion to the cause. He was also a symbol of his mother's hopes and goodness, so that his suffering and death are all the worse because they are by extension violations of her, the person from whom he received his virtuous sentiments. The South, on the other hand, by "knowingly" allowing such "innocent young lives to be blotted out" has offended "civilization and humanity," "Christianity and even decency"-all the forces of good that Goss can list.

Conversely, here is the way Cornelia Peake McDonald described her home in Virginia in February, 1863, after it had been occupied by the invading Union army:

I sit every day and see this lovely place converted into a wagon yard. The smooth green turf has disappeared, and roads go over and across in every direction. Under the dining room windows runs one, and mules and horses continually pass, driven by men cursing and swearing, uttering oaths that make my blood curdle...

Under the parlor windows goes another road. Those windows used to look out on a sweet shrubbery of syringas, mock orange, white lilacs and purple...everything old fashioned and lovely that I delight in...[Now] all the long day through [pass] wagons, artillery horses,...soldiers and camp women, gay officers on foot and on horseback, and most sickening sight of all, Yankee "Ladies" in dainty riding habits, hats and plumes, pace by as if the ground they passed over was their own; and chatting with their beaux, glance around at us if they chance to see us as if we were intruders on their domain. (5)

"Yankees" are "cursing and swearing" mule drivers and disgusting, supercilious "camp women," and Mrs. McDonald is too angry to stop and qualify these images with any further reflection that this is war and that soldiers and their camp followers are not genteel. Rather, she excuses herself for her "resentful and

revengeful" feelings towards them. She wishes that "our artillery could, from some near point, sweep them all away." (6)

The powerful emotions in these Civil War autobiographies helped to keep this war alive for generations after it was supposedly over, and this, in turn perpetuated the need for publishing more autobiographies, as apologists for North and South continued to build up the evidence for heroism or horror. In the ten years from 1862 through 1871, for example, seventy-four memoirs of Civil War prisoners were published. Interest apparently dropped off from 1872 to 1881, when only seventeen were published, but from 1882 through 1891, fifty-eight more appeared, followed by thirty-two in the decade 1892-1901, fifty-one in the period 1901-10, and twenty-seven between 1912 and 1921. (7) There were other reasons for this increase, too. Just as with the Revolution, there were controversies over pension legislation; elderly veterans wished to publish their stories before they died; and their descendants wished to honor them after they died. But ongoing rivalry of North and South continued to promote interest in the war and in the personal experiences of its participants.

Another significant difference between the prison story of Warren Goss and the narratives of Revolutionary prisoners, Indian captives, and others, is in Goss's interpretation of the meaning of his experience. Like other prisoners and captives, Goss saw it as a test of faith. He and his fellows had remained true to the cause and not accepted offers from the enemy to gain release by becoming turncoats. But the awful conditions of Andersonville-hunger, exposure, disease, and almost unimaginable overcrowding, with over twenty thousand men confined in an area of ten acres-pitted the prisoners against each other. Not all could survive, however strong their faith. Thus, as Goss shows, they fought among themselves, and "the strong often tyrannized over the weak" (104). To protect themselves, the prisoners developed ways of punishing offenders. To raise money for a little extra food, they developed simple kinds of businesses. The prison became a grotesque microcosm of nineteenth-century capitalist society, when "rough native force or talent showed itself by ingenious devices for making the most of little" (104). This was a world, as Goss describes it, where what later became known as social Darwinism definitely prevailed. Only the fittest survived, and Goss devoted great attention to explaining the techniques of his own survival, both physical and psychological. He needed a bucket in which to cook, wash, and carry water-and with which to trade such services to others, for their services to him. He needed to sustain his spirit, by humor and some pleasant thoughts, and by keeping up his hopes of escape, exchange, or parole, but without becoming unrealistic. Finally, he had to restrain his humanitarian impulses to help those who were weaker, sicker, and hungrier than himself, since, if he did not, he would die, too. With these lessons, Goss also justified his survival, overcoming the guilt arising from the fact that he had survived where others had not. Then he went on, directly and indirectly, to teach similar lessons to the post-war American society.

In the Civil War autobiographies, therefore, we see the emergence of a demonstrably different concept of self. The universalism of Transcendentalists, abolitionists, and revivalists has been eliminated or subdued. Not even Walt Whitman retains the optimism he had before the war. *Specimen Days* is a book of much more detail, of the speci-men and other specifics, rather than glorious universals. And when he celebrates himself, it is the tireless, gray-headed, middle-aged male nurse whom he celebrates, not the boisterous young democrat. This self, then, is a survivor and a teacher and a self historian more than a great liberator. Similarly, Frederick Douglass in his last volume of autobiography, the *Life and Times...*, devotes much more attention to the unique record of his own life as a public figure than to himself as a victim of slavery. To some extent, of course, these differences are due to the fact that by the 1880's and 1890's Whitman and Douglass were older, well-recognized public men, which they had not been before the war. Their individual stories now held significant interest for many readers. However, what gave them the license to tell these stories, and the forms in which they tell them, were the developments in autobiography which had been introduced by books like Goss's *Story* and Grant's *Memoirs*. The mundane particulars what Whitman had referred to in "Song of Myself" as "dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues"-which had once *not* been the real self, the "Me myself," and supposedly could not be recounted-were now a very large part of this new self, and could be, even had to be, recounted. Goss, Grant, Douglass, and Whitman had all survived to tell their tales, their *own* tales, and they could tell them with the expectation that book-buyers would want to read about them. Even people who had not been famous but had witnessed great events and survived could feel that their stories were important.

Mary Boykin Chesnut, the wife of a Confederate leader, worked for years at revising and improving her diary and preparing it for publication, which it first received in 1905, nineteen years after her death. Other manuscripts were left with children and grandchildren or privately published and then placed in attics and state historical societies, preserved from a sense of patriotism and family piety. Cornelia Peake McDonald's story was first passed on just to her children. Her children then published a private edition of it for *their* children, but it was not printed in a public edition until 1992. Nevertheless, McDonald, like Chesnut and Goss, had felt that her story deserved being recorded and saved. Just having been a witness to the war and played a small part in it was reason enough.

The Self could become this more specific historical self because, as we noted before, these later autobiographers had less shame about it. The dark, evil self was no longer within but outside: in the shape, first, of the wartime enemy, and later in the shape simply of others different from "one's self" by virtue of race, sex religion, class, education, or status, Autobiography and the Self has become, or were about to become, more racial, ethnic, and status-conscious.

These cultural and political valences of the self, as we might call them, were not new. They can be seen, for instance, in Thoreau's distinctions between himself and John Field, the impoverished Irish bogger, as also between Harriet Jacobs-Linda Brent and Mr. Flint, her mean and insensitive white master. But starting in the late 1880's with Lucy Larcom's *New England Girlhood*, these valences also become associated with the past and with differences between the past of childhood and one's origins and the present, the time of composition, in a very different world. A wave of nostalgia was about to break on many Americans and with it a discovery or rediscovery of childhood. And much of this nostalgia identified childhood with an innocent time before the war and before the ethnic multiplicity that had come with late nineteenth-century immigration.

Lucy Larcom did not have as sheltered and idyllic a girlhood as Lydia Sigourney's or Catherine Sedgwick's (whose *Life and Letters* was published in 1871). She grew up in the declining sailing port of Beverly, Massachusetts. The old New England Calvinism was also dying, and she did not regret it, thought she fondly remembered the old hymns. The death of her father, a retired shipmaster, in 1835 when she was eleven, was a drastic blow to family status and security, and her mother moved to the Milltown of Lowell, where she became housekeeper in one of the boardinghouses for the girl mill workers. Lucy, for her part went to work in the mills.

Working in the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1830's and '40's, before the arrival of thousands of immigrants, was a utopian experience, however. The girls came from farms and hill towns from all over New England, and, according to Larcom, they were glad to leave those confined places, where the only paying jobs had been as serving girls. In this new, relatively cosmopolitan world they made more friends, and, thanks to the benevolence of the factory owners, went to lectures, night schools, and music classes. They also had a chance to write poems and edit their own magazines, which was Lucy's particular delight. In 1846, she had a chance to go to Illinois, where she completed her formal education, then returned to New England, where she later became a teacher at Wheaton Seminary in Norton, Massachusetts, and an editor for Children's magazines. But the account given in *New England Girlhood* ends with 1852.

Although barely noticed, this is a significant date. Since the setting is nine years before the Civil War, Larcom could omit her later Unionist passions. It was also before the period of mass immigration that began in 1848 and became even greater in the 1880's. Larcom could, as it were, preserve, or recall the lost innocence of her "girlhood" of New England, just as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1844) evoked the "boyhood" of the Mississippi Valley. Collectively, such autobiographies and autobiographical novels of childhood took their middle-class, Anglo-Saxon readers back to a seeming childhood of America, where there were no rumblings of war, immigrants, strikes, labor agitators, or tenements.

The next two or here decades saw the appearance of many of these nostalgic autobiographies of growing up: William Dean Howells's *My Year in a Log Cabin* (1893) and *Boy's Town* (1904), Edward Everett Hale's *New England Boyhood* (1893), Hamlin Garland's *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899), Charles Eastman's *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and John Muir's *Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (1912). The early

chapters of *The Education of Henry Adams* (written in 1906-7) and the whole of Henry James' *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) belong in this genre, too. The anti-Semitism of the *Education* and parts of James' *American Scene*, are, therefore, not unique to James and Adams and their upper-class cohorts, but aspects of ethnic linkage and prejudice which had begun to be widespread. Ethnicity was presumably a matter of parentage and was normally simplest or purest in childhood. Yet, for ethnicity to be an issue, there had to be an awareness or alter awareness of other ethnic heritages and types-valences to avoid as well as valences to bond to. Therefore, "native" ethnic pride, be it New England, small-town Ohio, Prairie, Indian, or Negro, was but one feature among others involving various forms of ethno-centrism, ethnic anxiety, and ethnic prejudice.

Ethnicity was by no means the only theme in these reminiscences of girlhood and boyhood. A much older tradition, the success story, still endured having been handed down from Franklin to Barnum to Horatio Alger's novels about Ragged Dick (A series started in 1867), Luck and Pluck (started in 1869), and Tattered Tom (started in 1871). This was the tradition picked up by Andrew Carnegie, perhaps because as a Scottish immigrant he wasn't so prepared to write what reviewers liked to call a "delightful reminiscence" of a native-born childhood. The memory Carnegie begins with is one which was also a "lesson": his father, who was a hand-loom weaver in Dunfermline, Scotland, returning "to our little home greatly distressed because there was no more work for him to do." Then and there, writes Carnegie the millionaire, "I resolved...that the wolf of poverty would be driven from our door someday, if I could do it." (8)

"How I Served my Apprenticeship" (1894) is thus not only a success story, but also a grim, bare-knuckled account of what Carnegie learned in the worlds of nineteenth-century capitalism and technological development. The story was archetypal: from bobbin boy to messenger boy to telegraph operator to assistant to the superintendent of the Pennsylvania Railroad. There is more to the story, however, because Carnegie's even greater pleasure was his investment in "ten shares in the Adams Express Company." This required his parents' mortgaging their house, but it succeeded, and it taught "how money could make money"-the lesson of a real businessman, by Carnegie's lights. Thus his "apprenticeship" was not in an old-fashioned handicraft or trade in the traditional sense, but in capitalism, which was a success story of its own, at least to its persuasive advocates and apologists.

Comparison of Carnegie's little autobiographical essay with these others and with the autobiographies of earlier generations could be lengthy. His autobiography does not celebrate America or virtue or religion or nature or benevolence and civic improvement so much as it celebrates business and capitalism. Carnegie's aim, as he notes in the closing passages of his story, is to be "working upon my own account...being my own master,...manufacturing something and giving employment to many men." This aim was apparently so socially accepted and easy to learn that he could direct his story even to children, for it appeared in *Youth's Companion*. Autobiography was again didactic, although, some people would say, no longer very moral. And any successful, surviving, self-teacher could write it.

Warren Lee Goss (1835-1925) From *The Soldier's Story*

The Soldier's Story was first published in 1866 and went through two more editions and fourteen additional printings, the last in 1876. Many editions included an appendix "containing the names of the Union soldiers who died at Andersonville," and some had a "presentation page," indicating that the book was used as a gift and memorial.

Goss was born in Brewster, Massachusetts, and educated at Pierce Academy in Middleboro. In 1860-61, he spent one year at Harvard Law School, after which he enlisted as a private in the engineer corps. The Soldier's Story, however, tells only of his military experience, beginning with his enlistment, his capture in 1862, and his first imprisonment at Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia. Exchanged in the fall of 1862, he regained his health, and reenlisted in November, 1863, as a sergeant. In the spring of 1864, he was captured again and this time taken to Andersonville in Southern Georgia.

Andersonville prison was one of the worst atrocities of the Civil War. It was still being written about in the 1950s, in MacKinlay Kantor's best-selling novel Andersonville and in the Andersonville Trial, a play based upon the trial and execution of Colonel Wirz, the commander. Goss satisfied the great curiosity about it and appealed to post-war, pro-Union and anti-Confederate sentiments, while generally avoiding sensationalism.

He describes Andersonville as a bare compound surrounded by a stockade fence. Most of the prisoners had no more shelter than tattered blankets supported by sticks. They cooked on open fires, eating meager rations of dried corn, beans and sometimes a little meat. The barracks that once had been planned were built very late and in insufficient number (the South by that time being very short of men, funds, and supplies). The compound soon became massively overcrowded, and by August, 1864, held 31,000 men, nearly 3000 of whom died in that month alone. To escape, Goss and others dug tunnels, feigned death, and tried running off while outside on wood-gathering forays. Few succeeded, though Goss did once escape for a few days. In the fall he was among the "lucky ones" moved to a prison in Charleston, South Carolina, from which he was exchanged in December.

The chapter below, describing events near the beginning of his account of Andersonville, is typical in its emphasis on not just the conditions of the prison but also on the society and the survival strategies that grew up among the prisoners. As can be seen, he also attacks southern character and praises the prisoner's loyalty to the Union. But the overall message is that "Yankee ingenuity" and the New England and western character are what have been tested and have endured.

After the war, Goss became an editor and magazine writer and an author of children's novels and children's biographies of Grant and Sherman. He also held offices in veterans' organizations.

The selection here is Chapter 5 of *The Soldier's Story* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1866). There is no biography of Goss, though he did write a second autobiography, *Recollections of a Private* (1890).

Reading

The Soldier's Story of His Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle
<http://archive.org/details/soldiersstoryhi02gossgoog>

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) From *Specimen Days*

In 1865, Whitman was fired from a clerkship in the Department of the Interior because the Secretary had been shown a copy of his poems, *Leaves of Grass*, and decided it was an immoral book. In response, his friend William O'Connor wrote (with Whitman's direction) a short apologia, *The Good Gray Poet* (1866), which portrayed him as a stalwart democrat who had served quietly and heroically all through the Civil War comforting wounded soldiers.

With *The Good Gray Poet*, Whitman's public image began to change from the sensual, rowdy, egotistical "rough" of *Leaves of Grass* to the martyred democratic saint, an image which served him very well for the rest of his life. It comported better with his middle age and with the fact that in 1873 he suffered a paralytic stroke. For his convalescence, Whitman left Washington and moved near his brother George in Camden, New Jersey, where he was visited by a growing number of English and American admirers. In the late 1870s he recovered further from the stroke by spending many months at Timber Creek, outside Camden.

Specimen Days (1882) is the "good grey poets" memoir. It preserves the memories and images for which he wanted to be known and omitted (by its "skips and jumps") the supposedly immoral and more cosmic, tormented Whitman. It also preserved his voice, for there is a striking correlation between the book's material and method and the narrator's persona. Thus, its artifices of carelessness, kindness, and healthy and loving impulsiveness reveal as well as conceal. Whitman's service in the hospitals was indeed heroic—and a socially acceptable expression of his male amativeness, as he called his homosexual love. *Specimen Days* is the work of someone who had survived war, paralysis, public attack, and the risks in his own nature, and had grown into an older, mellower, and even more complex and accomplished man. Whitman sketches the contents of *Specimen Days*, which vary considerably, in footnote I, concluded here but adjusted (in brackets) to indicate contents by sections rather than pages.

The standard biography of Whitman is Gay Wilson Allen's *Solitary Singer* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1967). A scholarly edition of *Specimen Days* was prepared by Floyd Stovall for *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* and published by New York University Press in 1963.

Reading

Complete Prose Works

http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1472160

Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823-1886) From *Diary during the War*

The wife of James Chesnut, who was a U.S. Senator from South Carolina and later an aide to Jefferson Davis and a brigadier general in the Confederate Army, Mary Boykin Chesnut was ideally situated to keep a diary of life among the leaders of the South. Moreover, she was well-educated, loved novels (especially Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*), loved society, and had a very independent mind.

She also liked to write, and she recognized the historical significance of her experience and its literary potential—traits which were, paradoxically, both advantages and disadvantages, both supportive and contradictory. As her modern editor C. Vann Woodward has shown, what earlier editors had assumed was a “diary” in the conventional sense of a notebook made up of daily, sequential rewriting having been done between 1881 and 1884. Yet the polished version still 1861, to July, 1865, except for a break from August, 1862, to October, 1863, with the whole comprising a total of over twenty-five hundred pages. The break was caused by her having destroyed the notes for that period because of a raid on Richmond in 1863, but the gap was filled in by a 200-page narrative, done from memory, which was presented as if done in October, 1863.

For a full discussion of this complex compositional history, readers should see Woodward's long introduction to *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*. Her diary/autobiography also deserves reading in its entirety, both for its record of the war and for its reflection of her alert and caustic personality. Fortunately, however, even short excerpts of her book are very rich and suggestive. Her stories are usually brief, her wit sharp. Good stories and well-turned phrases were the delight of society—they were what made life in Charleston or Richmond so much more pleasant than life on a plantation or in a small town, and they were also what made memories of 1861-65 so important to preserve and distill after defeat. Chesnut's husband's words at the end of the diary, “Camden for life,” suggest what punishment it was for her to be away from society and its gossip.

For more on Chesnut's life, see Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, *Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1981). The excerpts below are from daily entries as these are given in C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981). All footnotes and bracketed editorial material are from that edition.

Reading

A Diary from Dixie, as Written by Mary Boykin Chesnut
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/menu.html>

Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) From *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*

Readers of *The Education of Henry Adams* know Adams's unflattering portrait of Grant: a "pre-intellectual, archaic" enigma who as president started the country on "a policy of drift," while also seemingly blind to enormous corruption in government.¹

The *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, which conclude with the end of the Civil War in 1865, show a very different kind of man, although to many readers still a puzzling one. The two volumes, totaling over 1200 pages, begin with his ancestry and childhood and then proceed rapidly through his time at West Point to his service in the Mexican War. By 1854 he has resigned from the army. But in 1861, living in Galena, Illinois, he helps organize Illinois volunteers, and is made a colonel. Then, as the war progresses, he moves from battle to battle, gaining larger commands, besieging Vicksburg, taking it on July 4, 1863, and becoming lieutenant-general in March, 1864, with command of all the armies of the United States. As a result of Grant's ever-widening role, the reader gets an ever-expanding view of the magnitude of the war, while the *Memoirs* press on, as inevitable as fate. Yet, throughout, Grant's language remains modest and firm and without the exaggerated heroic tones, contentiousness, and self-justifications that without the exaggerated heroic tones, contentiousness, and self-justifications that became almost standard features in other autobiographies of Civil War officers.

Alexander Stephens, the vice-president of the Confederacy, said of Grant, "He is one of the most remarkable men I have ever met. He does not seem to be aware of his powers."² The comment is suggestive, and it is borne out by the famous story of Grant's first expecting to publish the *Memoirs* with the Century Company, which had promised only a ten percent royalty and predicted sales of only five to ten thousand copies. Grant had been swindled by business partners, was sick and in debt, and believed this was a good offer. But Mark Twain offered to publish them by subscription, and they soon sold 300,000 copies, earning \$450,000 for Grant's family. (Grant died of cancer of the throat on July 23, 1885, a week after finishing the manuscript.

While home on vacation from West Point, Grant was teased for wearing a fancy military uniform, and he came to prefer utilitarian dress, as at Appomattox. This plain dress, in turn, fits with his plain language and his objection to misty legends like the "story of the apple tree" and how he supposedly returned Lee's sword. Yet Grant is still the stuff of legend, and he is often made a symbol of Union determination, the democratic values of the Union soldier, and the North's mastery of industrial warfare. Aspects of all these qualities show up here. So does the archetype with which the United States entered many other wars: that the country was a Sleeping Giant, peaceful and complacent until aroused to a just and mighty fury. Can a man have tapped into so many of the strongest legends, the latent narrative structures, in his culture and still been unaware of his power?

For further reflection, Grant can be compared to other military autobiographers like Black Hawk and Ethan Allen, to other writers about war like Chesnut Sarah Benjamin and Nathan B. Jennings, and to the pacifists Dorothy Day and Roderick Seidenberg.

The excerpt below, headed "Negotiations at the Appomattox—Interview with Lee at McLean's House—The terms of surrender—Lee's surrender—Interview with Lee after the Surrender," is the whole of Chapter 67 of the first edition of *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Co., 1885). This is still the authoritative text, but the library of America provides a good, available reprint. Two excellent short studies of Grant and his *Memoirs* appear in Edmund Wilson's chapter "Northern Soldiers: Ulysses S. Grant," in *Patriotic Gore* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), and James M. Cox's "U.S. Grant: The Man in the *Memoirs*," in his *Recovering Literature's Lost Ground* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989).

1. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), pp. 265, 267.
2. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 142

Reading

Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4367>

Frederick Douglass (1817? – 1895) From *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*

The *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, rev. ed. 1892) is not nearly so well known as his first autobiography, *The Narrative...* (1845), or his second, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). It is 752 pages long. Its description of slavery are not so direct and powerful. And the descriptions of the later years are often rambling, interrupted by long excerpts from letters and earlier writings. "What we have," one critic has written, "is a verbose and somewhat hackneyed story of a life, written, "is a verbose and somewhat hackneyed story of a life, written by a man of achievement."¹

Such a judgment may be too harsh, however, For one thing, the *Life and Times* contains some details about Douglass's early life which he had to omit from his first two autobiographies. Most important is the story of his escape, which is given in the first of the two selections below. It may not be as long and as exciting as the escapes in some other slave autobiographies, but it is still tense, and it shows how easy it might have been for a fugitive slave to be stopped.

Harsh judgments of *Life and Times* also fail to acknowledge the nature of this kind of autobiography. It was written by "a man of achievement." Less famous men and women simply did not have the materials. Douglass had known John Brown and been one of the first to hear Brown's plans for starting a guerrilla liberation movement. He had known Harriet Beecher Stowe. He had recruited black troops for the Union Army. After the Civil War he had been the nation's symbolic black leader and a minister to Haiti. *Life and Times* is for these reasons an important historical record and a good example of this kind of autobiography. Finally, as the second selection here illustrates, Douglass was well aware of the ways he was being used by the American whites (or "Caucasians") at a time when race prejudice was once again growing and becoming, in some ways, more patronizing and demeaning. He himself had been attacked during the late years of his life for marrying a white woman. In this justification for the last edition of his autobiography, he puts himself on the witness stand and relentlessly catalogues the ignorance and the prying "curiosity of my countrymen." He also has things to say about autobiography which every serious reader of it needs to consider.

1. Houston Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 44-45

Reading

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/>

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>

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) *How I Served My Apprenticeship*

Among the millionaires of the late nineteenth century, Andrew Carnegie is almost alone in having liked to think of himself as a literary man. He cultivated the company of Mark Twain, Matthew Arnold, and Herbert Spencer. He wrote essays for the *North American Review* and other magazines, and in 1886 he published a book, *Triumphant Democracy*, expounding his economic and political ideas. He also liked celebrating himself and the business ethic he lived by. "Attract attention," he advised young men. So, where many of his contemporaries avoided the public eye, Carnegie liked to show off. It might even be argued that his later beneficences endowing 2507 public libraries, financing the Carnegie Institute of Technology, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—were not merely done out of his belief that great fortunes should be given away, his "gospel of wealth," but out of his love of attention.

In this piece, he gives his life the kind of legendary status that is so strong in autobiographies addressed to children, while also helping to justify his success to himself. For men may lie when they talk to children, but they prefer not to think they do. They tend rather to be all the more certain of what they have said.

Youth's Companion, where the piece appeared in April, 1896, was also a magazine read by adults, as well as by adults reading to their children. Founded in 1829 by Nathaniel Willis, father of Sara P. (Fanny Fern) Willis, it was bought in 1857 by Daniel Sharp Ford, who, by the 1890's, raised its circulation from 4000 to 500,000. Carnegie took the opportunity to proselytize widely and simply for the glory of capitalism, combating the populist and progressive sentiments that had been rising since the depression of 1893. For him, nostalgia about childhood was not enough. He made his childhood into an economics lesson.

For biography, see Joseph F. Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970; 2d ed., Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), as well as Carnegie's complete *Autobiography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1920).

Reading

Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie

<http://www.freeinfosociety.com/media/pdf/4501.pdf>